

I asked Peter once, "Peter, when you think of God, what words do you think of?" Peter took a deep breath and looked me straight in the eye. Do you know what he answered? "Nice." And you know where he learned about that nice God? Through a congregation that loves and cares for him, as well as through his family and friends."

TRANSFORMED BY INVITATION

BY KATHLEEN DEYER BOLDUC

I've spent a lot of time during the last 28 years thinking about invitations, or, more truthfully, lack of invitations, for my son Joel. Joel has autism. Even the Church forgets he loves invitations as much as the next guy. Joel is often excluded because of the outward manifestations of his disability—he can't read, he has a difficult time concentrating, he doesn't do a very good job at sitting still, and keeping his hands to himself can be an issue at times. His differences make some people uncomfortable. He simply doesn't come gift-wrapped in a nice, neat package.

When Joel was 10, I discovered the then-newly published book, *That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People with Disabilities*, co-authored and edited by Ginny Thornburgh for the National Organization on Disability (NOD). I could barely contain my excitement. Here, in concise and powerful language, was an affirmation of my belief that God's house is meant to be open to all people. "Yes!" my soul shouted. "Yes! This is it! This is the truth I've known but didn't know how to articulate!"

The words in this book pulled me out of the mire of self-doubt

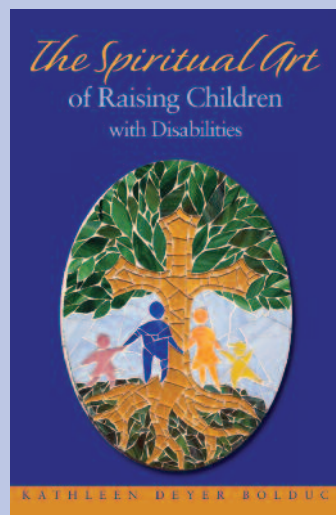
and depression and put wings on my feet, helping me access that place where I stand face-to-face with God and hear the Spirit's truths for my son's life. That place where I hear the invitation called out to Joel and all those children and adults who live with disability, chronic illness, or mental illness.

I met Ginny Thornburgh in 2009 at an inclusion conference in Katy, Texas. Currently the Director of the Interfaith Initiative of the American Association of People with Disabilities, she is also well known for her work in the Religion and Disability Program, which she founded in 1989, at the National Organization on Disability. A few months earlier, Ginny had graciously read my manuscript, *Autism & Alleluias*, for which she wrote a cover blurb. To my amazement this woman, whom I held in such high esteem, was eager to meet me.

To come into Ginny's presence is to feel recognized, known, loved and appreciated for one's unique, God-given gifts. She emanates a force field of energy that radiates enthusiasm and encouragement. After spending just a short time in Ginny's company, I returned home feeling recharged, recommissioned and realigned, both as Joel's mom and in my writing ministry.

Ginny and I connect again by phone on a sunny Saturday in March. I settle in with a cup of ginger tea. After a few minutes of catching up, Ginny begins our conversation by telling me of her introduction into the world of disability.

In 1963, at the tender age of 23, Ginny met, fell in love with, and married Dick Thornburgh, a "kind, smart, and witty" lawyer from Pittsburgh. The father of three sons, Dick had lost his first wife three years earlier in a terrible car accident, a crash which resulted in serious brain injury to his youngest child, Peter. Peter was just four months old at the time. Peter spent the next six months in the



A MOTHER'S PLEA Are you there, God? You have to show me how to raise this child. I'm helpless, Lord. I can't do this on my own!

hospital, where he underwent multiple brain surgeries.

Head over heels in love with Dick, Ginny threw herself into mothering with her characteristic, no-holds-barred enthusiasm. Her energy set off sparks, even over the phone.

"I was a third grade teacher at the time. I thought to myself, it can't be that hard being a mom! I had no sense in my young brain or soul what it is to be a mom, much less the mother to a child with a disability.

"Dick and the older boys adored Peter. There was lots of teasing, love and joy in that household. There was little realization for me, at first, of the long term consequences of Peter's disability. The bigger context for me that first year was, 'What's for dinner?'"

We both laugh.

"I gradually began to see that Peter was deeply loved, but had not been pushed to do or learn new things. There was no habilitation for him. No saying, 'We know you

can do this.' So, on the recommendation of a friend, we went to check out the services offered at what is now The Children's Institute in Pittsburgh, serving children with serious disabilities. And on my twenty-fourth birthday, when Peter was almost four years old, we walked up the steps of this wonderful facility. Peter was the first day student they

accepted with a brain injury.

"That's when my education began. OT, PT, speech therapy. The first thing they did was to craft a custom helmet for Peter, because he had a portion of the brain [with no skull protecting it]. The helmet allowed him to be up and running, falling safely, and doing all those things that four-year-olds need to do to grow physically."

In the meantime, when the family attended church each Sunday, the older two boys went to Sunday school while Peter stayed home with a babysitter. Two years later, when Ginny gave birth to a fourth son,

Bill, the baby was left at home with the babysitter as well. The family returned to church not long after the birth and everyone wanted to know when little Bill would be brought in to the nursery. No one asked about Peter.

"It's not as if they didn't know we had Peter," Ginny says. "We were out and about with all four children regularly. All of a sudden, my mind went, 'Boing!' I was hurt and angry. What about Peter? Why didn't they ask about Peter?"

The two of us sit in silence for a moment before Ginny continues. I watch a squirrel run circles around the maple tree in the front yard while I wait for Ginny to gather her thoughts.

"I went to our minister and director of Christian education and told them, 'This child is my joy. He needs to be here.' And you know what? I met absolutely no resistance.

KATHLEEN DEYER BOLDUC: I've spent a lot of time thinking about invitations, or, more truthfully, lack of invitations, for my son Joel.

**Ginny's calling
as an advocate for those who
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“Why didn’t we do that earlier? I asked myself. We didn’t come forward out of shame, laziness, lack of knowledge, confusion—all sorts of reasons. But now I was in mother bear mode. Soon we had a room assigned to us, and hired someone to teach the class. We even advertised in the local paper. The first Sunday came for the class, and Peter was the only child present! People were so used to being ignored in those years that they couldn’t even conceive of a program like this for their children. But I wasn’t about to give up.

“With Dick’s encouragement, I approached The Children’s Institute, and several children who were residents there joined the class. This was the beginning of my work in the field of religion and disability. I can close my eyes now and can see all six of us going to church together each week. Now we were worshiping as a family.”

Ginny’s calling as an advocate for those who live with disability began at that time, and 47 years later she is still going strong.

“Peter, all along, loved everything about faith, Jesus, and the Bible. He was our only son who *wanted* to go to church every week. I read the Bible every morning at breakfast, and when Peter is visiting, he

asks me to read it out loud. I’ll read a few passages to him and try to get back to my quiet time, and he’ll insist, ‘Read more! Read more!’

“Because Peter has lived away from us since he was 22 or 23, we do a lot of phoning, and once a month he visits us for three or four days. One day I asked him on the phone, ‘What’s new at church, Peter?’ He

was quiet for a moment, and then he answered, ‘They know my name!’”

“Amazing!” I answer, tears coming to my eyes.

“Yes. That’s a pretty deep theological statement, isn’t it? And another time, when we were worshiping with him at his church, it came time for the Passing of the Peace. This is not your typical Passing of the Peace. People get up and walk all over the church. It’s a time to talk, and let people know you care about them. Twenty-three people came up to Peter that day. I counted. Twenty-three! Peter looked at me and said, ‘This is what church is.’”

“That’s incredible,” I say. “What wisdom!”

“Yes,” Ginny answers. ‘This is what church is.’ It’s the sacred gift of friendship. Once I know your son, Joel, and know all about him, and find that he’s excluded from an event, I’ll say, ‘What about Joel?’

Why isn’t Joel here? Is there a reason for that?’ When I take time to walk in Joel’s shoes, I can anticipate the exclusion and make the event do-able for Joel. We want self-advocacy, but it’s mighty nice when someone else advocates for us—for our children.”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Peter brings so many gifts to us, and to his church. His grace, his smile, his laughter and contentment. He slows us down. He changes the whole dynamic. He takes us from frantic to a slower, more thoughtful pace.”

Ginny pauses a moment. “You know, it’s all been God and Peter. It’s nothing we’ve done. Peter wanted to be confirmed as an adult. He met with his minister five times beforehand. The minister helped Peter write his confession of faith. On the Sunday that he was confirmed, both Dick and I were so anxious when the minister invited us up front with Peter. But Peter stood up, his face grace-filled, confident, and shining.”

“What did he say?” I ask.

“My name is Peter Thornburgh. I am happy in my church. I am happy to have Jesus in my heart.”

“What a statement of faith,” I answer. “Why do we make it so difficult? It’s really that simple!”

Ginny has one more story to tell about the uncomplicated yet deep theology held by her son. “I asked Peter once, ‘Peter, when you think of God, what words do you think of?’ Peter took a deep breath and looked me straight in the eye. Do you know what he answered? ‘Nice.’ And you know where he learned about that nice God? Through a congregation that loves and cares for him, as well as through his family and friends.”•

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Kathy is the author of *The Spiritual Art of Raising Children with Disabilities and Autism & Alleluias*. Her books, blog, and contact information are available at www.kathleenbolduc.com. Kathy also blogs at www.specialneedsparenting.net

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 “What wisdom!”
 “Yes,” Ginny answers. “This is what church is. It’s the sacred gift of friendship.”

REFLECTION EXERCISE

In her foreword to *Amazing Gifts: Stories of Faith, Disability, and Inclusion* (p. xvii), Ginny asks some important questions.

Take time to sit with these questions

today. If, after answering the questions, you find that your church is missing out on the transformational gifts of people with disabilities, set up a meeting with your pastor or director of Christian education and ask them to go over the questions with you.

- ☼ Is your church a place where someone like Peter Thornburgh could come to understand God as “nice”?
- ☼ A place where someone who uses a wheelchair, scooter, walker, or cane can easily enter, make friends, worship, and go to the rest room?
- ☼ A place where someone with a long-term mental illness or psychiatric disability is honored and welcomed?
- ☼ A place where pain, difficulties, and weakness can be revealed?
- ☼ A place where an older adult is comfortable suggesting ways to improve lighting and sound systems?
- ☼ A place where no one is ignored and no one is treated as a nuisance or troublemaker?
- ☼ A place where children and adults, with and without disabilities, are included, affirmed, valued, and enjoyed?