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Author: Unknown

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**Abstract**

This is a brief account but provides a valuable insight into the strengths of parent to parent groups, and how new parents of a child with a disability can be helped by speaking with older parents. **Keyword: Families**

# FAMILIES AND DISABILITY NEWSLETTER

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## Strengths:

*This issue focuses on our belief that families have many natural capacities.*

## Metamorphosis to Strength

Somewhere in these United States—maybe in your town, certainly in ours—a common, but very extraordinary, rite of passage is taking place. A family is experiencing a metamorphosis.

Picture the scene: A group gathers, perhaps in someone's home, in the offices of an Association for Retarded Citizens, or in a seminar room at a local hospital. There is only one circumstance of life that convenes this group: everyone there has a family member with a disability.

It is evening, and a potluck dinner is available. Two newcomers, a married couple, have brought their contribution. They stand somewhat isolated, socially awkward in this setting, not knowing anyone, unable to join in the quick conviviality.

Their physician, a guest speaker tonight, spots them.

"Hey, there! Good to see you. Glad you came. Want you to meet a fantastic person, a real veteran of the disability wars. Follow me. Quickly, before anyone else gets to her."

They move across the crowded room, hastily, toward an imposing older woman. There already are others gathered around her. Undaunted, the physician barges through them and impolitely interrupts.

"Elizabeth, come here. I want you to meet some rookies. Talk to them. Tell them what you've been through. You're strong. Reassure them. Thanks."

Elizabeth excuses herself to speak with this couple.

"I'm the old vet here, as you just heard. Been in the crucible so often that the doctor thinks I can help you. Maybe I can. Tell me about yourselves. Do you have a baby? A young child?"

The married couple—young, obviously overwhelmed, unsure of what is happening—hesitate to speak. Their silence is protean with possibility. Elizabeth abhors the vacuum, knowing it can be filled with power or left intact, vulnerable. She knows what to do and say.

"Come with me. There's a quiet place just down the hall. I'll bet you've got a new child with a disability. I had one too, decades ago. It helped

me to talk with another parent. Maybe it'll help you, too."

Out of the earshot of strangers, Elizabeth speaks to the young couple.

"I am Elizabeth. My son, Daniel, has mental retardation. He's now 40 years old and doesn't live at home with me anymore. I've learned a lot about life from him and maybe I can help you. I'd like to."

The wife speaks slowly at first, then louder and faster, her controlled voice yielding to emotion.

"Our baby is just over a year old. She has cerebral palsy; maybe mental retardation, too. It's so hard. We've cried, blamed ourselves, felt guilty when we thought about putting her up for adoption or in the state's custody, felt totally alone, been exhausted by her needs, cursed our fate and asked 'why us?', been so angry with her when she won't eat or spits up her food or flails her arms around when we are changing her clothes, and felt so much of our family's disappointment. Jane was the first grandchild. Some grandchild she turned out to be."

Her husband speaks. All of that is true. And there's the matter of the future: where she will go to school, how we will pay for her care and treatment, and—God, help us—whether we can have another baby. It's not easy, facing the future without answers. Heck, we don't even know what questions to ask."

Almost in unison, the couple say, "We feel so vulnerable. We don't know if we can face the future. Where will we get the strength?"

A hush comes to this trio. Elizabeth is silent, the couple is suddenly fatigued, clearly embarrassed by their emotion, surprised by their candor to a stranger. Tears appear—not just on the couple's faces, but Elizabeth's, too. She speaks, her quiet voice belying the determination of her tone.

"I have walked in your shoes. So many others have, too. One day, you will walk in ours. There is a whole world of parents like you. And almost

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*Metamorphosis*  
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every one of us has felt the way you now feel, asked the questions you now ask, harbored the doubts you now have. You are not alone. You will never be alone. That's the first lesson for this evening. Wherever you go, you will have an almost instantaneous bond with others; strangers soon will become friends. Hear me well: you are not alone, and never will be. That fact is a source of strength for you. You have begun to draw on it, even now, by talking to me."

Elizabeth pauses, letting her words sink in. The couple seem puzzled, but relieved. A pall is being lifted. She speaks again.

"Have you ever faced a problem you thought you couldn't solve? It doesn't matter what kind of problem—school, athletics, work, relationships. And then been surprised when you solved it?"

She sees the answer on their faces and continues. "That's the way it is going to be with you again. You have been strong and successful in the past. You know you are competent. Your track record proves that you can run the marathon of parenthood."

The couple turn to each other. Without words, they review their pasts. Each knows the other has overcome something hard. Now they look back to Elizabeth.

"Here is a third piece of counsel: something happened to your baby. Some quirk changed her. It will change you, too. She has a limitation, so that you can surpass your own limitations."

Now Elizabeth risks losing them. She has confounded them, has been too abstract. She retreats and recovers them.

"When my son was born, I was embarked on a promising career as a scientist. Others, like me, have also been started on a chosen road. But Daniel diverted me. He changed my path. Others' children had that effect on them. Your child will do that to you. And you will be stronger for it. You don't believe me now, but you will learn that I am correct. You now see life as a crisis, but you will come to see it as the vehicle for a different life and a stronger you."

The husband, incredulous, asks. "How can that be so? We suffer so much now. Jane is so challenging. Her needs are so great. Doesn't she suffer, too, like us? How can you know that we will be a different and stronger family?"

Elizabeth responds. "Such a good question, and so universal. How can good come from suffering? It comes because you will learn about your real selves from facing and surmounting the challenges you will meet."

The wife asks, fearfully. "Will we have to do all that alone?"

Elizabeth answers. "No, of course not. Many people will help you. And in turn, you will help others. There is a time for every family. Now, it is time for you to receive others' help. Later, it will be time for you to help others. You will be walking proof that families are strong. And you will help and inspire others. Believe me."

All are silent. The young couple know they have heard from a wise person. The husband speaks.

"Let me get this straight. I'm an accountant; I need to summarize all of this. First, we are not alone. Second, our competence in the past is proof that we can run the marathon of parenthood. Third, our daughter's ability is the fountainhead of our new ability to grow. Fourth, we will grow; our potential will be realized. Last, we will be able to help others, just as you help us now. That's it?"

Elizabeth smiles, pleased, as a teacher is with a student. She turns to the wife, who speaks.

"When Faulkner accepted the Nobel prize for literature, he said that man would not only survive, but prevail. Is that what you are saying?"

Elizabeth, her face aglow, answers. "Precisely. Now, let's get back to the Parent to Parent meeting, and you'll see what I mean." ■

