BINNY: the transforming power of art



Binny and food

Binny was a large young woman with Down syndrome who attended the same day program. She was the main helper in the kitchen. She worked efficiently, persistently, and seriously.

In my experience, I came to see what others called stubbornness in people with Down syndrome as persistence. Once they accepted a task, they worked steadily and responsibly until it was completed. Binny was like that. A human quality is not useful or harmful by itself. Everything depends on the direction it is given.

Binny rarely smiled and almost never laughed. Food was her greatest passion. She was willing to perform almost any task in exchange for something to eat, and the staff frequently used food to control her behavior.

“Binny, wash these dishes, and I’ll give you some applesauce.”

Binny would smile and do the work. The problem was that the employee who promised the applesauce might forget about it a few minutes later.

Binny never forgot.

The staff treated food as a convenient reward. For Binny, however, a promise was a promise. When it was broken, her persistence turned into resistance.

A Broken Promise

At three o'clock, the people in the program were taken home. Binny usually went willingly. The bus driver, Tom, treated her kindly, and she liked riding with him. Sometimes he even stopped so that she could buy donuts.

One afternoon, however, Binny refused to leave the kitchen. She stood beside the refrigerator while Elsa, the employee who had promised her applesauce, tried to hurry her toward the bus.

"Binny, let's go! Come on, silly. The bus is waiting."

I reminded Elsa:

"You promised her applesauce."

"I don't care what I promised," she replied irritably. "Help me."

The applesauce was inside the locked refrigerator. Binny slid down onto the floor and held tightly to the refrigerator handle.

Elsa treated this as another unreasonable act of stubbornness. She decided that Binny should not be allowed to get her way and tried to force her toward the bus.

But Binny weighed approximately three hundred pounds. Two women could not simply lift her from the floor and move her.

"Call Tom," Elsa said. "Let him help us."

To the staff, the problem was Binny's refusal to obey, they saw it as her stubbornness . To Binny, the problem was simple: she had completed the work, and

the promised reward had not been given. Her persistence was now directed toward making another person keep her word.

Near the beginning of my work at the program, the supervisor asked me to make a peanut butter sandwich for Binny.

As I prepared it, Binny followed every movement closely. When I spread a thin layer of peanut butter onto the bread, her body became tense and her eyes remained fixed on the sandwich. I could feel her tension

I understood that the amount did not meet her expectations, so I added another layer. Her tension began to change. After the third layer, a broad smile appeared. Binny suddenly laughed, hugged me happily, and patted me on the shoulder.

That sandwich raised my authority in her eyes. Afterward, when we met in the program, she sometimes greeted me with a smile.

So, I did not want to take part in dragging her to the bus by force and tried to convince Elsa to give Binny a promised treat. But Elsa was the supervisor, and her approach to discipline was different. To her, giving Binny the applesauce after she had refused to move would mean surrendering to bad behavior.

Tom finally solved the immediate problem by promising Binny something else. She accepted his offer, got up, and went to the bus.

Money meant food

I soon noticed that when Binny was not working in the kitchen, she often stood beside the soda machine near the program entrance.

A can of soda cost seventy-five cents. People frequently inserted a dollar, and Binny waited for the change to fall into the tray. At first, her interest in the machine surprised me. Food was usually the only thing that made her so alert and purposeful.

Then the connection became obvious: food cost money.

One day, while completing paperwork at a nearby table, I watched two young women approach the machine. One inserted a dollar and reached for her change. Binny was already beside her. She moved faster and snatched the quarter from the tray.

I approached her.

“That isn’t your money, Binny.”

“I need it,” she replied aggressively, prepared to defend the coin.

“The money belongs to that woman. You cannot take it.”

But the two women had already walked away. A small coin did not matter to them, and my explanation lost its practical force.

Binny looked away, turned around, and left. I was not sure that my words had changed anything.

Her persistence had found another direction. The staff had repeatedly taught her that work, obedience, and food were connected. Binny had discovered one more part of that system: money could also lead to food.

The theft

A few weeks later, I found Binny alone in the office, obviously searching for something.

“Binny, what are you doing here?” I asked, keeping my voice neutral.

She looked guilty. She appeared to know that she was doing something forbidden.

“Do you take other people’s things? You know you shouldn’t do that. Other people may become angry. Why do you do it?”

Binny’s eyes filled with tears.

“I don’t know! I don’t know!”

She rushed out of the room before I could stop her.

I went home deeply troubled. If Binny were caught stealing, there would be a serious scandal. But I also did not want to report her and betray the trust that had begun to develop between us.

The next morning, my fears were confirmed.

“It was her! She took thirty dollars from my bag!”

“This isn’t the first time. My money has disappeared too!”

I found Binny crouching in a corner and crying. Elsa stood nearby, demanding that she return the money.

“She understands everything,” Elsa said angrily. “When she begs for food, she understands. But when she takes someone else’s money, suddenly she is an irrational child?”

Binny did understand that taking the money was forbidden. The more important question was why she could not stop herself.

Her overwhelming preoccupation with food seemed to be driving the behavior. Working in the kitchen and being constantly surrounded by food may have intensified it. I thought she needed a different work environment. Staff belongings also needed to be secured while we tried to understand and change the cause.

But no one was interested in investigating the cause.

When the employees attempted to search the small bag Binny wore at her waist, she jumped up and tried to run. Several women chased her, cornered her, and held her by both arms. Binny looked terrified and screamed as they pulled the bag away.

The missing money was inside.

The employees were filled with righteous anger and continued scolding her. Binny sat on the kitchen floor and cried.

The money had been recovered, but nothing had been solved. Binny would probably try again while learning to hide her actions more carefully, and the staff would continue becoming angry and taking back whatever she stole.

Without understanding the force behind the behavior, the same conflict was destined to repeat itself.

The transforming power of art

A few days later, I was assigned to accompany Binny and three young men to a pottery studio.

Perhaps because I had defended Binny so openly, Elsa wanted me to experience the difficulty of managing her myself. I felt uncertain. I liked Binny, but she was physically powerful, and I knew that I could not control her by force if something went wrong.

Still, she might enjoy painting pottery. We had to try.

I always carried my camera. On the way to the studio, I imagined photographing each stage of the activity and perhaps later using the pictures to create a PhotoBook.

At the studio, everyone was invited to choose an unpainted object. Some selected vases; others chose animal figures. I chose a small castle.

Binny became interested in the menorahs. She studied them for a long time before selecting the largest one. That was fine with me. It was her choice.

I photographed Binny holding the plain white menorah before she began. Soon, all the ordinary white objects on the table would become individual works of art.

Everyone settled down to work. Time passed unnoticed. Everyone became absorbed in painting, especially Binny. She worked with intense concentration, her tongue slightly extended with effort.

I told her that when the menorah was finished, she could take it home. Ownership mattered greatly to Binny, and she clearly valued the object she had chosen.

I photographed her working and invited the others to try using my camera. Binny took several photographs of me painting my castle. When I showed her the results, she laughed with happiness and pride.

I had never seen her in such a joyful mood. Everyone was laughing, talking, and enjoying the shared activity.

Then it was time for a break.

The group took out the food and drinks they had brought. Suddenly, Binny held out her soda and offered it to me. I was astonished. Until that moment, I had never seen her voluntarily offer food or drink to another person.

Binny seemed surprised by her own generosity. She laughed, took out her crackers, and began offering them to the young men in our group. Then she shared them with the pottery studio employees as well.

Creative absorption, success, ownership of something beautiful, and the joy of being part of the group had brought Binny into a completely different state. In that state, she no longer needed to seize and protect everything connected with food. She wanted to share.

When I later told Elsa and the other staff members what had happened, they listened with condescending smiles and disbelief. No one appeared interested.

They did not expect Binny to change.

For me, however, what had happened was extremely important. Art had revealed a part of Binny that the program had never tried to reach.

Binny's special day

When the pottery session ended, I carefully wrapped the finished pieces in paper and packed them into a bag so they would not break.

Binny refused to let me pack her menorah with the others. She wanted to carry it herself.

The pottery studio employees, with whom she had become friendly, placed the menorah in a clear bag and tied it with a beautiful ribbon and bow. They said they had enjoyed our visit and invited Binny to return.

It was probably the first time Binny had received so much positive attention—not because of food, obedience, or difficult behavior, but because of something she had created and the joy she brought into the studio.

We left the studio in high spirits and waited together for the bus. When it arrived, everyone sat close to one another, still talking and laughing about the day.

Binny held the menorah tightly against her body and radiated happiness.

One of the young men in our group also had Down syndrome. He was polite, hardworking, and had a gentle sense of humor. He lightly teased Binny about her precious menorah, and the entire group, including Binny, laughed.

The woman on the bus

It had been a wonderful day. Then, from a nearby seat, I heard two women speaking Russian. One woman said to the other:

"Down syndrome can be identified from the first day of life. I think these children should be put to death as soon as they are born. The world would be a much cleaner place. I have read that some countries do this."

It felt as though a sheet of ice had fallen over me.

I turned cautiously. The woman was looking at our group with obvious distaste. Later, I learned that she was a schoolteacher.

A moment earlier, they had looked like two ordinary, respectable women. After those words, they seemed to transform before my eyes into something cold and monstrous. Against their background, Binny and the others appeared especially alive, warm, and human—laughing together, teasing one another, and sharing the happiness of a wonderful day.

I felt bitterness and fear. I gathered the group and hurried them off the bus.

"We aren't there yet," one of the young men observed cautiously.

"We'll walk in the fresh air," I replied. "It isn't far."

The weather was warm. We walked the remaining blocks and talked. Everyone except me remained in a good mood.

Gradually, the icy grip around my heart began to loosen. I looked at the happy Binny, still carrying her menorah, and felt light and warmth returning.