

UNEXPECTED BLESSINGS

Michael D. Ruch

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“Are you sitting down?” My wife’s voice was quaking with excitement. She had been to her doctor for what we thought would be another routine early pregnancy checkup and called me with a startling update. “I have pictures of twin A and twin B!” And so we discovered that our very intentional “fourth and final child” would have a womb mate. Our giddy sense of anticipation overwhelmed the doctor’s caution that this would be a high risk pregnancy.

But four months later, when my wife delivered two frail 28-week premature sons, our dream became a nightmare. Ten weeks of intensive care in the neonatal unit, punctuated by surgeries, medications, tests, and specialists, gave way to the tumultuous early years of raising our fragile little boys. They were often spoken of in diagnostic terms such as hydrocephalus, cerebral palsy, profound hearing impairment, meningitis, and epilepsy instead of their given names. Doctor appointments and hospital visits became the events around which our lives were structured. Together we lived through medical procedures that ranged from EEG’s and hernia repairs to major orthopedic operations and neurosurgery.

Our greatest anxiety was the uncertainty of not knowing where we were headed next. Mostly, we just felt fatigue as we struggled to balance the twins’ extraordinary demands with the needs of their three older brothers. It was an impossible and stressful time that frequently made us feel both guilty and inadequate. We rarely went out as a couple as the instructions for the care of our special twins scared even the best of babysitters away. *“Remember his medication at six and eight o’clock. Oh, and if his eyes fix to the left, page us right away because that’s a seizure.”*

Thankfully, the early years of frequent trauma abated. The combination of love, good medical care, and our little boys’ determined spirits allowed them to push beyond our worst fears. We struggled to make peace with their limitations and we fought hard to avoid the curse of bitterness. And now, as our twin sons get ready to graduate from high school, we find ourselves reflecting on this amazing and unforeseen adventure of raising children with disabilities.

We found truth in the adage that adversity strengthens character. By necessity, we developed the ability to cope with situations that we thought were beyond our limits. We were able to shift into a special gear to deal with the numerous medical emergencies and the emerging revelations of their various developmental problems. Not surprisingly, living through such things as ICU stays not only made us more resilient, it also made dealing with things like flat tires a lot easier.

In a curious way, the experience has made much of our life more pleasurable. Our boys have served to recalibrate our joy meter. That is, they lowered our threshold for celebration so that sometimes seemingly small accomplishments were magnified and richly appreciated. We learned to acknowledge what they were able to do more than to fixate on their deficits. So while they reached their milestones more slowly than is typical, the sweetness of those accomplishments for

us was far beyond normal. We yelled and screamed when their older brothers won track races, but the tears of joy we shed when the twins learned to walk at age three were far more delightful.

Our boys' lives have often punctuated us of the important things in life. Whether it was through special education programs, adaptive sports, or their daily activities, they reminded us of such things as:

- The quality of your life is not measured by your GPA or your sports trophies.
- Great achievements are relative to potential.
- When you fall, smile and then get up.
- Kindness always trumps intelligence.
- It is better to stop and help up your competitor up than to take advantage of their stumble.
- Embracing the present leaves less anxiety to worry about tomorrow.
- Never take yourself so seriously that you can't laugh at yourself.

The twins often revealed others' character and compassion. We discovered that wonderful people are found in curious and unexpected places. It struck us that churches were sometimes not overly accommodating, but cruise ships and dude ranches were. At times, those closest to us simply did not understand, while strangers in waiting rooms often did. And of course a very few of their peers were ignorant or cruel, but countless others went out of their way to help and befriend them. On balance, we have found that the people who work with those with challenges seem to not only have more love to give, they also have more laughter and joy in their lives.

With so much kindness shown to our sons, one of the gifts we have been given is an easy acceptance of others. We are unable to look away from those with special needs and it has become natural and comfortable for us to accommodate and engage them. We are left with a humble sensitivity to the plight of others and feel as if we have gained admission to a special fraternity where there is an unspoken understanding with others. And now we are never uncomfortable around those with special needs and it is never an inconvenience to offer our patience and time to them.

Everyone's experience is unique and should be respected as such. And we are struck by the fact that in the end, this uninvited experience has made us better and has enriched our lives with countless unexpected blessings. The beauty of every day is appreciated so much more, when it is viewed in contrast to more difficult times. And it strikes us that instead of trying to make people with disabilities more like us, oftentimes we should strive to be more like them.