



The Power of Cheese

When my son was about seven we were at my Mother's beach house in South Carolina. We usually spent the summer and sometimes large parts of the winter there as well before both kids were in school, so the surroundings were quite familiar to us. On this summer's visit my son with autism who is also nonverbal, would get up quite early. So he and I would go and sit on the beach until the rest of the household was awake. John could sit for hours running his hands and feet through the sand and I would read a book and enjoy the smells and sounds the ocean had to offer.

On this particular morning, after sitting a while in the sand, my son jumped up and started walking down the beach. I was very excited because I would always try to get him to walk down the beach just a little bit, but this summer he refused. Long quiet walks next to the ocean are always on the top of my list. As he jumped up enthusiastically and began to walk cheerfully down the beach, I followed, happy in the moment.

As we passed the first mile marker, I'm still elated as well as John, but some concerns are beginning to rise inside my head. But we continue on in the glee of the moment. Then as we get close to mile two I begin to worry that he might not be able to walk the whole way back. I have no cell phone at this time so it's just him and me. As I tried to coax him to turn around, he wanted no part of it. He only wanted to go in one direction. Now I was worried. At seven he was quite large and as strong as me. We were two miles from home. As I tried to start physically turning him around, he began a screaming meltdown and threw himself in the sand. As this continues for several minutes (seems like days) people start coming out on their decks to check out the commotion, many people and many decks. Then other walkers feel the need to ask what's going on and if there is a problem. As I explain that he has autism and only wants to go in one direction, I can see in their faces that they have no idea what I am talking about. One person stops the beach patrol to report us and I thought "Great. Maybe they will drive up to us and we can get him in the truck and drive back up to our beach path." But sadly they just sit and watch.

When I have hit the wall in choices to get us home, a thought quietly popped into my brain. At the time I thought it was a probably a bizarre idea but at least it was stab at problem solving. "I wonder if John would stand up and walk home if I offered him cheese" Cheese was one of the only words he could understand at that time because he loved it so much. But I had no cheese with me at the time. Well, I only had to say it twice. He looked up at me, smiled, stood up, and walked home.

Consequently he would not go back down that particular beach path the rest of that summer, but would happily go down any other. I always carried cheese.