

"The Blank Spaces"

In this personal essay, one woman describes her fears for her toddler's future based on extensive prenatal alcohol exposure — but finds she can't be angry at his birth mom.

by Nora Dock

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I do not know much about my youngest son's first mother. I hold the flimsy intake form detailing her social history. Her personal details dot the sheets of paper at irregular intervals: name, height, weight, complexion.

I stare at the form, trying to make sense of the information. Most of her story is told in the blank spaces, the difficult questions left unanswered. I pore over the missing bits and fill them in with my own inferences. I weave the scant facts together with my invented narrative, letting the story of her loss unfold.

On the last page of the intake form, there is a break from the blank spaces: a scrawl tells me that she drank heavily throughout her pregnancy. When I read the number of drinks that she consumed on a daily basis, it makes my head swim. I try to find the reason behind her choices, but the blank spaces are not forthcoming.

What is evident is that, as a result of her decision, our son is living with irreversible brain damage caused by [prenatal alcohol exposure](#). Each sip that she took left a blank space on his brain, smoothing away entire areas of normal function.

His story is also written in the blank spaces.

When you look at our child, he resembles any other (exceptionally good-looking, wonderfully charming) three-year-old boy. His dark brown hair sticks up in a wild cowlick on the crown of his head. His green glasses perch atop the tiniest, squishiest nose. His lips are beautifully full,

and his cheeks bear deep dimples when he smiles. His feet are wide and solidly connected to the earth.

He takes my breath away.

He runs and laughs and tumbles with his older siblings. He appreciates the wonder of a friendly dog and a tiny baby. He hugs you with every part of his body. When I wake him early from a nap, he squeezes his eyes shut and whispers, “No, thank you, Mama. No, thank you.”

He is my star, my love, my heart.

What Lies Ahead

It is hard to detect the damage within our son at this moment in time. Like many children affected by prenatal alcohol exposure, he will “pass” as neuro-typical throughout toddlerhood. The first signs of compromised brain function may become evident as he starts school, and then, as years pass, the gulf between our son and his peers will widen.

It is bittersweet to look at our beautiful child today and know that this may very well be the best time in his life, that as he grows, so, too, will his challenges.

The picture painted by “experts” is bleak. My son is at risk for secondary mental illness and addiction. He is likely to suffer from intense bouts of **rage** and from an inability to distinguish right from wrong. He will struggle with impulse control and long-term memory. His open and friendly nature (so charming now) will read as naïve and dim-witted to his future classmates. As they descend into adolescent snark, he will become an easy target — the kid they trick into doing “funny,” possibly criminal, things.

Because our son’s physical appearance is unblemished, he will be presumed to be a “bad” kid (instead of a differently-abled kid). It is a dangerous cocktail of impaired functions that often leads to incarceration. His future could be swallowed by the blank spaces. Chunks of time lost to events too painful to record.

No Time to “Wait and See”

In defiance of the experts, I have not given up on our son. His life might take a different path — a stable, healthy path. Research shows that good outcomes are hard-won for children who have been exposed to alcohol in-utero; that the birth-to-three window is especially critical in setting them up for success. Because he became my son at 28 months of age, I cannot afford to take a “wait and see” approach; I cannot turn a blind-eye to what might come. I hunker down to fight for his survival.

In order for this to work, he needs to love me back. Me, the person he just met. Me, the person who took him from his foster family and his home country. He needs to love me — but I can’t blame him if he won’t.

I strain under the effort to woo him. I have never worked so hard to win another person’s love. As with romantic love, I take great care with my appearance. I stop coloring my hair, so that our tresses match. I slather myself in the same sweet lotion that I massage into his back each night, in the hope that his nose will trick him into associating my scent with pleasure. I give up my

fancy vintage dresses in favor of soft cottons and fleece — textures to soothe cheeks raw from weeping.

There is an urgency to the wooing. I need to make him love and trust me now, in his toddlerhood, because this time is as good as it will get for us. From this moment forward, he will slip farther and farther away from me, rushing toward the blank spaces.

I commit to being his “external brain” for the rest of his life. I vow to support him unconditionally — as only a mother can — and to scaffold him with love should he falter.

When he tantrums, I gather him into my lap and wrap my arms around his flailing limbs. I whisper “wuss, wuss” into his hair and sing our own version of “You Are My Sunshine.”

“You are my sunshine, my lovely sunshine. I love you so much my little buddy, forever and always I’m your mama.”

Peace and Light

As I cocoon my boy in love, I also hold his first mother in peace and light. It would be easy to lose myself in rage directed toward her and the pain she inflicted on our child. I am angry at the price our son has to pay for her decisions — but I can’t be angry at her. I know nothing about who she is or what her life is like today. It is unfair to imagine that her existence remained static, that the blurry social history is an accurate picture of who she is right now. At best, the information she gave upon surrendering her child was a snapshot of a tragic moment in her (and his) life.

The truth is that I’ve dwelled in the blank spaces too. I know what it is like to feel that your life is out of control. To fall to your knees in the face of deep pain and to take solace in whatever form you can find (a bottle, a stranger, a pill). I am in no position to judge anyone, least of all the woman who carried our beloved son into the world.

I imagine that, like our son, she too carries her damage on the inside, that our son’s absence from her life today is the most painful blank space of all.

I believe I am duty-bound to pick up where she could not continue. To raise her son to love and honor us both, in hope that they might one day reconnect and fill in each other’s missing details. That their reunion will resound with love and complete all the blank spaces. But again, that’s me writing my own narrative over their story. That’s me trying to fix their future, because I feel so helpless about their shared past.

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