I was taught to say, “Thank you for being my friend.”  
So I say it.  
I was told to smile like I mean it.  
So I smile.

I know I am supposed to feel grateful  
That you are my friend  
That you took the class  
On how to be a peer mentor to me –

The good friends way –  
A pal for six weeks  
You have been defined

You are a good person  
For giving up your spot  
At the popular kids’ lunch table

To earn the community service hours  
You need for graduation  
By eating lunch with me,  
By being my assigned friend.

I ask, “Do you know Jerry Lewis?”  
Because I think you would like him  
I think you are a modern day Jerry Lewis –  
A good Samaritan who calls himself friend.

You don’t have a telethon on TV,  
But you have the Jerry Lewis Telethon  
In you heart  
Imparted by Mrs. Jones in her Good Friends Program.

You are a good person.  
You are a trained good Samaritan now called “friend.”

Definition of good Samaritan

“A person who gratuitously gives help or sympathy  
 to those in distress.”

Says dictionary.com

Next month you will get your community service credit.  
Your lifelong attitude about people like me  
Will have been shaped

Because the peer mentoring training  
Has passed on to you  
Society’s adoption of Jerry Lewis’ ideas about me –  
A person in need of sympathy  
And a person in distress  
Only because I am me – an autistic

We have become fake friends  
For six weeks –  
A Mrs.–Jones–Good–Friends–Program–success!

Your benevolence;  
My neediness  
Having been defined

With a line drawn between us  
Our two groups separated  
Defined, distinct, different from each other –  
Society’s wisdom at categorization…

When it is over  
We say our goodbyes

And like I was taught I say,  
“Thank you for being my friend.”  
And I remember I am meant  
To smile like I mean it.  
So I smile.

Goodbye peer mentor –  
My assigned pal  
From Mrs. Jones Good Friends Program.

You go on to your next project  
I wait for my next assigned friend to eat lunch with  
Both of us having been marked by the experience

Unbeknownst to Mrs. Jones and to us –  
The indelible ink of societal attitudes  
Wrote messages on both our hearts  
Confirming my place in your world…

That it is indeed YOUR world  
And thus, your right  
To continually put me in my place

For which I am meant to say,  
“Thank you for being my friend.”  
And to smile like I mean it.

And this status quo could march on and on  
EXCEPT

Yesterday I stopped smiling  
And for all the rest of my todays

I will no longer say  
“Thank you for being my friend.”  
Even though I know I am meant to.