

Today is a very exciting day for me because it is the first public launch of my book and talking to you is a taste of my childhood dream to be a speaker. Ever since I can remember I have been speaking to audiences in my head - things I have learnt become fascinating talks to large amounts of imaginary people. But you are not imaginary. Every breath and heartbeat, every eyeball, smile and frown is right there. You chose to be in this room, and I am selfishly glad, because you are helping make my dream come true!

My book is also an achievement born out of childhood fantasies. Romantically, I would be writing in an attic and become a famous author. In reality, I was writing at a desk in my bedroom. If I dared to look out the window I would be confronted with a sandy, weedy backyard with a huge hole dug into it years ago for a trampoline, still waiting patiently for its final resting place. My son Peter, who is now 19, dug the hole, but if you are parent you will understand that while he decided it was a good idea to dig it, and while we have changed our minds about the trampoline going in there, Peter now refuses to fill the hole back in!

Peter was diagnosed with High Functioning Autism when he was 14. Raising him has been exhausting. We knew something was going on with him when he was two. We didn't have a clue it was Autism until he was about 13. I read this tiny cute book at a school library called, "All Cats Have Asperger Syndrome." I was a teacher sitting on a chair in the library store room balling my eyes out because it felt like Peter was in every page - but not only Peter. Suddenly with a burst of clarity I could see my whole life before me and knew that Asperger's described me too. I now understood why when I was nine, I suddenly realised that other children had feelings too. Why at the age of sixteen, as school president listening to teachers talk before an assembly, I clicked that they were actually human beings with regular family life and concerns. I also saw why I was so vulnerable when I left home when I was seventeen, but you'll have to read my book for more details of that!

My day to day life is wrapped up with being a personal assistant to each member of my family. My work commitments have nearly always come second to my family. In my world, having good relationships wins over how much money or prestige I have.

My greatest achievement is actually not about me. It is about the health and character of my children. Peter has often thought it would be better to be dead. He is still alive because when he was in year seven I took him out of school - where his stress had become overpowering - and worked through his education at home. Over the next five agonizing and frustrating years we explored a whole new paradigm for success - through Autism, through what we could and could not do, through what we chose to be important. As a family, we took in another teenager as well, for fourteen months - Brody was on the verge of suicide before he came to us - and while he left us making wrong choices - he was another boy with his life intact again. In Peter's final school year, I raised enough money for Peter and his dad to go to South Africa on a wildlife photography excursion. He was allowed to take photos of white lions at a venue that normally prohibit that. Then we held an exhibition of his photos to celebrate his achievement but also mine. Getting those boys through those years has been my hardest and most rewarding task ever.

I think that every family or other operating system - a business, a government, a school - needs a positive overarching goal or a hope, to succeed or be driven forward. Say we have a problem - which is a child with special needs. If we are running around with our heads in the sand, or waiting for some-one else to fix things, or allowing negative thoughts and comments to over-rule our sphere of the world, or believing that nothing will ever change - we are creating and adding problems to the core issue - which is that our child needs help. Our children need a positive environment, and something to hope for - or they will not thrive.

I know it is really hard - and often I haven't wanted to do it - but it is our job as parents to provide that positive environment and to help our child find something to hope for. How are Nic and I doing at this? Because we are Christians, we have been able to give Peter an ideology of hope - and our home (apart from occasional meltdowns - my own or Peters) is fairly peaceful and positive. A couple of years ago Peter said to me, "If I wasn't amazing, and I wasn't brought up well, I would have killed myself by now." Think about that. He has a really good self esteem. He thinks Nic and I have done a really good job raising him. But then there was his

overwhelming frustration - at the time it was because he could not see a meaningful future for himself. He has done a lot of work himself, and we have helped, on his attitude of acceptance - knowing who he is (by researching personality, and reading a book all in one hit about understanding yourself), and being patient. His deepest desire is to know how he is going to spend his days in a meaningful and enjoyable way - and be paid for it, so he can be independent. He doesn't fit into the typical mould of kids with autism who have an over-riding interest. In this way we have come to a standstill - but Peter in himself is much more content.

So what I wanted to leave you with today was the idea of instilling hope and positivity into yourself and your family - whether it is a personal dream or goal for you and your child - or whether it is finding something to believe in. There are no accidents in the way your family was put together and I believe each family member has exactly the right skills and ideas to make things work. It is just making a decision to explore how that looks - because every family will do this differently - and make it happen.