Parent to Parent Support programs provide emotional support and information to families of children with special needs and/or disabilities.

Supported by: The Arc of Washington State; Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction; Department of Health/Children with Special Health Care Needs; Private and Foundation Grants

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Welcome to Holland
By Emily Pearl Kingsley

I am often asked to describe the experience of raising a child with a
disability to try to help people who have not shared that unique experience-
to understand it, to imagine how it would feel. It’s like this...

When you’re going to have a baby, it’s like planning a fabulous vacation trip to
Italy. You buy a bunch of guidebooks and make your wonderful plans. The
Coliseum, the Michelangelo David, the gondolas in Venice. You may learn some
handy phrases in Italian. It’s all very exciting.

After months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags
and off you go. Several hours later, the plane lands. The stewardess comes in and
signed up for Italy! All my life I’ve dreamed of going to Italy.” But there’s been a
change in the flight plan. They’ve landed in Holland and there you must stay.

The important thing is that they haven’t taken you to a horrible, disgusting place,
full of pestilence, famine and disease. So you must go out and buy new
guidebooks. And you must learn a whole new language. It’s just a different place.
It’s slower than Italy, less flashy than Italy. But after you’ve been there for awhile
and you catch your breath, you begin to look around, and you begin to notice that
Holland has windmills, Holland has tulips, Holland even has Rembrandts.

But everyone you know is busy coming and going from Italy and they’re all
bragging about the wonderful time they had there. And for the rest of your life,
you will say, “Yes, that’s where I was supposed to go. That’s what I had planned.”
The pain of it will never, ever, ever go away, because the loss of that dream is a
very significant loss. But if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn’t
get to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special things about Holland.
I have been in Holland for over a decade now. It has become home. I have had time to catch my breath, to settle and adjust, to accept something different than I'd planned. I reflect back on those years of past when I had first landed in Holland. I remember clearly my shock, my fear, my anger, the pain and uncertainty. In those first few years, I tried to get back to Italy as planned, but Holland was where I was to stay.

Today, I can say how far I have come on this unexpected journey. I have learned so much more. But, this too has been a journey of time. I worked hard. I bought new guidebooks. I learned a new language and I slowly found my way around this new land. I have met others whose plans had changed like mine, and who could share my experience. We supported one another and some have become very special friends. Some of these fellow travelers had been in Holland longer than I and were seasoned guides, assisting me along the way. Many have encouraged me. Many have taught me to open my eyes to the wonder and gifts to behold in this new land. I have discovered a community of caring. Holland wasn't so bad. I think that Holland is used to wayward travelers like me and grew to become a land of hospitality, reaching out to welcome, to assist and to support newcomers like me in this new land.

Over the years, I've wondered what life would have been like if I'd landed in Italy as planned. Would life have been easier? Would it have been as rewarding? Would I have learned some of the important lessons I hold today? Sure, this journey has been more challenging and at times I would (and still do) stomp my feet and cry out in frustration and protest. And yes, Holland is slower paced than Italy and less flashy than Italy, but this too has been an unexpected gift. I have learned to slow down in ways too and look closer at things, with a new appreciation for the remarkable beauty of Holland with its tulips, windmills and Rembrandts. I have come to love Holland and call it Home. I have become a world traveler and discovered that it doesn't matter where you land. What's more important is what you make of your journey and how you see and enjoy the very special, the very lovely, things that Holland, or any land, has to offer. Yes, over a decade ago I landed in a place I hadn't planned. Yet I am thankful, for this destination has been richer than I could have imagined!

(My follow-up to the original "Welcome to Holland" by Emily Pearl Kingsley)
HELPING PARENT TRAINING MANUAL

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