

Today is April 5, 2005. It's Nicholas' 9th birthday. Nicholas has Autism. I have things I want to say to him. It is part of the gift I would like to give to him. Nothing compared to what he gives all of us. I read a short book of quotes on the meaning of life and came to the realization that Nicholas and my other children Paige and Drew "get it" much better than we do as adults who try to fit the molds society creates for us.

At the risk of losing what I think is a great book title; I want to tell you a story. About four years ago, a woman I have known since just after Nicholas was born called me, she said "My son has been diagnosed with Autism, what do I do? What will happen to him when he grows up?" I tried to help, I said, "Don't think so far ahead, deal with now." The next thing I said I realized later was very telling of how we live our lives. I said, "Typical isn't all it's cracked up to be." We finished our conversation and hung up.

The next day she called me back and thanked me for my "words of wisdom". I didn't quite understand, then she repeated the phrase back to me "typical isn't all it's cracked up to be". She said "that has really made me see things differently!" I think it made her feel like she could cope a little better with an overwhelming situation.

Nicholas helps us learn limits! Whether we want to or not!! My husband and I are both high energy over-achievers. We have been forced to slow down. I realize my family's happiness is more valuable than a clean house or a 65 hour a week job. I have also learned you can play 18 holes of mini-golf in under 15 minutes or go to a bowling alley for 20 minutes and have a great time or stay for two hours and leave with everyone crying (that has nothing to do with Autism). The same holds true for the zoo. I see so many people dragging their kids around when they are exhausted and overwhelmed. They do not understand that all kids feel this to some degree. Don't take them to dinner at 8 p.m. instead take them home to snuggle in their bed and go to sleep. These typical families don't seem happier than mine.

I want to share a bit of our atypical lifestyle and the many gifts we get. Let me tell you about our friends, sometimes we get up and leave someone's house in the middle of dinner. When Nicholas is done he's done. You have to take us for who we are as a family. We have been blessed with people in our lives that will do whatever we need to make our friendship work because they are kind, loving and supportive people. I wonder how many of these people we wouldn't know if I wouldn't have talked to them about his special need and gotten such amazing responses.

We have been blessed with a supportive family. They don't understand it but everyone does what they can and more importantly there is no lack of love from anyone in his life. I have found a part of my husband that I never knew. He is amazing! Often the stress of children with special needs can divide parents. It provides us strength and pride. We are good parents. We bring different things to our children's lives and respect that in each other.

Everyone in Nicholas' life seems to work toward his success. Twenty three (23) little third grades and several amazing teachers cheer him on each day in school. He is now in a typical classroom most of the day. They provide him with kindness and support. He also helps them learn about tolerance and compassion and on some level we help them to learn that each child has needs that are just theirs.

Don't let me mislead you; it is sometimes exhausting and challenging. IT IS NOT FUN to watch him roll around screaming on the ground at the airport with everyone staring and wondering why you can't control your child. My life is better now because I see most of that as their problem, not mine. I also know they do not understand that he is totally overwhelmed and can barely stand to be in his own skin. The noise and lights and waiting are all so difficult for him but even in these situations you come across kind strangers and it helps you remember the good in people.

Five years ago my husband and I stood outside of Nicholas' bedroom door after putting him to bed. We looked at each other and said "Do you think he'll ever be able to say I LOVE YOU? And if he can say it, will he know what it means?" He at the time had really limited comprehension and speech about that of a 2 year old. What a difference each year makes. Nicholas now understands almost everything we say. He still has anxiety and some sensory issues but they are improving. He says, "I love you" and knows exactly what it means. He hugs and kisses us each day and we occasionally get a glimpse of his big beautiful dark eyes. Eye contact is still hard. He reads books and roller blades and is excited to see his friends. He will also tell our friends "it is time for you to go home now" when he has had enough. They take it with a smile and now know that's Nicholas.

I want Nicholas to know how special he is but I would also like other people to know. When he was diagnosed and I kept reading books about how very hopeless it was I would cry for hours. The books said he would probably never talk or show emotion and for the first 3 years they were right, he did almost nothing but cry and vomit (this was his response to sensory overload). Now, I believe they were wrong. He is smart, kind, and is developing a great sense of humor, although he is still very literal. He will never be typical, but who is?