

Real Words *with* S A M



a father and son navigate autism,
apraxia, and unexpected intelligence

J BRAD AND SAM BRITTON

Introduction

Before We Get Started

I had no idea I'd been having a one-sided conversation with my son for two decades.

I've spent my life valuing clear communication.

And yet . . . I missed it.

Not because I wasn't trying. Not because I didn't care. But because I didn't know what I didn't know.

Looking back, it's humbling. I'd have put myself near the bottom of the list of people likely to overlook something so vital. But that's the thing about perspective. One shift, one new piece of understanding, can be like stepping into a new world.

This book is about my shift. About discovering my son had been listening, understanding, and thinking deeply all along. While I mostly just saw disability.

I'm an autism parent.

An autism dad.

That means I'm raising a child on the autism spectrum and learning to see through a different lens.

If you're reading this, chances are you care about someone on the autism spectrum and want to understand and support them better. You might be a parent, a sibling, a friend, or a teacher. Maybe you're not even sure what brought you here.

That's okay. There's something here for you.

So what is this, really? A guide? A confession? A lifeline?

It's stories. Real stories. Raw, personal moments that usually stay tucked away.

Whether you're walking a similar path or trying to understand someone who is, these pages offer something: practical wisdom for parents, guidance for supporters, and for everyone, a glimpse into how assumptions can evolve and relationships can deepen with new awareness.

Think of this as a map, but not the kind with a direct route from point A to point B. It's the kind marked with detours that turned out to be destinations. Imagine notes scribbled in the margins about things discovered along the way:

"Pause here for beauty."

"This detour was worth it."

"Here be dragons...and grace."

The early miles might feel steep. There are some hard truths I need to cover first, foundations that help everything

else make sense. But the terrain evens out. There are plenty of moments of joy, humor, and simple connection ahead.

Autism is not one thing. As the saying goes, *“If you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.”* So maybe this book isn’t just one thing either: part story, part guide, part invitation to walk a stretch of the road with me. And Sam. My son.

If something in these pages helps you understand a family member, a friend, or even yourself a little better—if it brings more clarity or encouragement—I’ll be grateful.

This is just one family’s truth. Not a blueprint, not a definition, but an invitation to take this detour with us.

Chapter 1

I Didn't Want To

On September 26, 2024, I decided to write this book, and unexpectedly found myself crying. That surprise hit me hard, urging me to understand why.

I didn't want to write it. I still don't, not really. There's a big part of me that wants to avoid it altogether. Writing it means reliving things I've kept inside for years. It means unpacking feelings that I usually manage by moving forward, rather than dwelling on them.

But something in me knows I need to write it. Maybe it's for Sam—to make sure his story is fully seen and heard. Maybe it's for other families walking a similar path. Perhaps it's for people who have never thought much about autism but want to gain a deeper understanding. Or maybe it's just for me to face what I've carried, cast a light, and see what's really there.

I believe each reader will take away something uniquely their own.

I'm not someone who usually shows strong feelings, especially the kind that bring tears.

Enthusiasm, optimism, gratitude? Easy for me.

Regret, frustration, or despair? I tend to keep those to myself.

That's why the tears caught me off guard. I realized this would demand a level of openness I rarely allow—a vulnerability I'd need to embrace to share my story as Sam's dad honestly. If I want it to matter, I'll have to step past my usual stoicism and share the parts I've kept hidden: the helplessness, the doubt, the fear.

That moment of tears wasn't just about me. I know I'm not alone in that. Many men are taught to keep their deepest struggles private. Not because we don't feel them, but because we're unsure how or when to share them. And for those who don't relate, I hope this offers a window into the world of men like me, who find it easier to stay silent than to speak the truth of what we're carrying.

For me, that tendency toward silence often shows up as composure. I've always taken pride in staying emotionally steady, rarely too high or too low. It's how I was raised, and how I've grown to function.

This steadiness is part of emotional intelligence, or EQ, which involves managing our reactions when things become challenging. One common explanation puts it this way:

“A cornerstone of EQ is the ability to manage one’s reactions. People with low EQ may struggle to control their emotions and might have unexpected emotional outbursts.”

For most of my life, I’ve lived by a simple mantra: “Can’t change it.”

It’s been my way of navigating life’s challenges by focusing on what I can control and letting go of what I can’t. That mindset has served me well in my work, my relationships, and most of all, in the journey of being an autism dad, where I’ve learned to release what I can’t control and hold tight to what I can.

As I dig into what this process is revealing, I realize it’s not always that simple.

When *can’t change it* falls short, faith anchors and helps me trust there’s a purpose, even in uncertainty. Love may push us forward, but faith keeps us grounded.

When it comes to my son, Sam, the stoic *can’t change it* philosophy helps me navigate challenges. It doesn’t address the deeper emotions, though. The anxiety. The frustration. The helplessness.

Writing is making me face it. The more I dig, the more I realize it’s hidden feelings, ones I’ve rarely voiced, that have shaped my path the most.

As Sam’s dad, I’ve learned to see my feelings through a simple lens: love and fear. Love drives my joy and hope; fear fuels my anxiety and doubts. That perspective helps me navigate the challenges of parenting him.

My wife, Paulette, is an autism mom. She's deeply connected to the autism community. She knows countless people across the country (and even internationally) who find support and strength there. Through her, I've glimpsed that world, but I haven't been very active in it. In twenty years, I've been to fewer than a dozen autism-related events, and frankly, only one stands out as truly valuable. I'll share that story soon, along with a few more about the amazing woman I married.

And then there's Sam's older sister, Madison. Just as Paulette is our link to the autism community, Madison is the one who keeps it real at home. She doesn't take any flak from Sam, never has, and she doesn't give him much slack either. She's his biggest protector, but also his fiercest challenger. She'll fight for him in a heartbeat, and just as quickly tell him when he's out of line.

Their relationship isn't perfect, but it's authentic. She picks on him. He annoys her.

Yet beneath it all is a bond built on love, loyalty, and mutual respect. And maybe most importantly, she treats him like a little brother, not a diagnosis. And because of that, Sam listens to her. He works hard for her approval. He knows she sees him, and that means more than words can say.

The tears that surprised me that day weren't really about writing a book. They were about Sam. He's 24 years old now, and still teaching me every day.

Sam has transformed my life in ways I couldn't have imagined.

My bond with him runs deep, and I've come to respect him at a level that I believe only an autism parent can fully understand. Watching Sam grow has been a privilege. Moreover, his growth has encouraged me to grow as well.

Recently, at church, the pastor quoted best-selling author Erwin McManus:

“If your purpose is rooted in success, your purpose is fragile.

But if your purpose is rooted in the person you become, it is untouchable.”

It's a truth I've believed for years.

Easy to repeat.

Harder to live.

Especially for those of us who measure success in careers, achievements, or outcomes, that quote hits differently. I've shared it with others. Living it takes work. Success can fade, but who we become endures.

While I hope you'll find ideas, tips, and maybe even strategies to help you face hard things, that's not my purpose.

My purpose is to share a relatable experience. Everyone faces challenges. They may look different, but underneath, the feelings are often the same.

Through my relationship with Sam, I've discovered insights I believe can resonate with anyone going through hard things.

There have been times when no amount of reasoning or problem-solving could bring comfort. In those moments, when nothing made sense, faith didn't solve the problem—but it steadied me enough to keep believing that something greater was at work.

Some of the strongest people I know are friends who have faced unimaginable hardships with optimism, grace, and belief. They helped me realize that growth comes from facing fear, not avoiding it.¹

Writing this book will require vulnerability. I'll talk about feeling lost, underestimating Sam, and doubting myself as a father. But I'll also share the immense love, joy, and gratitude that come from being Sam's dad.

This story isn't just for autism families.

It's for anyone who has faced the fear of the unknown or the doubt of not being enough. Parenting Sam has shown me that while the specifics of our challenges differ, the emotions we face, love and fear, are universal.

The hardest moments come when I confront my limitations as Sam's dad. When he's struggling and I can't find the cause fast enough, when I fail to prevent a meltdown,

1 I think especially of two men I deeply admire: Hal Elrod and Bruce Goodman. Both have faced life-threatening battles with leukemia and walked through them with extraordinary courage, faith, and grit. Their stories and their ongoing impact on my life helped shape my story more than they know.

when I sit there wondering if I'm doing enough for him, it's overwhelming.

But this uncertainty isn't unique to autism parenting.

It's part of being a parent. It's part of being human.

Love sustains me, especially when I doubt myself as Sam's dad, or can't ease his struggles. It's the bond I share with Sam, the simple and profound affection that steadies me. And when love alone can't carry me forward, faith steps in. Together, they build resilience: the quiet strength to keep going, one step at a time.

Introduction Continued

More Things You Should Know

(A chapter that's not a chapter)

Who is Sam Britton?

My son.

24 years old and I'm still discovering the full depth of who he is.

I hope this book helps uncover that, not just for you, but for me.

Reflecting on our experiences and putting them into written form deepens my comprehension of who Sam is and how our relationship continues to grow. And before we go further, there are a few essential things to share, pieces of background that will help the rest of the chapters make more sense.

These truths will unfold through our stories, especially in Sam's own words. But some things are worth saying up front.

The stories here weave together moments from across two decades and don't follow a strict timeline. Some look back to Sam's early years, others reflect on more recent experiences. This isn't Sam's story told in chronological order. It's our relationship explored through the moments that shaped us most.

Let me start here:

Sam does not have a learning disability.

That might surprise people, especially those who meet him for the first time or spend only a few minutes with him. His body moves in ways that may seem unusual. His words don't always match the moment. At first glance, it's easy to assume there's a cognitive delay or intellectual disability.

But that assumption is wrong.

Sam's challenge isn't comprehension.
It's expression.

He doesn't have trouble taking in information. He has trouble getting it out.

This disconnect has a name: apraxia.

It's a motor planning disorder.

When a person can say a few words but can't hold a conversation (or quotes entire scenes from YouTube, but

struggles answering yes/no questions), it's tempting to assume there's a learning disorder.

That's why so many people with autism are misunderstood. Their spoken words—or the absence of them—don't reflect the intelligence, insight, or emotional depth that's really there.

It's not a speech problem. It's a movement problem.

It's why someone like Sam can spell a profound insight or a poetic turn of phrase, yet still be unable to answer a simple verbal question on cue.

That's apraxia.

And once you understand it, things start to look different.

It's not a language delay.

It's not a behavioral quirk.

And it's certainly not a lack of intelligence.

It doesn't just affect speech. It can affect anything that requires voluntary movement. For Sam, apraxia can make even simple tasks take enormous effort. Walking from here to there, following instructions, initiating movement, or stopping a repetitive behavior can all become uphill battles. His brain is firing clear commands, but his body misfires or freezes.

Sometimes, the signal gets through.

Sometimes, it doesn't.

And sometimes, the harder he tries, the worse it gets.

In *The Speller's Guidebook*, authors Dawnmarie Gaivin and Dana Johnson describe apraxia this way:

“Apraxia is a disconnect between intention and initiation. The mind knows what it wants to do. The body doesn’t always cooperate.”

That one line explains more about my son’s experience than years of therapy reports ever could.

Here’s something that might surprise you: According to a 2015 PubMed study, apraxia affects roughly 67% of people diagnosed with autism. Think about that for a moment. Two-thirds of people with autism may be experiencing this same disconnect between mind and body. That statistic can completely reframe how we see and hear those who struggle to communicate.

Apraxia doesn’t always show itself clearly. From the outside, it might look like stubbornness. Or inattention. Or disobedience.

You might see it in something called echolalia: when a person repeats words, phrases, or sounds they’ve heard before, often from TV shows, songs, or people around them.

You might also see it in something called stimming (short for self-stimulatory behavior). Repetitive movements or sounds that help regulate emotion or sensory input. It might look like flapping hands, bouncing, or rocking. Some kids wave objects like straws or pens in front of their eyes to watch the motion. Others pace, spin, hum, or clap.

To an outsider, echolalia and stimming may seem random or out of place, but for the person with apraxia, it's a way of processing language, self-soothing, or communicating indirectly.

But on the inside?

It can feel like being locked out of the body. Fully aware, yet unable to respond in the way you want.

And that must be more frustrating for them than for anyone else.

Even when Sam uses his own words instead of repeating others, apraxia still interferes. That's what makes him what's known as an unreliable speaker.

He can say words, but often, those words aren't what he means. Sometimes they are. Sometimes they aren't. That inconsistency is what makes them unreliable.

His voice isn't always under his control. Not the words, not the timing, and definitely not the volume. And because of that, we've learned not to judge his intelligence by what comes out of his mouth.

That makes understanding him a daily challenge—and sometimes, a daily heartbreak.

His speech doesn't always reflect his thoughts.

But spelling does.

Sam spells his thoughts one letter at a time using a simple letterboard with a communication partner's support.

It's a process that takes patience, effort, and years of practice. And it's still unfolding.

Since Sam began spelling, much has changed, not only in how he communicates but also in how I see him and understand his mind. In just four years, that comprehension has grown more than it did in twenty years before.

He's revealing himself in unexpected ways.

I use the word "unexpected" intentionally.

When asked, "What is something you find rewarding?"

Sam spelled:

ALL THE TIMES THAT I ASTOUND
OTHER PEOPLE WITH MY UNEXPECTED
INTELLIGENCE.

I know, right?

My respect for his mind and his resilience has grown exponentially.

I used to think I knew him well. Now, I know better: I'm still learning who he is, one letter at a time.

What matters is this:

Spelling is giving Sam
a more reliable voice.

And you'll hear it throughout.

You may have noticed Sam is listed as a **co-author**.

That's not a gesture. It's the truth.

Yes, this book is about my experiences as Sam's dad, but it's also about his experiences.

And many of the most powerful words are his.

You'll find them in the pages titled **Real Words with Sam.**

Each time, you'll be reading real words spelled by Sam.

Sometimes as direct answers to questions, and sometimes as spontaneous thoughts that emerged during sessions.

Words spelled letter by letter, in moments built on trust, perseverance, and deliberate effort.

Nothing has been rewritten or polished. You're seeing exactly what he shared with us.

Where helpful, I've added brief notes for context.

These aren't imagined dialogues or polished essays.

They're glimpses into Sam's heart and mind, exactly as he chose to express them.

More than words.

They're his voice, finding its way into the world.

And to us, that's priceless.

Finally, one more thing you'll probably notice:

Sam's writing has a distinct rhythm: poetic, lyrical, sometimes formal, sometimes surprising.

While I can't replicate Sam's voice, I've leaned into a similar rhythm. One that values flow over grammar, cadence over convention.

I hope that choice helps you feel what this is about, not just intellectually, but emotionally.

Because these aren't just stories. They're glimpses into a relationship that's still growing, into a life that's always been richer than it appeared, into a young man who's been thinking profound thoughts and waiting—for years, even decades—for a way to share them.

And now, finally, he can.

Real Words *with* Sam

Tell me one word you think of when you hear the word snail?

SLIME

What do you think about the idea of eating Sakondry bugs?

THE IDEA IS GOOD TO SAVE THE LEMURS
BUT NOT FOR ME

What is one thing civilizations might rival over?

LAND THE RULERS WANT TO BUILD
THEIR LAND ON

Summarize in your own words why Alexander Selkirk was
left on a remote island?

ITS ALL BECAUSE GUYS ARE TOO
HOT TEMPERED

AND HE GOT INTO A DISPUTE WITH
THE CAPTAIN

What do you think is meant by the phrase humble
circumstances?

TO START WITH LITTLE
MATERIALISTIC THINGS

What do you want to say to your dad?

TO THE BEST DAD FOR ME

I VERY MUCH WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT I
LOVE YOU

TIME ONLY CONTINUES TO BUILD OUR BOND

Chapter 2

Hidden in Plain Sight

I walked into the symposium half-skeptical, half-supportive. We'd tried so many things already, and I wasn't expecting much. Certainly not to have my assumptions shattered in under three minutes.

It was 2018, and my wife, Paulette, had told me about the event a few weeks earlier.

The subject was Spelled Communication, an approach that helps non-speakers share their thoughts using letterboards and keyboards.

Over the years, we saw many therapies come and go. Some seemed to help a little. Some barely at all. What worked wonders for one child often had little to no effect on another.

As mentioned in the introduction, there's a saying in the autism community: *"If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism."* Sam had already taught us that, in a way only he could.

And maybe, without realizing it, I had grown a little callous toward new ideas. Perhaps I had become a little too good at managing my expectations.

That's probably why I walked into the symposium feeling cautious, maybe even skeptical.

I hadn't done any real research. I hadn't seen it in action. But I agreed to go.

We drove a few hours to the college campus hosting the event. We joined a crowd of about 150 people walking toward the main building.

As we walked into one of the main gathering rooms, where the presentations would take place, we saw a woman named Julie standing with Elliot.

Julie is a spelling coach. I'm not sure if that's her official title, but it fits.

As we approached, Julie turned to Elliot and said, "Hey, I think you recognize these people," gesturing toward Paulette and me.

Paulette immediately replied, "Oh, yes! We've met a few times. He's from our hometown of Fallbrook and the same age as Sam."

I realized that I had met him before, eight or ten years earlier, when he was about seven years old.

At the time, he was energetic—bouncing on his toes, flapping his hands, repeating random words and sounds with an infectious smile.

Now, at around 15 years old, he still had the same vibrant energy.

As he bounced, making excited sounds—“eeee!”—Julie held up a laminated letterboard in front of him.

About 12 by 9 inches. Simple, nothing fancy. One side had the alphabet, the other, numbers and punctuation.

Julie asked if he wanted to say hello.

And then we watched something extraordinary.

Still bouncing and flapping, he began poking letters on the board slowly, painstakingly, one at a time.

As he touched the board, Julie called out each letter, so we could follow along.

It took about two minutes, and this is what he spelled:

“Hello, fellow Fallbrookians. How are the life and times of Sam Britton these days?”

I got chills.

Tears formed in my eyes, and my jaw dropped.

That thoughtful, articulate sentence had been inside his mind all along.

In that instant, my feelings toward him changed. Not because I suddenly “respected” him (I like to believe I’ve always respected people as a baseline), but because I realized how much I had underestimated him. I had seen the bouncing, the flapping, the loudness . . . but not the brilliant mind fighting to be heard.

I had known him for years, in a way.

But that day, I met him for the first time.

And almost just as quickly, the possibilities for Sam began rushing into focus.

It was inspiring, but I didn't immediately assume Sam could do the same.

Hope was there, quiet and cautious.

Still, it was hope.

Throughout the symposium, we heard from dozens of spelling coaches, teachers, and parents.

We saw videos of non- speakers who, as children, exhibited the same kinds of behaviors we knew well. Loudness, echolalia, meltdowns, stimming.

We learned something critical: Much of what looked like 'behavior problems' was actually apraxia—minds trapped by bodies that wouldn't cooperate.

And right there in front of us, these same people we'd seen in videos showed us that they were far more than a diagnosis or a list of behaviors. It was staggering. Using keyboards, letterboards, or iPads, they told stories that were intelligent, aware, and eloquent. Even thinking back on it now, my head shakes back and forth in amazement.

By the time we left the symposium, we knew one thing for sure:

We had to give Sam this chance.

We left with a cautious hope and a plan. Sam would start spelling. It was time to listen.

Real Words *with* Sam

What animal language would you study?

GIRAFFE

Why?

THOSE GIRAFFES LISTEN TO EVERYONE

What might make a cow happy?

NOT ROTTEN FOOD

Name a negative emotion?

LONELY

What might make a cow sad?

PULLING TOO HARD ON ITS UDDERS

What do you think could have been a problem with
having real life animals in this original ride at Disney?

THEY POOP EVERYWHERE

Chapter 3

Presume Competence

At first, I thought the symposium changed how I saw the boy with the letterboard. But soon, I realized it changed how I saw my own son.

Among families like ours, one phrase echoes louder than most, simple and life-changing:

Non-speaking isn't non-thinking.

It didn't happen all at once, but over time, this understanding exposed something I hadn't realized about myself.

Without meaning to, I had spent years assuming that if someone couldn't speak clearly, they couldn't think clearly either.

I never would've said it out loud.

I don't think I would have even admitted it to myself.

But looking back, I can see it now, in the way I talked about Sam when he was standing right beside me, as if he couldn't understand.

In the way I apologized for him in public, assuming he couldn't process what was happening around him.

In the way I lowered my expectations without even noticing it.

There's a brutal kind of honesty in facing that truth.

It's not that I didn't love Sam. Of course I did.

It's not that I didn't respect him. I believed I did.

But in one critical way, I'd failed:

I hadn't presumed competence.

Two words. Presume competence. Simple to say. Much harder to live.

Because presuming competence meant
admitting I hadn't been doing it.

I hadn't treated Sam like someone with a mind full of brilliant thoughts, wise insights, and rich feelings.

Believing in someone's intelligence doesn't make communication easy overnight. It just stops you from underestimating what's already there.

Seeing a non-speaker spell for the first time didn't erase all my old habits. It cracked something open, but the real work was just beginning.

Slowly (painfully slowly at times) I started seeing how often I still spoke about Sam as if he weren't there.

How often I used words I never would have used with a neurotypical man his age.

How often I let old patterns slip through without thinking.

Even today, there are moments when Paulette and I catch ourselves talking about Sam, right in front of him, as if he can't hear us.

Old habits take time to unlearn.

But the more we get to know Sam, the more we presume competence, even when we don't see the evidence right away. The more we believe, the more he reveals: his intelligence, his wit, his heart.

It's not enough to love someone.

It's not enough to be patient, or kind, or good-hearted.

If we don't believe in their intelligence—if we don't presume they have something meaningful to say—we are stealing something vital from them.

Their dignity.

Their voice.

The truth we learned at the symposium: *Non-speaking isn't non-thinking.*

Once Sam had the tools he needed to spell, to type, to get his thoughts into the world, we began to see the depth that had been there all along.

What we found was more than understanding.

It was wisdom.

It was heart.

It was him.

Real Words *with* Sam

Name one thing you would find out in the jungle?

DANGER

What is one thing Tarzan is known for?

DARING ADVENTURE

Describe what you think it would be like to be raised by apes?

TO CREATE BELOVED HABITS SHAPED BY
APES WOULD TRULY BE SOMETHING UNIQUE

Why do you think this movie was so successful?

SO EASY TO LOVE A MOVIE FULL OF CATCHY
MUSIC AND COLORFUL CHARACTERS

What qualities and characteristics do you think make someone brave?

HOW SOMEONE EXHIBITS BRAVERY DEPENDS
ON THEIR OWN LIFE EXPERIENCES

IT CAN LOOK DIFFERENT ON EACH
PERSON BRAVERY COMES OUT WHEN
WE NEED IT MOST

Chapter 4

First Sam, Then Dad

Whether it's crowded or not doesn't matter. Sam loves taking a number at the barbershop. He pulls a number and waits for his turn. Even if nobody else is waiting, even if the staff isn't using the numbers that day, Sam has to pull one.

Today, we walked in, and it was one of those quiet days. No one was waiting.

Sam walked straight over and pulled a number anyway: 97.

I grabbed a number, too: 98.

Almost every time we go for haircuts, I hear the same phrase:

"First Sam, then Dad." On our walks there, I stay about five feet behind him, close enough to be present, far enough to let him lead.

It's a structure he counts on, especially on harder days. But today wasn't one of those days. Today, everything moved like clockwork.

I looked up at the digital display: 21.

It must have been a slower day, and they weren't advancing the numbers, but Sam wasn't about to get up until his number was called.

The staff knows Sam. They're kind, patient, and generous.

Without missing a beat, they clicked the remote and advanced the display to 97.

His face lit up as the number changed.

He stood tall, walked over, dropped his number in the trash can, and proudly sat down in chair number five, counting the chairs to announce his spot. *“ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR . . . CHAIR NUMBER FIVE!”*

Everyone knew he was here!

He tends to speak about three or four notches louder than necessary, part of his natural exuberance. It takes a great deal of focus and intentionality for him to talk with “appropriate volume,” and we're working on it. He's getting better.

The barber tried to put the cape around his neck.

But before she could secure it, Sam noticed something essential was missing: No one had advanced the number for me.

Sam popped up, marched to the remote control, and clicked the display forward to 98.

Order must be preserved; first Sam, then Dad.

I stood and gave Sam's barber some simple instructions.

“Regular boy’s haircut. Clippers on the side at one-and-a-half. Take about a half-inch off the top. Rounded in the back.”

We were good to go.

I sat down in chair number one.

Sam was three seats away, softly talking to himself, a steady stream of random phrases and cheerful words.

His volume was relatively mild. (Hallelujah, amen.)

I could barely hear him from where I sat.

The barber finished Sam’s haircut, and with it came a return to full Sam volume:

“Oh, thanks so much! What a cool haircut!”

Pure, unfiltered gratitude.

Sam went to the waiting chairs to sit patiently while I finished my haircut.

I could see him out of the corner of my eye, and I noticed him stand up and start walking to the other end of the shop.

There’s a restroom back there, and he’s been there before, so that’s where I assumed he was going.

Still, just to be sure, I asked my barber quietly,

“Can you tell where he’s going?”

She glanced up, her eyes following him, a little confused at first.

Then, across the shop, came Sam’s unmistakable voice, three notches above normal, per the usual:

“Biiigg Huuggg!”

I stood up, turned, and took a step toward him.

Sure enough, there he was, hugging his barber.

It was a gentle embrace, not a tight squeeze, and, thank God, she was smiling and patting his back lightly.

I didn't want to yell across the room.

Instead, in a firm but calm voice, just loud enough to carry, I said,

"That's enough hugging. Three . . . two . . . one."

And like a charm, it worked.

Sam gently released his hug and returned to the waiting chairs.

As he sat down, Sam looked over at me.

He could tell, just from my expression, that I wasn't happy.

The hug had already happened; no changing that. But this wasn't new.

We've had plenty of conversations about when it's okay to hug and when it's not.

Sam knows the rules. He really does. But sometimes, when excitement bubbles up, his body moves faster than his mind.

Fortunately, the shop itself answered with kindness.

I heard a few good-natured oohs and aahs from around the room.

One of the other barbers laughed and said, "I'm jealous. My customers don't hug me!"

Another joked, "That's a better tip than I usually get."

Sam, picking up on my disappointment, decided to stand up, walk over to me while I was still sitting in my barber's chair, and offer me a hug. I've learned this is Sam's apology language—not words he can't reliably summon, but touch he can control. The hug says what his voice can't: "I heard you. I understand. I'm trying." Maybe it's also his way of doing a little sucking up. (He's known for that move.)

That earned another warm "Awww" from the room.

He sat back down, a perfect gentleman, while my haircut finished.

When it was time to pay, I tipped my barber generously and gave Sam money to tip his barber even more generously.

A small token of appreciation for her kindness.

Sam waved and called out cheerful goodbyes:

"Bye, everybody! See you next time!"

I smiled and offered a grateful nod.

We stepped outside, the afternoon sun on our faces, Sam marching proudly a few steps ahead.

And just like that, we were walking home—numbers pulled, haircuts done, order preserved.

Real Words *with* Sam

What topic would you like to do research on?

LIVING ON THE MOON

Do you think you could live in a satellite in space?

I THINK TO ORBIT PLANETS DOES
SEEM INCREDIBLE

What is something you would like to do this summer?

I WOULD LIKE TO EAT OUT PLAYING
ON THE BEACH

Elaborate on the “eat out by the beach” statement.

I’M THINKING THE RESTAURANT

If you could build a bridge, what two places would you connect to each other?

IF I DESIGNED A BRIDGE NATIONAL PEOPLE IN
CALIFORNIA WOULD CONNECT TO SPACE

What do you think of skateboard clothing styles?

SKATER CLOTHES ARE NOT AS
COOL AS THEY THINK

Chapter 5

How Spelling Sessions Work (The Technical Stuff)

This chapter is going to feel different.

More structured. More technical.

Here's what a spelling session feels like: the rhythm, the hurdles, and the moments when his voice rises to the surface.

We use the Speller's Method, a structured approach that enables Sam to communicate by spelling out words on a board, touching individual letters one at a time. It's built on a simple truth: Sam is intelligent and aware. He just needs support to share his thoughts.

Sessions typically last 50 minutes, although some days Sam may need more or less time, depending on what his body or mind is processing. This variability reminds me that his pace is part of his progress.

A session begins on Sam's terms, not with spelling or questions, but with whatever he brings into the room. Some days, Sam strides in with bright eyes, ready to begin immediately. Other days, it takes 20 minutes for him to settle into his chair. He might repeat a phrase like "Wash clothes on Friday," which seems random, but it carries weight for him. His mind might be stuck, replaying an upcoming event or a thought he can't shake, unable to move forward despite wanting to. That's when support is vital—a gentle nudge like, "Sam, you're stuck. Take a breath. You've got this." That steady encouragement helps Sam shift and focus, preparing to think and respond. In those shifts, I glimpse the voice that's been waiting.

Once Sam is settled, the coach reads a short, engaging passage from a carefully selected topic. Topics like marine biology or jazz music are chosen to spark his interest and challenge his mind.

The material is divided into short paragraphs with key words capitalized, often paired with a visual, such as a photo of whales during a marine biology lesson, to bring the topic to life.

As the coach reads, they may spell out complex words to help Sam process them. To an outsider, Sam might seem distracted—looking away or repeating lines from a favorite video. Still, when he spells "DOING HARD PUZZLES TAKES MENTAL GYMNASTICS" after a lesson about an unsolved mystery, it's clear just how much he's taken in.

Recently, Sam started reading lessons aloud himself. His words can be hard to follow without the text. But hearing his voice tackle the material, shifting from what looks like passive disengagement to full expression, I'm overcome with gratitude and admiration.

After reading, Sam answers a carefully sequenced set of questions designed to build his confidence, from simple recall to full self-expression.



The Structure: From Known to Open

The questions follow a careful progression to build Sam's confidence, guiding him from simple recall to original thought, with each step becoming a small victory.

Here's how it works for Sam:

- **Spell Words:** Sam spells capitalized keywords from the story. For example, "OCEAN" from a marine biology lesson helps focus his motor planning and attention.
- **Knowns:** A direct question with one clear answer from the story—"What country was mentioned?" — "BRAZIL."

- **Prior Knowledge:** A question from Sam’s existing knowledge. For example: “What state do you live in?” — “CALIFORNIA.”
- **Semi-Opens:** A question with multiple correct answers from the story—“Name one animal seen at the zoo.” — “ELEPHANT.”
- **Prior Knowledge Semi-Open:** A question drawing on general knowledge—“Name a U.S. state by the ocean.” — “FLORIDA.”
- **Emerging Open:** A question from Sam’s own mind—“What’s one word you think of when you hear the word snail?” — “SLIME.”
- **Full Open:** The goal is to produce a completely original thought—“What is something you want to achieve?” — “REALLY WANT TO LEARN NEW SKILLS SERVING OTHERS.”

This thoughtful system is more than a spelling lesson. It’s a scaffold for liberation. Each stage builds Sam’s autonomy, expression, and connection—another step toward sharing a voice that’s always been there.

Real Words *with* Sam

The bitterness of cacao seeds is an excellent evolutionary adaptation. What is an adaptation you have?

I'M LISTENING EVEN WHILE TALKING

Name a concern you think regular folk wrestle with?

LIFE IS NOT EASY
STRESS TAKES TOLLS ON PEOPLE
MONEY TOUCHES EVERYONE

In one sentence explain why you think the author stated that poor is eternal.

THE REAL RICHNESS ISNT
RELATED TO MONEY
YOU MIGHT BE RICH BUT POOR IN SPIRIT

Why do you think rich dad said they would learn faster in the real world?

REAL WORLD TEACHES MORE TIMES TEN

What are your thoughts on what makes someone a monster?

THE UTMOST DISRESPECT
FOR OTHER PEOPLE AND HARMFUL ACTION

What makes a good role model?

ONE TRAIT IS INDEPENDENT THOUGHT

Chapter 6

Nice to Meet You, Sam

It happened in a rare moment of quiet, almost casually. But my fundamental understanding of Sam shifted.

Not suddenly. Not dramatically. In fact, it felt somewhat routine.

Sam was working through his usual steps—spelling key words, answering known questions—when his coach added one more.

A different kind of question.

The kind we'd talked about just days earlier.

And without hesitation, Sam spelled his answer.

For about a year, he'd been meeting with his spelling coach once a week. The rhythm was familiar. The sessions steady.

But that moment was different. And it moved something deep inside me.

When Sam first started, it was hard to imagine we'd get here.

Some sessions were rocky. Dysregulation, distraction, frustration.

There were times I wasn't sure if spelling would ever really click.

But as he grew more comfortable with his coach, and with the process itself, something started to take hold.

His body began to cooperate. Intentions finally turning into action.

And at first, I was just amazed he could spell the words from the reading paragraphs. That alone felt like a breakthrough.

His coach would say something like, "Spell *environment*." And Sam would slowly, carefully point to each letter:

E - N - V - I - R - O - N - M - E - N - T.

I don't think I ever took that for granted. Watching him do that was incredible. He wasn't just parroting; he was attending, tracking, decoding, spelling. Every letter was intentional.

But then, several sessions in, he started answering questions.

Not just spelling pre-selected words, but responding with a single, meaningful word.

I remember one day his coach asked, "Who were the four Beatles?"

J - O - H - N P - A - U - L G - E - O - R - G - E R - I - N - G - O

I don't think I've ever been more proud.

After that, we listened constantly to the Beatles station on Sirius XM. He loved it—I know because he'd tune to it himself.

If you ask him, “Who’s the greatest rock band of all time?” he can give you an answer—and it’s the right one. To be fair, he is also a huge fan of the Beach Boys and Jimmy Buffett.

For months, he stayed in that phase—keywords and one-word answers. It was steady, slow, and honest work. In every session, the pattern was the same: Read, spell-words, known questions, semi-opens...

But then we reached something new.

There’s a type of question in the spelling community known as an emerging open.

It’s not yes or no.

It’s not multiple choice.

It’s not drawn from the text.

It’s the kind of question that asks the student to reach inside themselves and say something only they could say.

That’s where spelling moves from skill . . . to voice. Not just letters anymore. But language that belongs to him.

The day it happened for Sam, the topic was something about activities people enjoy.

I don’t remember the exact story.

But I’ll never forget what came after.

His coach asked, “Sam, what’s something you like to do?”

We waited.

Letter by letter, slowly and with purpose, Sam spelled:
“RELAXING IN AN EASY CHAIR”

We laughed.

We cried.

We sat there stunned.

Not because it was poetic or dramatic.

Because it was real.

Because it was his.

We’ve never used that phrase around our house.

We say recliner. Maybe La-Z-Boy.

But “easy chair”? That came from him—maybe something he picked up from a movie or TV show, or a book read years ago.

But that’s the thing.

He picked it.

He stored it.

He reached for it.

And he used it—not just to answer a question, but to show us that there were whole worlds inside of him we had never accessed before.

It wasn’t the sentence itself that shook us. It was the fact of it.

We'd spent more than a year spelling. Hours of regulation, focus, effort, and repetition. And then, we heard our son express a fully original thought for the very first time.

And in that moment, something clicked open inside of me.

Any trace of cautious belief disappeared.

This wasn't just a method. This was Sam.

Not a behavior. Not a collection of challenges. Not a mystery we'd never solve.

A thinker.

A person.

A son I was only beginning to truly meet.

Real Words *with* Sam

Name an instrument.

THE DRUMS

Name one more.

THE TROMBONE

What does the Bible say about creation?

ALL THE STUFF IN THE WORLD
WAS MADE IN ONE WEEK

What is the effect of smoke on bees?

IT SUBDUES THEM

What's your smoker that subdues you and makes you feel
calm and in a happy place?

HELPING OTHERS DO LIFE

What's the honey in your life that sustains you and drives
you forward?

RELY ON THE UNDERSTANDING THAT YOU
BELONG TO THE LORD