

## Because of Alex...A Pilgrimage

by Clarence E. Schutt, Ph.D.

My daughter Rachel remarked recently that Alex, her thirteen year old brother with autism, was “a true artist, not interested in what others thought of his work, because his medium was water brushed onto patio stones dried by the setting sun. His art is pure expression.”

I visit Stockholm frequently for the purposes of scientific collaboration. I make a point of visiting Millesgården, a beautifully terraced sculpture garden easily reached by public transportation. Boarding the Red-Line at the City Center, and remembering to switch trains at Ostermalmsborg, will put you in Ropsten at the end of the line, where you will discover a footbridge that takes you across a broad expanse of water to Lidingo, a suburb of Stockholm. Ascending a steep hill on the right, along a wooded path, you will reach a high bluff overlooking the water, which faces in the direction of the City of Stockholm. It is there that Carl Milles selected a magnificent outdoor site to display many of his greatest works, as well as his outstanding collection of classical sculptures.

As a boy, I had become acquainted with Milles’ sculptures of Neptune and his children on our school visits to Cranbrook Academy near Detroit, where Milles was an artist-in-residence for many years. I suppose his name impressed itself on my 12 year-old mind because there was some talk at the time of my being offered a scholarship to attend this prestigious preparatory school, until my dad squelched the idea with a firm “He’s my son and he stays with us”—someone had to cut the grass and clear the snow. Kindly Fate remembered me because one of Milles’ best water fountain works occupies a central location on the University of Michigan campus where as an undergraduate I took my future wife on “sculpture dates”.

When Alex was about seven years old, we hung a poster from Millesgården in my daughter Susannah’s bedroom showing a secluded spot in the garden where Milles’ sculpture “Susannah” sits in the middle of a calm reflecting pool. Each night, Alex would visit Susie’s room and rub his hands on the poster in silent reverie. My wife promised him that, if he learned how to speak, we would take him to Stockholm to see the Millesgården for himself. I vowed to visit Millesgården on every trip to Sweden as a pilgrimage to a place symbolizing for me a time when Alex could speak.



Hand of God

On the lowest terrace of the garden, Milles placed on a high pedestal “The Hand of God”, a sculpture of a small boy poised bravely on the finger and thumb of a large hand looking back and upwards. That slender boy represents Alex to me: alone, silent, with his entire body expressing courage, hope, and wonderment.

On visiting Millesgården I never go directly to this lower terrace. I usually go to the Museum Café where, not speaking Swedish, I manage somehow to order a glass of wine and a small sandwich. I know that Alex is close by, perched high above the Stockholm skyline, but I like to let my emotional energy concentrate as I imagine him being there with me someday.

Then, after spending some quiet moments in Susannah’s little grove on the highest terrace, I descend the long staircase that takes me to Alex. At a certain angle, the small boy floats amidst a trio of trumpet-blowing angels that Milles placed on slender pillars. Nearby, seated on a stone bench, a bronze sculpture of a middle-aged man, hunched and worn by the years, yet bemused by the soaring sights about him, expresses the coiled energy of relentless parenthood.

Science will one day find the means to translate the artistic impulses in our autistic children into messages that we long to hear. The life of Helen Keller has taught us that when information from one sensory channel is scrambled or lost, the cerebellar circuits continue to form the endlessly novel combinations of impressions, memories, and emotions from which true art springs.

When I returned from Sweden, Alex found a small tube of Colgate toothpaste in my suitcase and silently asked if he could have it. I said that it was O.K. as long as he took it into the kitchen. Later that evening my wife showed me a white coffee cup with two thin parallel lines of chocolate syrup and toothpaste at the bottom. “We’re out of Mint Milanos,” she said. ♦

*Clarence E. Schutt, Ph.D. is Executive Vice President and Secretary of NAAR. Dr. Schutt is Professor of Chemistry at Princeton University, where he is also Associated Faculty of the Molecular Biology Department, Director of the Graduate Programs in Molecular Biophysics and a Member of the Program in Neuroscience. Prof. Schutt is co-founder and co-chair of The Eden Institute Princeton Lecture Series on Autism, now celebrating its fifth anniversary. He is the parent of a 13-year-old son with autism.*

