

Amazing Grace, Jack, and Multiple Intelligences

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Gloriously expanding limits lives at the heart of the arts. All of us who are in kindred spirit with VSA, whether affiliate or like-minded organization, have experienced that dramatic glory in our artistic ventures; however, before I delve into my true tale, it is incumbent to discuss the fact that inherent in the construct of the arts is the notion of multiple intelligences. According to Dr. Howard Gardner of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and author of *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (1983), the arts are cognitive. Human cognition is comprised of learnable potentials, otherwise known as intelligences, which just about everyone has. In Gardner's own words in *Frames of Mind*, "a human intellectual competence must entail a set of skills of problem solving—enabling the individual to resolve genuine problems or difficulties that he or she encounters and, when appropriate, to create an effective product—and must also entail the potential for finding or creating problems—thereby laying the groundwork for the acquisition of new knowledge" (pp. 61-62) in one or more cultures. Aha! Creating a product and problem solving are two essential components of art-making, whether the discipline is music, literature, dance, theatre, visual, or folk art. In fact, I have come to believe that multiple intelligences constitute the fabric of our lives.

Initially, Gardner proposed seven intelligences, which had been selected after years of research and which met a priority matrix of "signs" (1983, pp. 60-66) that included fulfilling the previous definition, as well as appearing in a symbol system of

codification and existing in a specific biological part of the brain, to name a few. About the time Gardner wrote *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* (1993), he came to recognize eight areas of cognition. According to the Project Zero Harvard Graduate School of Education website (April 21, 2010), those intelligences are musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, bodily-kinesthetic, logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, and naturalistic. In a brief overview, musical intelligence involves discerning importance and meaning in music and/or its creation; interpersonal intelligence is person to person communication; intrapersonal is, "Know thyself;" bodily-kinesthetic involves physical movement; logical-mathematical involves numbers and conflict resolution; linguistic involves language communication; spatial involves architecture and visual art; and naturalistic involves classifying nature in minute detail. Although each intelligence is named so as to be fairly easily recognizable and understood, please see Notes for more explanatory definitions.

Gardner maintains that there is no set order of primacy; no singular intelligence is more important than another. Different intelligences come to the fore, depending on which problem needs to be solved or which product needs to be created. Most often, various intelligences work in concert. Multiple Intelligences Theory (MI) does not stress the omnipotence of the logical-mathematical and linguistic, as does modern Western Society. The theory has little to do with static numbers like IQ, GPA, or SAT scores. Amazing and unique to Gardner's theory, intelligence is indeed learnable. It is also dynamic, multi-leveled, and exciting. When a multiplicity of intelligences is employed, effective learning and teaching take place, in both academia and art. As people

dedicated to the arts and education, we know that heartfelt communication and understanding take place, as well. Everything about MI heretofore, as well as more astonishing research can be found in his many books, including *Intelligence Reframed* (Gardner, 1999), *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons* (Gardner, 2006), and *Five Minds for the Future* (Gardner, 2007). They are published in a cornucopia of languages, as are the majority of his writings.

Following is a true story involving multiple intelligences as manifested in the arts, in tandem with fearsome tragedy and magnificent wonder. My extraordinary friend, Grace, has given me permission to relay her life tale.

Grace is a remarkable, enlightened woman, who was catapulted unwillingly into a life that she could have never imagined. By her own recounting to me, this journey, which involves her beloved son, his dedicated educators, her wonderful new husband, and Grace herself, has taken her from the denizens of despair to illuminated gratitude. She has evolved enormously as a human being, and so have the many people who have come to know her and her son.

During her first marriage, Grace gave birth to a beautiful, healthy baby boy, whom she named Jack. Weeks after he was born, she reluctantly returned to her job as a draftsman. Her husband stayed home to care for the baby. One evening, she came home from work to find her son flailing his arms wildly, with a vacant look in his eyes. In addition, his pupils had slid to the corners of his eyes.

“What happened to the baby?” she queried timidly. Her husband replied in disinterested, icy silence. Grace knew that something terrible had happened. After she

rushed Jack to the hospital, it was determined that the innocent, eight-week-old child had been the victim of Shaken Baby Syndrome. Grace's husband was the perpetrator.

The baby's life was in jeopardy, and he was put on life support. Soon she was informed that if she “pulled the plug,” Jack would die, which would be “for the best.” Her husband had been arrested and jailed (and there he would remain for several years), so Grace single-handedly decided to take her son off life support. For the next several hours, she held him, spoke to him, sang to him, and wept. She was determined to make those few, precious hours meaningful for both of them. She desperately wanted her son's life to have a purpose and promised that it would. Indeed, that promise was the commencement of their bountiful sojourn.

Jack lived. He needed care twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Grace was assured by teams of medical experts that her son would always be a “vegetable;” therefore, she really ought to put him in an institution and start her life anew. She flatly refused to put Jack away somewhere because her ex-husband would be out of the institution of jail one day, and it seemed the cruelest of ironies that the victim should be institutionalized and not the criminal.

She applied for and received funding that allowed her to quit her job as a draftsman in a nuclear plant and stay home to care for her son 24/7, 365 days a year, with virtually no respite. It was cheaper for the government to pay her to do this than to pay a trained team of full-time professionals to care for her son in an institution. Grace received rather meager compensation to care endlessly for her son and all the in-home, life support equipment he needed.

Eventually, she became impoverished, which is the situation in the United States for so many persons with disabilities and their families, according to the American Association of People with Disabilities website (April 21, 2010). Poor but hopeful, Grace turned their tiny, somewhat shabby home into a haven of sorts for mother and child, jammed with her son's equipment. Her determination, energy, and sorrow were huge. Fortunately, she received emotional and spiritual sustenance through music. The two of them, alone and surviving, were buoyed by the universal language of song. Jack could not see, had quadriplegia and extreme brain damage, but he could hear. Grace selected a variety of music, often soft rock renditions, which played lightly in their home at all times of the day, eight days a week, just like the famous Beatles song. Musical intelligence sustained them. What I call their intrapersonal wells were being nurtured and, thereby, giving them an auxiliary, intangible means of priceless life support.

Coincidentally, music is what brought Grace and me together. Several years ago, I had sent out several music and disability information requests via the Internet. I was aghast that my daughter was about to be banned from all high school co-curricular activities like Women's Choir, Drama, and the school music trip to Williamsburg, Virginia, due to too few credits as a direct result of her rightful and necessary, disability accommodations. She was on track with state credit requirements and had good grades in inclusive "regular" education classes, but at her particular high school, they had raised the barre and demanded more credits than the state regulations. Only in that respect was she short of credits. To ban her completely due to a legitimate result of her educational disability accommodations was (and still is) completely illegal. After mighty, linguistic protests via my voluminous acoustic voice, pen and paper, and email

to the governor, the school district reversed that decision with an addendum to my daughter's disability accommodations, otherwise known as her Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Relieved, but still smarting from the heartless, near-act of interpersonal discrimination, I wanted to hear stories of other students with disabilities and the importance of the arts, especially music, in their lives and IEP's. Grace was one of the first to respond.

I have a long, professional history in music and theatre, especially as an artist in residence, often for at risk students and populations with disabilities. The busy, non-profit company that I founded in 1990, Theatre in Motion of Metropolitan New York City/New Jersey, features professional performing artists with and without disabilities, serving fully inclusive populations of all ages. We offer original, participatory educational theatre programs of my design—including a new, much applauded musical CD, entitled *Disability Pride*, which “speaks” artistically via musical, linguistic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences. In addition to being an arts educator, I am a disability rights activist. I also currently serve as Arts Outreach Coordinator for VSA New Jersey and, over the years, have collaborated with VSA South Africa and New York City, as well as Accessible Arts of Australia. I well know about many respected studies on the positive effects of the arts on education, such as *Critical Evidence: How the ARTS Benefit Student Achievement*, which states, “The American public, by an overwhelming margin, believes the arts are vital to a well-rounded education; more than half rate the importance of arts education a ‘ten’ on a scale of one to ten” (Ruppert, 2006, p. 1) and *Eloquent Evidence: Arts at the Core of Learning*, which states, “Schools that incorporate music, art, drama, dance, and creative writing into the basic curriculum

have found that teaching the arts has a significant effect on overall success in school” (Murphee, 1998, p.3). As already noted, Gardner's brilliant MI Theory has shown the world that the arts are indeed cognitive, abundantly created with and expressed by all eight known human Intelligences. As proponents of the arts, we surely are aware that creative cognition plays in harmony with the emotional and psychological aspects of every art discipline. Despite my being fortified with the entirety of this notable information, it turned out that Grace's loving inclusion of music in her son's life and IEP became the most profound information of all.

Initially, in Grace's teeny-tiny, dark, cramped home, a soothing music repertoire was her primary psychological support when almost nothing else could bolster her. Although her son eventually began to respond emotionally and cognitively to the melodies, during the first several years of his life, he cried loudly—non-stop. Later, she said to me that music had saved their lives. Here is a list of their favorites: “Canon in D,” “Winelight,” “Broken Wings,” “Fields of Gold,” and songs from Nickel Creek, Sting, Boston, and Little River Band, just to name a few.

Along with the healing music in their lives, there co-existed important, healing bipartisan legislation, which had initially begun as a passionate, united, grassroots movement on disability rights that soon walked and rolled in tandem with like-minded efforts of state and federal officials. The ensuing historical information, as presented in *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation* (Fleischer Zames & Zames, 2001), constitutes basic, well-known events in disability rights history in the United States:

By 1996, when Jack was four years old, *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) was about to be strongly crafted from the preceding 1975 legislation; *The Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA) was six years old. The twenty-three-year-old *Rehabilitation Act* (or 504 legislation) required that public schools be accessible, and *Brown v Board of Education* was forty-two years old, which made “Separate but Equal” illegal. Technically, the latter made all kinds of discrimination in schools illegal, not only that of ethnicity, but discrimination against students with disabilities, as well. Obviously, legislation was in place to provide for Jack's non-segregated, free, appropriate, and least restrictive public education. Sadly, in many cases, schools disregarded much of this legislation. Grace, however, had different fortune. She went to the local public school and registered her son—not for Special Education, but for inclusive pre-K. After a small protest, he was accepted. Grace came on board to help teach everybody as much as they needed to know about the “mainstreamed” inclusion of her son in a typical classroom.

The next quantum leap, which involved his IEP disability accommodations, was her idea. One day, at the dentist, two little children from school recognized Jack and came over to say hello. They were so excited and pleased to know him. “He's in my class,” one of the children said with pride and a celebratory sense of diversity that more adults need to learn. Without any prompting, they opened the door for Jack so that Grace could push his wheelchair through the door without struggling. Then it occurred to her that these little children, her son's non-disabled peers, would benefit from honorable Peer Helper assignments at school. Plus, it would benefit her son. And that

is exactly what happened because her son's public school thought this was a fabulous idea, too.

Throughout the school day, Jack needed assistance that the Peer Helpers could provide: moving his wheelchair, turning up music, and, best of all, being friends and companions. To be a Peer Helper was indeed an office of honor. Each week, the teacher would select a different Peer Helper. This was public service at its purest and best—helping one person, thereby helping the group dynamic and lifting oneself up, as well. Each of his non-disabled peers reaped the benefits of improved self-esteem, respect of self and others, inclusion, and a positive sense of a happy, diverse community. So, too, did the teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators. Without question, this arrangement also benefited Jack. The Peer Helper addendum became a prized part of his IEP year after year. The personal intelligences flourished for all to enjoy, as well as linguistic intelligence because everyone spoke to him throughout the day and bodily-kinesthetic intelligence in the happy movement of the wheelchair, a freeing and beautiful extension of Jack's being.

As Joseph Shapiro's edifying book, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (1994), points out in text and title, this equal rights movement of people with disabilities is neither borne of nor desires pity. That notion is infantilizing and archaic, even to a group of kindergarten children. Public service, inclusion, reasonable accommodations, self-esteem, respect, diversity, tolerance, and pride in an integrated community are mature interpersonal and intrapersonal virtues that everyone in the classroom came to know. Year after year, disability was normalized at the school because disability is, after all, normal. Needless to say, Jack's formative

grade school years reaped tremendous profits for everyone. Jack's full inclusion was conflict resolution at its finest (logical-mathematical).

Of course, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences prospered. In an email to me on April 20, 2010, Grace wrote that a mother of one of Jack's second grade classmates had once said, "I just wanted to let you know how grateful I am that my son is Jack's Peer Helper. I had a hard time getting my son to school on time. He didn't want to get up, and he's always behind in his school work. Then when he started to be Jack's Peer Helper, he would say to me, 'Mom, I have to be in school early today. I have to help Jack get off his bus.' And since he started to be Jack's Peer Helper, he started to do better in his school work."

Undeniably, Jack's life was and continues to be purposeful, just as Grace has always wished.

When he was nine years old, Grace married again. Her husband is, in her words, a loving and wonderful man, who adores her and her—their son. They moved to another state, where a similar Peer Helper IEP was established.

By the start of middle school, it was no longer appropriate for her son to attend an inclusive regular classroom, as the academic material was intensifying, and he had profound brain damage. He started attending a school for students with all kinds of disabilities. Grace decided to bring a fresh perspective to his new IEP contract. Naturally, this petite iron butterfly had a great idea once again.

Grace had started to plan for her son's future career because after the age of twenty-one, the IDEA and the public school system would no longer be responsible for him. She envisioned a type of independence and future for him, well into adulthood. At

this juncture of career planning, I shudder when thinking of the medical experts, who had bemoaned that he was hopeless. Maybe someday we knowledgeable humans will get over this Cure 'em, Hide 'em, or Kill 'em mentality. I think we forget that, in actuality, most able-bodied folks are temporarily non-disabled!

Grace attended Lafayette College to study engineering, and she is designing a digitally run greenhouse for her son. She feels that the abundant, fresh oxygen is best for him. In addition, Jack has started to genuinely respond to music. Her dream for his future and career is for him to operate the greenhouse, which she is designing for him, with various music cues as his program prompts.

Guess what? Everyone, who is a part of her son's IEP (teachers, paraprofessionals, administration, case workers, etc.), is extremely excited about including MUSIC, MUSIC, MUSIC in his IEP!!! Responding to music, music therapy, musical adaptive physical education, music to motivate his developing skills to activate sensors and switches! Musical intelligence is an integral part of Jack's education. This will help him prepare for his future career running his own custom-built greenhouse.

Grace and her supportive, loving husband have built a beautiful, completely accessible house in a forested setting. She and her family are surrounded by Nature, their very own sylvan Arden, as close to living joyfully ever after that anyone can get.

With her permission, I am sharing Grace's April 15, 2010, communication with me: "The Power of the Arts is amazing :) We are still working on our dream for Jack. We are on the planning stage for the automated greenhouse [which they will soon construct themselves]. It is now going to be attached to a barn with 2 horse stalls. Underneath the greenhouse benches, we will raise mealworm colonies to sell for

feeding bluebirds or bait for fishing. I have a few favorite causes: protecting bluebirds, saving wild mustangs, saving baby seals and preventing child abuse. Wish me luck :)"

In an email on April 21, 2010, she shared some information from his current IEP: "Most of Jack's daily schedule should be sensory based, with Assistive Technology and Music as curriculum priority The automated greenhouse plan is still . . . expanding. One of the main goals is to have other students involved in the project as well. This will provide Jack with peer contacts, and visiting students with new information. Also Jack will be able to spend time with some of his close friends. This could be done as a field trip, or a vocational field experience.

"Jack appears to enjoy being at [school]. Sometimes, when the class becomes animated, Jack's vocalizations and attentiveness actually increase. He is a happy teenager who is well liked by his peers and staff. His smile and happy disposition are appreciated by all who come in contact with him.

"Music Therapy: Jack continues to participate in weekly music therapy sessions in the sensory room He will often turn his head and move his eyes when he hears music. He will at times smile or laugh when he hears another person make a joke. He is encouraged to touch and manipulate a variety of instruments Jack has run a power point presentation on Shaken Baby Syndrome with the use of head switch/jelly bean switch and adult assistance" He gave this presentation to the entire school and distinguished, invited guests.

Ponder that.

Obviously, their artful lives well lived include not only musical intelligence, but also naturalistic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic,

spatial, and linguistic. Multiple intelligences and creativity are the very fabric of their lives—yours and mine, too.

Grace and her son, Jack, have become unlikely teachers for many people. In fact, I think of them both as gurus. If that term displeases, try these words: role-models, disability rights activists, leaders, entrepreneurs, and, yes, the plural applies because they are a team. A+

Notes

The ensuing information has been gleaned from *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (Gardner, 1983), *Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice* (Gardner, 1993), and *Multiple Intelligences: New Horizons* (Gardner, 2006):

Neurologically, human cognition is comprised of eight learnable potentials, or intelligences. They include:

1. Musical—the ability to discern meaning and importance to percussion or to sets of rhythmically arranged pitches and/or to produce such percussion and pitch sequences as a way of communication, which is used to solve a problem or create a product that is useful in one or more cultures

2. Interpersonal—the ability to notice and make distinctions among other individuals in regard to their moods, motivations, and temperaments, which is used to solve a problem or create a product that is useful in one or more cultures

3. Intrapersonal—the ability to access one's own feelings about life, which is used to solve a problem or create a product that is useful in one or more cultures

4. Bodily – Kinesthetic—the ability to utilize the body and physical movement, which is used to . . .

5. Logical – Mathematical—the ability to rationally deduce by sound reasoning and/or to understand the science of numbers, which is used to . . .

6. Linguistic—the ability to understand and use language, which is used to . . .

7. Spatial—the ability to transform objects of two or three dimensions within an individual's environment to give some kind of order or meaning to the space, which is used to . . .

8. Naturalistic—the ability to see and hear specific links in nature, to recognize patterns in nature, and classify to minute detail, which is used to . . .

According to Gardner, there is no set primacy or order for any of these intelligences. Different intelligences are important at different times, depending on which product needs to be created or problem solved.

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Of great importance are my substantive, interpersonal communications with Grace, 2004 – 2010, in-person and via the Internet.