

The right note

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [July 11, 2012](#) issue



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If you are looking for a great book to share with a young person this summer, I recommend Francisco X. Stork's *Marcelo in the Real World*. Marked by a combination of page-turning storytelling and theological depth, it is full of romance, mystery and a risky quest: everything you might want in a great summer read. At the heart of the book stands the question: What claim does the suffering of strangers make on us? Or as the book's main character puts it, "How do we go about living when there is so much suffering?"

Marcelo Sandoval is a 17-year-old looking forward to his senior year in high school. Living with something akin to Asperger's syndrome, Marcelo has spent his life learning step by step how to do things that many people learn intuitively: how to read facial expressions, how to interpret sarcasm and slang, and how to imagine what another person might be feeling or thinking. He's good with animals, hears music playing in his head, feels most comfortable adhering to a predictable schedule and, like many on the autism spectrum, nurtures a "special interest." Marcelo's special interest is God.

Marcelo pursues his interest by praying, studying holy books, going to mass and meeting regularly with his spiritual mentor Rabbi Heschel (she's no relation to Abraham Heschel, though she does loan Marcelo *God in Search of Man*). He is cherished by his family, his teachers and mentors, and the terminally ill children his

mother cares for in a hospital.

His father, however, worries that Marcelo is not being prepared for “the real world.” The real world is competitive; it has rules by which success is measured. Marcelo’s father makes a deal with him: if he will spend the summer working at his father’s law firm and successfully follow the rules of the real world, he can choose where he will spend his senior year. If he doesn’t, he will have to attend the local high school.

Marcelo is assigned to the mailroom under the supervision of Jasmine, a no-nonsense young woman and aspiring jazz musician. She’s not happy about having the boss’s son foisted upon her, but she trains Marcelo in the ways of the mailroom. Another partner’s son, Wendell, asks Marcelo to work with him on a special project involving the firm’s defense of a manufacturer accused of knowingly making unsafe windshields. Wendell calls Marcelo “Gump” and tries to enlist his help in seducing Jasmine.

Marcelo is trying to sort out his discomfort with Wendell’s menacing attraction to Jasmine and his own confusing feelings for her when he comes across a photo of a young girl in a box labeled “trash.” The girl’s face was badly disfigured in a car accident when the windshield she hit did not shatter into pieces as it should have.

Once Marcelo slides the photo out of the envelope, he cannot turn away. The girl’s eyes look into his eyes, and he sees “a question directed at me.”

This question plunges Marcelo into turmoil. He wonders if he is overreacting the way he has seen other autistic kids overreact to things others do not find nearly as troubling. Obviously, others at the law firm have seen this photo and have not been affected as Marcelo is affected. Obviously, his father has seen it and done nothing.

Marcelo is in new territory, for there is no schedule he can devise to solve this problem, no rule book that will tell him what he ought to do. But he knows he must fight for this girl. When he turns to Jasmine for help, she urges him to listen carefully, in every choice he makes, for what the next note should be. “But how do I know the next note is the right one?” Marcelo asks her. “The right note sounds right and the wrong note sounds wrong,” she tells him.

Rabbi Heschel also makes an argument for improvisation, reminding Marcelo that discerning God’s will is a “messy business.” “What else can we do,” she asks this young man who is on fire with purpose, “but trust that He is at the source of what

we feel and hope He is at the end of what we want to do?" That is faith, she tells him: "Following the music when we don't hear it."

When a stranger looks out of a photo into Marcelo's eyes, he responds the way Jesus responded when a leper knelt before him and said, "If you choose, you can make me clean." He responds the way the Buddha did when he slipped through the gates of his father's palace to encounter the realities of illness, old age and death. He offers the best help he can give, and he searches for a way of living that allows him to respond to human suffering with his heart open. What he finds is the risky art of improvisation, grounded in prayer and friendship, life and love, justice and forgiveness. As heroic as Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, as romantic as Edward in *Twilight*, Marcelo is a young adult character to love and to follow.