

Awakening Ashley (Excerpt)

It was difficult for me to accept Ashley was now considered “a child with special needs.” To me, that was always a child with overt problems. No one on the street would have thought Ashley was a “special needs child” by looking at her. But the doctor had given us his opinion. He was the expert. And this...we *had* to accept!

As we left the building, we were in disbelief and full of questions. Dave carried Ashley through the windy parking lot. The day had turned colder and darker while we were inside. We walked to the car in silence.

We settled Ashley in her car seat. She appeared quite tired and worn out. Dave and I looked at each other.

“What just happened in there?” I asked.

We had gone in the hospital two hours earlier with a puzzle genius and came out with a daughter labeled autistic! Something had gone terribly wrong. What we thought to be a problem with Ashley’s hearing somehow turned into a disability with perhaps a bleak outlook. And we were now parents of a child with special needs! We were stunned from the blow.

We turned to look at Ashley and found she had fallen asleep. What a trooper she was. We had just subjected her to a very long testing process. She did what she could in terms of her ability for the doctor. We couldn’t be disappointed with that. The rest of the questions would be answered from the results of the additional testing Dr. Conlon recommended.

“How did he determine she belonged on the autistic spectrum just by observing her for a few hours?” I asked Dave as he started driving.

“She doesn’t even know him, and yet, he wanted to see her look at him more and come up to him more than she did. She was in a strange place with a strange doctor. Why would not opening up in that environment be held against her?” I rambled on.

“I know, Sharon. But you know, she didn’t look at us much either,” Dave said in all honesty.

And I guess that was the point the doctor was making. And her lack of being able to point was apparently a tell-tale sign of a problem. Not pointing meant not engaging us in something she found interesting—not bringing us into her world so we could enjoy something with her.

“But he thought she was exceptionally bright! She can do puzzles better than the kindergartner down the street!” I said, trying to make some sense of all of this.

“She’s very smart, yes! She just does things her own way and at her own pace,” Dave tried to reassure me.

“You know, Sharon, I’m not much of a social butterfly myself. Maybe she takes after me. I’m pretty reserved. I don’t care for big parties and socializing. She’s very laid back, and so am I. Didn’t he say if she keeps developing with high visual skills, he only saw great things for her to the tune of possibly an ‘engineer’s mind’?” he said, trying to give me some hope.

“Do I want her to be an engineer?” I asked, sarcastically.

“That’s not the point. He meant she could grow up to be very smart and perhaps embrace a career such as that—engineers are very creative and brainy. It was a compliment, Sharon!”

“But how can he forecast what she may become in the future? He thinks she’ll go far with her visual talents, but he just placed her on the autistic spectrum due to a variety of social and behavioral deficits. That’s like taking one step forward and two steps back. It makes no sense to me,” I said, becoming a little discouraged.

I was stressed. We were stopped in traffic. I shut myself down and stared out the window not looking at Dave. It was a very long ride home in silence.

What we were taking away from all of this was that Ashley had some autistic traits that put her on the autistic spectrum. But the doctor apparently had every expectation of Ashley going far in life, despite what we all saw that day.

I guess Dr. Conlon’s experience seeing children on the autistic spectrum allowed him to forecast these expectations for Ashley. He was encouraged by her cognitive ability and wanted us to be clear as well about her visual gifts. But his position on labeling her left me too stunned and confused to see a brighter picture just yet!

We were putting all of our trust in this doctor and our daughter’s life in his hands—a man who we didn’t really know. As his words changed the course of our lives as we knew it earlier in the day, we hoped we were trusting in good faith. For he had just altered Ashley’s life and ours—forever!