

I Am in Here: The Journey of a Child with Autism Who Cannot Speak but Finds Her Voice
Thirteen-year-old with Autism Can't Talk, But Her Poems Speak Volumes

Elizabeth Bonker is profoundly affected by autism and can't speak, yet she illuminates the inner world of autism through poems that she types one finger at a time. *I Am in Here: The Journey of a Child with Autism Who Cannot Speak but Finds Her Voice* by Elizabeth M. Bonker and her mother, Virginia G. Breen (Revell, \$16.99, October 15, 2011) is the story of Elizabeth's courage, determination, and optimism, and the relentless love of a mom who knew her daughter was "in there."

Over many years, Elizabeth has learned to type independently on a letterboard and computer. She began to write poetry, and has since written more than 100 poems. This child, who had been diagnosed as mentally retarded, was at last able to reveal her gifted mind. In a poem entitled "Me" Elizabeth expresses her wish to be understood:

**I sometimes fear
That people cannot understand
That I hear.
And I know
That they don't believe I go
To every extreme
To try to express
My need to talk.
If only they could walk
In my shoes
They would share my news:
I am in here.
And trying to speak everyday
In some kind of way.**

The book combines Elizabeth's poems and reflections with the story of their journey written by her mom. The poems reveal Elizabeth's strong desire to communicate, her rich spiritual life, her love of animals and nature, fascination with birds and flying, and her aspiration to be a doctor working with people in Africa. Her goal for the book, she wrote, is for people "to find peace in my book. I want them to read my prayers with understanding."

One in every 100 children in the U.S. has been diagnosed with autism. "Children with autism can't speak for themselves. They want you to remember that they are *in there* and to keep trying to reach them," Virginia writes. She never gave up trying to reach Elizabeth, and continues to seek her healing. This includes supervising medical, educational, behavioral, and spiritual approaches, visiting countless specialists, seeking out new treatments, and often, fighting school

bureaucrats and medical “experts.” She writes of the “great battle” of autism, which also afflicts her son Charles, and how the family draws strength for the journey:

•**Faith:** Elizabeth’s poetry reveals a deep spiritual life, “contemplating God in a way that went beyond what she learned in Sunday School,” Virginia says. “The burden of autism has helped us both understand one of life’s great mysteries. The most tangible way we experience God is through the presence of the people God has placed in our lives.”

•**Clinging to Hope:** “Autism Moms must find a way to cling to hope with a tenacity that is stronger than autism’s grip on our children,” Virginia says. “My answer is finding the joy in the smallest of moments...a conscious choice to seek these small flowers of joy in the crannied wall.”

•**Drawing Inspiration from ‘How’ People:** ‘How’ people ask, ‘how can I move forward?’ rather than ‘why me?’ Elizabeth, with her overwhelming challenges, is the ultimate ‘How’ Person. The book also includes a gallery of the ‘How’ people whose inspiring stories are told in the book.

Thanks to the Internet, one of Elizabeth’s poems has become a mantra beyond autism, as people substitute their own struggles in place of autism. Written when Elizabeth was nine, this poem “is where we first saw into the soul of autism and how it traps a beautiful mind,” Virginia says:

The Things I Know for Sure

**There is a God.
I am loved.
The sun will shine.
I will survive autism.**

“Elizabeth is my little flower, relentlessly breaking through autism with her poetry,” Virginia writes. “Like the flowers in the sidewalk cracks, she is a quiet miracle.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Elizabeth M. Bonker is a thirteen-year-old young lady with autism who cannot yet speak, but who writes deeply revealing poetry, which was featured on PBS’s *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*.

Virginia G. Breen is the mother of three beautiful children, two of whom are profoundly affected by autism. Besides working to heal her children, Virginia is a venture capitalist investing in high-tech companies, and she sits on both corporate and nonprofit boards. Previously she studied computer science at Harvard, business at Columbia, and eastern philosophies in Singapore. She now studies relentlessly at the School of Autism.

I Am in Here: The Journey of a Child with Autism Who Cannot Speak but Finds Her Voice
by Elizabeth M. Bonker & Virginia G. Breen
Revell

\$16.99 Cloth ISBN: 978-0-8007-2071-1
Release Date: October 15, 2011

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