



By Caryn Sullivan

THE LATEST LEAP OF FAITH
Extracting a son from solitude, delivering him to strangers

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I remember the conversation with my brother as if it was yesterday. We were grouching about the fact that obstetricians deliver babies without a parenting manual. As new parents, we felt ill-equipped for this momentous journey with our spouses. Since then, I've made thousands of decisions, ridiculously unimportant and overwhelmingly significant ones, without a manual. All the decisions – Pampers or cloth diapers, public or private school – formed a foundation for making the two critical parenting decisions my husband and I have faced.

The first, unimaginable decision, was whether to combat our daughter's potentially fatal disease with a bone marrow transplant that could either save her life or end it. Right choice, great outcome. The most recent was a quality-of-life decision for our teenager who has autism. With a lonely summer ending and a potentially friendless school year looming, we learned of an option that could change his life dramatically. Hence, the question: Should we uproot him from his solitary existence in suburbia and enroll him in a remote boarding school that offers rich potential, socially and academically?

Initially, it was almost a no-brainer for me. For there to be a chance of him leading a relatively independent life, our son needs lots of meaningful, structured interactions with others. While that was not happening on a sustained basis at home or school, it would be unavoidable in a small boarding school. A dorm with no Internet, TV or video games could break his troubling electronic addiction. His focus, sleep and disposition could only improve with daily outdoor recreation. He'd have to connect with at least one of the boys! This window of opportunity, opened in the home stretch of high school, seemed too good to be true. While some parents might give this fleeting consideration as they struggle with a challenging teen, we saw this haven of other bright but lonely boys who don't fit into the mainstream as the answer to our prayers.

Just nine days after learning about the school, I drove through the breathtaking beauty of rural New Hampshire with my silent companion at my side, his bags packed. The intellectual analysis that drove the decision receded into the back of my mind, and my motherly instincts took over. The wrenching realization that I was taking our son, for whom I had devoted the past 16 years of my life, across the country to live with complete strangers who know nothing about his habits, his idiosyncrasies, or his needs, finally struck me. The school's approach — you step back, we step in — suddenly seemed fraught with risk. Had I, the air traffic controller of this boy's life, actually advocated for this?

Almost on cue, the radio began playing a favorite tune from my youth, "You've Got a Friend." As James Taylor sang about how winter, spring, summer and fall, all you need to do is call and I'll be there, you've got a friend, the tears began streaming down my

face. I realized how desperately I wanted this to be true for our son. I already had the intellectual resolve that I needed for the decision. But the song's lyrics gave me the missing emotional affirmation that I was on the right road. Scores of parenting decisions had prepared me for this pivotal moment. In a huge leap of faith, I accepted that I had to extract our son from his autism-induced solitude and deliver him to strangers, in the hope he would find a friend. So, ignoring his plea not to leave him at this old-fashioned school, I took a deep breath and did just that.

In the days that have passed since we said our painful goodbyes, there have been moments when my heart has hurt so much that I fear it will burst. Knowing him as I do, I'm certain he is struggling, too. So I pray that he will find a buddy and stop wondering why his parents did this to him. I'm praying that some day he will hear that song and be grateful that at last he has a friend to call upon.

Caryn Sullivan lives in Mendota Heights with her family. Her essay, "Dancing with Despair" is featured in *Special Gifts: Women Writers on the Heartache, the Happiness and the Hope of Raising a Special Needs Child* (Wyatt-MacKenzie, July 2007). Her email address is carynsullivan@comcast.net.