

If Ana weren't my sister, I would be a worse volunteer. Ana is four years younger than me. She has Down Syndrome.

On 5th avenue at 106th street, there is a center called Terence Cardinal Cooke, which people shorten to TCC. It is a home for disabled people of all ages. I volunteer in the rec room, where I meet with the children to finger paint, play games, and sing songs. Most of the children have breathing tubes. When they smile, it twists their mouths out of shape. Once, I was allowed to visit the floor where they sleep. Their rooms had rows of beds with wooden bars on the sides to keep the kids from rolling. Next to the beds were monitors and I.V. kits. In the hallway, there were rows of wheelchairs lined up.

During the first few years of her life, Ana also needed constant attention. She had scoliosis. She had crooked eyes that needed corrective surgery. To walk, she had to wear plastic casts that she decorated with stickers of flowers and one of Elmo. Until I was seven, I thought she was normal, but annoying. She had tantrums. She couldn't speak clearly. I didn't understand that her mind was younger than she was.

As a thirteen-year-old, she tries to act older. She wants to be able to do what anyone else her age can do. Recently, when I was putting order-in sushi on dinner plates, Ana wanted to help. I told her she could set the table. She knows how to set the table. She has set the table many times before. But she wanted to help move the sushi. Since I asked her to help in a way she didn't want to help, she chose to neither set the table nor to move our dinner onto plates. She chose to watch me and scream. She sometimes does this when she is being helpful. She wants to remind me she is there.

It can be hard to watch people who are mentally disabled. It is particularly hard if those people can't stand or talk or are trapped inside their bodies, like the children at TCC. If I had not grown up with Ana, volunteering at TCC would be more difficult for me. I might ha've stood in the back, watching other people play with the children. Ana is not easy. Sometimes, she can be unbelievably frustrating. But she doesn't break if you talk to her. She is playful, loyal, and sometimes she makes me laugh.

The children at TCC are more difficult than Ana. They won't try to help with sushi because they can't move their arms. But Ana, somehow, makes it easier for me to spend time with them. One seven-year-old girl, named Princess, squeals in a low pitch that moves higher when she likes something. It was exactly what Ana did before she was five.

The poet Iris Murdoch says love is "the exceedingly difficult decision that something other than oneself is real." Ana has made that decision easier for me. I can't ignore her when she is being irritating. I

have to acknowledge that she is a full, thinking, acting person. And that makes it easier to realize other people are real too. The kids at TCC want the same things I would want – or any of us would want – in their situation. They can't speak. But in their own, silent language they are repeating the same things we all say to each other. "Look at me." "Do that thing that makes me laugh." "I like you." "I'm sad." "Can you hold me?" "Are you happy?" "Look at me." "Here I am."