

What Our Retarded Son Taught Us

By CATHERINE CHRISTOPHER

TOMMY IS 15 years old. He is crazy about cars, as most boys his age are. In Tommy's enthusiasm, however, there is a difference.

Tommy is a retarded child. The cars he likes are the ones his father brings home from the dime store—little plastic cars.

Tommy's father is a brilliant professional man. For a long time he was bitter, looking upon the difference in Tommy as a cruel trick.

It has taken Tommy quite a while to arouse in his father a wisdom that did not come automatically with his college degree—that his little son does not live or, more precisely, love on a one-way street.

The bitterness ended definitively a few weeks ago when the father came home with another little plastic car. Hugging the trifling present, Tommy said to his father:

"Daddy, aren't you lucky to have a little boy who loves you so much?"

This incident shows how parents of retarded children not only can "make do" but actually find a special glimpse of happiness.

Our little son Jimmie was retarded, too. He had hydrocephalus, water on the brain. For a time we were lulled and unaware, able to pretend that there was nothing wrong with our rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed little son.

The day came when we could not pretend that other children Jimmie's age weren't outstripping him in development. We went through the long search for the miracle that did not happen, and found one that did. The miracle we did find was the understanding that in spite of his severe retardation, Jimmie could love us splendidly.

When I talked to other parents, my understanding grew that the retarded child is a giving child. I remember one parent's story:

One of the world's great cellists and his wife came to live in our town. His career for half a century has been in the stratosphere of the world's finest symphony orchestras—Dresden, Paris, San Francisco, and others. Now he sought the secluded cottage where he was soon to die. His wife, to defray medical bills, took a job in the local department store, and saying good-bye every morning never became easy for her. The musician spent his days mostly in the sunshine, for he was now too ill to meet the demands of



*This is a mother's own story
of her boy who was
subnormal—except in his
ability to give love*

that most rigorous instrument, his beloved cello.

One day little Michael came into the yard. Michael was a severely retarded child. He could not talk intelligibly. Thereafter, the cellist and Michael spent hours sitting together in the sunshine each day, conversing in the language that needs no intelligence, only love.

One day the cellist died. His widow was inconsolable for many months, for theirs had been a long and loving marriage. Every day, however, she would find Michael waiting for her when she came home from the store. He would pull her skirts, mutely indicating that he wanted his friend to come out and sit in the sun again. He would put his arms around her and hug her fiercely, then dart for home.

"Not one of my sophisticated friends," she told me, "was able to bring me the same love, the same comfort I had from that precious child who couldn't even talk to me!"

PARENTS CANNOT LEARN this in one easy lesson. It is a long lesson and a hard one. But it must be learned if parents are to be happy. Our own son taught our retarded hearts that he was born for a purpose, and he fulfilled it.

He elicited love, evoked compassion and tenderness, and gave love even though he could not put one block on top of another. In loving, our son was not retarded.

There was never a day during his 18 years on this earth that he did not give. Indeed, he asked nothing but to give. In the several years since he died, we see daily how his work goes on. We could not wish it undone, or done differently.

I recall that every morning a nondescript sparrow used to come and pick up crumbs from the window sill outside his room, his world. I put crumbs there because he loved to watch the birds.

Every afternoon the sun slanted into his room, and he spent the hours trying to catch the sunbeams, laughing and enjoying himself, happy as though he had actually captured them. He didn't understand that you cannot catch sunbeams.

His little sister and I were with him one afternoon, and we laughed with him. It was a gentle, joyful moment. Then she became quiet a moment, and I asked her what she was thinking about.

"Mama," she replied, "I was just wondering—when can I have a little bird and a sunbeam for my room, too?"

ILLUSTRATION BY MARVIN FRIEDMAN

COVER:



It's hard to imagine Sophia Loren's looks needing improvement, but it took beauty strategy to achieve the Loren of today, as you'll learn on page 6. Photo by Pierluigi.

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