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Life at 8 mph

*How a Man with Cerebral Palsy
Taught Me the Secret to Happiness*



PETER BOWLING ANDERSON

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The Elephant Awakens

Somehow, he passed.

By the grace of God, two late nights, and a gallon of coffee, we plowed our way through Richard's seventeen-page sermon on the nature of unconditional forgiveness, submitting it eighty-six minutes before the deadline. Because his professor had to turn in his grades soon, we didn't have to wait long to learn our fate. Richard received an "A" and passed his class by the width of a fingernail.

As if that triumph wasn't enough to celebrate, Richard and Michael's story aired on TV the following week. It was raining good news. Richard couldn't stop smiling. He invited over a few friends from church for a viewing party. The segment aired at the end of the news broadcast and was put together well, though my fifteen minutes of fame had to wait since I was excluded from the final cut (I needed a good agent). I could tell Richard was proud and pleased as everyone congratulated Michael and him. It was the happiest I'd seen Richard yet, and it seemed like he'd finally entered a peaceful, satisfying period of life after so many years of struggle.

Until the next day when he started bawling.

I had no idea what was wrong or how to console him or if I should leave him alone to collect himself. I stood lost in the middle of his living room watching Troy climb onto Richard's lap to lick his face. It was actually quite poignant. Just as I began backing out of the room to let the two of them hug it out, Richard blubbered, "Wait...wait."

I froze, hoping he might forget I was there if I stayed silent and motionless. Then he waved me over, and the only thing racing through my mind was, *Please don't hug me. I'm not Troy. Hands off!* Aside from my mom, my family had never endorsed displays of affection. Or encouragement. Or acknowledgment, for that matter. My three highly competitive older brothers, dad, and I we were all obsessed with beating each other at anything, and a pat on the back, much less a hug with tears, simply didn't happen. That poor sap would've been heckled mercilessly for a decade. Most of the time, we pretended not to know each other in public.

We were very enlightened and mature.

On top of that, I was extremely quiet and shy, so Richard, an extroverted, affectionate, emotionally accessible man whose love languages clearly included physical contact, was my antithesis. My hands began trembling as I approached him. What did he want from me that able service dog Troy Aikman couldn't offer? I was a leftover sardine compared to Troy in this department.

Richard pointed to the couch for me to sit down, and I practically shrieked, "Yes, sir." Whatever it was, we could work through it together from a safe, healthy distance with no touching. He slowly inched his chair into the center of the room and turned so he was facing me. He took a moment to compose himself. I waited patiently. I was in no hurry to dig into this. Something told

me it was going to be heavy with no easy solution. I considered offering to fetch him some sweet tea, always a hit, yet kept quiet.

Finally, Richard calmed down and looked at me, while gently petting Troy on his head as he sat dutifully beside the wheelchair. Richard then said two words that forever changed our lives: "I'm lonely."

I almost blurted, *Don't look at me*. I didn't know what he had in mind, but this definitely wasn't in our contract. I managed to restrain myself long enough to hear him out. He said, "I miss being married...but I don't miss my ex-wife." He started chuckling and coughing, and I grabbed his giant cup for him to drink. I sat back down, and he continued, "I need a companion, somebody to talk to. Somebody who loves me for me." He started to say something else, but his crying resumed, and Troy immediately climbed up on his chair. I sat with my hands clasped in my lap, unsure of what to do. I supposed a comforting pat on the back was in order, but again, how did one go about that?

After a few moments, Troy climbed down, as Richard said, "And Michael needs a mom. He's so young. His own mom's a train wreck." I couldn't help but laugh out loud. I wasn't sure if that was appropriate, yet thankfully, Richard laughed, too.

"Well, what about at church?" I suggested. "Maybe there's somebody nice there you could meet." I felt like a pathetic knockoff version of Dear Abby.

Richard shook his head and explained, "They're all married. Or young."

I frantically tried to think of another possible solution before he started crying again, though this wasn't my field of expertise. All I could come up with was, "Maybe you'll meet someone in the community. Or through a friend."

“Nobody knows no one,” he grumbled dismissively. He was careening toward the abyss. I needed to pull him back before it was too late. I scratched my head and looked around, desperately trying to think of what he could do. And then I saw his computer.

“Hey, Richard, have you ever thought about online dating?” I asked hopefully.

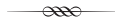
There was a stigma attached to dating sites when they’d first appeared that they were only for the weirdest, most unattractive, and socially inept losers who couldn’t meet people in the “real” world. But now public perception had shifted to the more accurate view that not everyone was nineteen with plenty of years and options to bump into their soulmate. For a thirty-eight-year-old divorced mother of two, one of the best avenues available to find someone willing and able to step into her world was the Internet. Richard was looking for a rare woman who could meet his unique, incessant needs while feeling completely content. There wasn’t one of these ladies in every corner drugstore. We needed the widest possible perimeter for our search: the world.

At first, Richard didn’t respond, yet he also didn’t reject it. I could tell he was on the train to Funk Town and didn’t want to raise his hopes, but this idea had undeniable potential. He held out as long as he could, until finally he sighed and said, “What do I have to lose?”

We were on. I sat down at his computer and began our quest to find Richard a new wife. If I’d stopped for two seconds to think about how daunting the task was, I probably would’ve scrapped the idea and taken Richard for ice cream to distract him. Not only was I attempting to help guide him to a master’s degree and, ultimately, a job in the community, which would take years of diligent work, but now we were going to create a new family for him. It

was the toughest challenge I'd ever undertaken, and not typical for me at all. I tended to avoid responsibility so I could remain focused on my own passions and pursuits. Yet after many years of this, maybe I was ready for something else. Something more. I needed to put somebody else first for a change. The greatest rewards were given away, and I wanted to try that approach. I wanted to help Richard, or at least give it my best shot. I really didn't know if we could pull it off, but like Richard said, we could try. I was motivated and optimistic, and he'd stopped crying. It was a step in the right direction.

Admittedly, it felt good to help him. When we'd found out he passed his class, it was a lot more fulfilling than I'd anticipated. Even though I was working closer to thirty hours a week while still getting paid for only ten, I didn't feel cheated or used. I felt needed. I wasn't just another warm body to fill a position, I was indispensable. That was a job perk not easily matched.



I quickly realized that my official title of tutor only scratched the surface. We worked on Richard's new class most days, yet I also typed emails for him, helped with phone calls, made him meals, fed him, occasionally changed his shirt if he spilled food or tea on it, and accompanied him on errands. Basically, I was his assistant. At first, it bothered me that we were doing so many other things unrelated to schoolwork, but as time passed, I cherished the variety. Each day was broken up into thirds: a few hours on classwork, a few hours on calls and letters, and a few hours out in the community. It made the day fly by much faster than if I'd merely sat in front of his computer for eight hours. It was another unforeseen job benefit and a daily reminder of how much I didn't know.

There was no shortage of reminders.

When I'd first returned to Fort Worth, my top priority was to move my roommate, Bryan, and myself out of his parents' house. They were nice, considerate, and generous people, but I wanted our own space. We looked at several apartments yet didn't take the plunge. If we had, we would've been evicted after the first month or two. We simply couldn't afford it, but living with Bryan's folks turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Not only did it permit me to help Richard for less pay, it also allowed Bryan to remain with his parents, especially his mom with whom he was very close. Bryan had struggled with depression, manic mood swings, intense anxieties bordering on panic attacks, and severe ADHD for nearly twenty years. He'd been suicidal, gotten arrested, and slept in his car many nights. He was now on medication, going to counseling, back in graduate school, and trying to get his life together. Living with his folks was exactly where we needed to be, yet I'd been convinced of the opposite.

Bryan and I had also started a band in Dallas with a tremendous female vocalist. Before Bryan found her, I was certain we needed to limit our search to Fort Worth because of the distance to Dallas. Yet when he played me some of her recordings, and then I heard her in person, Dallas seemed like a block away.

Everything I'd been sure of was dead wrong, and the last thing I wanted turned out to be the best. My lack of foresight and judgment astounded me. But rather than beat myself up on a daily basis, I decided to concentrate on the flipside of the coin: At least I'd remained open-minded. If I hadn't, I would've missed out on it all.

This was the attitude I adopted for my job with Richard and for life in general. I even said a prayer on my way to work each

morning that I was willing to do whatever God wanted just as long as He made it clear to me, because otherwise I'd miss it. I needed it spelled out in large, *crystal*-clear capital letters. With blinking lights and fireworks. And a foghorn. Of course, I could've just used George Costanza's method on *Seinfeld* and done the opposite of my natural inclination. That sounded foolproof.

Though, the first time Richard asked me to help him defecate, I started reevaluating my gut instinct's accuracy.

I'd been lucky my first few weeks with him—no pooping on my watch. I felt like I was a free man living behind enemy lines. I was on borrowed time and I knew it. One day, the elephant napping in the room was going to need to go potty, and I was thoroughly unprepared for it.

Part of why I'd dodged the bullet for this long was Richard didn't want to waste our time together relieving himself. He needed my help getting schoolwork and paperwork done. He could go to the bathroom later. He was also being incredibly considerate of my germaphobia, of which he was well aware. He always tried to have a bowel movement in the morning before I arrived, or he simply held it until I left. It was one of the most selfless things anyone had ever done for me.

Unfortunately, that didn't make this any easier.

We were both sitting in front of his computer. He was looking at me, waiting for my response to his request, while I scanned the screen for a portal to another galaxy. Finally, I glanced at him and the need was obvious: Richard had *I GOTTA GO* tattooed across his anguished face. There was no way out, and besides, this was my job. I'd signed up. He was under my care until the night shift arrived.

Maybe it won't be so bad, I reassured myself as we relocated to Richard's bedroom. *We'll laugh about it...it'll be fun*. I was panicking

and desperate. His room appeared twice as small as usual. I wanted to wash my hands and we hadn't even done anything yet.

That reminded me—gloves! “Hey, Richard, uh...do you happen to have some...gloves I could wear?” I hoped this wouldn't offend him, but at the moment, I was far more concerned with not fainting.

He smiled and said, “You want two pair?”

That sounded like a splendid idea. Did he have plenty to spare? I wondered if I could stretch them over my entire body. I needed a Hazmat suit.

I found the gloves in a bottom cabinet in his bathroom and squeezed my hands into two pairs. When I turned around, Richard pointed to another cabinet. When I opened it, I discovered a box of surgical masks. I smiled and nodded, and he started laughing. It was a very thoughtful gesture, and I happily slipped one on. “Just hurry up before I go in my pants,” he cracked. I looked like I was ready to perform open-heart surgery.

As he positioned his wheelchair underneath the lift and I lowered the bar with the three straps, he asked, “You okay to wipe?”

I was still coming to grips with what was about to happen; I really didn't need him to spell it out. Yet it got worse.

He looked up at me and specified, just in case there was any confusion, “In the hole.”

I almost passed out. *He didn't just say that, did he?* My head felt hot and my mouth began watering like I was about to vomit.

I didn't respond, I simply gritted my teeth and tried to get through it as quickly as I could. After I unfastened his ankle bands that kept his feet from sliding off his footrests, and then removed his shoes, he told me to take off his dress shirt to get it

out of the way. Next, he instructed me to put only the strap under his arms and hook it to the bar, raise him enough to slide off his pants, and then lower him back down into his chair and place the other two straps around his bare thighs and fasten them to the bar. Richard didn't wear underwear because he had a condom catheter attached from his penis to a urine bag strapped to his left ankle. Suddenly, I was face to face with a naked man. Things were spiraling wildly out of control. I'd understood I'd have to remove his pants for him to be able to use the bathroom, yet reality left nothing to the imagination. I literally closed my eyes for a moment trying to picture the beach.

Then I had to pull the condom catheter off his penis and unsnap the urine bag from his ankle. I was starting to have an out-of-body experience and could see myself reaching toward his private parts as I frantically tried to wave myself off from above. *ABORT! ABORT!* I screamed from the ceiling, to no avail. I hustled to the bathroom and emptied the urine bag in the toilet, and then placed the bag and catheter on the end of his bed, reminding myself never to touch that corner of his bedspread again.

Richard was now ready for takeoff. For weeks afterward, I couldn't erase the image of a naked Richard flying through the air on his lift toward the toilet. I watched a different movie every night to bury the memory as deeply as possible. Nothing worked.

The final hurdle of the operation was by far the toughest, and at that point, my knees were wobbly. I felt like a dazed boxer in the last round of a slugfest. Couldn't Troy take it from here? He was wisely staying out of this. I raised Richard off the toilet and moved him in position to wipe him. I really wished I had put on a third pair of gloves. I grabbed a wad of toilet paper as thick as a phone

book and tried to steady myself. I was sweating through my mask. His small bathroom felt like it was on fire. Could the lights have been any brighter? I wanted to turn them off so I couldn't see what was happening. To his credit, poor Richard just hung there on his lift waiting for me to pull it together. He didn't complain or sigh or anything. He knew he was breaking in a pitiful rookie.

There was no way out except in, so I took my softball of toilet paper and did my duty. Between the second and third wipe, the room started spinning and I had to put my left hand on the wall to prop myself up. I didn't think I was going to make it. If we waited long enough, the night attendant would arrive and she could finish. Of course, that was in three hours. Maybe Richard would fall asleep up there and we could just ride it out.

I shook my head and refocused on the job at hand. I needed to finish and put him back in his chair. It wasn't safe or comfortable for him to be suspended in the air this long. I wiped two more times before the mission was successful, and then dressed and returned Richard to his chair as expeditiously as I could.

Then I threw away my gloves and mask, and scrubbed my hands for three minutes.

Richard thanked me and smiled, and asked, "Did you survive?"

I wasn't sure. I was soaked with sweat and felt like I needed a shot of whiskey. That was more physical contact than I had with myself. I didn't think I could ever get used to it, and I was concerned that it would become a regular occurrence now that we'd tamed the elephant. To this point, working for Richard wasn't as bad as I'd projected and I didn't dread going to work. But if we started taking daily trips to the bathroom, I thought I might have to quit.

Of course, I didn't say this. It wasn't fair or right to present Richard with the ultimatum, *Stop pooping or else*. I felt pretty evil just thinking it. Yet it was my attitude and I didn't know if it would change. I hoped time would take care of the matter, either allowing me to grow used to accommodating all of Richard's needs or spacing enough distance between crises so it wasn't overwhelming. I still felt like I wasn't exactly cut out for this line of work. But Richard liked me, and as hard as I resisted, he was wiggling his way into my world full-time. I wasn't even looking for other jobs anymore. He took up most of my week, and besides, East Gourmet Buffet had just started serving chocolate mousse on their dessert table. Time was already paying dividends.

"Yeah, I made it," I answered Richard, with a thumbs-up for reassurance.

"You wanna switch to mornings?" he joked with an even wider grin.

I waved my hand and shook my head. "No, thank you." I was on the right shift, for more reasons than I could've guessed.