**Lessons from a Little Girl**

I arrived in Chapel Hill in June of last year to prepare for my first semester as a physical therapy student at UNC. My husband actually arrived here first since our six-year-old daughter had a dance recital to perform in back in Hendersonville. Christina was not about to *move* until she had tapped her way through three dance numbers in her seafoam green outfit with sequins. Our four-year-old daughter, Ashley, made the move with a strep infection, an ear infection, and a resolving case of pneumonia. She would add a broken clavicle to her list of ailments by the time the sun rose on our first day in Chapel Hill. Just what was I thinking when I decided to apply to physical therapy school?

Ashley was actually the impetus for my change of career at the age of thirty-four. She was born with an extremely rare genetic abnormality-trisomy one. Ashley's diagnosis was so rare that the National Organization of Rare Disorders didn't have any information on it. I began writing letters and gathering information. This process of raising a daughter with a developmental disability that no one in the medical community knew anything about convinced me that I wanted to give up the nomadic life of an airline pilot and become a physical therapist.

I began my first semester feeling decidedly out of place in a room full of people who seemed to *have* more relevant work experience than mine. I remembered how I had described in my admissions interview that my experiences with Ashley prepared me for this new career. After about a week of gross anatomy I longed for the drone of the cockpit and wondered how in the world I ever thought that I was cut out for this.

I was reminded how my experiences with Ashley had taught me that being a competent health care professional meant more than memorizing the brachial plexus. The cardiologist who managed to get an echocardiogram of Ashley without sedating her was a great example of this. He could have been the most skillful cardiac surgeon in the world, but if he couldn't distract Ashley long enough to get an accurate echocardiogram it didn't mean a thing to me. For four years we had been told that her heart murmur was of concern, but sedating her for an echocardiogram was not recommended because of her chronic respiratory infections. This cardiologist understood our desire to get a definitive answer to this question of whether there was a heart defect or not. He also knew that nothing beats a Barney video and some puppets for distracting a four-year-old. For the first time in four years we could rest assured that Ashley's heart was "noisy, but working fine."

There were many other fine examples of health professionals in Ashley's life who brought something more to their profession. There was the pediatrician who performed a magic trick for both of my daughters to get their minds off their upcoming flu shots. There was the nurse who listened to my concerns about my daughter's slow development and arranged for genetic testing when the first pediatrician dismissed my concerns by saying that I was just being "hyperattentive." Then there was the new pediatrician who took time out from putting her twins to bed one night to calm my fears when clumps of Ashley's hair began falling out in the bathtub. I wanted to be like these professionals, but as the semester went on I increasingly wondered if I was ever going to be a physical therapist at all. I studied for my first gross anatomy test in Ashley's hospital bed with the *Atlas of Human Anatomy* in one hand and an oxygen mask over Ashley's pale face in the other. For the first time in my life I knew what it was like to get the worst grade in the class on an exam.

My husband kept reassuring me that if I could learn all the electrical busses on the Saab-Fairchild 340 that I used to fly, I could certainly learn the cranial nerves. I wasn't convinced, and I kept longing for some part of physical therapy school that would cover an area I had some experience in. Then one day I found out from a classmate that she was doing a group project for one of our classes on family dynamics and disability. Here was a topic I knew something about! I told her that I had written a few things about raising a child with a disability and the next thing I knew I was in front of her group reading something that I had written:

*I sat with my little girl in the waiting area of the dance studio and waited for her big sister to take her tap and ballet lesson. Two other Moms had little boys who were younger than my girl. Their boysran around the small room filled with metal chairs and shiny trophies. My little girl sat quietly on my lap and sucked her thumb. Their boys talked excitedly about the train that rumbled by; one ran out with his big brother to watch. My little girl waved and smiled, but no words came from her lips.*

*One of the Moms smiled at my little girl and commented on how nice it must be to have a child who would sit so quietly and patiently on my lap. I* *wanted to scream and tell her how it really was, to watch the other children walking and talking and wonder why it could not be so for my little girl. I* *wanted to tell her how it was not such a wonderful thing to have a* *quiet and patient child sometimes—that two-year-olds are supposed to be noisy and bouncing out the door to see the train. It was one of those moments when I long for the burden of having to chase down a child who is unwilling to sit quietly and wait for tap lessons to end.*

*So* *I sat there with my daughter happily sucking her thumb and these thoughts raced through my mind. As the tapping drifted from the next room and I wondered if my daughter would even learn how to tap, another little girl approached. She 'was probably around seven years old and she was the sister of the boy who was a fan of trains. She sat and talked to my daughter without giving a second thought to the fact that this was a one-sided conversation. She smiled happily at her and my little girl took her thumb out of her mouth and reached out to give her a hug. Then the girl asked if my daughter could walk. When I replied that she could not, the little girl said, "That's okay. My little brother over there hasn't learned how to suck his thumb yet like she can."*

Pausing for a moment, I could hear the sniffles and see the tears of my classmates. I knew that I was going to bring something extra to the profession of physical therapy after all. It took that little girl to remind me that I should see my daughter through the eyes of a little girl.

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