

Waiting for the Silence

by Sharon Roth-Lichtenfeld, CPC, ELI-MP, BFA

TWENTY-TWO YEARS AGO I gave birth to my son, Brandon. About the time he turned two, it was apparent that Brandon was delayed in his development. Over the years we have had numerous “diagnoses.” Basically, Brandon has a little bit of this and a little bit of that: ADHD, impulsivity, auditory processing, OCD, anxiety, and a slightly lower IQ. I call it a pooh pooh platter of special needs, or what others call the high function on the autism spectrum disorder. Brandon also struggles with the social cues and the social filter. At times it is quite refreshing, other times extremely uncomfortable. Sometimes it is frustrating to talk

to him because he processes information differently. However, once you figure out “Brandon Speak,” you are good to go.

Brandon has many wonderful strengths and attributes. He has a great sense of humor, intuition, determination, and always wants to please. He has come a long way in his journey.

One of the main things that Brandon has always struggled with has been interrupting and waiting his turn to

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speaking. For twenty years the litany has been: “Brandon, wait your turn,” “Brandon, you are interrupting,” “Brandon, wait until they’re finished talking.” It’s one of the most exasperating issues and has caused a lot of frustration and anger.

Last week I had

the opportunity to attend an all-day Asperger syndrome convention. Asperger syndrome is an autism spectrum disorder that is characterized by significant difficulties in social interaction, along with restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior and interests. I thought it would be a great networking opportunity; however, what you think you are supposed to get out of something isn’t necessarily so. The keynote speaker was a gentleman who has Asperger syndrome and has struggled with it all his life. In spite of it, he has become very successful. He spoke for two hours. He was very inspiring. One sentence from the entire speech stood out and rocked my world. He spoke about a strategy that he taught himself. He figured out that if he waited for the silence in a conversation then it was his turn to speak. I had the *Aha!* moment.

That night, while having a one-on-one dinner with Brandon, he of course interrupted me. This time I said, “Brandon, you know if you wait for the silence after someone talks, that is the cue for your turn.” He looked at me with surprise and wonder, and said “Really? I never knew that.” I said, “Yes, maybe you should practice it and see what happens.”

The next day we were out at the local deli having dinner. The conversation just flowed. We then stopped and chatted with a couple and Brandon was interacting with ease. Afterwards, I asked Brandon a question and there was dead silence. I said “Brandon, are you okay?” He replied, “Yeah mom, I am practicing the silence. And I have been practicing at dinner and I practiced when I was talking to the man and lady. It’s easier than I thought.” Twenty years of grappling with this issue went out the door. I then had a twinge of



guilt because it took all these years to figure out one simple strategy. The next thought was joy. Joy, because a whole new world has opened up for Brandon.

Over the past week or so, Brandon has been observing the silence. I asked him what he learned from it all. In simple terms, as only Brandon can say, "Mom, I am listening more."

Practicing the silence has given Brandon a better understanding about the art of listening. A lesson for all of us. How can we hear if we are so busy interrupting or talking over people? Applying silence while others are speaking teaches us how to concentrate and acknowledge those around us. It creates rapport and understanding. People feel acknowledged and validated. Of course, waiting for the silence to speak gives the other person the opportunity to listen as well. How simple.

I will say that Brandon does fall back into his old patterns. It usually happens when he is excited about something or has a strong opinion. However, he is learning to recognize that, and practice more silence and more listening.

What can we learn from Brandon? We can learn that we are not so different from individuals who have social difficulties. They miss the social cues; however, we do too. We all interrupt or talk over each other. We forget to be silent and just listen. The lesson is clear. We should all practice waiting for the silence, so we can learn how to listen.

How have you honored the silence? **A**

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