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AM I STRONG ENOUGH?

Before the birth of my son six years ago, I would have defined strength as a gruff grinning and bearing, the opposite of uncertainty. When he was born with severe brain damage and later diagnosed with cerebral palsy, I felt anything but strong. I was devastated. But I promised myself that I would find a way to handle whatever happened. My baby boy deserved and needed nothing less.

I came to see that what constitutes strength is not just muscle or will. It can also include the most desperate vulnerability, the saddest heartache, the lightest, sweetest laughter. Being strong for my son meant learning to love not just him but his endless crying, too. It meant letting my lovely flesh-and-blood child take the place of my abstract fears. It meant accepting those fears as the flip side of my love, my weakness as part of my resolve.

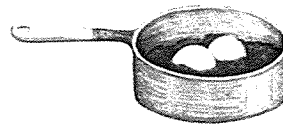
He couldn't latch on or breastfeed; he wasn't holding up his head; he wailed mightily and furiously for no reason we knew. He did not smile or laugh. He might never see, walk, or talk. Yet he was also this marvelous red-haired, chubby-cheeked, green-blue-gold-eyed baby who could, I absolutely knew, feel my love and return it. My child was both the light of my life and the nexus of my deepest

worry, and I had to be strong enough to accept this paradox.

One day, at long last, I saw him smile back, recognizing me and feeling—I swear he sighed with pleasure—safe and happy in my arms. I knew for certain that he was aware of how loved and adored and wanted he was, and that steeled me for the years of caretaking to follow. Through years of surgeries, therapies, and medications, no one has smiled like this boy. I try to remember how brave he is, because this bright-eyed, vibrant child is a source, not just a recipient, of love.

People are always complimenting parents of children with special needs—for being so *amazingly strong*. But it doesn't take strength to love your child. It's the other way around: Love gives you resilience. When I tend to my disabled child's medical needs, I'm simply being a mom, caring for my son. Strength means honoring your entire range of emotion, even your despair and heartbreak. *Especially* your despair and heartbreak. It means acknowledging each of those feelings, your questions and ideas and faith and terror, and meeting what comes with the full force of your heart.

Brenda Shaughnessy is the author, most recently, of the poetry collection *Our Andromeda* (Copper Canyon).



& BY THE WAY...

What's my go-to recipe for surprise guests?

"Shakshuka, a North African dish of poached eggs in a tomato sauce, is both easy and cheap. Just heat up canned tomatoes (jarred marinara will work, too) in a skillet over medium heat, crack two eggs per person straight into the pan, cover, and poach for four to five minutes. Serve with salad and bread or rice, and you've got dinner."

—Deanne Katz, creator of the *Impromptu Kitchen* blog

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