

The Failure that Was a Success

How My Son's Losing the Spelling Bee Was the One of the Proudest Moments of My Life

My son, Samuel, turns eight in a month. He is a big, handsome boy. He loves karate and soccer and, most of all, Wii and computer games. In that he is like other little boys his age. He is also very sweet and loving, and he is an amazing artist. But he is not like other children. He has autism.

Many of you have been on this journey with me and Elaine, either because you are a regular part of our lives or because you have followed on Facebook or Times & Seasons or my Mormon Channel radio show. Those who are closest to me know that Samuel's diagnosis was the most heart-wrenching thing that has ever happened to me, striking my soul even more deeply than the death of my father. The hopes and dreams and expectations that I had for my son died that day.

But those same people also know that we have seen wonderful miracles that past four years. Some of these have come from hard work—from Elaine and family members and therapists and teachers and coaches. Some have come from God's good grace. Some miracles await the resurrection, when I know that, at last, all things will be made right.

Despite Samuel's Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), which makes noises and crowds and new situations terrifying for him, he wants to do be with other children and do what they do. Despite his verbal and social handicaps, he is mainstreamed in our local public school. It has not been easy, and each year presents a steep learning curve for him, for us, for his teachers, and even his classmates. But God is good, and most people are good. What seemed like a terrible bullying incident at the beginning of this school year turned out well as we wrote a letter to his classmates' parents, and they, in turn, talked to their children. His classmates now understand Samuel better, encourage him, and accept him.

And he has blossomed. He is very, very bright, his other disabilities notwithstanding. He is a good reader and he excels at math, doing problems in his head faster than I can. Winning the periodic class math contest, "Around the World" I think it is called, has filled him with confidence and let his classmates see that he is good at something.

So in a way we were not surprised when he came home from school and told us that he was one of the winners of his class spelling bee. He was visibly excited and proud, feelings he does not always clearly exhibit. And for days he would comment on how well he could spell, even telling people when we introduced him, "My name is Samuel, I am a really good speller." (Yes, that made me think of Rain Man, "I'm a really good driver!").

Still, his qualifying for the school-wide spelling bee filled us with real trepidation. He would be a second grader going up against fifth and sixth graders. And worse yet, he would need to stand up in the gymnasium in front of the whole school when sometimes standing in front of two or three other children in his primary class at church is more than he can handle. Yet he was insistent: he was going to compete in the school spelling bee, and he was going to win! I cannot tell you how many times he has read and re-read the Berenstain Bears book *The Spelling Bee* these past two weeks.

So all that we could do was work as hard as we could with him, and at first he cooperated. The spelling list consisted of 444 words, two sides of a page, each consisting of six daunting columns of words. It began with second grade words like "gang" and "kitten" but ended with truly intimidating words such as "duodenum," "kinesiology," and "euphonious." We dispatched the second and even third grade words pretty quickly, making it through the first three or four columns in a couple of days. Then the going got tougher, so Elaine, Rachel, and I all worked in shifts, pushing Samuel through 20–30 words a day. He really is amazing. He could look at the words once or twice and remember them pretty accurately.

But after a week and a half, Samuel began to reach his saturation point. 10 words were all we could pull off, and he started to resist practicing. His anxiety started to manifest itself in other ways, culminating in an uncharacteristic near-meltdown at karate Wednesday night. Yet when we asked whether he wanted to stop or withdraw from the spelling bee, he was adamant that he wanted to do it. Elaine and I were torn: we wanted to support him in something he wanted to do so badly, and we wanted him to succeed as much as possible, but we did not want to put him through the incredible stress any further.

So Thursday night came, and we had made it through 349 of the 444 words I think. We were proud of him, but increasingly worried. At the "dress rehearsal" Thursday after school he broke down, crying and needing to sit down, though he got himself together and trying a few more rounds, getting more words than he missed. Later that night as I kissed him good night, he asked for a blessing, something that he requests with surprising frequency but usually just "to feel better." This time the request was clear, help on the spelling bee, and as his Dad I listened to the spirit and tried to only pronounce God's will, wishing I could say more.

Everything was in order Friday morning as Momma, Daddy, and Nana got to Canyon Crest's gym early. The principal let me and Elaine sit on the side by the teachers so Samuel could see us . . . and so one of us could quickly get to him and intervene if the worst happened. His wonderful aide, Ms. Bunker, was seated off stage, not only to support him if he got scared or broke down, but also the help restrain his more obvious autistic behaviors—flapping his hands, silly talking, not paying attention.

When the teacher in charge introduced the second graders and my boy stood, confidently with a big smile, and waved to the assembled crowd I began to weep. Was this happening? Was the boy that Elaine could not get to enter the chapel if she arrived late for sacrament meeting or who was scared to enter his classroom for the first week or two of school each year really standing there in front of the entire elementary school, looking out and ready to compete?

I think he was the eleventh contestant to spell. He stood at the microphone, one hand on his hip and one on his chin, in his "thinking pose." We smiled. The teacher asked whether he was ready. "Yes," he gasped quietly. His word was "citizen." He knew it, and we knew he knew it.

But when the teacher asked him to repeat the word before he tried to spell it, exactly what we feared happened. He looked out at the crowd and panicked. He bent way over the desk and began to write the word out, as the participants are allowed to do. But he kept leaning farther and farther, until his head was touching the paper. "Samuel?" the teacher asked. "Repeat the word so I know you heard it." Nothing. "One minute, Samuel." Nothing. "Twenty seconds left, Samuel."

A little face looked up and at last said something. He looked so sad that my heart immediately broke. I could not look at Elaine, though we each clutched at each other.

"I can't," he said, and his tears began to flow.

He turned around and went back to his seat, dropping his head.

I am not one to get angry with God, but several of the times I have in recent years have been because of the plague of autism. I guess I was in a better spiritual place this morning. I was not angry, but I was very, very sad. Could Samuel not have made it through at least one round, to prove to himself and his classmates that he could do it? Could I not have one video clip of my boy succeeding, something we could show him later and celebrate as a family? Something we could show him when so many of the other disappointments that will inevitably happen to him in life bring him low?

But God is good, and his spirit was present. So many of our friends and family have been praying, praying for our little boy. God knew it. And he knew Samuel, and he knew us. A peaceful wave of comfort flowed

over me, and sadness was quickly replaced with pride. Most of the other people in that room, kids from the upper grades and the parents who were in attendance, had no idea what had just occurred.

When Samuel left the stage after that first round to sit with the other children who had been disqualified, he seemed okay. He was looking around, mouthing some words, no doubt to the last video he watched or book that he read. Ms. Bunker gently reached over to still him.

Sure I would have been happy if he had done well. Yes, I wish he could have made at least one round. But he was *in* the first round! He stood up there, more scared than most of us can even imagine, and he tried. In the end he "couldn't do it," but the same loving Heavenly Father that has brought him this far did not care that he could not do it. I might have wanted him to succeed so badly that it hurt, but God did not need him to succeed. He just loved him. So Samuel stood in front of me, his earthly dad, teaching me my own need for grace. There is so much I cannot do really. Without the Lord I am nothing, and I teach all the time that Jesus has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

So Samuel lost the spelling bee in the first round. I do not think that there is a prouder father in Utah today.