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CHAPTER 1

In HIS WAY

“Lord, I believe that You can do anything.
Please make Eric soar.”

I’VE LOVED THE OLD children’s movie *Dumbo* for many years.

Dumbo is a little elephant with enormous ears. In fact, his ears are so big that he trips over them all the time, producing all kinds of problems. Dumbo is mocked about his ears and snubbed when his clumsiness embarrasses the other elephants. But one day Dumbo discovers that his ears are large enough to act as wings. Upon realizing that Dumbo can fly, his only friend cries, “The very things that held you down are going to carry you up!” As the movie ends, Dumbo is rich, famous, and admired by all, performing in the circus as “the world’s only flying elephant.”

I remember watching the movie when Eric was a newborn. Sympathetic tears rolled down my cheeks as the other elephants ridiculed Dumbo. Couldn’t they see that he was beautiful? His big ears were just *different*, not ugly! I would sing the lullaby that his mother sang in the movie to my own adorable baby, little knowing that this movie would become more than just a story to me in a few short years.

Three years later Eric, by now diagnosed with autism, became fascinated with Disneyland’s Dumbo the Flying Elephant Ride. Every time we went to

Disneyland we had to ride it over and over. In those days the ride had a motto painted on its top, "Believe—and Soar." As we rode again and again I'd pray, "Lord, I believe that You can do anything. Please make Eric soar."

*"The very things that held you
down are going to carry you up!"*

I bought Eric an enormous stuffed Dumbo for his bed. He never cuddled it, but sometimes I did, and prayed again that Eric would one day soar, like Dumbo. I also prayed that one day he'd smile, he'd speak, he'd cuddle stuffed animals, and most important, that he'd tell me that he loved me. And do you know what? One day he did all of these things. In fact, the first unprompted sentence Eric ever spoke, at age four, was "I love you, Mommy." God has been so good to me!

One day Eric soared, too. I sobbed with joy as I listened to him give the valedictorian address at his high school graduation. (You can read his address in appendix C.) His top-ranked university recently announced that his GPA placed him in the top 5 percent of students in his college. It seems that the sky is the limit for the young man who was once a mute, unsmiling little boy with vacant green eyes.

I've thought about Dumbo many times since the summer when we rode the Dumbo ride over and over again. In the following years, as Eric struggled to learn to ride a bicycle, understand the concept of team sports, or make friends, he was often ridiculed, and I remembered Dumbo tripping over those ears. I sometimes cried myself to sleep, singing the little lullaby to myself.

Baby mine, don't you cry,
Baby mine, dry your eyes.
Rest your head close to my heart,
Never to part, baby of mine.
Little one, when you play,
Don't you mind what they say.
Let those eyes sparkle and shine,
Never a tear, baby of mine.

In His Way

From your head to your toes,
You're so sweet, goodness knows.
You are so precious to me,
Cute as can be, baby of mine.¹

BORN TO FLY

One day I realized that the reason Dumbo tripped over his ears was because he wasn't born to be a *walking* elephant at all. Dumbo was born to *fly*. As I understood this, Dumbo's story became a parable for Eric's life. I began to pray that his challenge might one day turn out to be the source of a unique ability, just as Dumbo's had.

Like Dumbo, Eric often didn't meet the expectations of other adults or his teachers. He was teased and sometimes rejected by his peers because of his differences. His doctors talked about his "neurological deficits" as if the essential truth about Eric was that he was lacking necessary qualities, which had to be made up somehow if he was going to have a meaningful life. But the essence of what made Dumbo himself didn't lie in what he was *unable* to do. Dumbo would never have flown if his ears hadn't been long enough for him to trip over in the first place. The tripping was a necessary stage in his development into the elephant he was born to be. He was never defective or inferior. He was just embarked upon a different path, born for a different kind of life.

I believe that this is true for all of our autism spectrum² children. Granted, their differences will probably keep most of them from becoming rich or famous one day. But each one is unique, and the contribution that each makes to our world will be, like Dumbo's, *because* of their uniqueness, not in spite of it. This is true even if their main contribution is in teaching the rest of us the joy that comes from loving and caring for those who cannot care for themselves. Because this is so, our focus as parents must be on so much more than simply trying to help our children be more like everyone else's.

If Dumbo were a child today, his loving mother may have arranged for plastic surgery to make his ears look more like the other elephants'. But if she had, Dumbo would never have made the distinctive contribution that he was born to make. Please understand that I'm not saying that we should just leave our autism spectrum children as they are, and not work to equip them for the most functional and rewarding adult life they are capable of. As you'll learn, I committed myself to finding all the assistance I could to help Eric to become all that he was born to be. But because I am a Christian, I also believe that God had a

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purpose in making Eric just as he is, and that my role is not primarily to “fix” him, but to help him realize his full potential as the unique individual he was born to be. Come to think of it, isn't this our role with our *typical* children, as well?

WHAT IS GOD'S PURPOSE FOR HIS LIFE?

I don't see Eric's challenges primarily as the consequence of a genetic mistake, a birth accident, or a vaccine injury, although any one of those things may indeed have happened to him. But the Bible teaches that his body was designed and the course of his life planned in detail by his loving heavenly Father, long before I ever dreamed of having a son. So if he did indeed suffer brain damage during his birth or from a vaccination, this, too, was from the hand of God, who is in control of all of the circumstances of our lives.

*For you formed my inward parts;
You knitted me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made
in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written,
every one of them, the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there were none of them.*

PSALM 139:13–16

We are told in Romans 8:28 that “for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” This means that everything God allows in the lives of believers (and their children) is designed by God for their benefit. This precious gospel truth ministered comfort to my heart during the dark early years when I struggled to believe that God was doing good things in our lives, even though I couldn't see them yet.

COOPERATING WITH GOD'S PURPOSE

Once Eric was diagnosed with autism I hit the books, seeking to understand as much as I could about how he was different so I could help him grow to his fullest potential. I studied the Bible too, looking for principles that would direct me as I sought to “bring [him] up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). I left my psychiatric practice and joined Eric in his early

intervention program, learning techniques for teaching him language and other skills. I also prayed like crazy, asking God to show me principles from medical science and the Bible that would teach me to help him become all that God created him to be.

Life was pretty chaotic at first! But slowly, order began to emerge from the chaos. Our mute preschooler, who tested in the moderately retarded range at his first assessment, grew slowly in his understanding and use of language. His IQ score rose, too. Our obsessive little boy learned to accept the word no and turn from what fascinated him to obey our instructions. Our anxious preteen, who would become hysterical when he couldn't control what was going on around him, slowly grew in the fruit of the Spirit *self-control*. Our angry teenager slowly grew to understand that God designed his body the way He did for a reason, and to believe that His plans for his future were good, even as he struggled with the desire for acceptance and understanding from his peers.

Jeremiah 29:11 says, "I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." God proved the truth of this Bible promise as Eric grew. He not only ministered increasing wholeness to Eric, He also brought increasing wholeness to me. I've learned so much from this journey. My goal in writing this book is to share what I've learned with others who are on their own journey.

TRAIN UP A CHILD IN HIS WAY

How did I go about helping Eric to become all that he was created to be? How did order begin to emerge from the chaos of autism? I began with what I believe is a fundamental biblical principle for child rearing, which I've found applies equally to challenged and to typical children. (See the glossary for an explanation of "typical.")

Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train up a child in the way he should go [and in keeping with his individual gift or bent], and when he is old he will not depart from it" (AMP). I like the Amplified Bible's version of this verse because it captures the intent of the original Hebrew, suggesting that we are not only to train our child to do the right thing, but that the manner of our training should be consistent with his natural abilities and interests. In recognition of this nuance, some Bible scholars have rendered the first part of this verse simply as, "Train up a child in *his way*."

This verse captures perfectly the approach I believe we need to take as we seek to lead our children toward wholeness. If we can understand how our

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children are different, we can learn to craft a teaching approach for almost anything they need to learn. Here is an example of how this works.

THE TRICYCLE

At age three, Eric had never ridden his tricycle. He would turn it upside down and spin the wheels, or push it back and forth while watching the wheels turn, but he'd kick and scream if I tried to put him on it and push him, or told him with words how to ride it. I thought that Eric didn't want to learn to ride and only cared about watching the wheels spin. This is how many autism spectrum kids play with their trikes, and most parents leave them alone, concluding that if they don't want to ride there's no reason to make them learn.

But Eric didn't really understand how the trike worked, perhaps because all he'd ever really noticed about it was its wheels. When I would put him on it and start to push him from behind, the movement of his feet on the pedals would startle him. Unlike typical kids, he had difficulty drawing conclusions from what he observed, so he didn't connect the motion of the pedals with the trike's forward motion. And he would never have picked up how to pedal his tricycle simply by watching other kids ride. Eric had no spoken language and didn't understand what I was saying, so he had no way either to ask for help or learn from my explanations. Most spectrum children are also unwilling to try anything new. Eric fought me when I tried to teach him to ride because of these differences.

The behaviorist we hired to teach me how to work with Eric understood these things about his challenges. He explained to me that spectrum kids are able to learn skills that they can't pick up in the usual way if they are broken down into a series of smaller steps. So teaching Eric to ride a trike "in his way" would be very different from the way the average toddler begins to ride.

Eric first had to be put on the trike against his will, kicking and screaming. Some parents balk at teaching their child to do anything he doesn't want to do, and indeed, one could reasonably ask why this was a necessary thing for Eric to learn. But the behaviorist explained that once Eric could ride, the trike would give him hours of pleasure. He also told me that it was worth the effort to push Eric through his discomfort to increase his abilities, because this would teach him that he was able to learn new things. He said that although autistic kids have to be pushed to learn at first, as they experience success they become more motivated to learn and less fearful of new things.

An autism spectrum child can be brought to a greater sense of competence, control over his environment, and ability to understand how the world works through teaching him “in his way.”

Once Eric was seated on the trike, the behaviorist pushed his left foot down on the pedal, then his right, so that Eric could see that as each foot went down, the trike rolled forward a little. His screaming slowly stopped. After moving the trike slowly and jerkily forward with each depression of the pedal, the behaviorist began to alternate Eric's feet in a smooth up-and-down motion. And, oh, the joy when Eric finally “got it” and began to pedal without help, just like the other kids!

Years later, Eric told me what was going on inside him before he could ride the trike. Because he didn't have the words to ask for or understand the help I was trying to give him, he played with his trike the best way he could figure out for himself. He fought me on learning to ride, not because he didn't want to ride, but because he didn't understand that I was trying to show him how to do it. And even though it took pushing Eric through a painful scene, teaching Eric “in his way” actually set him free to do something he really enjoyed.

This story is just one example of how an autism spectrum child can be brought to a greater sense of competence, control over his environment, and ability to understand how the world works through teaching him “in his way.” This basic principle can help you craft an approach to practical challenges like potty training. It can help you determine which schooling options and curriculum will best meet his needs. Applying this principle can enable you to train him to be self-disciplined in a loving and sensitive way. As you'll see, it's a very powerful key to helping your child reach his full potential.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

But real life isn't like the movies, is it? In the movies the clumsy elephant flies. The kid everyone made fun of grows up to be rich and famous. His parents and the girl who believed in him before he “made good” are vindicated for their faith in him. But in real life, people who are born different usually stay different, and most of them don't “live happily ever after.”

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So when I tell you that, like Dumbo, Eric soared, I don't want to try to sell you a fairy tale. He hasn't become "better than normal," and his peers aren't lining up to admire him and learn his secret for success. He still faces challenges in many areas of his life. But together we have blazed a unique path, Eric's way, through a very difficult childhood and adolescence. Now as he faces the future as a young adult, Eric is beginning to discover what God had in mind when He created him so very different from other people. And we also believe that God has only begun to do all the good things He's intended from the beginning, both in and through Eric's life.

NO FOOLPROOF SOLUTIONS

A number of books in recent years have offered techniques or treatments that promise to cure autism spectrum challenges. Invariably these books create a stir, as desperate parents try the latest thing. Also invariably, most wind up disappointed. This book is different. I don't have a foolproof solution to offer you. I can't promise you that if you follow the principles I teach in this book, your child will become just like a typical child. In fact, I don't even believe that Eric has become just like a typical person. Oh, it's certainly true that he's no longer autistic. But he's still different from typical young men his age—and I don't think that's a bad thing! He's on his own developmental path to becoming the man whom God created him to be, with his own unique strengths and weaknesses, just as typical young adults are.

As you come to appreciate your own child's distinctive way, your hopes may begin to change.

The Bible tells us that when we trust and obey God, He will minister increasing wholeness in our lives. This is a promise that we can take to the bank, because God is always faithful to His promises. We can expect God to slowly bring order out of the chaos of autism as we trust Him to illumine our path, and obey the principles in His Word, but this doesn't necessarily mean that our autism spectrum child will go to college, achieve independence, or even speak. But each and every autism spectrum child can glorify God as he lives by faith within the limits of the potential that God has placed in him.

I've come to understand much about autism through almost twenty years

of helping my own child and others, and I believe that you can learn to understand your child better, too. As you come to appreciate your own child's distinctive way, your hopes, like mine, may begin to change. Instead of hoping that one day he'll be the same as everyone else, you may find yourself beginning to hope instead that he'll grow to be the adult whom God designed him to be, differences and all.

This book is about teaching you to help your child to do just that. It will help you to understand how your child is different, and how you can work with his nature, instead of against it. And because we are spiritual as well as physical beings, it will also teach you principles from the Bible about nurturing his spirit and drawing him into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, from whom his true wholeness must come.

HIS OWN WAY

Parents of typical children walk a well-trodden path, worn deep by the experience of many generations and illuminated with many lights and signposts. God has called you on a different kind of journey. Wherever your child is on the spectrum, from mild to severe, he is different enough that the usual way will not work for him. You and he or she will need to blaze a new trail together. I can't show you the one true way for all spectrum children. Your child is unique, and his path will be unique, too. But I can teach you how to wield your machete to clear the brush, and I can tell you how to determine if you're going in the right direction. I can give you principles, but the exact nature of your journey is yours and your child's to discover. Let's take our first steps into understanding together, and may the Lord bless you with wisdom as we begin.