This semester I’ve had the opportunity to be a natural support for the Scholars with Diverse Abilities Program on campus. The program’s first student is Courtney, who is a vivacious young woman with Down syndrome. Throughout the semester, I have accompanied her to lunch once a week and attended a class with her to assist in modeling appropriate classroom behavior.

I worried that I would treat Courtney like a client instead of a companion. Initially, I would try to offer too much assistance for things she was perfectly capable of doing. For example, at lunch I had the urge to step in and explain to her what types of hotdogs they had at one of the stations. However, the minute I went to step forward she was already ordering one.

One time in class, the teacher asked the class if they liked part of their listening assignment. I only go to class one day a week, so I wasn’t sure what the assignment was. Courtney started rustling through her backpack and retrieved a CD. She looked at me and I asked her if she wanted to share it with the class. She nodded and then stood up and told the class the title and what she thought about it. What a moment! She was beaming after she shared about her CD and I was too.

Spending time with Courtney has really taught me about therapeutic presence and being authentic around all types of people. I think my clinical authenticity has been developing through my practicum and general life experiences. My greatest fear is that I won’t be liked if I’m really myself with my clients. Clients don’t have to adore their therapist, but who doesn’t want to be liked?
I’m comfortable enough around Courtney to share things I’d share with a friend. Yesterday when we were sitting outside on campus, she gave me a hug and said, “You’re my best friend.” Now, I’m quite sure that she’s said this is not exclusive. There should probably be a “Courtney’s Best Friend Club.” Nevertheless, it was a warming sentiment to hear.

Bottom line: I can be myself and people will like me. This is quite possibly the most important lesson I’ll have learned all year. I’ll continue to work with Courtney for the remainder of the semester and also next semester.