PERSONAL VOICES

Revelations from a Silent Angel

Howard McOmber

Editor's note: With this pair of essays by Howard and Amy McOmber, Dialogue *continues its series on the relationship between the Church and persons with disabilities.*

There is no way to describe the day-to-day anxiety associated with being connected to an autistic life. The first time I held Gregory I felt an impression from God that said he was lucky to have Amy and me as parents. I was embarrassed by that impression then, but now it is all I can hang on to. Everything around me makes me feel otherwise.

At birth, Gregory could not nurse properly. Amy suffered biting and then cracking, followed by fevers. She stopped nursing for two weeks, healed, and pumped herself every two hours to nurse him again. He screamed constantly. Extended family members affectionately called him "the screamer." He didn't look at us. He pushed us away when we were close to him. At first we thought he was deaf, but after tests determined that he wasn't and operations to put tubes in his ears failed to help, we persisted until we saw neurologists and other specialists. When he was eighteen months old, we had the earth-shattering diagnosis of autism.

He bites us. He clawed at us. And so it continues. At every wedding or every other public occasion, one of us sits on the periphery because Gregory can't handle the stimulus of the event. It is lonely—for him, for Amy and me, and for our other three children. Even now, he sometimes spreads excrement everywhere. Amy does countless loads of laundry, cleaning blankets and clothes every day. We bathe him every day, sometimes many times. We go through sofas and cars the way other people go

through shoes. If he can, he takes off all his clothes and goes out on the streets.

More than once, his little sister Heather has gone for a kiss; and he has knocked her to the ground. There isn't one of us whom he hasn't suddenly attacked while we are driving along the freeway. He makes it difficult to maintain friendships. He gets obsession after obsession. He has scraped DVDs with his teeth, broken plates and slid his finger along the sharp edges, flooded the basement, and frequently clambered to high points in the house. For the last few months, he has been breaking ball point pens so he can spread ink everywhere. He loves fast-moving traffic and does anything he can to stand on the sidewalk, close to the cars.

Six years ago when Gregory was turning eight, the age of baptism and acceptance of Christ's atonement, I was in a season of anger. I was full of what the Book of Mormon calls "murmuring." My heart was furious with God for giving this trial to Gregory and me. It all seemed like more trial than I could handle. I couldn't see why either of us needed it.

Yes, I believe that children like Gregory are destined for the celestial kingdom. We believe that he is already pure. We believe that before we came to earth we lived as spirit children of our Father in Heaven. We loved Him and He loved us. He was perfect, patient, loving, kind, strict, dependable. We obeyed him, but we were always free to choose not to. Heavenly Father called a council in heaven and told us that we could come to earth to be tested because we would learn more with a body. We would feel love and pain, and we would grow by learning patience, perseverance, kindness, and love. Furthermore, we would have an example to show us the way. On earth, we would inevitably sin and we would need a Savior. Through Him we would be healed of our mistakes and of the problems inherited with our mortal bodies. Then we would be able to return to live with our Father in Heaven, having proven our faith and having grown through this mortal experience. I believe all this.

More specifically, I believe our small family was at this council. We were spirits. We shouted for joy with the sons of God. We watched as Lucifer proposed to force us to choose good. Although such a choice was impossible, he drew a third of the spirit children to his side, and there was war in heaven. We beheld as Satan and his hosts fell from heaven and were cast to the earth, where they afflict us today, unseen but felt.

And I believe even more. I believe that Gregory's righteousness was so complete in the pre-earth life that he does not require the same test as

the rest of us. He endures his time on this earth for another purpose. We believe other spirits were equally righteous; but in their case, they came to earth only long enough to gain a body. These other special spirits will be resurrected as children and be raised by their parents in the Millennium. They will be raised in a world free from the evils of child molestation, robbery, and sin.

But as I said, when Gregory reached the age of baptism, I was angry. I murmured. Gregory did not need baptism because of his heavenly promise. Then why should he have to endure seizures and mortality where he had no hope of a family of his own, no wife, no children, no real existence? Amy said, "Maybe it is for us to learn how to live with helping Gregory." I am embarrassed to say that I retorted, "I have not learned one thing! I have not learned anything from dealing with Gregory!" Amy quietly responded, "Maybe I am supposed to learn how to live with *you* not learning anything from Gregory."

I am grateful for Amy's reminders of my spiritual gauge. I humbled myself. I prayed to have a softer heart, to gain answers, and to learn. So I will tell what I have learned, what we all have learned, from our silent angel. We have learned what love really is. It is pure service. It is patience. Most of all, it is hope.

In the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross, Jesus took the lives of all of us upon himself, one at a time—our inadequacy, our autism, our sins. He understands all that it is to be us. He has the power from this understanding to teach us each individually and as a group how to serve. I came to appreciate the Savior's lesson of service most distinctly one day when Gregory was nine years old, a year before we successfully potty-trained him. He had defecated and finger painted with it all over the basement. I put him in the tub and cleaned the room. I finished and went to get him out of the tub, only to find the bathtub full of more excrement. I pulled him out and cleaned the tub. I came out of the bathroom, back to the room I had just cleaned and found that he had done it again.

I went crazy with frustration. I thought, "I am going to lose it." Instantly, I felt someone think to me, "PRAY!" I crumpled to my knees and cried immediate, hot tears. I said, "Father in Heaven, this is more than I am capable of. Help me, please help me!" Suddenly, like a roaring fire or wind, I felt flood into my soul an incredible rush of love—the love of Heavenly Father and Jesus for me and for Gregory. I could feel the love Gregory has for me, a love clouded behind his autism that doesn't always allow

him to show it, a love so strong that any service or sacrifice seems as though it is the easiest thing to do.

I cleaned the room for the second time, praying and thanking my Father in Heaven for the chance to serve Gregory and the chance to feel His love. In my thoughts I could hear the voice of the Savior saying, "I am thankful for the service I did for you on the cross and in the Garden of Gethsemane." I felt as I served Gregory that I was truly serving God, too. I could feel the Gregory with whom I had a relationship in the pre-earth life. I understood more clearly how Jesus could have borne the suffering of each one of us and of all of us.

As for the lesson of patience that Gregory has taught us, I confess that I haven't yet mastered it entirely. I pray. I struggle to learn it. Gregory is fourteen now. He has become mind-bogglingly patient, for the most part, accepting a life that often has little indication of what will happen next. He is filled with such innocence and has become so much more loving. The idea of a life without Gregory in it is unbearable. His soul touches us daily. Amy and I have wondered if, given a choice to do it all over again, whether we would still choose Gregory. We would, although that fact doesn't keep me from wishing we could choose a Gregory healed.

The third lesson Gregory has taught us is hope. We have all—Amy and I and our three children without autism—learned it well. We hope for a cure to autism or for a prevention of it. We hope for greater communication with Gregory, and lately that hope has been realized. Most of all, we hope for the day in which we have faith—the day of the coming of Jesus Christ. In the Book of Mormon, when the resurrected Jesus visited the inhabitants of ancient America, he healed all the little children. The same experience is to happen when Jesus comes again. We have hope that He will heal Gregory. We hope that Gregory will have an opportunity to find a wife and have a family in the thousand years of peace that the Millennium will bring. All the pain and anxiety we suffer will be wiped away, but the strength we have received will remain like gold.

In the meantime, Gregory strives with his last ounce of courage. Good things do happen to him. Perfect tutors have come to him at the perfect time. Each person who tends Gregory brings just the things he needs to progress. Recently Meredith, his current tutor, has been helping him work with a small, indestructible laptop-like device called a Mini-Merc. He is learning to communicate by typing and touching. He

has mastered 300 signs and he has also started a new method of communicating and learning called the Rapid Prompting Method (RPM).

I pay tribute to Amy who has been Gregory's best and most tireless advocate. She has ripped out contaminated carpet and has laid new flooring to facilitate the daily cleaning that is required. She has been the epitome of perseverance in getting Gregory his Mini-Merc and in helping maintain funding for therapy. She chaired the local walk for Autism Speaks, which brought in over $300,000. She went to two leadership conferences in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., and lobbied for supportive legislation. She also chairs the yearly talent show at our elementary school, is an art docent, runs half marathons and triathlons, plays volleyball and basketball, and teaches music. It is fun trying to keep up, but honestly I can't. She is amazing. Our other kids always know when she is at their games. She is usually their coach. On the football field, she is the mom yelling the loudest.

So, just as the hymn instructs me to do, I count my many blessings. I am grateful for my family. I am grateful for the home in which we dwell. I am grateful for my neighbors and for the loving members of our ward. I am grateful for the strength which Heavenly Father gives us to provide for Gregory. And I am grateful for Gregory.

A Most Amazing Gift

Amy McOmber

Little did I know that when I was contemplating having a second child that I would be blessed with a very challenging, incurable neurological mystery. I didn't know that there would be so many sleepless nights past the baby stages, that there would be decisions to be made for a nonspeaking child who can give us few clues as to what he is feeling inside.

Raising a child with severe autism is definitely a frustrating daily dilemma, but at the same time a gift invaluable beyond words. One minute Gregory can be the most loving and adorable, the kindest and kissiest