

## **The Eye of the Beholder**

*Mali Farnell*

As she looked at her lined face in the mirror, she lightly ran a finger over the red, dry, scaly skin that had formed on her eyelid. The morning sun that shone in the bathroom window cast a light on the deep, dark rings that hung below her eye sockets like heavy curtains.

Metaphysical practitioners would say that an eye condition is 'an inability to see ahead with joy'. The General Practitioner diagnosed eczema, brought on by stress. The Pharmacist said it was most likely an allergic reaction to wearing eye make-up.

Probably a combination of all three, she thought to herself.

She was used to making her own assessments based on intuition, history and experience. Being a parent for the past 16 years had been a long journey, but also a short one.

During that time she had taken her son to see a myriad of Paediatricians, Psychologists, Occupational Therapists, Speech Pathologists, Nutritionists, Homeopaths, Naturopaths and even the local psychopath at one point. Each had their own conflicting theory and understanding of him. Or misunderstanding.

She had known from a very young age that her son was different. At age two at 'story-time at the library' he could not sit still on her lap like the other children. He would call out and ask questions and disrupt the session. Some kind mothers would smile at her, appreciating her child's curious and inquisitive nature. Sometimes he would call out "Champagne" when trying to flag the attention of Chantelle, the story-reader. Some sympathetic mothers would titter whilst others would shoot a silencing glare in her direction.

Seeing him as more of an active boy, she took him to Kindergym, in search of physical exercise for him and social connection for her. She was sadly disappointed by both. The group facilitators expected the children to refrain from climbing on the inspiring maze of metal tunnels, ropey nets and wooden play equipment and sit quietly in a circle singing nursery rhymes. When her son did not comply, they would insist that he exercise some 'self control'. Seeing them as uptight authoritarians, she did not return. What child wouldn't want to play on the equipment, she thought to herself? Isn't that why it's called 'play equipment'?

At age four he was eventually old enough to attend Kindergarten. Sensing that her son experienced the world differently to other children, she took him to an independent Kindergarten that followed an alternate teaching philosophy said to 'revere and embrace the inner child for their unique and individual differences'. There, children ran freely, picked flowers and used imaginative and creative play with minimal and natural materials (mostly in rainbow colours). Midway

through his second kinder year, she was informed by the teacher that her little boy had bitten another child. Astonished, she inquired as to why it had happened? To which the teacher breezily replied “Oh, he was probably being a shark”.

Perhaps, but the woman knew what happened to sharks. They were hunted out and taken down by an outraged community. In anticipation of other parent's reactions, she took him out of the school. Besides, it had not been the first time he had exhibited aggressive behaviour, and having a sinking feeling that it would not be the last, she took him to yet another alternative school.

This one was based on the scientific philosophy of an Internationally acclaimed Italian woman who had noted and observed over many years that children learned and developed at different stages, and it promised to follow the lead of each child as they experienced learning ‘explosions’. This ‘child led learning philosophy’ could be seen as a worldwide movement at the time, with hundreds of schools dotted across the globe. This one, however, was housed in a dot – a small under-resourced out-building. But what they lacked in physical space and materials, they made up for with a genuine love and respect of children. Unfortunately, being an alternative school, it seemed to attract other children who for one reason or another did not fit into the mainstream system, and the only ‘explosions’ the woman witnessed was that of the tempers of the other children.

Seeking out more positive peer experiences and attractive role models, she headed for the mainstream. Normality was in order, she thought, for both her life and his.

Which begged the question, what exactly was ‘normal’? Being her first born child, she had no yard stick to measure it by and parenting values had vastly evolved (or regressed, depending on your viewpoint) since her parents had practiced it, so there was no-one really to turn to. The friends she had gathered over the years were like-minded in values. They too believed that each individual should be respected for their individuality. But she was soon to discover that the broader community's ideals and expectations of ‘what is normal’ were narrowing.

In these highly diagnostic days, society was appearing to become less tolerant and increasingly judgemental of others. She had noted that the bell curve of normal development was narrowing, marginalising more and more children's behaviour. Why did we feel so compelled to diagnose children with conditions and syndromes and define them as ‘other’? What did that give us and indeed, them?

Perhaps as the world we lived in became crazier and less predictable, people were driven to become more and more controlling of others, she pondered.

Some would say that a diagnosis helps others to understand that person better and see the way they experience the world. Perhaps, but it still demands that the person alter and adapt their behaviour to better fit into the world as it is, not

alter the world and the way we live in it to accommodate others' different points of view.

How did this assist her son and people like him who experienced the world differently to others? In her experience, it didn't.

Her son was squeezed through the mainstream schooling system due to a lack of any better alternative. Melt-downs, tables over-turned, absconding, skipping school, all depicted his struggle to fit in. They were his way of saying 'one size does not fit all'.

Home-schooling? Whilst cocooning her child from the difficulties he faced everyday was a natural reaction, she knew all too well that one day he would need to go out into the world and live independently. That was her desire, her vision for him. To reach his full potential and live a happy, healthy life. Besides which, it just wouldn't be the same playing 'catch and kiss' at home with your mum.

Reflecting on his years of development made her bottom lip tremble. The knockdowns, the setbacks, the highlights. His challenging intellect, sharp wit and absurd sense of humour, affectionate nature, searing sarcasm and the deeply intuitive way in which he saw the world was unlike any other.

Only the world didn't see him. Feeling increasingly maligned and misunderstood, the teenage years proved difficult for him. As they say, 'everyone wants to be an individual, but no-one wants to be different'. Knowing that he was somehow different from everyone else was painful for him, leaving him alone and isolated. No matter that it had a name, a label, a diagnosis, a metaphorical box to put him in.

Her eyes smarted as she recalled him in her mind. She breathed deeply as if to breathe him in. The memory was as warm and fresh as his sweet soft skin in the morning. How ironic, she thought - he once lived 'outside the box', only now he lives within in it.

She looked down at her make-up bag through blurred vision, and rustled around looking for her water-proof mascara. It would have to be that water-proof one, the one that gives her an allergic re-action. There would be a lot of tears shed today.