



Childhood Redefined
AN UNSCHOOLING SUMMIT

I Am What I Am

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TRANSCRIPT

Hello!

This next video you'll be seeing is me reading an essay that I wrote back in 1999. My entire session is really built around this essay, which is entitled I Am What I Am because those are the five words that Jacob had written down on a piece of paper back then, when he was 8 years old. So those words and my essay are a really important preface for you to hear before we begin our journey to the Summit and before we begin our Journey within. Thank you so much for listening and enjoy.

I Am What I Am

Revised from the original, as my view and experience of radical unschooling has expanded. Also, as Jacob has grown and expanded himself, it was important to me to revise it and use terms that were respectful of him and his glorious path and Being-ness. His note is taped to my mirror as a daily reminder of his unique contribution to our lives, to our Universe. In handwriting and spelling that a teacher would surely frown

upon, it reads, "I AM WAHT I AM." Five words. Five short, simple words. But what a message. What a huge, wonderful, powerful concept for an eight-year-old boy to possess.

Jacob is the eight-year-old author of that note. Jacob is my gloriously unique child who most likely would have had a label or two attached to his mind and spirit if he were in school. But he's not. He's unschooled. And it is Jacob who introduced his family to the world of unschooling and to its glorious gifts.

Unschooling is so many things, and this is not the space where I want to try to define it. To me, however, it is mostly trusting in a child's innate desire and ability to learn and grow. Just as children learn to walk and talk without being pushed or tested, children will continue to learn and children will continue to love to learn when they are trusted and when it has real meaning in his or her life.

John Holt said it best, that unschooling is about faith: "This faith is that by nature people are learning animals. Birds fly; fish swim; humans think and learn. Therefore, we do not need to motivate children into learning by wheedling, bribing, or bullying. We do not need to keep picking away at their minds to make sure they are learning. What we need to do - and all we need to do - is to give children as much help and guidance as they need and ask for, listen respectfully when they feel like talking, and then get out of the way. We can trust them to do the rest."

The Universe put John Holt into my hands one afternoon when I was in the library...and every single sentence John Holt wrote backed up all that Jacob was showing me about how it was absolutely necessary for him to learn in his own way, in his own time. It was as if John Holt wrote a book or a chapter entitled, "You GO, Jacob!"

From the moment he was born, my husband and I recognized that Jacob had an exceptional awareness of his world. I wanted to be as aware as he appeared to Be. His eyes had such depth and knowing...this child came into our world seeming to know truths that some people take a lifetime to discover.

As he grew, our initial impression of our son was continually confirmed. His acute awareness of the world made everything seem new to us, too, as we were seeing it through his eyes, from his unique perspective. The typical adults we encountered were

confused, as their “Standard Approach to Talking to Children” did not work with Jacob. He subtly demanded and challenged adults to treat him as an equal, even as young as 18 months old. He spoke in perfect sentences at that age, corrected other people’s grammar, and interrogated everyone as they emerged from the bathroom as to the cleanliness of their hands. Before he was two years old, when an unsuspecting family member asked if he could say, “Liverpool” (the city in which we resided at the time), Jacob responded with, “Yes. Can you say micropachysapholosaurus?”

Jacob’s world was so large, his mind always working. This child showed us the meaning of real learning, for not only did he want to find answers to his questions, he wanted to ask his own questions, too. And we loved that, followed that, nurtured that, encouraged that, and learned from that. We were learning all the time from HIM, as he was learning all the time from the world.

Children love to learn as long as that light is allowed to Shine On in them. We made the mindful choice to not extinguish that light in our children.

I don’t remember the exact moment when we decided Jacob would not go to school. I do remember him intently observing children on the school playground, some pushing, some shoving, most not even aware or caring that there was anyone else around them. These children’s faces and behavior were clearly focused on survival, not fun or Joy. I also remember Jacob watching the school bus and asking questions about it, questions that may have made other parents uncomfortable, about children leaving their mothers and their homes and traveling on that bus to the school. Jacob always settled for nothing less than the absolute truth and so I told him the truth.

And I do remember that it was Jacob who decided once and for all that school was not for him. Those of us that knew him and loved him well agreed wholeheartedly that this child should not be confined to a room in a building for most of his day. His world was already so large, he was showing us that he was learning so much every day in the real world, we couldn’t imagine making his world smaller and taking away the best parts of his life.

Thus, from a very early age, we knew we would be homeschooling Jacob. Or rather, Jacob would continue to educate and enlighten us.

Our homeschooling method was painfully determined with my first attempt at teaching this child some “schoolwork.” He resisted. I insisted. He yelled. I yelled. He cried. I cried. And it was over. Our attempt at schooling at home had failed.

As a result, our unschooling lives were born, even though at the time we did not know that the concept even existed, let alone was in practice. But for us, it was just a natural extension of the life we were already living, the life that Jacob had shown us was best and most fulfilling for him, and it turned out to be the best and most fulfilling path for all of us. If we had never come across the word unschooling, we would have "invented" it for ourselves, as *This is How Our Child Was Shining*.

We continued to allow Jake to do the driving, while we experienced the journey from the passenger seat. The view from that seat was amazing, as my husband and I learned how to really live and learn ourselves. The ride was fascinating, world-expanding, thought-provoking, and glorious.

Unschooling has been a gift to our entire family, one that now defines our very way of life. And it has been this gift of unschooling that has saved my child’s spirit and his self-concept.

Because we never attempted to fit our gloriously unique child into the society-typical box, we were unaware of the fact that society’s box held labels for him. To us he was Jacob, our child, celebrated and loved and honored for being exactly Who He Is...just as every child has a right to be.

As Jacob reached age nine, challenges surfaced that previously had gone unnoticed because of our free unschooling lifestyle, our focus in life on Joy, and our conviction to allow Jake to BE completely HimSelf. He had always held a small level of anxiety in his spirit, for his awareness of the world not only brought enlightenment, but also disturbing knowledge for which his young years were not prepared. When his mild anxiety increased, his fine and large motor skills showed no signs of advancing as he got older, and his beloved quirks became more intense, my husband and I knew it was time to find some answers.

It was not our plan to label him. It was not our intention to research his challenges in order to improve him, change him, or fix him. He was perfect just the way was. He was

CELEBRATED for Being Exactly Who He Was. It was merely our intent to own a better understanding of him, his mind, and his spirit. It was our goal to find answers that would enable us to bring more joy and less stress into Jacob's already very free life. So I started researching. And I was shocked at my findings. I found label after label that my child fit into...a little bit here, a little bit there...labels ranging from Asperger's to Gifted to Sensory Integration Dysfunction and everything else in between. How could this be? Yes, of course we knew for sure that Jacob was different from any child we had ever known...and sure there were some challenges...but it never ever occurred to me that the traits which were a celebrated part of Who He Was would be considered dysfunctions or special needs...and while we understood he was gloriously unique, we never once looked at him and had the term "a-typical" pop into our heads.

I developed an insatiable hunger for information about the labels. I read all I could...I joined message boards, lists...I read many books. And I only grew increasingly frustrated with the answers I was receiving. It seemed the focus of the books and the lists was always the same: advice was given to assist you in forcing your "special needs" child into that society-typical box, mainly the **school** box. Parents are given the message that their child needs to be fixed, that their child is the one that needs to change in order to fit into those boxes, no matter how demeaning and defeating it is to the child's happiness and the child's spirit. And right there in black and white in all of the books were experts to give you advice on how to do it...how to change and fix Who Your Child Is in order to have them fit into the box of society's expectations. According to these "experts", there was no alternative.

To further my research, I attended a support group meeting for families with children on the autistic spectrum. As the meeting began, the attendees were instructed to go around the room and share stories about our children. I felt so excited! I love talking about my children. I couldn't wait to hear other people's stories.

But as I listened, my heart was filled with a heaviness and a deep sadness for the children. The parents' stories were about their child's "disabilities", and their struggle to get appropriate services from the school and understanding from the teachers. Their stories were filled with pain and anger and a fierce determination to fight the system.

From my perspective, one thing was clearly and devastatingly missing from their stories: the children themselves.

When it was my turn to share, I took a deep breath and held my sweet Jacob in my mind, in my heart. And I spoke. I spoke of my child who has always been so spirited, so unique, and who has so blessed our lives. I spoke of my child who is at times challenging, but what child is not? What human being is not? From Jake's challenges, we were able to learn things about ourselves and about the world and about our lives and about love that we could not have learned otherwise. I spoke of my child who has never been forced to be someone he was not, who never was and never will be expected to fit into someone else's idea of who he should be. I spoke of how my child has always been celebrated for being exactly who he is. I spoke about our unschooling lives ~ the child-led learning we completely trusted in and lives which were focused on Joy, stemming from Jake's passions and interests, questions and answers.

And as I spoke, all was silenced. I paused, and I realized that I wasn't looking at anyone, I was thinking so much about my boy. And when I finally looked up, I saw every face turned toward me, every eye on me, many of them containing tears. And on every lip was a gentle smile.

I had spoken that day with the same passion with which I parent....a passion for my child and a focus on how he Shines in this world. That is the focus of our lives...not the challenges...but the Shine. There is never a lack, only an abundance of the glory of Who My Child Is. I believe that all children Shine when celebrated for being exactly who they are...and when I spoke that night of how Jacob shines, I believe it reminded other parents about how their child shines, too.

I never returned for a second meeting. I learned all I needed to know that night. I learned, once again, that the answers were already within us, and we were living them every day. My insatiable hunger for knowledge about Jacob's challenges was replaced with the ultimate reinforcement that our present unschooling life was most definitely the right path for us. It was time to put the research down and continue with life...with unschooling, because unschooling IS life. And yet we now walked forward with a new understanding, even more compassion and empathy for those gifts that have always made Jacob so wonderfully unique.

Jacob is my child. Jacob is my gloriously unique child, the author of that note, I Am What I Am...just a few short words that held so much. Special needs? Sure ~ every human being has the special need to have the freedom to Be and the celebration for Being Exactly Who They Are.

I have learned this from my boy. And every single day, as I read Jacob's note, I hope that all people everywhere will celebrate themselves and know what this child was born knowing:

I Am What I Am.