**In Defense of the Nap Year**

By Rebecca Lanning

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Everywhere I go, people ask about my son Liam. They know he graduated from high school and want to know what he’s doing now. Smiling politely, I say that Liam was accepted to his first choice college. And then, just in case someone spots him around town, I mention that Liam deferred enrollment and is taking a gap year.

“How cool!” everyone says, but I sense by their placating tone that cool is a euphemism for crazy or scary or just plain dumb. I suppose their reaction goes with the territory, in one of the most educated metropolitan areas in the country where almost everybody’s name is followed by its own alphabet, and competitive parents raise go-getter kids.

The other day a woman in my lunch-time yoga class told me she’d never let her daughter, a high school sophomore, take a gap year. After all, the woman said, her daughter would be going to grad school, launching her career, and starting a family. She didn’t have time to goof off.

I wish I’d just moved my sticky mat to the other side of the room. Instead, I tried to convince this woman that taking a break from formal education was not a waste of time. “Many top colleges actually encourage students to take a gap year,” I said. “It gives kids a chance to figure out who they are and what they want out of their college experience.”

“So what’s your son doing with his windfall of free time?” she said, baring tiger-mom teeth. “Is he traveling abroad? Doing research?”

My cheeks burned as I played along, offering sound bites. A startup venture. A film project. Independent study. What I failed to mention was that my handsome, broad shouldered son was, at that very moment, home in bed with the shutters drawn, covers pulled over his head.

Officially, Liam is taking a gap year. But after 13 years of school, what he needs, what he’s earned, is a *nap* year.

“He’s not where the other children are,” Liam’s kindergarten teacher whispered to me one morning. I knew what she meant. Clumsy and slow to read, Liam rested his head on his desk a lot. His written work, smudgy from excessive erasing, looked like bits of crumpled trash. Still, her remark stung. I couldn’t shake the image of 20 kids on the playground, climbing on the monkey bars, and Liam alone on the soccer field picking dandelions. *Not where the* *other children are.*

Had I been the sassy sort, armed then with the knowledge I would later accrue, I might have joked with that teacher, told her that Liam had greater aspirations than being normal. But I wasn’t there yet. Confused and fearful, I had no idea how to stand up for my son or find the help he needed.

School was torture for Liam. He couldn’t take notes, failed to turn in homework, forgot when tests were coming up. It was as if he attended school in a country where he didn’t understand the language. Except he *did* understand the language. On standardized tests his verbal scores consistently exceeded the 99th percentile.

“Just get him through school,” his first grade teacher advised. Neither of us had any inkling what a long and painful road lay ahead. But her advice became my mantra: Just get him through.

Over the next several years, Liam was evaluated for learning disabilities (LD). While he had a superior IQ, an excellent memory, and a solid grasp of complex linguistic cues, he fatigued easily and suffered from weak sensorimotor, visual perceptual, and language output skills. And because he exhibited all nine symp- toms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or ADHD-inattentive type, he was slapped with that label too.

While these evaluations provided useful information, they never answered our more pressing questions. What type of school would serve Liam best? Is there a way to determine reasonable academic expectations? How do we know when to push, when to back off?

By the time Liam hit sixth grade, I’d reduced my work hours and my husband increased his so I could be home in the afternoons to help Liam with homework – an often overwhelming effort. Even with a master’s degree and years of teaching experience, I still struggled to re-teach Liam everything he should have learned at school.

“You can do this,” I would say as Liam sat slumped beside me at the kitchen table, eyes red and glassy from working overtime, having to learn everything twice. We’d go over math facts, science terms, and spelling words until they stuck, and then review them again. It was like doing taxes or cramming for exams. Every. Single. Night. We were Lucy and Ethel in the factory trying to wrap candy as it sped ever faster down the conveyor belt. My heart broke watching my son struggle to assimilate all the information flying at him and then to organize his work on the page. Some nights, my own head spinning, I sent Liam to bed and completed his homework for him, that old refrain riding me, taunting me: *Just get him through.*

Occasionally, I could detach long enough to recognize the insanity of our situation. I kept thinking of that Einstein quote. “If you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will believe its whole life that it is stupid.” I knew Liam could swim with the fishes. But how did we get him out of the damn tree?

Late at night, I lay awake, heart pounding, waiting for my husband to get home from long work days, and imagined child protective services showing up at our door. Not to claim Liam, but demanding I give some long-over-due attention to his younger brother, Thomas, forced to fend for himself during those agonizing afternoons while I drilled Liam with facts. Sometimes I had trouble taking a deep breath, the weight of Liam’s education so heavy on my chest. Worried too about other children who were suffering in school with no support at home, I started subbing in the classroom and teaching literacy skills to low-income students. I’d glimpsed the need for monumental reform in education, and yet could barely keep Liam afloat. Some nights I’d soothe myself to sleep with twisted fantasies of his middle school vanishing in a cloud of chalk dust.

Because Liam stayed up so late doing homework, he was having trouble waking up the next morning. He often dressed and ate breakfast in the car. Every morning he asked the same question: *Why does school have to start so early?*

One morning I made the mistake of telling Liam about a story I’d heard on NPR. In response to research findings regarding the circadian rhythms of teen- agers, a secondary school in England had shifted its schedule to start later in the morning and end later in the afternoon.

“Why can’t we live in England?” Liam asked. He couldn’t understand why he had to change to fit a system when the system itself needed changing.

“I’m sorry, honey,” I said as I dropped him off at school. Glancing in the rear-view mirror, I noticed Liam’s shoes were untied, his hair unbrushed. The flap of his backpack hung open like the tongue of a broken down dog.

Every morning I felt as if I was sending Liam into battle, and every after- noon that I was retrieving a soldier with massive invisible wounds. I’d ask about his day, and then, dread rising like acid in my throat, ask what he had for homework. Instead of being whisked off to sports practice or piano lessons, I drove Liam to occupational therapy. Then we went home, unloaded the backpack, and dove in.

Eventually, we resorted to what doctors and teachers had been recommending for years: medication. I’d read enough books and talked to enough parents to know that, for some children, medication is salvation. Maybe it would help Liam. “It can take a while to find the right medication at the right dose,” his doctor warned us. Liam tried various meds at various doses. Adderall, Ritalin, Concerta, Strateera, Focalin. When Liam exhibited signs of agitation, the doctor added Zoloft to the mix.

We were patient, but the meds offered no benefit to Liam whatsoever. In fact, they caused horrible side effects like insomnia, weight loss, and finally, tics. Liam started licking his lips so much that the skin around them grew red and raw. He blinked his eyes forcefully, his whole face contorting into a kooky jack o’ lantern. Then he would open his mouth as if he was going to yawn but he never yawned. His mouth just stayed open, sometimes for several seconds. When the tics continued for weeks after we stopped the medication, I took Liam to a pediatric neurologist two hours away.

“When will the tics will go away?” I asked, but she couldn’t say.

That was the moment I knew something had to change. And it wasn’t Liam.

For years I’d been lurking on the website of a small Quaker school in a town two and a half hours away, not far from where my husband and I had grown up and where our extended families still lived. When we finally toured the school, set on 126 wooded acres with streams and nature trails, we instantly felt it was where Liam belonged. While we knew the school couldn’t cure Liam’s problems, its philosophy of tolerance and inclusivity gave us hope that, at the very least, Liam’s problems would not be compounded. Our friends thought we were crazy to leave the town where we’d lived for 14 years, but it felt riskier to stay and push Liam through a system that could not, by design, accommodate his needs or celebrate his strengths. As sad as we were to leave our small-town community, we felt fortunate to have jobs that allowed us to relocate in order to give Liam a chance.

Away from the assembly-line approach to education with its tyranny of grades, Liam flourished. For a while.

The school offered discussion-based classes, and students sat on couches in wood paneled rooms that looked more like cabins than classrooms. Here Liam learned the power of silence and the power of his own convictions. His subtle wit found a warm reception. While differential equations and the nuances of French grammar eluded him, he excelled in the analytical digging required of history, philosophy and literature.

Because he was gaining confidence in his intellect and inspiration from his teachers, he quickly weaned himself from my assistance. A request for extra time to complete a test or a paper was granted without a tangle of red tape. And when Liam was re-evaluated by a new psychologist during his sophomore year, we learned he did not have ADHD after all. He had not grown out of it. This new school had not masked it. He simply never had the disorder.

Liam, the psychologist explained, exhibited a lack of attention when he was in distress. And he was in distress often because he was twice exceptional *—* intellectually gifted, with slow cognitive tempo. The magnitude of discrepancy between Liam’s intelligence and his processing speed was so rare, the doctor said he only saw it in about one kid per year. “If you were a car,” the doctor told Liam, “you’d be a Maserati with two blown tires.” There was no name for this particular disorder, simply called Learning Disorder NOS (Not Otherwise Specified), and sadly no cure. The only way to deal with Liam’s problem was to give him extra time to get his work done, to show what he knows. The psychologist added that, with the right support, Liam would shine in college. But first he had to get through high school. *Get through.*

Liam performed well until junior year when he registered for eight academic classes, a difficult load even for neurotypical students. The extended time his teachers had so generously granted now merely extended his misery. Liam believed that when given more time to do his work, that work had to be worthy of the extension. No one could convince him to focus his effort in a few classes, and just meet the basic requirements in others. He tried to pro- duce extraordinary work in every class, and the effort nearly destroyed him.

Liam liked to study on the couch in our home office, and the more home- work he was assigned, the farther down on that couch he slid until one day he was completely supine, a posture he maintained for weeks. He could not muster energy to study, and eventually couldn’t get himself off the couch to go to school. Sometimes, when I approached, he growled. Other times I’d find him sound asleep listening to his iPod.

When Liam was younger, I could coax him to forge ahead. But at 16, he was taller than I and 30 pounds heavier. None of the tools in my arsenal worked anymore. Not the proverbial whip. Not the cheerleading pom poms. Not the promise of pizza or Pokémon cards. I’d run out of strategies and incentives just as he’d run out of steam. Liam wanted to drop out of school.

I’d been trapped in an elevator once, and was now overcome by that same desperate, claustrophobic sensation. I retraced our steps, berating myself for doing too much, for doing too little. Making too many sacrifices or sacrificing the wrong things. I felt a raw, aching regret for all the mistakes I made. All the times that I looked at Liam and saw only a problem to solve.

As I found myself swallowed up by regrets, I clung to memories of Liam before he entered school, a happy go lucky kid who once tried to crawl inside our television so he could hug Barney.

During Liam’s graveyard spiral, I was enrolled in a class on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, learning to detach myself from the turbulence around me, to rest in the eye of the storm. I began to realize that no matter how deeply I longed for Liam to find the strength to finish high school, the decision was his. I could not undo whatever had caused his learning disability, and I could not take away his suffering. I could only remain supportive, and so I talked to him, matter-of-factly, about his career options. We discussed the GED.

And then I let him go.

It was as if, after having been tied together by a rope, sinking in a river, my weight dragging him down, his weight dragging me – my cutting the rope released him, and we each were then free to rise to the surface.

Rather than dropping out, Liam enrolled in a charter school that specialized in helping kids who, for a variety of reasons, struggled in a traditional school setting. He completed his junior year there, attending classes from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Finally he was at a school that catered to his LD. But by spring, he realized something: Just getting through wasn’t satisfying. Though he was honored for his GPA and passed the state end-of-course tests, he didn’t feel he’d really learned anything. He did learn that he’d rather wrestle with open-ended questions than take multiple choice tests, and missed being engaged with purposeful coursework.

Liam made an appointment with Mike, the Head of his old Quaker school. On a dazzling May day, they walked along a forest trail, and my son—who must’ve felt he had nothing left to lose—told Mike his story. I wish I could’ve been a horse fly on that trail because by the time the walk was over, Liam had not only decided to return there for his senior year but committed himself to being a voice for other LD students who carried the burden of an invisible challenge.

Liam had a successful senior year, not without bumps but smooth as glass compared to junior year. He cobbled together a support system, including a math tutor with a special education degree, and a wise academic coach who kept him from getting stuck. He took the SAT and applied to colleges, but it was clear he was going through the motions of that final, high-stakes push, uncertain of his goals and weary.

When Liam walked across the stage to receive his diploma, so striking in his new suit, I did not feel that swell of pride I imagine other parents do. I felt, instead, tremendous relief and gratitude to that school for taking my son in, brushing him off and ushering him to this day. But I also felt something strange and unexpected, a gnawing fatigue, the kind you feel after a long trip hindered by detours and delays. I was as exhausted as Liam.

Now, while I try to resurrect my career, Liam volunteers at the food bank and is creating a website with a friend. A paid internship starts next month. In the meantime, he’s working on the three R’s: recovering, reflecting, recharging. His first choice college is holding his spot for next fall, and through their disability resource office, he’s been granted accommodations. But lately he’s talking about attending college closer to home, maybe part-time. His dad and I tell him that, whatever he decides, he has our full support.

Still, when confronted by people who ask what he is up to, it’s hard for me to explain Liam’s gap year, his nap year. They don’t understand a thing about what I call Post Traumatic *School* Disorder. All I see are raised eyebrows, and I have to shake off a twinge of shame that Liam’s not off at college, *not where the other kids are.*

But where he is right now, at home with us, resting, re-setting, feels right. I haven’t seen Liam this happy since he was four years old. For the first time in years, he’s not weighed down by the stress of homework and dead- lines, and I’m not a wreck worrying if he’s keeping up.

I don’t know what his future holds. Sometimes I imagine Liam as a teacher, helping LD students find their way. He’s been encouraged to pursue advocacy in social policy. Two of his teachers marked him for a movie critic.

I get that. The other day, with his dad out of town and his brother at sports practice, Liam and I went to the movies. I loved sharing a bag of popcorn, looking over at him during the funny scenes. The light from the screen shone on his face. He was smiling, and I felt deliriously lucky to have this time with him. Time to enjoy the moment, to enjoy each other. Time to be his mom, not his teacher. Later, on our way home, we laughed, recalling lines from the film, and I marveled at my son’s ability to grasp references, to explain, patiently and eloquently, everything that I’d missed.

Author’s Note: As a writer, I’ve always gravitated toward fiction. Heartbreak, homesickness, even a mad crush on Joaquin Phoenix. It was easier and way more fun to project these feelings onto a protagonist and see how she managed. And yet when I finally felt ready to write about this journey with my son, I found that crafting it as fiction kept me from fully confronting the experience. In this essay, my first, I shed fiction’s protective cloak to expose the challenges of raising a learning disabled child. It’s a plea for education reform as much as it is a tribute to my square-pegged son who, as I write this, is heading out the door to catch the late-night premiere of Zero Dark Thirty.

Rebecca Lanning lives with her family in Durham, North Carolina. As a former editor and advice columnist at Teen magazine, she admits that writing for teenagers in no way prepared her for the humbling experience of raising two of her own. Her work has appeared in a variety of publications including Sunday Reader, Southern Magazine, Haven and Woman’s Own.