

Lessons from an Unplugged Life

Finding refuge from the sensory overload of the modern world

The children's church teacher was concerned about my son's spiritual education. Andrew wasn't attentive in children's church, and she wasn't sure how much he was learning about Jesus's love for him. I told her that he watches a lot of *VeggieTales* videos, and she seemed glad to hear it. In fact, she generously offered to lend us her complete library of *Beginner's Bible* videos, feeling that maybe through them Andrew could learn more about the faith.

I had my doubts. While I certainly have nothing against *Beginner's Bible* videos, and have been grateful for *VeggieTales* and their witty presentation of "Sunday morning values," I'm not quite sure that even Bob and Larry bridge the gap. Andrew, who was diagnosed at birth with Trisomy 21 (Down syndrome), is autistic—a disability that affects his ability to understand and appropriately use language.

While he is fascinated by videos—which show the exact same sequence over and over and over again—the content of their message is probably lost on him. For Andrew a significant message that he can understand is "popcorn" or "swimming" or "underdog" and even those messages usually require a visual (or olfactory, as the case may be) aid. A message such as "God thinks you're special and he loves you very much" probably has no more impact on An-

drew than "Blah blah blah blah-blah, blah blah blah blah blah-blah blah!"

I find myself asking, "Is God inaccessible to Andrew?" Has Andrew any chance of learning about Jesus? Can Andrew experience God's love for him despite his handicap? I cannot believe that God who is omnipotent and omniscient, should be incapable of relating to a child of his own creation because of a language barrier. If that were so, then it would be God who was disabled—unable to communicate or relate without language.

As I think about how God relates to Andrew, it occurs to me how powerful sensory experiences are for my son. Andrew has a sensory modulation disorder, a very common experience for children with autism. He experiences an unbalanced amount of sensory input—being alternatively overstimulated and understimulated by sensory input to his system.

When Andrew was three, bedtime became complicated. Though he was sleepy at the end of the day, he became more agitated instead of calm. He would run around endlessly, or sit and bang his head gently against the wall. Eventually we learned to hold him firmly as we rocked him to sleep every night. It was the deep pressure that his body was craving. That sensory input along with the calming rhythmic sensation of rocking comforted him and allowed him to rest.

I still hold him as he falls asleep, providing deep pressure and holding his restless limbs still, and as he quickly relaxes, he often smiles or even laughs, sometimes joyfully laughing himself to sleep. I think to myself, this is how my son knows that God loves him and cares for him. God holds my boy tight.

Tactile input presents issues for Andrew as well. We have learned to dress him in only the softest clothing with seams that don't form scratchy ridges that irritate his skin. At the same time, he craves tactile input and walks down the school hallway indiscriminately touching everything along his path: lockers, doorways, kids, teachers' backsides.

To provide more appropriate tactile input, we give him massages with a soft surgical brush. Other times we put him in an oversized bin of lentils. He loves the feeling of lentils on his toes! The sensory input calms Andrew and provides what he needs to be comfortably engaged in activities.

When I look in my rearview mirror and see Andrew wonderingly grasping but never catching the wind, I realize that God delights in touching Andrew.

Sometimes, Andrew seems to be a bit foggy or unfocused in his thinking. At those times he loves to jump on a swing, Superman style, and go flying—back and forth across his playroom. The input clears his mind so that



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he is ready for anything! As I watch him joyfully soar in movement, I know that God flies with my boy and gives focus to his thoughts.

Andrew has a limited capacity to comprehend theological language, yet he is in fact a boy who seems to understand concepts like peace, joy, and love—sometimes better than more capable people I know.

I find myself asking, “What might God be teaching us through those with disabilities?” We live in a society that is searching for meaning and spirituality. We want peace, but we can't seem to get a hold on it. Maybe God would have us learn to stop seeking him so exclusively in that special corner of our existence we call our “spiritual life”—to slow down and experience him in the thousand ways he reveals himself and

touches us every day.

Our world moves fast these days, from cars to planes to cell phones to the Internet—so different from the world where Jesus walked. I wonder if we have become adapted to permanently overstimulated systems.

A commercial I saw recently showed a well-dressed young man telling us that he was busy and under a great deal of stress and as a result suffered from tension headaches. His conclusion was “That's life!” and told the audience to take a certain brand of headache medicine, “so you can get on with life.” The commercial is indicative of a people who, like Andrew, meet their sensory needs by running around aimlessly and banging their heads against the wall for relief.

Sensory experiences can lead us to

the Father, but when they overwhelm us, we lose the ability to function as God intended. The grocery store, for instance, is an unbearable sensory experience for Andrew, and I haven't been able to put my finger on what exactly it is that makes it so. Usually, though, it is during checkout that something about the sounds, sights, or level of activity overwhelms him and he can't control his response to it all.

I don't think that the average person is all that different. When our systems become overwhelmed, we are unable to function in relation to our Creator and lose control of our behavior and thoughts, becoming irritable and losing perspective. For some of us, like Andrew, the grocery store is an overwhelming sensory experience. There are thousands of products to consider, sale prices to take into account, coupons to organize, and on top of it all time constraints, people in our way, and long checkout lines.

It's the same at home or work: phones ringing, the images and sounds coming from our televisions, the Internet, or even the sale ads in the paper all pressure us. Bright lights, the subtle and constant whirl of machinery, multi-tasking, too many demands on our time—the list goes on. The sensory input that the typical North

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American experiences in one day is so overwhelming that we are more occupied in coping with overwrought systems instead of reveling in the rich sensory experiences that draw us nearer to God.

Life is full of sensory experiences. I am learning to be selective with the sensory input I allow in my life. Just as I am finding that it is better to meet Andrew's need for deep pressure with a firm hug than by allowing him to bang his head against the floor, it is better to meet my need for sensory input with a balanced diet of experiences. No one can avoid all of the overwhelming experiences in our world, so we need to be selective with the ones we can.

We need a balance between two types of sensory experiences: those that, like a superstore, inspire anxiety and gives us headaches, and those, like a

walk on the beach, that inspire worship, gratitude, and peace.

While I don't claim to have the answers for anyone else, I find that my life is richer without Internet access and cell phones, and avoiding traffic, places of commerce, and television as much as possible. Pursuits that seem to instill a more wholesome attitude include reading, gardening, cross-country skiing. Those pursuits provide opportunity for prayer, contemplation, and community.

Since implementing sensory integration therapies into our home life, the changes in Andrew are incredible. He relates to us better and more often, makes eye contact more frequently, and temper tantrums have all but disappeared.

I find that, like Andrew, when I take care to control the type of sensory

stimuli in my life, my relationships and mood improve, and I am more available for the kind of service to which I am called. Most importantly, my connection to God does not depend on momentary circumstances and I am able to respond more gently and gracefully when spilled milk, traffic jams, long lines at the store, and any other annoyance happens to come along. Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," refers not to amazing superhero powers, but to Christ's ability to keep us based in him and to give us peace in whatever circumstance that should occur.

And like Andrew grasping God in the wind, we find he gives focus to our thoughts, his touch transforms us, and our hearts proclaim: Immanuel, God is indeed with us. □