

The  
Wisdom  
of  
Sam

## Praise for *The Wisdom of Sam*

*“Another beautiful volume from one of the few inspirational writers who has actually walked the walk and not just talked the talk. Gottlieb is a national treasure.”*

— **Daniel Gilbert**, professor of psychology, Harvard University; author of *Stumbling on Happiness*

*“This is a heartwarming book written by the grandfather of a young child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder. The relationship between the two is remarkable, in terms of understanding each other’s point of view and life experiences. The book can be read at many levels, from a description of autism in a child and quadriplegia in a mature adult, to a philosophical understanding of the meaning of life. I really enjoyed reading the words of wisdom in **The Wisdom of Sam**.”*

— **Tony Attwood**, author of *The Complete Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome*

*“In the imagination, important things are big achievements in the past or future. In life as it is experienced, important things are small, present, and moment to moment. This beautiful book is a meditation about those small and yet important moments. As you read it, you will find yourself settling down, breathing in, and opening up to your own life. Consider it a gift to your heart.”*

— **Steven C. Hayes**, University of Nevada; author of *Get Out of Your Mind & Into Your Life*

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— **Robert Naseef**, author of *Special Children, Challenged Parent*; co-editor *Voices from the Spectrum*

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*VOICES OF CONFLICT; VOICES OF HEALING:  
A Collection of Articles by a Much-Loved  
Philadelphia Inquirer Columnist*

# The Wisdom of Sam

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OBSERVATIONS ON  
LIFE FROM AN  
UNCOMMON CHILD

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DANIEL GOTTLIEB, PH.D.



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To Sam and all the Sams in this world.  
Who are able to see things we can no longer see.  
Who know things about the joys of life,  
the beauty of nature,  
and the opportunities each moment brings—  
those things most of us have long since forgotten.  
May they be patient teachers  
and we their humble students.  
So that we may rediscover what  
we have always known.



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# CONTENTS

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<i>Introduction</i> . . . . .	x1
Chapter 1	Just a Little Forgiveness . . . . . 1
Chapter 2	Permission for Happiness . . . . . 11
Chapter 3	We're All Together . . . . . 17
Chapter 4	I'm Sumfing Else! . . . . . 23
Chapter 5	I Don't Know That Face . . . . . 33
Chapter 6	Why Do People Have to Get Naked? . . 39
Chapter 7	Everything Just Went Too Fast . . . . . 47
Chapter 8	Toughen Me Up . . . . . 53
Chapter 9	My Kind of Place . . . . . 61
Chapter 10	Enough Madness . . . . . 69
Chapter 11	How You Back Today, Mommy? . . . . . 75
Chapter 12	Was the World Only Black and White? . . . . . 83
Chapter 13	Where Bad Dreams Go . . . . . 91
Chapter 14	Great Expectations . . . . . 97
Chapter 15	A Bus for Sam's Pop . . . . . 105
Chapter 16	I Am More Kind . . . . . 111
Chapter 17	My Death . . . . . 119
Epilogue	The Care Package (to Debbie and Pat and Sam) . . . . . 125
<i>Acknowledgments</i> . . . . .	133
<i>About the Author</i> . . . . .	135

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# INTRODUCTION

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When my grandson, Sam, comes for a visit, we usually have breakfast together. The conversation is pretty much what you'd expect between an 8-year-old and a 62-year-old. Our morning talks often focus on juice and cereal. We might discuss going to the arcade later in the day. Or, if Sam is in the mood, he will tell me about his friends in school or how he feels he is doing in wrestling this year. And, inevitably, we will pay a lot of attention to our dear friend Loki with the soulful eyes and light auburn hair. As Loki is a dog, his mood is mainly dependent on one factor—whether he has been fed or not.

During the morning's transactions, Sam will give me a big kiss. And before breakfast is over, we will usually find something that amuses me and sends Sam into gales of laughter.

In other words, it's a normal morning. Sam is bursting with energy and eager to get a start on the day, but each of us has our limitations. I'm quadriplegic and will spend the day in my electric wheelchair. And Sam is a child with autism. It is hard to tell that Sam is different. That is, until he runs into children his own age, or is asked to leave his mother, or faces an unforeseen turn of events in the day's schedule.

These limitations don't matter. We are who we are.

I started writing letters to Sam when he was born. A lot has happened with Sam, with his parents—my daughter

Debbie and her husband, Pat—and with me. When I first noticed symptoms of autism, and Debbie and Pat got a diagnosis, we had no idea what would happen to Sam as he got older. Would he be able to talk, attend school, and get along with other children? The word itself, autism, covers a wide range of possible symptoms and outcomes—what is referred to as a “spectrum.” The diagnosis does not give any prediction about where a child will be on the spectrum. So there was no way for us to anticipate future challenges. But having an early diagnosis, in itself, proved extraordinarily important, and soon Debbie and Pat were using all the resources they could find to help Sam make his way in the world.

*Letters to Sam*, completed when Sam was five, expressed the hopes, fears, and unconditional love of a grandfather finding his way with his grandson. Both discovering, each step of the way, the possibilities of that relationship. However, the correspondence was all one way, from Pop (as he calls me) to Sam.

Now Sam is growing up. Our relationship has gone through many transformations, but perhaps the best of all is the way he has become my teacher.



Shortly after I started writing this book, I happened to have dinner with my friend Linda Welsh, a psychologist who works with medical residents at the University of Pennsylvania. Linda is affiliated with a program in which each resident is assigned to a family that is dealing with a severe chronic illness. After meeting with the family, the resident visits the family’s home throughout the year, learning what it’s like to live with chronic illness.

While doing follow-up with one of these families, Linda spoke with an 11-year-old boy who had severe rheumatoid

arthritis. Linda asked the boy how he felt about the resident who had come to visit him. “He was really cool,” the boy replied. Then Linda asked the 11-year-old what he liked best about being with the resident. The boy thought for a long time before he replied: “I got to be the teacher, and it feels good.” No surprise there. Any time someone is genuinely interested in our lives, we feel dignified and respected. But when it is an adult allowing the child to be the teacher, that is a gift that can have a lasting impact.

All of our children have something of critical importance to teach us, but are we able to be their students? I believe we do have that capacity, if we respect their wisdom.

In *Letters to Sam*, I told the story of how each of us got an indentation on the upper lip before we were born. As the story goes, God whispered all the secrets that we need to know in order to live our lives. Then he, or she, said “Sssshhhhhhh” and pressed a finger to our upper lip.

Those are the secrets that Sam and all of us were born with. We know them, but that knowledge can be easily lost. In many respects, children are more honest than adults, because they are not yet influenced by expectations of teachers, peers, and the larger world. So what they say is their truth, and what they see is more clear than what we see.

As Sam’s grandfather, I see him as a child who is different from other children. His character is uniquely his own. Sam is loving and engaging. He has eyes as big as the moon that seem to be asking questions even when his lips don’t move. When Sam does say what he thinks, he speaks without editing himself, often expressing thoughts that are surprisingly kind and considerate and often remarkably insightful. He remembers rules and is quick to remind me of them—especially when I’m not following them! The Sam I know, and love, often can’t differentiate between appropriate and not-appropriate timing for these reminders, but if his confusion makes him stumble a bit socially, to me that’s all the more endearing.

But for all his uniqueness, Sam has many traits in common with children who see the world differently than many of us. Now that Sam is talking to me about the world, there are numerous times when I'm aware he actually sees it more clearly than his parents or I do. How can this be explained? Often these children are not influenced by context. The positive side of this is that they can see things we miss—the texture of a paper with an important message, the exact words someone used at a critical moment, or the colors of the sunset when everyone else is rushing around. But this clear and narrow focus is also one of the reasons their social skills are often so poor. They cannot absorb all of the social cues in the environment. For example, Sam would be comfortable going up to a group of peers and trying to engage them. But he wouldn't be aware that they were already having a conversation, so he would just begin saying whatever he wanted to say. And then he wouldn't be able to notice that the kids might be uninterested. Sam's focus would be exclusively on the story.

Sam has improved dramatically since his initial diagnosis, but he still has that clear-minded perception. And because Sam is doing so well, he is able to talk about his inner experience.

But . . . is he really wise? Can a seven- or eight-year-old teach us anything truly important?

These were some of the questions that led to the writing of this book. If I have accomplished my mission, this book is not only an introduction to Sam's world seen through Sam's eyes; it is also a reminder of the things we once knew and might otherwise have forever forgotten.



Implicit in this book, as in *Letters to Sam*, is another question that, I hope, will fascinate you as much as it does me. It is something that many of us ask about our children

and grandchildren. Who is this person? And what will he or she be like as an adult?

Author and physician Rachel Naomi Remen tells a story about a gift from her grandfather. It was a clear plastic glass that contained a seed. When she wanted to know what kind of seed it was, her grandfather merely said, “Make sure it’s watered and has plenty of sun, and you’ll find out.”

Rachel dutifully did as her grandfather requested, and eventually she saw a little sprout. She called him on the telephone and again asked what it was. Same answer. Every time she called, she asked the same question, and each time his answer was the same.

Our children are a lot like that seed. We cannot know what they will be. And we certainly cannot make them into the children or adults we want, but we can love and nurture them nonetheless. Sam changes almost every day. He started off as a delightful, smiling, and fully aware baby. And then his parents and I watched him change. The light seemed to go out. That’s when Debbie and Pat had him tested and learned that Sam had a pervasive developmental disorder, which placed him on the autism spectrum. He didn’t speak, and he banged his head on the floor when he got frustrated.

And then, after two years, with the help of various therapies and his own development, he began to speak—at first with a speech impediment and then without. We watch him now, and he is thoroughly engaged, delightfully empathic, and loving.

On a recent visit, Sam asked my nurse to put me on the sofa so he could lie on my lap while we watched a movie. And then in the middle of the movie, we just looked in each other’s eyes for a while and said nothing—in that silence, feeling great love for one another.

He’s had plenty of water and sunshine. He will continue to unfold and blossom, I hope for the rest of his life.



For my own part, I can't say Sam's birth has made me different, but it has brought a new kind of love into my life—a kind of pure adoration that doesn't come with a sense of responsibility other than to love this child fully. His birth has also given me the great gift of watching my own child become a loving and devoted mother.

Sam's birth has also made me feel more comfortable with growing older. When I look at Sam, I know that I will not see much of his world, that my life is finite, and that these moments are precious.

I have always been a loving man, but the role of "grandfather" has given me more freedom to love. Whatever might have been inhibiting my deep, affectionate caring for the people in my life ended with Sam's birth.

So now I am a man with more faith in the innate health of living beings. As a result, I sit with my patients and there is a loving twinkle in my eye. I know that they will be okay. We just don't know what that "okay" will look like.

My lectures always conclude with the importance of love, telling people to love who they love and how to do so better. Because of Sam and everything he represents, my deepest wish—my daily wish—is to make the world better for my Sam and all of the other Sams by making it more loving and compassionate. I want to do this through my writing and lectures, through my relationships with friends and family, and through my interactions with people I encounter in daily life. The book you now hold is an expression of that wish.

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## CHAPTER 1

---

# Just a Little Forgiveness

When Sam was younger, he loved to draw pictures with crayons. As a budding artist, he was a study in concentration. There was something princely about the way he sat at the kitchen table, his feet dangling, his thick brown hair bowed over the sheet of paper that commanded his complete attention. When he concentrated really hard, his tongue poked out of the left corner of his mouth.

I don't know where his artistic inspiration comes from, but I do know that it has been encouraged by his mother, Debbie. We all learned shortly after his diagnosis that loving adults in his environment needed to keep him engaged so that he wouldn't get lost inside his mind. Debbie has been with him constantly and involved with his activities from then on. And with that safe and secure presence, Sam began to flourish; over time, we all watched him become more engaged and more comfortable in his world. So whenever Sam sat down to draw pictures, Debbie stayed nearby, her presence providing reassurance. And when Sam became

wrapped up in what he was doing, it was clear that he was not getting lost inside his mind anymore. Still, he relied on Debbie's presence, and sometimes he would call on her.

When Sam makes a picture, he is keenly aware of color, and nuance is important to him. This is not unusual for children on the autism spectrum: they are very sensitive to sensory stimulation and the wrong color can be visually irritating. I became aware of this when Sam was about six years old. He and I were talking and I happened to make some comment about a green shirt someone was wearing. "Actually, Pop, that's aquamarine," Sam said matter-of-factly, not knowing that his pop really had no idea what aquamarine was.

Though that was the first time I learned about Sam's acute awareness of colors, Debbie found out much earlier. One day when Sam was about five years old, he sat down to color a picture. Debbie, as usual, was nearby, and Sam asked her to hand him crayons as he named the colors. Though Debbie was doing her best to assist Sam, she was also trying to finish up a number of things in the kitchen, which left her momentarily distracted. She wasn't paying close attention when Sam requested the color turquoise. Debbie glanced quickly at the crayons in the box, picked one, and handed it to Sam. Unfortunately, the crayon she handed him was light blue.

On the verge of applying crayon to paper, Sam's hand froze in midair. He seemed shocked. Raising his dark eyes to regard his mother, he spoke with an uncharacteristic edge in his voice.

"Mommy, I asked for turquoise."

Debbie retrieved the light blue crayon and handed him the turquoise one.

Sam's searching gaze never left her face. He studied his mother, trying to fathom what had gone so terribly wrong.

"Mommy," he concluded. "You weren't paying attention!"

“I know, Sam,” Debbie confessed. “Will you forgive me?”  
Sam thought for a moment.  
“Just a little,” he said.



I’m not sure that I, or Debbie, or anyone but Sam would have felt what he was feeling at the moment he realized the awful truth—that his mother (such a seemingly caring and loving human being!) had betrayed him in so casual a manner. To most children with autism or Asperger’s, a milder pervasive developmental disorder, the devil is in the details, and Sam is no different. When things are orderly and predictable, his comfort increases, but surprises are deeply unsettling. Now that Sam is eight, while surprises still come thick and fast, he can often identify what’s bothering him. When he was younger, that wasn’t the case, and he responded in ways that disturbed and frightened us. There were tantrums that reached a level of uncontrolled violence when, for no obvious reason, he would repeatedly bang his forehead against the wall or floor. Sam didn’t speak until he was nearly four years old, which only added to his frustration with the world. But by the age of five—with steady therapy and guidance from family and teachers—Sam had come to a much better understanding of what distressed him, and he was starting to learn how to tell us. There were no more head-bangings and fewer tantrums. Obviously, Sam felt great frustration at finding the wrong color crayon in his hand, but he had been able to explain the source of his frustration!

So I admired the way Sam expressed himself. I also admired his honesty about forgiveness. Sam, to his credit, understood how much he could forgive. His mother asked for complete and categorical forgiveness. Sam couldn’t go that far. What he could manage was to forgive her “just a little.”



Hearing Sam's words, I felt as I often do—that his starkly honest and unmediated response conveyed his own particular brand of wisdom. Sam, like all of our children, has something to teach us. This time, the lesson was about honesty and forgiveness.

Some time later, as I was preparing a talk on the topic of forgiveness for a group at Villanova University, that incident with Sam came back to me. I also recalled a letter I had received from a young man in South Korea. Unlike Sam, my Korean correspondent had been deeply influenced by religious education. He accepted the tenets of his Christian faith while grappling with his own conflicted feelings, and that had brought him to an impasse. Though he struggled at times with the English language, the essence of what he wrote was this:

Sometimes I feel that it is not easy for me to forgive someone who has inflicted severe pain on my heart. I know that I have committed many mistakes with my neighbors, brothers, and sisters . . . therefore, I know that I have often received forgiveness from them and I will have to beg forgiveness from them in the future. However, because I am not a perfect person, sometimes it is very hard to forgive my colleagues who have hurt my feelings—which eventually causes depression. I know that Jesus asked us to forgive our brothers and sisters, always and consistently. However, I am not a perfect person like Him. *Sometimes, what Jesus asked of us sounds like another violence to me.* Because I am not a perfect person like him, it is very difficult for me to live like him.

Violence! Imagine that.

What's violent about what he believed Jesus asked of him? Perhaps at the deepest levels, it feels violent when we ask things of ourselves that are unreasonable. Here we are, after experiencing an injury, being told that the right response is forgiveness!

What if, instead of placing unreasonable expectations on ourselves, we take a look at who we are and what has happened to us? Once we get away from the lofty theological, philosophical, and psychological preaching, this whole business about forgiveness is really just about managing injury. It's about finding a way to live with injustices, large and small.



When we are dealt an injustice, it comes as a shock to the system. A number of times, I have been asked to describe the car accident that left me a quadriplegic. What I learned, some time after the accident, was that an entire wheel and tire had broken loose from an oncoming truck, flown across the road, and landed on the top of my car. My only memory of that moment—and the answer I give—is simply this: “I was hit by a black thing.”

After that, life as I knew it was forever changed. But I also believe it is an accurate metaphor for what happens to all of us when we experience trauma. A black thing comes out of nowhere, and in an instant life is altered. Isn't this what happens when we experience a divorce or the death of a loved one? In an instant, we are in the grip of a disaster that destroys the world as we know it. One moment, we are walking down the sidewalk on a sunny day, and the next moment there is no sidewalk. No sun. And no day. Only darkness.

Afterward comes confusion and terror. But somewhere in the mix, most of us experience a silent rage because we

feel something has been *done* to us or *taken* from us against our will. As we carry that rage, we look for a target and yearn for justice. I spent over a year with seething rage that was directed toward the truck driver, having violent and sadistic fantasies. Then I found out that a tire and rubber company was the cause of my accident, and I wished a lifetime of unhappiness for those who contributed to my suffering. The truth is, for most of us, justice represents just one thing—the ability to reclaim what we have lost. It is the longing for what we had yesterday or the day before.

And, of course, when we try to pursue justice that way, we fail. Every time.



I'm sure each of us can describe the essence of an injustice we've experienced. For me the injustice originated in the engineering department of a prosperous, cost-conscious tire-and-rubber company where massive metal wheels for trucks were being designed. A number of people in that company knew their wheels had a design flaw. Under certain circumstances, a truck wheel could come loose from one of the trucks that they put into production. The wheel could fly across the road or down the highway and land on top of a car. And if that happened, the passengers of that car could be killed or injured. Knowing all of this, they made the decision to go ahead and build an unsafe product. That is how, and why, I was injured.

For Sam, the fact of the injustice is a turquoise crayon instead of a blue one.

The stories differ, but the experience of injustice is similar for all of us. When we *experience* it, we feel shock, outrage, and helplessness. And we realize how extraordinarily vulnerable we are.

So how do we cope with these feelings? Clearly, what has happened to us is *wrong*. If the injury was perpetrated

by someone, then that *person* is wrong. I knew the company was wrong and I was an innocent victim. Knowing that, we open the gates to great anger and righteous indignation. We mobilize those around us to agree about right and wrong, to assure us how entitled we are to our anger. So we wrap these feelings around us like a threadbare coat in a snowstorm in an effort to protect ourselves from our own vulnerability. It doesn't help, but it's all we have.



My dictionary defines *forgiveness* as a “letting go of resentment.” I’m sure that’s what forgiveness is supposed to be. But how do we let go if we believe our anger protects us from further injury or, in some strange way, holds a perpetrator accountable? Resentment and righteous indignation distance us from our own pain, and we need distance to survive. At least initially. But when resentment continues, it becomes toxic.

It might not matter whether *they* are wrong where we are right. What matters is that we were hurt and forced to suffer. What matters is that we lost a piece of our life, and now we are vulnerable. What matters is that we need compassion, and the safety and courage to feel what we feel. When that happens, when our suffering finds its voice, our heart softens and opens. And rage turns to grief—a deep and heartfelt grief for what we have lost. In the ideal world, the person who hurt us would bear witness to our pain and feel genuine remorse. But that is often impossible. What is possible is for us to bear witness to our own lives. To listen to the suffering with compassion, sadness, and love. And then it is safe to grieve.

So, how does grief turn into forgiveness?

I believe forgiveness is a spiritual process, which requires faith. Not necessarily faith in a higher power, but faith that

broken hearts heal. Faith that we have all of the resources to recover and be loving and compassionate once again. Faith in the knowledge that true healing is not about reclaiming yesterday but fully opening up to today.



When I wrote to my Korean correspondent, I told him Sam's story. And then I added:

"Sure, Jesus talked about forgiveness, but he also talked about caring for those who suffer. The reason you have closed your heart to those who hurt you is because you suffer. And the longer your heart stays closed, the longer you suffer. There is only one thing that opens hearts: compassion. Do you think you could offer yourself compassion? When you are hurting, do you think you could love your wounded heart without hating someone else at the same time?"

After I mailed my letter, I realized that there was something else I wanted to add. I wanted to say: "Don't worry about forgiveness. Allow your wounds to heal. Allow your heart to heal. And then use the wisdom you have acquired to help heal the world. Don't pursue forgiveness. Allow it to follow in the wake of your life. True forgiveness asks you to be able to find the other person's humanity. You cannot do that until you find your own."



When we are wounded and alone, we need people who love us enough to look in our eyes and see our suffering. That's what Debbie did for Sam. She was able to see that he was truly hurt, not by the turquoise crayon but by his mother's distraction at a time when he needed her full attention.

If Sam had behaved in a more "grown-up" manner, perhaps he would have felt obliged to try to forgive his

mother completely. Perhaps he could have reflexively said, “Yes, I forgive you, Mommy,” without even noticing that he was hurt. Or he could do what most adults do: forgive out of fear of causing conflict. Or he could hold a grudge so that he could have the illusion of control.

But there is too much tenderness in Sam. He was hurt, and he knew it. Perhaps, in some way, he also knew that this small injury would heal. So he forgave his mother as much as he could—“just a little.”

And then, as always, life went on. Sam never did any more work on his forgiveness. As far as Debbie could tell, he thought no more about it. Whatever sense of injustice lingered inside him probably dissipated quickly. That’s what happens with children. They somehow know that hurt feelings get better.

Maybe that’s another lesson we need to learn from them.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I first met Patty Gift five years ago when she was my editor for *Letters to Sam*. At first, I loved the way she thought about the book. As I got to know her, I loved the way her mind worked. And then I grew to love the way her heart worked until, beautifully, they all worked together. She has been a wonderful guide and mentor, but how fortunate I am to call her friend.

One of the many gifts she gave me was my introduction to Reid Tracy, the CEO and president of Hay House. At our first meeting, Reid told me that Hay House was only about helping people and that every author they published had that as their goal. I remember thinking that this is a man who is leading an organization with both his mind and his heart. And then I noticed that for lunch he had eaten a half of a cheeseburger and half an order of French fries. And then I knew that he could balance matters of the heart with matters of the mind!

Among the wonderful people at Hay House who helped with the *Wisdom of Sam*, I thank Patty's assistant editor Sally Mason, copy editor Anne Barthel, and designer Bryn Starr Best.

I always acknowledge my agent, my friend, my counsel Edward Claflin, and I always will. We first met when he was my co-author with my first book, *Voices in the Family*. That was nearly 20 years ago, and not a week goes by that we

don't talk on the phone or exchange e-mails. None of my books would have been published without his talent and his friendship.

Of course the real credit for this book goes to Sam. His sweetness could be felt well before he had words. But once he began speaking, his simple and honest observations about life showed us a child who wasn't just sweet but also insightful and compassionate and wise. So I thank Sam, my grandson, the love of my life, my pal, and a very unique child.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Psychologist **Daniel Gottlieb**, is the author of *Letters to Sam* and *Learning from the Heart*, which have been published in 15 languages and received worldwide attention. In 2009, in the U.S., he was the recipient of the Books for a Better Life Award in the Motivational Book category for *Learning from the Heart*. The same year, in Taiwan, he received The Fervent Love of Life Award in recognition of the Chinese-translation version of *Letters to Sam*.

Gottlieb is also the author of *Family Matters*, recently reprinted as a trade paperback, and *Voices of Conflict; Voices of Healing*, a publication of People with Disabilities Press. He hosts an award-winning mental health call-in program, *Voices in the Family* and writes weekly blogs on the Websites of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and The Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation.

A practicing family therapist as well as author and talk-show host, Gottlieb lives in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, where he has a private practice in individual and family psychotherapy. In 1979, when he was 23, Gottlieb had a car accident that rendered him quadriplegic. One year after the accident, he resumed his practice. He later served on the advisory board at Wordsworth Academy and The Boys & Girls Club of Camden, and from 1996 to 2000, he was on the National Advisory Council at the Center for Mental Health Services.

Gottlieb's radio program, *Voices in the Family*, can be heard weekly on the public radio station WHYY-FM 90.9 FM in Philadelphia. He is the recipient of numerous awards for the show, including a national Clarion Award, a Best Local Radio Program Award from the Society of Professional Journalists, a National Mental Health Media Award, and the Philadelphia Society of Clinical Journalists Lifetime Achievement Award. Other honors include the Excellence in Media Award from the Association of Marital and Family Therapy and the Pennsylvania Public Broadcasting Award.

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