Waiting Amidst Limitations

By Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

Weather and George had been unkind to the old picnic table. Years of rain, sun and snow had lifted the burnt red paint off the graying wood. The strips of faded color that remained had curled into tiny and worthless troughs. If you put your hand on them, they'd flatten and break. Small pieces would stick to your palm while the rest would lay helpless, waiting for the wind to scatter them into the sun scorched grass.

George's contribution to the table's demise came from his selection of the bottom right corner as his perch. That choice didn't spring from a labored process of decision or from the dictates of tradition. The small area behind his townhouse just didn't offer many other options and his mother always insisted that he stay close by.

But from that sagging table he could gaze down the long stretch of backyards that cascaded along the rear of the sprawling complex. From that spot he could detect any movement that might foreshadow a chance to say hello to one of the neighbor kids, or ask a mother if she were happy today, or the mailman, who usually came about now, if he brought any letters or packages with a sample of some new cereal or candy. He could see any of the cars that entered past the faded Brighton Valley sign to take up position in one of the many parking spaces that remained empty during the long and shapeless summer day.

Hour after hour he'd put his feet on the bench, rest his small head in his hands, and wait. Every few minutes he'd get up to search for events of interest. More often than not a tour of inspection yielded nothing but renewed exasperation with the cruel persistence of the status quo.

If he had looked up, he would have seen his mother absorbing the view. She

stood at the small sink, colored in that 1970's favorite color of harvest gold that made no one think of autumnal fields or ingots of precious metals. Of course, George wouldn't have seen the sink or its chipped surface or the soapy water that hid the green plastic dishes or the remnants of the breakfast oatmeal that floated near the surface or the old clock radio that marked the passage of the minutes by flipping black numbered squares. He would have just seen her round and soft face, dark hair the color of tea speckled with sugar, and green eyes that often misted when she gazed at him out the kitchen window.

Gloria's thoughts ran through the same gamut they almost always did when she saw George sitting on the bench: a gut piercing dread of what might not be, a sadness that perfused her soul, a crusader's spirit and fight that had become feared by administrators near and far, and sprinklings of remorse and apprehension over an open wound of helplessness.

But more than any single feeling bloomed a profound, primordial, aching kind of love. A love usually reserved for swaddled newborns or maybe for children just at that young age when their love for you is whole and unblemished because the world to them seems so intriguing and your enthrallment with them is equally complete. She once heard some bearded expert say that children who are most daunting to rear are often the ones to whom we're most closely drawn. They need us. Their problems keep us close and occupied and committed and always thinking about some scheme for salvation. She had to agree.

What affliction beset George? Nothing even remotely enchanting. No acute illnesses or elaborate syndrome laying in wait for a miniseries. He just wasn't very bright. Well, in real terms, he was retarded in that gray zone between the average and

the profoundly limited.

It took her years to even say the word retarded. She went through every possible euphemism and maneuver to keep that concept at a bay. She mocked the professionals with their tests, she insisted on services for him that were far beyond his reach, she dashed from office to office looking for quick fixes for an enduring condition. She did everything she could do to keep the realities of his limitations from blinding her.

She knew that retardation was now the chic theme for TV shows and movies. The concrete and clueless drew laughs across the network channels and theater screens. Those who were dumb or even dumber were the straight men of the age. Not that she was offended. But she had good reason to know that the life of a retarded boy was rarely glamorous. Worse, the often-supportive treatment of TV friends was not in abundance along Brighton Valley's sidewalks and playgrounds.

Yes, she thought, it was another day of keeping George occupied. Or trying to. No easy task day after day. And it was nearly impossible during the summer months. The common timeoccupiers of childhood were generally lost on George. Baseball games, books, running into the wood with friends to act out some tribal warfare or scientific expedition usually proceeded without George in tow.

She learned early on that simple routines were the joys of George's life. He adored the familiar repetition of the music tape his uncle made him. He actually loved to attend church services because he liked the order and predictability of its content. His cereal bowl was always the one with the slight chip on the edge and a faded picture of bears sloping down the sides. And he always sat in the same spot on the picnic bench because that was his place and it felt comfortable. When life is confusing because so much is hard to comprehend, she thought, a steady routine must offer friendly security.

And he always needed reassurance that, even when life got baffling, someone kind would be near to show him the way.

But it was love that served as the fuel that kept the engines of his soul humming. His face blazoned with joy when family would stop by, or when the man from two apartments overtook him to a baseball game. He paced back and forth behind the front window, peering every few seconds to the left in hopes of spotting expected visitors. It was painfully hard for George to contain himself when the excitement of human contact overtook him.

George lived in a classic nether land: too limited to live as others, but not so limited that he couldn't judge his differentness and feel lacking. It left him desperately frustrated and with a vague, unarticulated sense of being odd. But more than anything, he often felt a deep loneliness that started with a gulf between him and his age mates that then widened until he felt like a castaway left abandoned on a distant shore.

Of course, it wasn't all bad being George. For one thing, he didn't worry much. It dawned on Gloria that worrying requires a certain capacity to anticipate dread. You need to have concept of achievement so it can loom ahead and mock you. You must imagine mountains of information you'll never master and, if you did, barely retain. World class worrying assumes prodigious creativity for playing out scenarios of doom that represent the tiniest fractions of statistical probability. Combinations and permutations of potential ills mercifully eluded George's simple grasp.

Life was simple for George, sometimes too simple, but often blissfully uncomplicated.

Gloria also noticed that he didn't cry much. As sweet as he was when he wasn't being rageful and despairingly frustrated, George never showed the more subtle

emotions. Even when his grandfather died, George didn’t cry although all around him wept with bittersweet sadness. Although George loved the old man dearly, no tears were shed. Couldn't he contemplate the sadness? Was he too threatened by the emotions? Or was the finality too hard to get his mind around and so it floated by? She just wasn't sure.

And so they both spent that heat-soaked time just waiting. He’d wait for a bit of friendship; she’d wait for inspiration. He’d wait for his mom to play UNO with him, she’d wait for a man who could love both of them and be kind. He’d wait for the baseball game to come on TV so he could sit there with his hat pulled low over his eyes and yell uncontrollably every time the catcher with the square jaw and wide shoulders stroked a single, she’d wait for a reason to feel confident about his future. He’d wait for little joys, she’d wait for big plans and sure solutions. He’d wait for a smile while she’d wait for a miracle or, at least, a deliverance from never really knowing what would become of him. He’d wait for a reason to cling, she’d wait for a time when she could let go. And so they both waited