

As adults, some of our greatest teachers can be children if we allow them the opportunity to assume that role. As we move through adulthood, we lose sight of the fact that life is meant to be fun and full of joy. We lose our perspective on the true meaning of what is going on around us. Children have pure hearts, which creates a difference in their perspective on life.

The term “Master Teacher,” refers to the ability to guide one's learning at the highest level. There are children, whose purpose is to be master teachers for us as adults. Weston was one of the most important master teachers in my journey, so far. He is one of the select children who are here on earth for the purpose of creating change. Change always comes through a shift in perspective. Weston created a major shift in my perspective of how I see children with learning challenges and thus how I work with them.

Children, who are master teachers, many times come to us in different packaging than what is considered the typical looking child. Their look and presentation is intentional, based on the lessons we must learn. Because they do not fit the mold of typical, we can easily miss the opportunity and blessing to be their students. This is why we must always look beneath the outside surface, and ask good questions of ourselves and of the child, so that no opportunity goes unmissed.

Looking back over the early years of my practice, I had the opportunity to work with several children who were master teachers, but because I was so focused on being their therapist, I missed the opportunity to be taught by them. I am very thankful that Weston and his mom were patient with me and my slow start to understanding the big picture.

I had worked with Weston for almost two years before the light even flickered that possibly this child had more to teach me than I could ever teach him. It took me another three years of working with him before I fully grasped the monumental changes this child was making in my belief system and treatment perspectives. Finally, after nine years of being his “speech therapist”, I understood the impact this child had made on my work with children and part of his purpose of being here on earth.

Weston is definitely not packaged in the “typical” form of what we call a “normal” child. He has a large head with an oversized forehead. He had a significant sensory delay affecting his vestibular system. The vestibular or balance system, is the sensory system that provides the dominant input about movement and equilibrium. For this reason his knees were in a hyper flexed positioned. He didn't like to wear shoes, because his bottom up input, in terms of feet to head, was reduced affecting his ability to interact quickly with his surroundings. His clothes were usually on backwards (his choice). His speech consisted of no intelligent words and he communicated primarily through grunting sounds.

You are probably asking the question, how could this child be a teacher? Or maybe you are thinking that I am crazy in even suggesting a child with this makeup and characteristics could be a master teacher. Absolutely! See this is where we are being challenged as educators, therapist, doctors and parents, to look below the surface of the outside packaging. Far too long we have made assumptions about children's intelligence and their abilities by their looks and characteristics. If we continue to do this, we are limiting ourselves for learning and growth, as well as, limiting the children's potential. There is a new generation of children who are here to teach us wonderful things about ourselves as a human race, and about physical aspects of our bodies, but first a shift in our perspective must occur for us to reap the blessing of them being our teachers.

What if I told you Weston could read, comprehend and learn information at a 12th grade level at the age of nine? What if I told you this child learned Chinese in two weeks, Spanish in two days, and mastered many subjects like physics, chemistry, and high level math skills in record time? However, he still doesn't demonstrate knowledge of phonetics. Through written expression or speech, he can't form a single letter, and may not even be able to identify a letter by name. Does this mean he can't read? Not at all. Here is where the learning comes in. Here is where I became the student. It was my job to learn how he learns. Up until this point I had been imposing my way of learning on him, instead of letting him show me how he learns. When I allowed him to show me how he learns, I was able to have a whole new understanding of the way to help children across all spectrums, from mild to severe.

If we step back and look at the simple flow of development, to become a fluent reader, we all eventually leave the phonics model and become visual readers. Why is it wrong to think that some children come into this world with the phonetic code already imbedded in their brain? They do not need to go through the elementary curriculum of learning this code. They don't even need to show us that they know this code. They need to be given the opportunity to move forward and excel in learning. The worst thing that can happen is to hold a child back and continue to hold a child back who is functioning at higher levels, because they are not fitting in to the "typical educational development" Sounds logical and you would say, of course, it would never happen that a child would be held back from their potential in learning. It happens all the time, in school after school in special education, across the United States, because we look at a child and assume we know their intellectual level, we label and limit their abilities.

Let me give you the first example of Weston being my teacher. He had started kindergarten at a private Catholic school. The Arch Dioceses wanted to expand their educational experience to include special needs children. So perfect timing, Weston was able to be enrolled at the school. He had already had two years of prep work, in phonics, drilling him on the letters of the alphabet and sound symbol identification. Weston did not demonstrate any knowledge base or accuracy level for this area of academics. He entered kindergarten and immediate frustration set in. When again drilled on these sounds and letters, Weston put up a defense. He immediately withdrew and when forced to interact, he responded with playful behavior that was labeled by the school as aggressive and deviant. He ran away from the teacher and hid under tables and behind chairs.

After two months, the school asked that he be removed from the classroom. His mom began to home school him, but she didn't know where to begin? He didn't talk, write, or respond to presentation of information. Notice that I said he didn't do these things, not that he couldn't do these things. Too many times we assume a child can't do something, just because they are not responding to our modality of cueing. A change in modality and many times creates a change in response.

His mom came to me for help with learning, in hopes that if Weston was homeschooled, eventually he could go back to the classroom. I put speech

therapy aside and began looking for answers on how to teach Weston the basic academic skills. I made the same mistake as the teachers at his school. I thought I had to teach him the alphabet and phonics, before he could ever move on to anything else. I didn't get quite the same reaction that his teachers got, of chairs flying across the room, but I got a little boy who withdrew to a corner and rolled up in a fetal position. Instead of stopping and asking why, I was getting this reaction, I pushed forward to continue introducing the same thing, session after session, with no change in response. As I look back at this situation at my complete stupidity, I am embarrassed.

One day, after about two months of the same worthless routine, Weston responded by retreating to his corner and picking up a book from floor in the treatment room, and began madly flipping through the pages. This was not a new behavior. Weston had done this task endlessly for the two years I had known him. Anytime he was around books or magazines, he began rapidly turning the pages, one book after another. Of course this behavior had been labeled by me, as well as multiple other therapist and doctors as an Autistic characteristic. Autism was one of the many labels that had been given to Weston, since birth. In fact, some medical specialist had felt Weston was so Autistic, at the age of two, they told his mother he would never fit into society, and she should consider institutionalizing him.

I don't know what caused me to react differently to Weston's behavior of rapid page turning on this particular day. Usually, I just ignored this behavior, or removed the book from his hands. I think my change in reaction came from a feeling of complete frustration of not knowing how to work with this child. I felt worthless as a therapist and I was ready to give up. Submission of control is many times all it takes to begin a new and better path. Dr Phil has a great saying to bring people into the reality of their situation, of "How is this working for you?" It wasn't working for me or Weston, but until this day, I was continuing on the same path. Daily, God is just waiting for us to say, "I can't do it on my own... I have no solutions... You take control." This is not an admission of failure. This is a relinquishing of control, to the Master Healer of the Universe, and with this relinquishing of control, amazing doors open.

I basically threw up my hands that day and looked across the room, where Weston was curled up in a ball madly flipping through the pages of a book on clouds. As I stared at him, trying to have some revelation of what to do next, the thought crossed my mind, what if he really is reading that book. Feeling that the question I had asked myself, was so off base, but having no other great alternatives, I removed the book from his hands and I began to look through the pages. After reading the first two pages, I wrote out a short question that pertained to the text of the book and then two answers to go along with the question. I held up the piece of paper in front of Weston's face and read it out loud. Then I held up the choices, one in each hand. Weston looked at each of them and turned his head to the wall and swiped at one of the pieces of paper. It was the right answer. I immediately questioned my self. Was he really choosing this answer? I switched the papers between hands, held up the two answers again, and asked the question. Once again he had the same behavior, with a right response, only this time he looked at me after he answered the question. I quickly wrote out another question, with two answers. Weston answered that question correctly, with a more deliberate pointing and not an offhanded swipe. As I started to write out the third question, Weston began pounding the floor and getting so excited. He couldn't wait to answer the third question. Question after question he correctly answered about clouds. He became frustrated with me, that I couldn't gleam the information as fast as him and present it in question form for him to respond too. I was excited, thrilled, and amazed all at the same time. This child could read! He could not only read, but he could read and comprehend information at rapid speed. The reading level of this book was at about a fourth grade level and Weston was only about to turn six. I had found a method of extracting information from Weston and his knowledge base was above age level. He had allowed me the opportunity to see his amazing abilities for learning. A tremendous shift in my perspective of the way I saw outward characteristics of children with special needs radically changed in that one moment.

Weston had been trying to demonstrate his learning style and abilities for at least three years. He had been demonstrating it over and over by would refuse to put down books or magazines that he was looking at to come into the treatment room. I thought I was just appeasing a behavior, by allowing him to bring the book with him. He then began bringing books from home, and carrying a magazine with him at all times. Again, this characteristic was

labeled as Autistic and his true ability ignored, because he was only viewed as a nonverbal, quirky child; when actually he was a master teacher, and a tremendous blessing, wrapped up in different packaging.

This was only the first lesson Weston would teach me. Over the next five years, I would learn so much more from interacting with this child. My perspective and belief system of the true blessing of children labeled as "special needs," would grow and change ten times over and my approach to treatment would be completely altered.

Now that my eyes, heart and brain had been opened to idea, of looking beneath the "packaging", I would have the blessing of recognizing many more child teachers in my journey. Tremendous child teachers...tremendous lessons learned and I am grateful for every one of them and their patients while I learned these paradigm shifts in perspective of treatment.

Please read: [From a Mother's Heart](#), by Marilu Schmier (Weston's mom)
A picture of Weston is on the first page of [About Us](#).

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