

## THE THREE STAGES

by  
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### The Three Stages in the Growth of a Parent of a Mentally Retarded Child

We have had some splendid speakers in our meetings from time to time, who have spoken to us on a variety of subjects, mostly concerned with the medical, psychological and training aspects of the mentally retarded child. But for a long time, I have felt that there was a place for a message of a different kind. I believe that we, as parents, need some message peculiar to ourselves, some comforting idea, some torch to light our way and keep us from stumbling in the darkness of our distress.

If I were to give a title to this message, it would be "The Three Stages in the Growth of a Parent of a Mentally Retarded Child."

I trust that you will not think me forward or presumptuous in trying to bring that message to you--in the last analysis, who, that is not one of us, can speak with authority? And so, please bear with me; I do not mean so much to preach to you, as to think aloud myself.

We have all trod the same path of disappointment and disillusionment, and so we speak in a common tongue; in a language which only they can understand, who have learned it from the lips of Life itself.

That awful moment of disclosure, when the doctor, perhaps with an aching heart, told us that our child was not normal! I so often think of that blessed man, that physician who has passed on to his deserved reward, who had faced many a grim crisis with unflinching courage. He met me at the top of the stairs which led to the maternity ward, as I came bounding up two at a time in response to the attendant's, "You have a baby girl, Mr. Boyd--you can go up now." I shall never forget his face, so benign and gentle and yet so tortured with that message fraught with finality of Fate, "You will want to kill me if this proves to be false," he said, "but I must tell you--I am afraid that your baby girl is not a normal child. I think she is a Mongoloid." The earth seemed to rise up around me and the heavens seemed about to crash upon my head. A Mongoloid child! What was a Mongoloid child? I had heard the name, but my recollection was vague and tinged with horror. A thousand thoughts raced across my brain with kaleidoscopic rapidity. Was this the result of heredity? Was there no hope at all? Why did this have to happen to me? Why had God singled me out from all other men, to place this burden upon me? Why? Why? Why?

And then in the days that followed, the queer, hysterical thoughts that kept sweeping over me like an engulfing wave--that false sense of shame--what would people think?--how could I face them?--what would I say?--what did the future hold?--how could I go on living?

Oh, you know and I know, above all others, what silent agonies, what repressed hopes, what buried miseries we experienced in those dreadful days. Time passed, we knew not how, and eventually brought with it a kind of healing numbness. We went about our daily work mechanically and without purpose. There was no ray of sunshine, no relief from the piled up pain. And then one night I came to the Parents' Group in the blessed old East Paterson Firehouse, and for the first time realized that I was not alone; that there were many others who had the same problems. "Misery loves company"; but I never fully appreciated that until I joined the Parents' Group.

That was the first stage in the growth of a parent of a mentally retarded child, the stage where one is entirely subjective, concerned almost wholly with himself and the effect that things have upon him.

Then came the second stage, when I began to think a little less of myself and a little more of the little one, of Bonnie. What did the medical profession know about retarded children? What treatments were available, what clinics, what help? What methods of education and training were being used?--in short, what resources could I tap for the benefit of my child? I was astounded and stunned to learn that the medical profession knew scarcely more than we did about causes and remedies and treatments. I knew by now that this was not a new problem; then why had nothing been done about it throughout the years? There was no use in blaming the medical profession, or in condemning the educational authorities; if there were a fault, it clearly lay with the parents of the forgotten children of other years, who had locked their problems in their hearts and spoken about them only in whispers! The public did not know then, and does not know now, of the very existence of the situation. And only when an aroused public says, "This thing shall not be," will it cease to be.

I do not know your thoughts and your experiences, but there is a sameness about us, as people, which makes me think that we are not much different in our reactions. I believe that all of us have gone through that first stage of self-pity and the second stage of concern primarily for our child. And, heaven forbid, some of us may stop there in stunted growth, as did our forefathers! It all depends upon our thinking; upon whether we think that all is lost, or whether we think that a great opportunity lies before us. It was Shakespeare who said, "For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." I found that brooding did not solve my problem, nor Bonnie's; that bitterness and self-pity, on the contrary, were eating at my soul, impairing my efficiency in business, and undermining my chances for happiness. I knew that I must find some philosophy for living, some way to go on. And I found it! I found it in one of the oldest of books, and upon the very first page! "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth," it begins. Then a little farther on, "and God created man in his own image; in the image of God created he him." And then still

farther on, "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." I thought about our little one, and my first reaction was: "It is a lie!" And then I thought about it some more.

Whatever our several religious tenets may be, we all believe in God, an omnipotent Being, all-powerful and supreme. And we all have some belief in a life after this one, despite the fact that it is "the undiscovered country, from whose bourne no traveler returns." We think of that life as an eternity, and in our poor human way, we try to prepare ourselves for it. All this passed through my mind, and then other excerpts from the great Book suggested themselves: "Behold, thou hast made my days as an hand-breadth"; and, "Man that is born of woman is of few days, and full of trouble"; and, "My days are like a shadow that declineth"; and "As for man, his days are as grass; as a flower of the field, he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more."

I was confused, for if God is perfect, then his work should be everlasting; particularly, if it is made in his image. And yet here, repeatedly, was a contradiction. And then I had my answer! My days are "like a shadow that declineth," when compared to that eternity of life that I believe awaits us all. I remember my loved ones as I saw them, but because I can no longer see them is no reason for me to believe that they have ceased to live. And so, it all came back to an understanding of the word "man." And I knew what it meant--it was the spiritual, the everlasting, eternal man. That was what I wanted for Bonnie; that was the big thing that overshadowed all else. Now I knew that I need have no fear for her. I could speak for her from the lips of Whittier:

I know not where his islands lift  
 Their fronded palms in air;  
 I only know I cannot drift  
 Beyond His love and care.

Now, at last, I was able to look at life a little more objectively, to see more clearly, to think more rationally. When we can do that, we are ready for the third stage in the growth of a parent of a mentally retarded child. We now begin to think more of what we can do for others, and less of what they can do for us.

I was humbled and discouraged by the thought of how little I could do as an individual; but I was challenged by the realization of how much we could accomplish together! No one knows accurately how many mentally retarded children there are in the United States. Educators estimate the 2% of the school population is retarded, but the great majority of the mentally retarded children are never admitted to the schools. Considering the numbers in the schools, the institutions and at home, their number must run into the hundreds of thousands. And each child has two parents. Why, that is an army! Together, and with a common purpose, those parents could work miracles! They could sweep away all resistance and enlist the interest and support of the entire country! Money for research, training courses for special teachers, schools for all!

"God works in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform." There may be a reason for our affliction. Just think of it! This problem is as old as time. It has been no respecter of color, race, creed or time. And in all the thousands of years, nothing has been done about it! God's timing is always perfect. What a perfect coordination of factors for success, in the forever solution of this age-old problem! Modern medicine has made more progress in the past twenty-five years than it made in the previous one hundred. Sulpha, penicillin, cortisone, heart and brain surgery, and many other miracles of modern medicine are a reality; research has come into its own. And precisely at this time of medical progress, Parents' Groups are spreading all over the country--an army is falling in--the trumpets are sounding!

But it must be an army of individuals, each one inspired with a purpose, and the will to see it through. It will not be easy; it will not be quick. There will be many a disappointment and many a set-back. It will take courage on the part of all of us--the courage of that valiant old soldier who fell on the field of battle, and then cried out to his comrades:

Fight on, my men, cried Sir Andrew Barton  
I am hurt, but I am not slaine,  
I'll lie me down and bleed a-while,  
And then I'll rise and fight againe.

Yes, this is the third stage in the growth of a parent of a mentally retarded child. And how rewarding it can be to all of us! How it will broaden our lives and make them rich and pure and purposeful! You all remember those lines of Shakespeare that you struggled with in high school:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath; it is twice blest;  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

And as we experience the rewards that can come when we forget about ourselves, when we merge the problem of our child into the problem of all mentally retarded children, we shall realize the promise: "Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down and shaken together, and running over."

And then we shall be able to look into our children's eyes and see them as they really are--God's children--and be thankful!

"And God created man in his own image; in God's image created he him." "And God saw everything that he had made and behold, it was very good."