

*sacred*  
SPARK

Rev. Lisa K. Sykes



# *sacred* SPARK

A Minister-mom's Quest to  
Restore the Light in Her Son's Eyes  
Inspires Her Church to Protect  
Children from Harm and  
Ignites a Global Debate about  
Autism and Childhood Vaccines

Rev. Lisa K. Sykes

Epilogue by

Mark Geier, M.D., Ph.D. and David Geier



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Burgess, Virginia

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Front cover photo: Wesley Sykes at age one.  
Back cover photo: Lisa Sykes with Wesley Sykes at age thirteen.



Joshua, Seth, Wesley, Lisa and Adam Sykes, 2009.

This book is dedicated  
to my son, Wesley, and to all those like him,  
who live heroically in spite of mercury poisoning  
and to my husband, Seth, and our sons,  
Adam, Wesley and Joshua,  
and all those like them,  
who love heroically in spite of mercury poisoning.

"The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children."

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

1906-1945

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## FOREWORD

If you ever have the pleasure of meeting Reverend Lisa Sykes in person, the last thing that will cross your mind is that this soft-spoken woman with a gentle smile is really a firebrand of social reform, a person of great public resources and personal power. Through her public ministry in the United Methodist Church and her private fight for her son, Lisa's gift to other advocates for children is her ability to shine the intelligent light of ethical questioning on the vaccine safety issue, an issue that tends to bog down with political debates that obscure the real question of "When are we going to act as a nation with a conscience and do whatever it takes to protect and heal our children?"

In her search for answers to stopping the autism epidemic and healing her son, Lisa's path has taken her to discussions with scientists, national television journalists, state attorneys general and national politicians. In addition to her medical and political advocacy, Lisa is also a legal pioneer, having the courage to take her son's case out of our government's Vaccine Court and into Federal Court. Although her case was unsuccessful because of a legal doctrine called preemption, her effort will likely be seen as advancing the efforts of all those who seek to prevent the further poisoning of children by mercury in medicine.

While federal health agencies continue to spend billions of our tax-payer dollars in promotional efforts to shore up the public's trust of the ever expanding childhood immunizations schedule, there has yet to be funded one comprehensive study to assess the health impact of cumulative vaccine doses and the effects of their multiple toxicants. The glaring problems presented by the still present supply of mercury in our medicines and an ongoing skyrocketing autism epidemic cannot be solved by marketing alone. This tired tactic failed in the not too distant past, when all the king's horses and all the king's men could not put "safety" back into tobacco products again. As history shows us, at some point the truth becomes too obvious to too many to be spun away with clever marketing. We have reached this point now with poorly manufactured and tested vaccines, especially those still containing mercury and other toxic ingredients, and the fact that they have not been and cannot be proven safe by our tax-funded federal health agencies.

It is now more than ever that parents, physicians and researchers supporting vaccine-safety must continue to hold our ground as we fight for our children and all those, born or unborn, who will benefit from our strength and unity. We need look no further than true stories like Lisa's for the inspiration to go forward in the coming months and years as the house of cards upholding the indefensible position of keeping mercury in our drug supply and children's bodies comes crashing down.

Books that chronicle the heartbreak and trials of families going through the ravages of autism are not uncommon, given the current high rate of autism. However, few stories have had an impact like the story of Lisa Sykes and her son, Wesley. With its impressive reach, *Sacred Spark* is a testimony of someone who stands fast in her faith that, when called upon, society will always act in the best interest of its children.

Lenny Schafer, Editor

*The Schafer Autism Report*

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## CHAPTER ONE



### TOXIC

"In other words, Merthiolate (*Thimerosal*) is unsatisfactory as a preservative for serum intended for use on dogs. Occasional[ly] dogs do not show the local reaction but in some instances the reaction is extremely severe."

—Pitman-Moore Company to W. A. Jamieson, Director,  
Biological Division, Eli Lilly and Company, July 22, 1935

IT WAS LATE IN THE EVENING ON A FRIGID WINTER NIGHT WHEN NIKKI CALLED. For her to call me so late was as unexpected as it was uncharacteristic of her. Through hurried and jagged breaths, she begged me as her pastor to come over as quickly as I could.

The headlights of my car divided the darkness well into the rural outskirts of Richmond, Virginia. In the chill of the night I got out of my car and hurried to the door of a very modest home, feeling that something had to be very wrong. It was.

As soon as I entered the home, I saw Nikki's two children, their faces drawn, sitting shoulder to shoulder on the sofa, saying nothing, too scared to move. Nikki's face was tear-streaked, and the atmosphere in the room was painful and stagnant. I surveyed the chaotic situation, and suddenly it all made sense. Behind her, Nikki's husband, Sean, was seated, a loaded gun at his side. The smell of alcohol hung in the air around him.

"I didn't know whether to call you or the sheriff, Lisa. He's threatened to shoot all of us and then himself..."

I drew a long breath, knowing that the sheriff would have been the more appropriate choice. But I was here now, and could not leave, nor risk increasing the volatile dynamic that was reaching its pinnacle. Gently, as if waking a child, I began to speak.

“Sean,” I almost whispered. “You have a disease, one that will kill you if you leave it untreated, as surely as cancer would... and this one may destroy your family, too...” I paused until his vacant eyes focused and registered comprehension. Every word I chose with the utmost care, and before the sun rose, the gun had been put away and help enlisted from the county’s mental health department. Nikki called the next afternoon: “I didn’t know you could be that strong,” she said. I hadn’t known it either.

I worked to dispel the frightening memory of this family’s crisis by reassuring myself that as long as my husband, Seth, or I lived, our children would never face avoidable endangerment or jeopardy. With no alcoholism in the family and believing that we were not a part of that genetically vulnerable population, Seth and I could expect our children to be safe from disability or danger from intoxication.

What a fool I was to think I could safeguard my children so utterly or that it would be so simple. While I was not so naive as to believe that children were never sacrificed in contemporary society, I was naive to think that the tragedy was random, the result of illness and circumstance conspiring together. I had no reason then to imagine that I would soon, unwittingly and unknowingly, practice such profanity—sacrificing the well-being of my child. And that I would do so not because of any illness of my own, but because of a widespread and unrecognized sickness—the institutional and societal compulsion to inject susceptible infants with unseen but devastating mercury.

JANUARY 1996, RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

On a snowy day in January 1996, when the obstetrician placed our newborn son in his father’s arms at the hospital, I was in no mood for love. Six hours of natural childbirth, the delivery, the exhaustion, the worry over how my two-year-old son, Adam, was... No, I had no time to fall in love. In fact, in my exhaustion I foreswore the possibility of any more children. I was done.

But then, my husband, Seth, entrusted the newborn infant into my

embrace and I gently touched the baby's nose to my breast. He was docile, sweet, unassuming. The brilliant blue of his eyes upon their first opening would never fade, or so I thought. Here was as much magic and as great a miracle as I had ever hoped to see. I set my eyes on Wesley, and I vowed never to take them off.

The student nurse assigned to me on the maternity ward was fascinated that this thirty-year-old mother was an ordained minister. I shattered all the usual stereotypes of a clergyperson. No one ever first thought that I—a tall, slender woman with long wavy hair that bounced about the shoulders and who liked to giggle irrepressibly—was a clergyperson. Now, holding the child to whom I had given birth, I surprised strangers when I replied to their queries about my profession, saying I had been ordained six years earlier. Each time the student nurse came into the room to bring Wesley to me, or to return him to the nursery, she struck up a conversation.

“What did you do to have the perfect baby? He's so good.”

I already took pride in the new nine-pound bundle that had so recently changed my life.

“I don't want him to be perfect. Just healthy and happy. That's all.”

In that statement, had I already sought for too much, though I was blissfully unaware of the tragedy which had already begun.

The nurse, still searching to find her professional demeanor, addressed me again. “Lots of times, I worry about the babies. About whether or not they're getting the best. It's nice to see that this one is.”

I smiled, in response, surprised by so searching a comment.

“I'll do everything I can to take care of him,” I replied in answer, gently lifting the baby from the nurse's arms and holding him close.

He was perfect, still. The wondrous newness had not worn off my bewitching cherub-like son.

## SUMMER 1997

Even the doctors in the pediatric office, who had seen little ones day in and day out for years, gawked at the rolling blue-green eyes, the neatly squared chin, and the plump cheeks that framed a precocious nose. After the doctor examined Wesley during each well-baby visit, the nurse took him out of the room while I spoke to the doctor about his progress. “Ninetieth

percentile in height. Ninety-fifth percentile in weight.” Wesley was thriving. “The picture of health, Ms. Sykes,” said my old-school pediatrician.

“Is he still nursing?”

“No. He stopped at seven months.”

“Why, that’s just fine. Now, as for formula...”

The doctor went through his checklist. Wesley was crawling, saying “mamama” and “dadada” and giggling at his big brother’s games of peek-a-boo. Wesley was so excited to see his father arrive home each day, and he ate only too well.

“You’ve got a fine boy there, Ms. Sykes...” I smiled in agreement.

“Now let me see, which shots is he due for today? He’ll have...” The doctor began the list. “Any questions?”

“No.”

“All right then, Ms. Sykes, just go down to the lab. Wesley is waiting there for you and his shots.”

I wandered down the hallway with its bright and broad stripes of yellow, green, red and blue to discover Wesley was captivating several adults. I giggled.

“Come here, you flirt.” I caressed his head.

“Oh, Ms. Sykes, if you could just sit him in your lap.” I did so, dreading the prick of the needle for my son, but knowing it’d be over within only a second or two.

“Ms. Sykes, please initial right here, and then we can give Wesley his shots.” I complied without question. Responsible parents, watchful parents, would do no less than get their children vaccinated against life-threatening infectious diseases.

“Now, there may be some redness, or swelling, or fever. If you see anything like that, just give him some Children’s Tylenol, okay?” I nodded.

The nurse picked up the vial and inverted it. The syringe was inserted and a precise amount of clear liquid withdrawn into its cylinder. She then took the cotton swab and scrubbed a small patch of skin on Wesley’s thigh. The air about this act was so keenly antiseptic. I winced as my baby boy was stuck with the needle. Two seconds. Maybe less. Wesley let out a wail of protest and a couple big tears. A cotton ball was placed over the site of the injection and secured with a purple Barney band-aid. Everything was clean, precise and efficient. Though my baby had cried, I felt an inner sense of



security that Wesley would have the benefit of immunity from so many dreaded infectious diseases.

“It’s going to be just fine,” I cooed to Wesley.

I had been watching him resolutely. Protectively hovering, enjoying the inconvenience of a baby in my life. I reveled in his new discoveries. His coy smiles. His gentle soul. The special outfits for Christmas and Easter. His new-found abilities and newly-captured hearts. Wesley was a treasure, and each day was a joy. He played in the baby pool with the glee and abandon only a child knows. He crawled, and chased, and cuddled. Life seemed complete and perfect to me.

Wesley was slow in developing his language, but it was coming. My family had a history of late-speaking boys, especially on my father’s side. Our pediatrician, when queried about it, replied with a laugh in his voice, “Why, Ms. Sykes, his big brother is doing all his talking for him!”

With reassurance given, I hadn’t begun to worry until Wesley neared one-and-a-half. It seemed to me that I was hearing the few words he used regularly less and less. This social child, who loved to be adored, seemed suddenly stubborn about smiling. The portraits that had been so easy to make in his infancy and first year, now became difficult. He ate, but only soft foods, and ever since he had begun to walk at fourteen months, he didn’t really stop to get into trouble. He just wandered and wandered happily about the house.

Oddly, he loved to be in his crib and was very contented there. I wrongly considered this a providential blessing because Seth was finishing his dissertation and each minute I could spare was spent editing his writing. I did ponder the fact that Wesley did not cry when Seth or I turned off the light in his room at night. I found this very strange because my eldest son, Adam, had been terrified of the dark at the age of one-and-a-half. Perhaps Wesley simply had a different, and more relaxed, disposition. Afterall, this seemed to be true of his teething also. When Wesley was getting a tooth through, he didn’t seem to be in much pain. Adam, by contrast, had screamed and howled as if he were dying when his teeth broke through the gum. Occasionally this second son needed Tylenol to ease the pain of teething, but not very often.

OCTOBER 1997

Adam’s fourth birthday party in 1997 was intended to be a brilliant

celebration. A crystal clear October sky, the welcoming warmth of the sun, a park all to ourselves, and lots of little friends to bring presents and eat cake. As the children arrived, they played on the climbers and in the forts. Seth was supervising Wesley, now one-and-three-quarters years, amidst the kiddie climbers.

As I yelled that cake was ready, the children came running. Wesley, who was playing in the mulch beneath the playground equipment, angrily protested being removed from this diversion and bit his father hard. Wesley began sobbing and screaming and Seth literally had to hoist him up sideways so that Wesley's flailing arms and legs did not hit him in the face.

The party proceeded on, but from this day forward, Seth and I worried what might be wrong with our son.

I had watched over this child so carefully, how could it be that he seemingly had drifted away? One minute, there he is, right beside me, and I am the good mother. The next minute he disappears from sight as if he wandered into a cave, as black and vast as the darkest recesses of heaven's night. He is gone. At first, of course, I do not believe it. I dismiss the evidence. I reject it while tentatively holding onto the memory of a happiness that is already gone.

The cave is autism, and ten months after Wesley's first uncontrollable tantrum that October, he is diagnosed. He would soon cease to look at books and fall mute. He would become completely unpredictable, dropping to the floor and screaming without provocation, and more significantly, without warning. His eyes would become glazed and hollow, and despite my frantic searching, I would be unable to find the glint of recognition in his eye, the sacred spark of personality and spontaneity that had danced upon the brilliant blue and given me such joy. It was gone, and the vast emptiness which had replaced it was the measure of my sorrow.

I watched Wesley. This child, who had been the pride of his pediatrician, was now so sick. His skin had become sheet-white with pallor. His eyes were circled in purple and his ears were often bright red. The tale-tell hallmark of autism—chronic diarrhea—set in and lasted for a year. We gave up any attempt at toilet training.

Wesley wouldn't eat. I did not yet know why. He wouldn't look at toys or objects, just ceiling fans. Certainly, he seemed utterly deaf. But what devastated me to the point of being nearly inconsolable was the fact that Wesley

would no longer permit me to touch him. I now had a child of two-and-a-half years who would not be rocked or held or caressed.

I could not bear it. And so I would wait... wait until Wesley fell deeply asleep. Because Wesley slept at odd hours, I did not dare intrude into his fragile slumber in the night, for upon waking he would scream and scream and scream. But occasionally, after one of those bad nights, he would fall asleep on the sofa, mid-afternoon, alone except for his tattered bear. And only then would I ease my body slowly, delicately, down beside his. I would slide one arm beneath his legs, the other, behind his back. Then, I would hoist him as softly as I could upon my lap, against my chest, and remember... remember he had not always been this way.



## CHAPTER TWO



### MERCURY

"My first reaction was simply disbelief, which was the reaction of almost everybody involved in vaccines," Halsey\* says. "In most vaccine containers, Thimerosal is listed as a mercury derivative, a hundredth of a percent. And what I believed, and what everybody else believed, was that it was truly a trace, a biologically insignificant amount. My honest belief is that if the labels had had the mercury content in micrograms, this would have been uncovered years ago. But the fact is, no one did the calculation."

"The Not-So-Crackpot Autism Theory" by Arthur Allen,  
*New York Times Magazine*, November 10, 2002

OCTOBER 1998

WESLEY HAD NOT YET TURNED THREE YEARS-OLD. I FIRST HEARD THAT A LOCAL pediatrician, Dr. Mary Megson, theorized that children with autism were suffering a vitamin A deficiency and needed the fat soluble form of the vitamin, while sitting in a meeting of the Central Virginia Chapter of the Autism Society of America.<sup>1</sup> For three days thereafter, I gave Wesley the recommended daily allowance of vitamin A in cod liver oil. On the third day, Wesley was sitting aimlessly on the bottom step of the foyer stairs. I was hovering close

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\* Dr. Neal Halsey, Director, Institute for Vaccine Safety at the Johns Hopkins University, Former Chair of the Committee on Infectious Diseases of the American Academy of Pediatrics

by when the outlandish thought crossed my mind to simply speak his name. Not yell. Not scream. Almost whisper, in fact—whisper, in truth, for fear of being devastated one more time. “Wesley?” I cooed. “Wesley?” That was all. His head swung from center and down to right and up.

That week our home became a laboratory. Every move of his eyes, every positioning of his hands, every writhing tantrum upon the floor, I started writing in a log. Finally, I had so many minute but undeniable improvements recorded on paper that I could not keep a respectful distance or a polite silence from the unknown doctor whose protocol was helping my son. Without ever meeting or speaking to her, I was already convinced that this physician knew where the brightness in my son, the spark that until so recently shone in Wesley’s eyes, had gone.

The road to accurate diagnosis and revelation began with Dr. Megson, a petite and insightful physician who was the Head Developmental Pediatrician at Richmond’s Children’s Hospital.

A “children’s hospital”, I thought as I looked up the number—a place I had assumed I would never need. I dialed the switchboard and got the receptionist.

“Excuse me,” I said, “My name is Lisa Sykes. I just wanted to tell Dr. Megson how my son is doing with her treatment recommendations. His name is Wesley, and he has autism.”

“Is he a patient of hers?” the receptionist asked.

“No,” I gulped. “It’s just that I heard about her new treatment,” I stammered, “...and so I went ahead and started him on cod liver oil.”

“And how is he?” a very intent voice asked from the other end of the line.

“He is better!” I burst out in declaration. “He is getting better!” I gasped, almost crying.

“Hold on please,” said the receptionist, “I know Dr. Megson would like to talk with you.”

I breathed in deeply, hoping Dr. Megson would listen to everything I had to tell her about Wesley.

“Hello,” came an inquisitive, focused voice that sounded much too

familiar and pleasant to belong to a medical specialist. “You have your son on cod liver oil? When did you begin?”

I told her, and began to recite a long litany of improvements.

“I’m going to call your pediatrician and have him order labs. Bring in the results. I want to see you and Wesley as soon as I am in my new office.”

At that moment, I didn’t know that Mary—a board certified pediatrician, Fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics and mother of four children—was summoning the courage to walk away from her nine year-old medical practice and open an independent clinic. All I knew was that finally someone had told me something to do that had clearly helped my son.

As we finished our conversation, Dr. Megson did not give me her condolences for having a child with autism, as had other specialists. No, she had a radically different response. “Keep him on cod liver oil.”

The hope in my soul now exploded upon my face in the first true smile I had felt cross my lips in months. My Wesley had a chance. Deeply thankful for a new-found taste of hope, I dared to wonder if Mary would be successful in finding what had disappeared? Could Mary, by restoring a simple vitamin to my son’s body, rekindle the lively and sacred light that God had intended to illuminate his eyes?

#### JANUARY 1999

I realized at Christmas that my three-year-old didn’t understand that presents were to be opened. Wesley’s face filled with no joy to be given a gift; his hands moved in all directions, but with no intent to open the package. As the New Year began, my greatest gift was an appointment with the physician who had already helped my son without ever seeing him.

I had not quite sat down across the desk from Mary when she began asking me questions, not about Wesley but, instead, my family history.

“Do you have a family history of cancer?” Dr. Megson asked.

“Why is she asking me that?” I wondered in ignorance. It didn’t matter; I would have told this woman my darkest confession, if I had one. Anything. Anything, I resolved.

“Yes, my father died of a rare form of leukemia at 44. It was called ‘Hairy-cell.’”

Mary was visibly excited to hear my response. She picked up a medical reference book and flew through its pages.

“Here it is. Hairy-cell Leukemia. Inhibitory factor: vitamin A. You realize, Lisa, your father was also deficient? I bet I can tell you your father’s favorite flavor of ice cream. Was it butter pecan?”

At that moment, I was ready to accuse Mary, the daughter of a Presbyterian pastor, of summoning spirits. Surely, it was not possible for her to diagnose my dead father’s favorite flavor of ice cream when he had lain in his grave for nearly twenty years!

“How did you know that...?” I stammered, stunned.

“His body was craving the fat soluble forms of vitamins A and E, Lisa. You know what butter pecan ice cream has in it? The highest concentration of milk fat of any ice cream. It’s loaded with fat-soluble, absorbable forms of vitamins A and E.”

Though my father’s waking mind had had no idea how sick and how deficient he was, his body did. He had craved butter pecan ice cream and now, two generations later, my son Wesley, who had inherited this genetic disposition, begged for fat-soluble vitamin A in cod liver oil, begged with hands that could not form the sign for “more” any faster, nor telegraph his demand any more repetitively, than he did.

“Anyone in the family with night blindness?”

“Yes, my mother and my grandmother. And my husband’s mother has glaucoma.”

“Anything else?”

“Well,” I answered dutifully, “My brother Dan is red-green color blind. And Seth and I are night-blind, too.”

“That’s a vitamin absorption issue, too, Lisa.”

I prayed for Mary. I prayed she could work a miracle on Wesley and every child that entered her office. In different ways, both our lives were about pulling children out of the darkness, she as a physician and I, as a mother and a minister. We both sought to renew the expressions and delight of childhood in children from whom autism had stolen these things.

With each consultation, this physician, who didn’t mind if I called her “Mary,” asked the most discerning questions about Wesley and the most unexpected questions about my father.



“Does Wes usually look at you sideways?”

“Yes.”

“Could your father match his clothes or did they clash?”

“Mom matched them; Dad couldn’t.”

“Does Wes have chronic diarrhea?”

“Yes.”

“Did your father have ulcers?”

“Yes, at age twenty, in college. We always assumed due to stress.”

“Does Wesley spin?”

“Yes, and he is mesmerized by fans.”

“Did your father have IBS?”

“What’s IBS?”

“Irritable Bowel Syndrome”

“Oh, yes. So do my mother and brother.”

“Does Wes crave milk or wheat?”

“Yes—milk, yogurt. He tantrums for them.”

“Did your father have stomach troubles?”

I thought back. “He was always taking Gaviscon for his stomach. Is that important?”

“Does Wesley look out windows?”

“No.”

“Did your father have unusual numerical or spatial abilities?”

I was lost for words. Again, how did she know that?

My father was a farm boy from Deshler, Ohio, whose numerical abilities propelled him to a remarkable career in the nation’s capitol. Employed as a young man by a private engineering firm contracted to the United States Government, he had begun designing the guidance systems for the Atlas rockets. The federal officials with whom he collaborated and developed technology for national security purposes were so impressed with his abilities that they recruited him, and he quickly became one of this nation’s leading counterintelligence engineers and scientists, receiving the Intelligence Medal of Merit by forty-two. By forty-four, he was dead.

Though he was stalwartly honest and ethical, throughout his life he was always accused of cheating at cards. Many people did not realize that Richard Courtney could remember every card played during a game.

My paternal grandfather was similar. Though he had no formal education, Paul Courtney was a Checker Champion in the state of Ohio. I never beat Grandpa Courtney at checkers. It was common knowledge that almost no one had. Grandpa, as if mystically, could see twelve moves ahead on the checkerboard.

“Spatial-numerical, Lisa.” Mary said. “Your grandfather, your father. I’m telling you Wesley is incredibly gifted. You just can’t see it yet.”

“Yet...” I turned the word over in my mind, like a connoisseur moves a taste of wine upon his palate. “Yet...” Everyone else had told me to abandon all hope. All Mary did was fill me with it.

Only one mystery ever seemed to stump this physician who truly seemed to me a healer. “Mary, I need to show you something.” I hugged Wesley to me, and pulled down his blue jeans. “Do you see it there on his right thigh?”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

I laughed. “You’re asking me? This odd patch of skin is thick and tough.”

A patch of skin, two inches in diameter, high on Wesley’s right thigh, was distinguishable by its stubborn texture.

Mary studied the skin somberly. “The texture is like orange-peel.”

“Exactly,” I concurred. “I don’t know what to make of it.”

“Neither do I,” Mary admitted. It would take a year-and-a-half to decipher the stubborn patch of skin on Wesley’s thigh, and many more years to resolve it.

## SUMMER 1999

I sat once again in Mary’s office as this physician poured hope and understanding, in equal portions, into my soul. The things she told me! Who ever heard of such absurdity? The gut as the second brain? Both formed of epithelial tissues that separated during the gestation of a child. News of this was only coming into medical textbooks in the 1990’s.

“Lisa, you have a G-alpha-I protein defect,” diagnosed the most gifted clinician I had ever met.<sup>2</sup> She didn’t accuse me of being emotionally unavail-

able enough to cause my son's illness, as mothers of autistic children had been in the 1950's, and occasionally still were. She did not pity me or pronounce my child incurable. She did not discount my observations or suggestions, as had other physicians and textbooks.

"This protein defect produces a brilliant mind and a weak gut," Mary explained. "Wesley's gut is weak, and the tissue has become diseased. It can't absorb basic nutrients, especially water-soluble vitamin A, which we call palmitate. This form of vitamin A is about the only source of A in our diet. That's why Wesley craves the fat-soluble form of A in cod liver oil."

In a couple sentences, Mary explained to me what was to become the most fundamental truth of my universe.

"You know what vitamin A is?"

I stared stupidly ahead, eager to be educated out of my ignorance.

"It's the speech centers of your brain. It's the language. It's the social meaning. It's sensory input. It is the interconnections in the frontal lobe." There was a long pause. "It's the shots."

As Mary spoke these words to me, I did not yet appreciate the dogged courage by which she pronounced them.

"The shots?" I repeated, in a stunned and unsteady monotone.

"Yes, Lisa. Vaccines compromised Wesley's gut."

Slowly, I began to grapple with this revelation. Genetic vulnerability. Unforeseen consequences. Unpredictable reaction. I rubbed my head, which had suddenly begun to throb, with my hands. "The shots?"

Mary would eventually document and diagnose Wesley with deficiencies in Vitamin A, D, Calcium, Magnesium, Zinc, various enzymes, and with bacterial overgrowths of the gut, yeast overgrowths of the gut, viral infections, gluten intolerance and casein intolerance.<sup>3</sup> With each new identification of a breakdown in my son's body, I struggled with the knowledge that immunizations had created an unexpected catastrophe in Wesley's life.

During the next year and a half, I learned more and more from Mary's "biological approach to autism," and simultaneously, I learned more and more about vaccinations. I had not yet lost faith in them. I simply regarded Wesley as one of the rare and tragic failures of scientific know-how—that was, until one day, when Mary's office manager called me with an urgent request.

NOVEMBER 2000

Wesley had been in for another blood draw. I had lost count how many times his skin had been pierced by “butterfly” needles. In truth, I didn’t want to count anymore. This had merely become a normal part of life, and I tried not to think about it.

The order Mary had written this time included seven different tests and would cost over seven-hundred dollars after insurance. But the results would cost more: they would cost me my faith in the American medical system and the country’s national health agencies.

Mary had been out of town, speaking at a Defeat Autism Now! conference on her research. Mary’s absence hadn’t worried me. I knew I would hear from her office when the results came in. And I did.

But the message from Mary was unusual. “Lisa, Mary wants to see you in the office at 8:30 tomorrow morning.”

“Okay,” I answered, always grateful for the genuine care Mary had for my son.

“But what was this urgent,” I wondered to myself, “that she must see me first thing tomorrow morning before the office opens?” The results had to be crucial, I knew, or she would not have demanded my presence so suddenly.

“I’ll be there. I assume the blood came in.”

“Yes,” said the office manager, “Mary wants to go over the results with you in person.”

Early the next morning, I sat in her waiting room, anxiously. What had Mary found?

Mary came out to the waiting room, a bounce to her step as always. “Come on back, Lisa. Sit down.” She shut her office door behind us.

I noticed Mary’s jaw was set. Something was very wrong.

From across her desk, I stared intently at Mary, one of the first physicians in the world to realize what physical anomalies to test for and to treat in autism, trying to anticipate what she found so difficult to utter. She grimaced, in utter disgust for the truth she had to tell me about my son.

“Lisa, he’s toxic. I think he’s toxic.”

“Toxic? Toxic with what?” I stammered, more dumbfounded this time than any other before, when Mary had diagnosed what others couldn’t see and deciphered what others had ignored.

“Mercury. He’s toxic with mercury. If the shots hadn’t had mercury in them, I bet he would have been fine.”<sup>4</sup>

Mary was silent for a moment, waiting for my mind to comprehend what she had said.

“Mercury?” I repeated, hesitantly. “He’s toxic from mercury in his baby shots?”

“The preservative used in them is half mercury. It’s called Thimerosal. But there’s something else, Lisa,” Mary could see I was struggling with each word she pronounced.

“What more could there be, Mary?” My voice cracked.

“The shot that you were given when you were pregnant with Wesley for your Rh factor—it was loaded with mercury, too,” Mary looked grim. “He was exposed to mercury before he was born; it crosses the placental barrier.”<sup>5</sup>

I sat, speechless; my spirit reeling. Gently, Mary resumed the conversation. “Lisa, you know the patch on Wesley’s leg?”

I looked up. “Yes?”

“It’s a hypersensitivity reaction to mercury. Some of the metal pooled in the skin at the injection site. I was just reading about it in new medical science articles.”<sup>6</sup>

My dazed mind finally settled on one horror and that one alone: my son had likely been poisoned by his baby shots. Worst of all, I had in ignorance held my baby down while he was repeatedly and regularly injected with enough mercury to devastate him for life. I was only in Mary’s office for twenty or thirty minutes. But in that time, I aged. I grew old.

I spent the rest of the day going about my professional duties. I wept between hospital visits, phone calls and calendar appointments, when no one could see. That evening, I waited for Seth to return home from work. I had been married for eleven years to this quiet, strong Scot, whom I had met during a junior-year-abroad to the University of St. Andrews in Fife. After a fairy tale romance amid a medieval gray stone town on Scotland’s east coast, we assumed when we married the years we spent having our family would be full of nothing but joy. Now, Seth struggled to take in the tragedy of what I was telling him as gently as I could.

“Seth, Mary thinks Wesley has been poisoned with mercury from his vac-

cines and my Rho(D) shot. No one ever told us, Seth. No one ever told us that there was mercury in those shots. If I had known there was a poison in them....” My voice trailed off momentarily, and my voice broke, as I fought back tears. I breathed in deeply, until the catch in my throat was gone.

“We’ll learn soon enough if Mary’s right. She’s ordered tests to detect heavy metals, including mercury.”

In order to test Wesley for heavy metals, Mary sent me to a specialist whose office was a half-an-hour drive away on the Southside of Richmond. The specialist was a distinguished man with a long-held belief that toxins were related to a myriad of chronic diseases. He regularly saw adult patients, but it was only after long conversations with Mary that he agreed to see her pediatric referrals. Under his direction we gave Wesley an initial dose of medication by mouth for three days and then collected a urine sample in a plastic container, which I drove to his office with the greatest of care as if it were a fragile piece of china. The nurse received it and prepared to ship it to the lab.

“We’ll be in touch when the results are in, Reverend Sykes.” I thanked her and drove home, willing the time to pass in an instant.

I picked up the phone, dialed the number and waited for her to answer. “Katherine, the test results are in. I can’t get there today due to my work schedule and I’m desperate to find out the results. Could you run by the specialist’s office and pick them up for me? I’ll call and let them know you are coming.”

In gaining the results, I hoped to regain peace of mind. What an immense favor I asked of Katherine this day. She agreed without a moment’s hesitation.

For this reason, I prized her. Katherine had been one of the few friends from my old circle to weather the diagnosis and challenges of autism. She was beautiful, artistic and constant. Katherine’s own son had struggled with epilepsy as a preschooler and, perhaps because of this, she offered no platitudes nor ever failed to inquire about my injured son. She lived some miles away from me but was always close in support and encouragement. As chance would have it, Katherine was also geographically close to the specialist who was overseeing Wesley’s new test for heavy metals.

Within fifteen minutes, my cell phone rang. “Lisa, it’s me. I have the results. They’re in a sealed envelope. Do you want me to open them?”

“Yes, Katherine! Quick!”

“Okay, I’ve got them in my hand.”

“Katherine, what do you see?”

“I see lots of dots... a line of them running off the page.”

I knew from Mary that the succession of dots, in a straight line, was a reading. And a succession of dots running off the page was an unspeakably high reading. Dangerously high.

“Katherine, what word are the dots beside?”

“Mercury.”

“That’s it. That’s my smoking gun. Katherine, Mary was right!”

When I sought to give Wesley’s general pediatrician a copy of Wesley’s lab report, he wouldn’t see me. I was exasperated.

“Are you telling me that he could vaccinate my child with mercury-containing vaccines, but he is unwilling to discuss my son’s off-the-chart mercury reading?”

Neither the receptionist nor the nurses behind her, who had become increasingly interested in our conversation, answered me.

“Do you see this?” I asked, handing over Wesley’s dramatic test result. “I want to talk with him about this.”

Though the nurses and receptionist eagerly received the lab report, no one moved to call Wes’ pediatrician nor usher me back to his office.

Upset, I resigned myself to merely leaving the copy of the lab report at the front desk. I had no idea that as soon as I left this pediatrician would pick up the phone and call Mary.

“Mary, what the hell are you doing?” He gave her no opportunity to ask him what was so wrong. “I’ve got this mom, this autism mom, in my waiting room on the verge of tears! She starts talking about mercury, in the hearing of everyone in the room, and then hands my nurse this lab with a line running off the page! Do you know what that does for business?”

Mary did not know which she hated more: his complete disregard for a toxic result in one of his patients or his over-riding concern for his finances above all else.



[illegible]

Doctor's Data, Inc. urine lab report for Wesley at age four.

"The lab is a clinical result. I didn't order the result—just the test!"

“Well, Mary, stop ordering the damn tests! You’re working the parents up and every time one of them brings their kid in for shots, I’m going to have to spend ages telling them not to worry about it! You keep slowing me down like this and I won’t be able to afford my country club dues!”

Mary clenched her teeth. She was so sorry to have inconvenienced him!



From now on, she thought to herself, she would leave the toxic kids on the floor to writhe in pain so this physician could enjoy a nice Saturday morning on the green!

“I think you need to look at the mercury issue,” Dr. Megson encouraged.

“I think you need to look at your medical license, Mary! You may find it’s missing one of these days.”

Compelled by her own convictions and clinical evidence, Mary would become more than a dissenter amidst the medical community. She would come to be considered a blasphemer. She would reveal to parents that their children had been injured, and could be injured again, by the mercury in the shots. To an institutional medical faith that tolerated no dissent, but rather demanded unquestioning assent to its central affirmation that all vaccines were safe and effective, Mary was now a threat. The faithful esteemed her as either lunatic or evil. The local pediatricians in Richmond, and many in the medical community where Mary taught at the Medical College of Virginia, ostracized her. At a great cost, weathering distress that was both professional and personal to her as a physician and mother, Mary learned to heal children discretely.

Miracle recoveries achieved by scientific breakthroughs were trumpeted in the medical community only when the illness healed was not one that the community itself had inflicted. In comprehending this, Mary became one of the first clinicians to begin a Copernican revolution in medicine. Though medicine instructs society that all vaccines encircle risk, protecting the public health, Mary was now convinced that risk encircled some vaccines, endangering the public health. She only hoped that, unlike Galileo, she would not end her professional career before an inquisition defending herself as an apostate from the one “true” faith.

#### DECEMBER 2000

With Christmas approaching, despite my busy pastoral calendar, I made time for yet one more unusual phone call to a perfect stranger.

“Hello. I’d like to speak with Mr. Cliff Shoemaker, please,” I requested, seeking to be as articulate and calm as I could.

“Speaking,” replied Cliff. His voice was deep, steady, and inviting.

“Mr. Shoemaker, I understand you are quite expert in legally representing children with vaccine injuries.”

Cliff replied, a modest demeanor in his voice, “Well, thanks. It’s been my area of specialty for years.” Cliff was the leading attorney in the nation advocating for injured and damaged children in a special vaccine court established by the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program.<sup>7</sup> “Call me Cliff. What did you say your name was?”

“Lisa Sykes. I have a son, Wesley, who is almost five. He has been diagnosed with mercury-toxicity, Cliff. His mercury reading is literally off the chart!”

“Oh? I’m not sure I understand, Lisa, why you are calling me about this?”

I drew a breath, and dared to propose the link.

“A lot of people—physicians, even—Cliff, are beginning to realize, you see, that the preservative used in the immunizations is mercury-based, and the amount of mercury in even one shot, never mind dozens, is well in excess of safety guidelines.”<sup>8</sup>

Cliff was silent, considering. There had been a steep rise in vaccine injury cases, beginning in the 1990’s and parallel to the increased mercury load in baby shots. Mine was not the only call he had received from a parent about this issue. Already, Cliff had begun to wonder if these things could be connected.<sup>9</sup>

“What I want is a recall of these shots, Cliff, before more children have to suffer the way Wesley has. It seems to me that litigation would be one of the best routes to both publicizing the problem and stopping it.”

“Well, that depends, Lisa. I have a lot of questions.”

“Surely. I can appreciate that. But would you be willing to investigate what I’m saying? Wesley’s treating physician is Dr. Mary Megson, right here in Richmond. I’m sure she’d be willing to speak with you.”

“Okay, Lisa. I know the best vaccine experts in the field. Let me begin by consulting them, and see what they have to say. That seems like the next step to me.”

I did not know that the vaccine experts with whom Cliff would consult would be Dr. Mark Geier and his son David. Mark, a physician, geneticist and vaccine researcher, had led the fight to replace the whole cell pertussis

vaccine (DTP) with the safer acellular form of the pertussis vaccine (DTaP), a change which saved thousands of children from permanent brain damage.<sup>10</sup>

“Thanks, Cliff.” I breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, one more thing. I’m sending a letter out to notify some of the federal officials whom I hope will help. It will have a copy of Wesley’s lab with the mercury result. Can I copy you on it?”

“Sure. I’d like to see it. Thanks.”

I was pleased. Cliff had not shared my sense of urgency, but of course, he was not yet convinced. What was important is that he seemed genuinely interested and open-minded.

When I got off the phone, I pulled up the letter I had just finished composing on my computer. I didn’t want to send it to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), nor to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), since I credited them with approving products that caused my son’s disorder. Having learned that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) was exceedingly strict on exposure issues, I chose to write them instead and only copy the CDC and FDA. So, to a copy list which included these agencies, my senators, congressmen, and governor, as well as the American Medical Association, I now added one more name: Mr. Cliff Shoemaker. I printed the letters, and had them in the mail that afternoon. With them, and Wesley’s toxicology lab, I enclosed my hopes that someone would help us.