

Life Skills 900: An Autism Mom in Grad School

By Bernice Olivas



The day starts at 6:15 when Thing Two runs, heavy elephant feet slapping on hardwood, at full speed, out of his room to greet the day. I can almost hear him skid around the corner into the kitchen. He touches every major surface; the wall, fridge—he jump-brushes the freezer door—then the counter, sink, and trashcan. This is ritual. I want to downplay the intensity of these moments, use the word routine or habit, or maybe call it a quirk or eccentricity, but those words lack depth. They lack the hint of compulsion that flavors our lives. He *needs* to do this.

Just as I often *need* to write into the early morning.

Next *Wow! Wow! Wubbzy!* blares. It's the alphabet song this morning. Then elephant feet rush past my door a second time. He's back in bed, tucked under the sheet, his tablet basting. This is followed by the soft scamper of Thing One who is a slick whisper of socks on wood, a hushed voice singing about monkeys and doctors; he is big eyes under a fringe of overgrown faux Mohawk. Thing One is older but smaller, more verbal but softer spoken. My boys are autistic, energetic, and beautiful. Thing One is funny—not my-mom-says-I-am-funny funny, but wickedly, biting, insightfully funny. If I am rushing to make breakfast, running late or distracted, he will wait until I have placed his plate on the table and then look at me, all serious and grave.

“Mommy!” he will say, “Good work. You did it.”

“Thanks, Pumpkin,” I say while Daddy laughs at the look on my face.

If I begin to hit overload point, seething, he will wait until just the right moment, when I am teetering on the edge of tears or about to say something that will haunt me later, to sidle up to me, press his head against my hip, peek up at me through his eyelashes and say, “Mommy. You need to make good choices, please. I love you.” It's hard not to laugh, so I don't try.

And Thing Two loves more deeply than any love I have ever witnessed. He throws himself into joy so fully that it bursts out of him in a trilling waterfall of giggles that roll bystanders under. Like tsunamis. Like riptides. Autism in my house is the normal even though it is not “typical.”

By 6:20 they are both back in bed. This gives us exactly 17 minutes to decide who is getting up, because in 17 minutes Thing Two will realize he is hungry and then he will raid the kitchen. Cheerios and cheese crackers or toast will be tossed on the carpet, smeared into walls. In 22 minutes I can expect breadcrumb and jelly artwork on the floors.

I get up. Run through my to-do list in my head; reading, laundry, writing, do we need groceries?! Class prep, grading, mentoring, meetings, and networking. I swing by the potty and mop (Thing Two's aim is a work in progress), as I try to remember what articles I need to make available to my 100-level writing course. In the kitchen I make lunches and then dash to the laundry room for clean clothes. I only do this about 20% of the time because Daddy is our morning warrior. He gets us all on the bus and ready for school before he goes to work. Some mornings he packs me a lunch in my old-school Wonder Woman lunch box. Today, Things One and Two and I reach the kitchen at the same time.

"Morning, Pumpkin," I say to Thing One.

"Are you Happy? What is your name? Do you like Cheetos?" Thing One is scripting. He will ask me these questions several hundred times today.

"Yes, baby! I am so happy to see you. My name is Bernice. No baby, Mommy like potato chips." I will answer these questions, and others, over and over again. Sometimes he will shift into wordplay and tweak his script so that we are verbally sparring over peanut butter or cartoons. This ends with him laughing until he is breathless in my lap.

"I love you, Mommy."

"I love you too, baby." Thing One is nine. He does not remember a time I was not in school.

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The scripts for grad school are wordier but just as relentless. Everything in grad school is wordier. The admission committee, my professors, my students, my dissertation committee will ask me the same questions a thousand times before I take my PhD in Composition and Rhetoric.

The script: "How are you preparing yourself to be a productive member of academia? Who ARE you as a scholar? Who do you serve as a scholar? What do you love enough to do for the rest of your life?"

Me (First Year): "I don't know. I only know that I love to write, to learn about writing, to talk about writing. I love words. Teaching. Teaching about words."

They ask again and again.

"How are you preparing yourself to be a productive member of academia? Who ARE you as a scholar? Who do you serve as a scholar? What do you love enough to do for the rest of your life?"

Me (Fourth Year): "I know that I love this bloodletting we call writing. I love all of its forms, all of its moods, all of its possibilities and limitations. I love this giving of ourselves, this offering up of the knowledge that we work endless hours to acquire, synthesize, process, and send back into the world. I love the act of guiding my students to new ways of seeing and thinking." I have always understood that my work in composition and rhetoric, my work as a writing teacher, tutor, and mentor, brings me joy that rolls me under. Like riptides. But like

Thing One, I struggle to find words, make meaning, put it all together so that it makes sense outside of myself. Grappling with these questions is also ritual. I *need* to do this.

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Back in the kitchen Thing Two bursts into tears with no explanation. He spills his drink. I comfort him with a kiss and he sticks out his tongue and swipes it over my lips and cheeks. He laughs joyfully, and I laugh with him even as I shudder at the sensation of thick spit on my lips. His giggle is infectious. He dashes into the front room, spins, flaps, jumps, dashes back into my legs, almost knocking me over, and is gone again. He slams his body into an office chair and demands, “Spin!” Thing Two is seven.

Momma spins because it makes him happy, because it may be one of a handful of words I hear from him today, because his whole body relaxes into the whirl of the chair and he relaxes only when he is in motion. Thing Two is hectic, messy and, at times, hard to understand. With him I am always in motion. In many ways his needs are much like the demands of grad school. I am always rushing to the next class, meeting, or gathering. I never really feel like I know, truly know, what I am doing or if I am succeeding. It all feels so subjective at times. Grad school demands that I spin or dance just because they say so, even if I don’t understand the reasoning, and I do it. And sometimes I cry with the frustration of not knowing how it will all work out or because it is all too all too much or just not enough.

Thing Two jumps out of the chair, hugs me close. “I love you!” he says.

“I love you too!”

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I learned to “do” grad school after I learned to “do” autism mommy-ing. I learned to be quick, flexible, and ready for any absurd, strange, or unexpected turn of events. If Thing One stands up in the grocery cart, drops his pants, and pees on the floor, Momma grabs the paper towels, reminds him that we “do that in the potty” and moves on. If Thing Two pulls a Houdini and vanishes into the rows of DVDs at the grocery store, then Mom and Dad turn into a well-oiled baby-locating machine. Dad heads for one exit and Momma starts looking for the Elmo rack. No need to panic. Panic is waste of focus and energy.

I learned to focus on my goals, whether that was finishing an article or getting through the shopping day without worrying about what other folks are thinking, or doing, or needing from me. Shutting down the fear that other students were writing sublime prose and intellectual gems while I struggled to produce a single decent sentence was almost as hard as learning to ignore the way folks look at me when I quietly sing “You are my sunshine” to a stimming nine year old in a grocery cart. (Stimming means self-stimulating, or, in the case of Thing One, it means tossing his head side to side, drumming his feet against the cart, grabbing the handle and shaking his body back and forth, back and forth.) It was a critical lesson. People in the store stare, sometimes they mutter, but it doesn’t matter because when the song is over Thing One will rest his head on my chest and breathe. He will relax because he knows he is safe if I am singing—even if everything in his environment is scary or hard or just too much. In grad school other students write beautiful things and I can let myself feel less-than, stared at, judged, or I can sing about sunshine and write my own beautiful things. Focus is everything.

This essay is part of the “All I needed to survive (and thrive) in grad school” essay project. <http://survivegradschool.weebly.com>

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Grad school and being an autism mom means developing patience and learning to celebrate victory in the smallest things. The single new word uttered by a child who struggles to speak, the unexpected surprises, that moment when someone in the grocery store looks up and smiles because they understand the landscape of autism. These are victories, wins—just like getting an A in the class that induced anxiety nightmares, developing friendships over coffee and theory, or seeing the work in print are wins.

Being an autism mom means jumping out of bed into a fighter's stance because advocating for your child is a real fight with serious consequences. Being a grad student is also a serious fight with real consequences. Only a very small percentage of the population earns a graduate degree, fewer yet are women; even fewer are women from underrepresented backgrounds. The truth is that both autism mothering and graduate school are hard. The stats say that grad school is all but impossible for a native mother who dropped out of high school with a GED. The stats say that mothers raising children with autism lose husbands, jobs, friends, and family. Being an autism mother means ignoring the stats because they don't matter and while I can't change my reality, I can direct it. I've learned to fight smart and fight relentlessly. I have also learned to recognize when I need to ask for help, when I need to just being weak and soft and human. There are tears in grad school—and sweat, and blood, and shit—but autism mothering taught me that they wash off. It taught me that both success and failure happen over and over again, and each one helps me refine and revise my answers to the questions life scripts at me. Life, parenting, and grad school are about getting up and doing the work and serving the Things that you love; every day. This is ritual for all of us. We *need* to do this.

The day begins at 6:15.

Bernice Olivas is many things: She is a Composition/Rhetoric Ph.D. student at University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She is an indigenous Latina American. She is a teacher. She is married plus kiddos. She is a polyamorous writer in deep, loving but conflicted, relationships with academic prose, fiction, and creative nonfiction. She relies on humor, coffee, and, occasionally, good beer to get by. It's not a bad life, but it can be messy.

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