



## AN INFLUENTIAL PERSON

### **“John Nash”**

---

**Jonathan Cross**  
**Duke University**

AFTER SPENDING A WEEK WITH JOHN Nash, I may have stumbled upon a central purpose of my life. Well, not Nobel Laureate John Nash himself, but whenever I describe Fred, their characteristics seem quite parallel. Fred is unique, possessing an indomitable spirit to fulfill his dreams without fear of failure. Not only is he the most brilliant young man I have ever met, he exhibits a genuinely compassionate heart. Sadly, many people may never recognize Fred as the beautiful individual that he is, or what he has to offer. While our society may call him “challenged,” I have come to recognize him as an unexpected role model. For Fred, you see, is autistic. He does not interact well with people, and is often unable to express his thoughts clearly or articulately. He doesn’t understand why people laugh at him. Yet even so, Fred is blessed with an acute sense of purpose and caring that is unmatched by most—including perhaps even the most altruistic among us.



Several years ago I traveled with a small group of Fairfax County high school students to Portland, Oregon to compete as a Finalist in the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair. I was excited at what was certain to be an experience of a lifetime—having no clue that the most valuable lesson would come not from the Science Fair itself, but from Fred. Because of my prior experiences in working with special needs children, the school administrators asked me to room with Fred during the trip. I distinctly recall my initial anxiety and reluctance about the prospect of taking care of another individual during the stressful, high-pressure atmosphere of the competition. In retrospect, though, this was the beginning of an incredible journey for both of us—but especially for me.

Fred's passion—actually more of an obsession—is theoretical mathematics. He eats, breathes, talks, and probably sleeps mathematics, to the point where he annoys others by his constant chatter about it. His idea of fun is solving differential equations on a napkin in a fancy restaurant, oblivious to others wanting to socialize or relax. That Fred is brilliant is unquestioned, a fact that was clearly evidenced in his science project where he solved a math problem previously believed by experts to be insolvable. Yet in his own mind Fred firmly believed his entire *raison d'être* in life was the pursuit of math—and that he was destined to use his incredible mathematical ability to help make the world better.

However, Fred's disabilities were only a fraction of the challenges that faced him. Growing up in a dysfunctional home, he suffered from a lack of love and patient understanding. Still, Fred's life revolved around his relationships and mathematics. Although he has few close friends, people are indescribably important to him, and he always treated them with sensitivity and compassion. Unfortunately, some people—including but not limited to his peers (who can sometimes be quite cruel)—are unable to set aside their prejudices long enough to see his uniqueness as the incredible gift that it is. His enthusiasm and his indomitable spirit in the face of adversity taught me valuable lessons—lessons I will carry with me for the rest of my life. He taught me to live for what you truly cherish, to be passionate about your dreams, and to always smile in both the service of others and adversity. He has shown me the truest meaning of love for others, and the ability to understand and always



live for what is important. A trip that started with me “taking care of him” turned into a trip of substantial personal discovery.

Children with special needs have powerful talents, and if we could only open our hearts to hear their voices, we would learn what it means to live without conventional boundaries. I have lived a week with a genius, not only of the mind, but more importantly, of the heart—and my life has been permanently changed because of Fred.

### ANALYSIS

Jonathan begins his essay with a reference to a famous figure, John Nash, but wisely doesn't assume we know who he is and mentions that he is a Nobel laureate. Then, the essay hooks in the reader by throwing in a twist: this essay is not about John Nash at all, but about someone named Fred. It's obvious that Jonathan holds Fred in high esteem, but it is initially unclear just who Fred is. However, as we read about Fred, we not only meet someone who has influenced Jonathan, but we are also introduced to Jonathan's admirable ability to be open-minded towards an individual even when others might be dismissive. As Jonathan notes, “While our society may call him ‘challenged,’ I have come to recognize him as an unexpected role model.” This is certainly not the typical role model story, where one might name a family member or famous person. The parallel between Fred and John Nash underscores Jonathan's respect for Fred, and this unusual and unexpected comparison shows us how Jonathan stands out from the rest of society.

Note that Jonathan is careful not to get on a “high horse,” making much over himself. Instead, he writes, “Fred is blessed with an acute sense of purpose and caring that is unmatched by most—including perhaps even the most altruistic among us.” The last part of this statement adds a sense of humility so that Jonathan does not seem to be judgmental toward us for not accepting people with autism or other disabilities in the way that he is able to do. Generally, taking a moralizing or condescending tone is alienating for readers, who want to be *invited* into your story, not estranged from it. Indeed, Jonathan further avoids a high-minded tone by describing his “initial anxiety and reluctance” at rooming with Fred, even in spite of his previous experience in working with special needs children. Jonathan's honesty is impressive: many people might not admit to such seemingly taboo or even discriminatory thoughts of not wanting to spend time with special needs children, even if these thoughts are true. However, Jonathan's honesty helps us understand why he sums up his time in Portland as “an incredible journey . . . especially for me.”