

## A mother's guilt

So this med student calls the other day and asks  
*What do you think about ADD?*  
Like it was some sort of poll.  
And I'm thinking,  
*How did you get my name? Who gave it to you?*  
*Leave me alone!*  
*Leave my son alone.*  
*He's just trying to live a life*  
*by your rules; with your labels.*

You know, nothing really scientific pops into my head  
when someone says ADD.  
I'm sure the little white-coat was looking for stuff like:  
*Inability to concentrate, acts impulsively*  
you know, the medical works.

What I see in my mind are things like report cards:  
*Bright, promising young man,*  
*If only he could apply himself more, and focus.*  
I see five years, in five different doctors' offices:  
*There is nothing wrong with your son, ma'am.*  
*Open your eyes, he's the best-behaved child in this office.*  
*If you are really having problems at home*  
*it's nothing that some good discipline won't cure.*  
*Have you considered parenting courses?*

I was convinced  
that anyone else could raise this child better than I could.  
That doesn't make sense now, of course;  
my other children were fine.  
But we took a year of parenting courses.  
My son wrote lines every time he did something impulsive.  
He lost privileges, including the furniture in his room  
whenever he acted out ... well ... exploded.  
I have an image of a room  
stripped bare  
except for a mattress.  
*Everything children have or do is a privilege.*  
That's what they teach you in parenting courses, you know.

I see my marriage  
hanging on by a thread:  
*Listen, honey, you heard the doctor,*  
*there is nothing wrong with our son.*  
*I'm only gone for 9 hours a day*  
*and he's in school for 5 of them. Get along.*  
*You've got to be firm with him.*  
*You can't expect him to listen to everything you say.*  
*Pick your battles.*  
*Stop egging him on.*  
*Well, of course he doesn't behave like his sister.*  
*He's all boy.*  
*What is your problem?*  
*Aw, hon, don't cry. We're in this together.*

I see the faces of my other children:  
the fear every day after school that there'd be a fight,  
the tears when they heard their brother spanked  
and their parents yelling,  
huddled in a room,  
trying to block out the noise of the fighting,  
the anger in their eyes toward a brother  
they couldn't understand,  
who was tearing their family apart.

And the guilt.

How could I pass guilt on to children that young?

*Mom, he doesn't need a shrink.*

*Translation: Please don't go to that doctor or he'll find out  
how I tease my brother and know it's all my fault.*

And I remember the fights.

Oh my God, the fights.

He'd come home from school  
with that half-crazed look in his eye.  
a time-bomb ticking.

He had sat still, trying to be good all day  
and he couldn't stand it anymore.

He would blow,

I would yell,

someone or something always got hurt.

And afterwards, we would talk:

*You know, you really are a good kid, a caring person.*

*But there is something wrong here,  
this just isn't normal.*

*I know, Mom.*

His voice would break.

*I don't know what is wrong with me.*

*I hurt too many people.*

*I just shouldn't be alive.*

*I want it to end.*

I think he was nine then.

And then there was the diagnosis.

Took the shrink damn near a year to make it.

My son, he was not misdiagnosed.

It was a relief to have a reason.

A reason to assure him he was not bad.

Something concrete to work with and try to alter.

A reason to give people for all of his differences.

Of course, he doesn't look different,

so they'll always expect him to act like he doesn't have ADD.

They'd rather not admit there's something they can't explain.

They'll never accept that he runs to the beat  
of a different drum.

It's easier to claim bad parenting.

Other parents don't get it.

How can they, when their kids can sit for 5 minutes without  
crying

screaming

lashing out

and do their math homework.

How dare they judge us?

How dare they question the existence of ADD?

Were we looking for an excuse?

Are people with dyslexia looking for an excuse  
for not reading?

Maybe I wasn't right to let the doctor give him a label.

Maybe I needed the diagnosis more than he did.

When I look back, I see oh so many pills.

Gravol at Christmas

so that he'd go to sleep and Santa could come.

Gravol at his birthday

so he wouldn't hit the other children.

If I could have given him Valium I probably would.

What kind of mother drugs her kid all the time?

And Ritalin.

Our doctor calls it Vitamin R.

I don't care if it is overprescribed,

as long as it works.

You have no idea how real ADD is

until you've seen your child reassess the world on Ritalin.

Normalcy.

That crazed look in his eyes of immediacy and fear,

so much fear,

fades.

The worst memory, though,

is the sound of my own voice:

*Sit still and do it*

*Would you quit that incessant tapping, you're driving me mad*

*Godammit, look at me when I'm talking to you*

*You've made your siblings afraid of you*

*Don't you ever call me a bitch again, that's 400 lines*

*If you can't get a grip on yourself,*

*you're never going to make it in this world*

*You have so much potential, why can't you just focus*

*You're tearing this family apart*

*Why can't you get your shit together*

I can't brush that off as frustration.

No matter how wrong

the doctors and teachers may have been,

no matter how well my other children may have turned out,

no matter how much ADD played a role

in my son's behaviour,

no matter how happy the family is now,

no matter how well he is getting along,

no good parent

would have said the things I've said to my child.

My baby. My little bird with a broken wing.

I was supposed to make the world better for him.

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