AUTISM'S OWN

Volume 2 - 2014

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About Autism by Persons with Autism

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EISSN 1929-6177

Autism's Own Journal

Autism's Own is published annually by:

Autism's Own Publishing
University of Victoria, Authors with Autism
PO BOX 3035 STN CSC
Victoria BC V8W3P3
Canada

<u>Cover Art</u>
"Study in Purple" © 2014 Maria Iliou

Autism's Own is a University of Victoria peer-reviewed journal about autism culture authored and edited completely by persons on the autism spectrum. It offers an intimate first-hand depiction of the subjective experiences and thoughts of autistic persons. Autism's Own was founded in 2012 by Joseph Z. Sheppard, a UVic student and author with autism as a compilation of works by members of "Authors with Autism," a UVic peer-support group for students and lifelong learners with autism. Professor, Dr. James Tanaka became a co-founder by suggesting it become a true academic peer-review journal. This vision was later actualized under the guidance of Dr. Catherine Mateer, A-VP Academic of UVic. We are now pleased to warmly present readers with Autism's Own.

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University of Victoria

Maria Iliou directs an autism radio program called Anca Radio. Her warm and insightful interviewing style is world renown in the industry. Maria is also a poet and artist, as well as, advocates for autism rights.

Autum Lake by Maria Iliou, 2013

“Sharing stories of autistic voices.”

“We will continue the conversation.”

by Maria Iliou

Old Crown

Sit down my children
Share your stories of
Who you are, your
Proudest moments
And achievements

Whispering winds of
Receptive words
shower us all

Our voices, stories
Life experiences
Unique, it’s time
To share and
Be understood

As our world gathers
Collective voices
Teach their
stories
To the world

Time to listen
Get their attention
With a symbol…

Gold crown, joining
Us together, reflecting
The golden light
Of opportunity

Gold crown, protecting
Our autistic community
A family with
Wisdom, courage
And choice

Gold crown, powerful
Thorn of injustice
Grabs the attention
Of all who see it

Vulnerable yet strong
We present ourselves
To the spot light of
Cameras, media
And opinions

We will do
Our best

MARIA ILIOU

Invisible Rooms

by Maria Iliou

Invisible Rooms

Unique rooms within
our brains…

More rooms or less
Bigger or smaller
Because we're all
Different, and that's
Okay

In my own brain, there's
room to withdraw, to be
Quiet, the silence
Comforting

Plenty of places to store
Deep thoughts, scary ones
Unfinished ideas and talents
Rooms to work on myself
A work in progress

Some rooms have music
While others replay
The past…there are some
Filled with light
And others darker
Than a moonless night

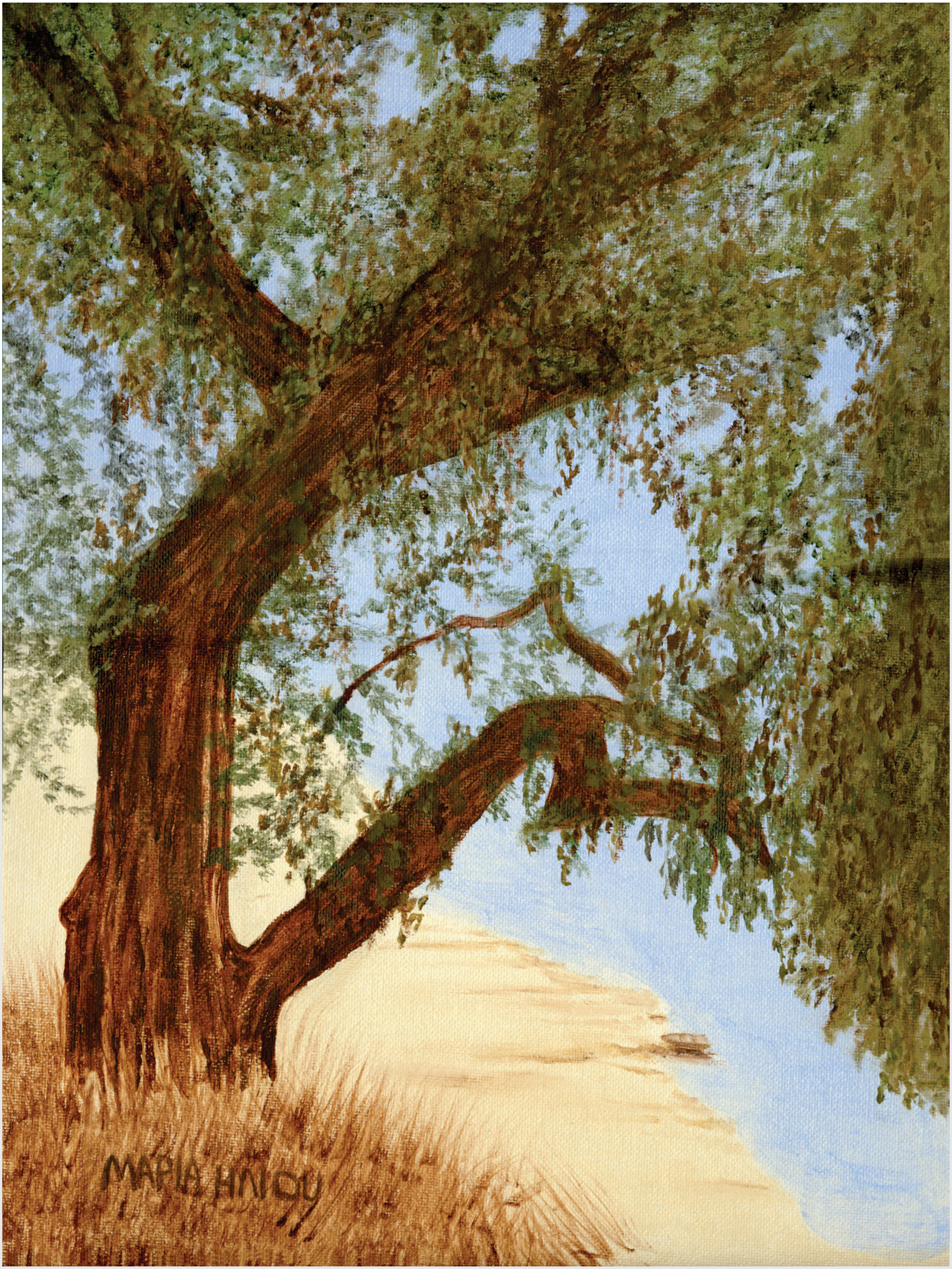
There's even a special
Place to store the tears
We shed, to be used later
To water our dreams
So they don't die

A room of remembrances
Storing the traumas
And joys, of a single
Life, so we learn
Instead of blindly
Forgetting either

We are all on a voyage
From here to there
Birth to death
Sadness to happiness
And the destination isn't
As important, as what
We do along the way

With those rooms

MARIA ILIOU



Greek Island by Maria Iliou, 2013

In the Words of an Alien

By Patrick Dwyer

In the Words of an Alien

Tgr!qïnv regarded the rolling blue disk beneath his window. He'd seen similar sights a thousand times before, of course, but he never tired of them. At length, he tore his gaze away; he spoke a simple command to hidden computing engines; commands surged and photons spun; the world dropped away. Tgr!qïnv, who had also seen this a thousand times before, turned for a final gaze, then wandered to the aft cabin to munch on a packet of Vgysïn's "Always Juicy" Raw Bqÿn!ïgq. As he did so, he decided to get caught up on some correspondence:

Dear Rys!ĉïnq,

Happy Gnibqns'ï! I was glad to hear that you're acclimating well to your new body. (Transfusions are always such a pain.) Have they discharged you yet? You must send me a hologram so I can see!

Thank you for asking after my studies—exoplanetary cultures can sometimes be fascinating. Some of the aliens can be so similar to us, and yet, at the same time, they can shock you with the differences that do exist. I'm presently exploring a barred galaxy not far from the Makgsranï. It's a fairly desolate region, for the most part, but I did visit the most curious planet. It seems to be host to an overpopulated barbarian species coping with the aftermath of an era of industrialization. (They apparently have thousands of languages, but most of them seem to call their planet "Earth". Officially, it's designated 06743-11-059-01894-3.) In order to learn more about these people, I interviewed a number of them—under holographic illusion, of course. It's fascinating to see how disorganized their society is. For one thing, some of them seem to be "autistic", a general category they seem to use to refer to anyone with some sort of social oddity: people with autism seem to range from mildly eccentric to completely nonverbal! The very first thing I saw on their planet was an autism convention, so I became rather interested in the matter.

They tend to think of autism as largely a disorder affecting children, for some reason, but the way their society is set up, adults seem to have the worst of it. They're only capitalists—you wouldn't expect anything else; they've barely even invented computers—so they expect everybody ought to provide labour to get currency. However, for some reason, they prefer not to employ people with this "autism". I read some studies (I should give them credit; their scientific methodology is actually quite advanced) and it looks as though even those people with autism who have more or less normal intelligence are heavily discriminated against.

One study of sixteen adults, by some Earthlings called Engström, Ekström, & Emilsson (2003) showed only one with independent employment. Now, granted, that's a small sample, but Howlin, Goode, Hutton, & Rutter (2004) found only six to eight of sixty-eight adults with Asperger Syndrome were independently employed, while another sample from Cederlund, Hagberg, Billstedt, Gillberg, & Gillberg (2008) showed only 10% in any form of ordinary employment. One of their governments did a survey, the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2, and a weighted estimate showed that just 32.5% of all the young adults with autism were employed in any paid, out-of-home capacity. That's apparently got a standard error of just 3.92.

Now, I fully understand that defining success in adulthood solely on the basis of employment is incredibly reductive, not to mention archaic. That goes without saying, really; it's not like anybody civilized labours for currency or material gain.

"I fully understand that defining success in adulthood solely on the basis of employment is incredibly reductive, not to mention archaic. That goes without saying, really; it's not like anybody civilized labours for currency or material gain."

After speaking, Tgr!qïnv thought about this sentence, and decided it was perhaps too dismissive; there was, after all, nothing fundamentally superior about his race. The Earthlings just happened to be less advanced and rather uncivilized, through no fault of their own. Therefore, as in a spirit of charity to one's inferiors, he spoke, "Computer, erase the last sentence, and substitute the following…"

I only mention the figures because they show that these people are being neglected. This is, after all, a society barely out of industrialization; they simply lack the automated productive capacity to allow people to work only as much as they desire. Thus, to obtain material goods, one must labour. Really, in a way, it would almost be better to be exploited, abused by some other class or group, than just cast aside as though useless. It's now how we tend to think of barbarians, but I suppose it's just as bad.

A major problem that seems to underlie this whole situation is that many of the typically developing Earthlings seem to think, or simply assume, that the people with autism should be the ones who need to change, to accommodate themselves to the majority. Granted, there seem to be many who disagree, or who only adopt this approach because it's their only option, but one conversation I overheard seemed to encapsulate the whole problem.

Here Tgr!qïnv ceased his dictation. He asked the computer, "Computer, what was the time when we heard that kid complaining about his social thinking lessons?"

The computer, in response to this inquiry, obediently drew up a list of terms, keywords, and indicators associated with complaining, social thinking, lessons, and kids; it reviewed its records in reverse order, beginning at the present moment and racing back centuries to the point of its creation; it found a conversation; the automatic address system activated. A perfectly-balanced voice, calculated to please Tgr!qïnv's ears, barked "g!ïqns bqÿnsq v!nvs qïïlvs vgr!ns." (That is, to Tgr!qïnv's people, this was a soothing tone; to human ears it would sound rather like a mangy dog yipping into a maladjusted microphone. Translated, it meant, "time index 37-v!nvs".)

Tgr!qïnv, to whom all of this was utterly irrelevant, wasted no time. As soon as he heard the reply, he demanded, "Right, now add a recording from the time index to the draft!"

Person with Autism: Seriously, why do I have to learn all this stuff?

Neuro-Typical: Well, remember, when you're grown-up, you need to be able to get a job. To do that, you need to be flexible and pleasant.

A: If you're all so flexible and nice, why can't you accept me for who I am?

NT: Well, I know you're a brilliant, kind, generous person, but the rest of the world doesn't know that. Most people are just too caught up in their own concerns to always consider the needs of others. They find it easier to hang out with people who make them feel comfortable, and tend to avoid people who make them feel uncomfortable. To succeed in the world, you need to try and fit in.

A: And you wonder why I don't like people!

I know I shouldn't criticize them—there are many Earthlings who have devoted considerable time and effort to helping those with autism. Changing the attitudes of the majority, and encouraging them to accept the minority, is a slow and tedious process; in the interim, there are many relatives, professionals, teachers, and other individuals who have dedicated themselves to helping people with autism learn functional skills. Really, it deserves our respect. (Of course, they are barbarians, so there seem to be plenty of frauds, pseudoscientists, and people they call "psychoanalysts" as well. Remember what I said about decent epistemology? I wasn't including psychoanalysts!)

It seems to me, Rys!ĉïnq, that they have it wrong when they claim "autism" is a disorder, or anything which is entirely about the people with autism. It's more like an interaction. There's nothing inherently wrong with those with autism, but the culture and society they live in is organized so that they can't succeed.

Tgr!qïnv and his computer now went through another interaction much like above, searching for a specific recorded conversation.

Employer: Unfortunately, I've heard complaints from your coworkers. It seems that you've been making them feel uncomfortable.

Person with Autism: How could that be? I always say "Hi" in the morning.

E: Apparently you've been ignoring them the rest of the time. And it's not just them—whenever I talk to you, you never seem friendly! You're too focussed on your work.

A: Wait, you're complaining that I do too much work? Didn't you hire me to work? And my work is good, is it not?

E: No, no, the work is excellent. The problem is that you're making the office uncomfortable for everybody else.

They call their employment "work", which in our language means rÿq!nn. However, it seems to me that an equally important part of their employment is not the work, but the interactions around it. Every individual has a niche, something they can do as well or better than anyone else, but it seems that their society is not structured to accept the contributions of all its members. Let us suppose there is a particular group of people, some of whom have a skill and some of whom lack a skill. Those with the skill can be employed, but the ones who will be employed are the ones with additional social finesse needed to interact with others. The rest of them, who have the job skill but not the social skills, are ordinarily discarded. (There are exceptions; if they're really, exceptionally good at the job skills, or if they have a really, exceptionally good employer, or if the job is a really, exceptionally bad one, then they may still be hired and retained.)

Part of the problem seems to be that the barbarians understand social skills as moral kindness. Rys!ĉïnq, you and I both prefer being treated with courtesy, and we always strive to treat others with kindness, but we both know the distinction between deliberate unkindness and social incompetence. When others lack social skills, we don't blame them for it, but treat them with extra kindness, if not pity. The Earthlings do the opposite: they treat those who lack social skills as morally guilty.

Neuro-Typical: Why do have to be so mean to me?

Person with Autism: What are you talking about?

NT: You know what I mean!

A: No, I don't.

NT: See, you're doing it now! You won't even have the decency to admit it and apologize!

A: Seriously, what are you talking about?

NT: (leaves)

Some of the Earthlings call this "invisible disability"; since others don't recognize it, it easily breeds stigma. (I realize that I've been somewhat too sweeping here, since if some of them realize that the problem exists and invented a name to describe it. I suppose I should remember to always hunt for the juicy bqÿn!ïgq, no matter how dry the rest of the pack is!)

Indeed, we both know that social skills and empathy are, in a sense, more the ability to manipulate others than a genuine interest in others. Now, obviously, we've evolved to be interested in the welfare of children and relatives, because evolution favours those who ensure the survival of their genes in others, but other than that, there really isn't any altruism. We're only interested in making others feel good because it makes them feel good about us. Thus, when I inquired after your new body's comfort, I was just trying to make you feel better-disposed towards me. Indeed, come to think of it, it actually shows something peculiar about our people, for we intellectually understand that our social interest is often self-motivated, and that our empathy, while undeniably present, reflects self-interest; nevertheless, we still feel good when others show an interest in us. The problem with these barbarians is that a good many of them haven't yet figured out that social thinking is manipulation, or if they have, they forget it when they most need to remember.

The end result of all this is quite depressing. Following the method of Bqïïnĉs, I imagined this dialogue in an attempt to illustrate the current state of the interaction that is autism; it is, of course, not a real or even plausible conversation, but I believe it captures the essence of the problem.

Person with Autism: But I want to contribute! I want to have friends! Tell me what to do!

The World: Well, you need to get yourself a job, and then you can contribute. As for friends, you need to be friendly to people, and then they'll want to be friendly to you.

A: But whenever I get a job, I'm always getting fired. And what do you mean, friendly? I learned to say "Hi", I learned to smile, and I even ask questions about other people. What am I doing wrong?

The World: It's none of my business to find out. That's your problem. You're all grown-up so now behave like it.

A: I'm no better or worse than you! If you can't accept me, it's your own fault. I won't keep on trying if all that it only ends in failure!

The World: That's too bad, because we run the world. If you don't like it, better find yourself another planet.

A:	But this is the only habitable planet in the solar system, and besides, I don't have a decent job, let alone enough money to make rockets!

The World: I was being sarcastic, idiot.

But I do not believe that the people with autism are doomed to be forever confined in their current position. Indeed, I should not be surprised if our own culture once suffered from a similar problem, during the ancient industrial and information eras. In time, perhaps, they will advance in wisdom and understanding.

In the meantime, for those among them who will not live to see this new world—they have very short lifespans, Rys!ĉïnq, as a consequence of not having body transfusions—we should not forget that there are some among them who do make arrangements to receive currency for their labour; there are some who gain respect within their society. Of course, those with autism are still mistreated by that society, and I would not be at all surprised if some of them wished to give up entirely, and withdraw in bitter fury at an uncaring world. However, I did see progress being made. I can also see that many are able to obtain what, in the eyes of the other barbarians, constitutes success—not a majority, certainly, but enough that we should examine them.

The people with autism can advance themselves, it they take responsibility for their own achievements—and failures. By succeeding, they can achieve happiness and self-actualization; moreover, only from within can they can put themselves into a position to meaningfully change the society in which they live. In the end, the onus is on them to, through their own efforts, succeed in their endeavours.

"The people with autism can advance themselves, it they take responsibility for their own achievements—and failures. By succeeding, they can achieve happiness and self-actualization; moreover, only from within can they can put themselves into a position to meaningfully change the society in which they live."

Well, I think I'm almost at the next world on my list, so I'd best get on with scanning it. You will send me a picture of your new form, right? And say hello to Cv!qsï from me!

Your friend,

Tgr!qïnv

While Tgr!qïnv dictated to his computer, his vessel had hurtled through emptiness, disgorging distorted spacetime as it travelled. As he despatched the message to his friend Rys!ĉïnq, sending it racing down the shadowed pathways of this netherworld, his ship came at last to its destination. The alien pulled himself back onto the command bridge, regarding ahead the looming light of a young sun, casting a pale dawn onto the shimmering surface of the half-formed world beneath.

(It was, Tgr!qïnv thought, an utterly uninteresting star system. He set the computers to run some scans—presumably some dull astrogeologist or cosmochemist somewhere would use the data—and retreated into the back cabin.)

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Concerning Normalcy and Identity

By Lane Chevrier

Concerning Normalcy and Identity:

When I was asked to write a piece about my experiences with autism, the first thing I thought of concerns the greatest fundamental attribution of my identity, which is this: the most important aspect of my identification with autism, is that I do not identify myself as having autism. Sure, it says on a piece of paper I do. When I was 11 I was diagnosed with Asperger's, and, suddenly, it became my complete identity. There was instantaneously a perfect explanation as to why I was such a 'difficult child', why I didn't respect authority, why I couldn't handle change, why I couldn't empathize with others, why I lived according to my own rules in my own world. It all made sense. At that point there appeared a list of attributions that stated who I was, completely. In a single moment, the intricate complexities of myself as a human were reduced to a personality profile created by a team of psychologists.

This became my identity, not by my choice, but by the assertion of all of the adults and professionals around me. As such, I began to use it as a scapegoat, to justify why I got in trouble all the time, and that I couldn't help it because I was 'special'. This became my method of relating to myself and to the world. I was a person with a disability. There was obviously something wrong with me, from birth, until death. Over time, I came to believe that I would never and could never be 'normal', that, neurologically, I was vastly different from everyone else in the world, except for a small subsection of people who, like myself, were social rejects, and unlikely to succeed at life. I saw Asperger's as a crippling, lifelong impairment forever separating me from the possibility of living a normal, successful, happy life.

Part of the fundamental concept of living with neurological differences is that such a person cannot consciously perceive how they are different, because the differences are the underlying core of their entire world perception. Therefore, people with brain injuries or neurological disabilities may or may not cognitively understand that, according to an outside observer, their behavior and schemas differ greatly from the majority. However, they have no ability to see the differences for themselves, because to experience the differences from a subjective standpoint, they would need to be neurologically typical, which is impossible. Hence, the conundrum that, as people with neurological differences, we will never know the extent to which we are different, other than what we piece together from externally presented evidence, and observations of 'experts'. We must believe this is true, because we have no way of judging for ourselves. This was my reality. I was convinced I would never be normal. I would always be plagued by irregular thought patterns, behaviors, and social deficits. I might as well just accept it. And so, my life continued on bleakly, such as it was.

I am 28 years old now, and it has only been recently that I have come to a very logical conclusion: What is normal? Normal is a baseline arbitrary measurement created by psychologists and statisticians as a reference point in an attempt to categorize the enormous diversity and entropy of the world. Every person is different from every other person in hugely variable ways. Yes, it is true that there are characteristics and behaviors exhibited by a vast majority of people, that may be considered 'normal' because of their prevalence, but what does this really prove? It certainly doesn't state that the majority is the 'best' way to be, because that is subjective. Even when it comes to the concept of greatest utility, "Normal" has not served humanity all that well, with consideration to the great thinkers and ground movers of history. Many of the greatest moments in human history have come about as a result of someone who is not normal – take Einstein, for example, who reportedly couldn't tie his own shoes. Consider Nikola Tesla, the father of many modern concepts such as fluorescent lighting, the rotary engine, radar, (and some incredible prototype technologies which died with him and no one has been able to replicate). Tesla was extremely germ phobic, suffered from hallucinations, night tremors, and possessed a terrified loathing of women wearing earrings. He also had the rather anti-social habit of spending his time at dinner parties calculating the cubic contents of his plate--definitely not normal.

"Instead, I say, "Sometimes I make social blunders, just like everyone else." I am not a person with a 'disorder'. I'm just a person who struggles with just as many personal ups and downs as anyone else out there. I'm completely normal... but certainly not ordinary."

By confirming that I am not normal, I have realized that I am just as normal as everyone else in the world, because normalcy is a fallacy. And, as a person who is now as normal as they come, aren't I entitled to all of the joys and miseries anyone else might experience? I must be. At this point in my life I am completing an undergrad degree at the University of Victoria. I excel at writing, but struggle with math. I am in a relationship with a wonderful woman and am exceedingly proud to be a positive influence on her two young girls. I am happy a lot of the time, and depressed some of the time, and anxious a good deal of the time. Overall, I feel pretty normal, which is all I have ever wanted to be.

It is true that some of my personality traits and behavioral characteristics have been influenced partly or fully by my position on the autism spectrum, but it is not who I am. I refuse to say, "I am socially awkward because of my autism," because that attributes the complexities of who I am as a person to an externally created identity. Instead, I say, "Sometimes I make social blunders, just like everyone else." I am not a person with a 'disorder'. I'm just a person who struggles with just as many personal ups and downs as anyone else out there. I'm completely normal... but certainly not ordinary.

Layers

By Ruth-Ann Neil

Layers

Basalt Caves

And I shall wander there
because I know them,
the caves cradled in the basalt cliffs

I am one with them in my dreams

And was it from a life of mine lived before,
was I bear padding heavy through the sage and aspen,
was I coyote, voice ululated to the stars,
like so many songs written and recorded
only by impenetrable darkness?
Was I Lynx Rufus, nursing my young
on beds clawed and dug from chalk debris
in hollows to cup my dappled kittens?

There is a remembering singing to me,
dream crafted, wrapped in tissue layers,
humus pressed against my thin body
sent as a gift to wrap me home.

by Ruth-Ann Neil


3

Some of my first memories were of crying in my crib for my mother to bring me a bottle of milk. She didn't come and I remember that this happened many times. I cried until I was sick. I was born with pneumonia in 1957, and had it again when I was two years old and again when I was four. When I was two, I remember I was in an oxygen tent and my parents were not allowed in the hospital, but my grandpa was. He sat beside the tent and put his hand in with me. I remember looking into his blue eyes and hearing him singing to me above the hissing of the machine.

I also remember when my father brought strangers into my room at night and I heard him urging me to get up. I could smell them and I knew that my Dad wanted something from me. I wanted to respond to him so I stood up and said "shit". I had heard that from a brother and I didn't know what it meant. I only knew the strangers wanted something. I got spanked very hard and I cried myself to sleep. I didn't know then that is was a swear word, but I found out in later years that Dad had been drinking and wanted to show his friends how "cute" I was.

I had a morning routine when I was about four that involved getting up in the early morning as the sun was rising before anyone else was awake in the house. I crept outside and ran up the small hill above our home. I was so happy I started to yodel loudly and sing about the earth and the creatures that I had found the day before down the hole where they lived. I didn't use words just loud sounds that were like the yodeling I heard on my mother's records.

Five years old meant you started Grade One if your birthday was in October. On the first day of school my brothers and sister and I got new bikes, but we couldn't ride them long because snow fell early. Riding a bike was difficult for me and I had a lot of falls. We walked in single file along the macadam to the elementary school. It was exciting to smell the paper and glue in the classroom. I brought my lunch in my first lunch kit. The coat room and the routines of school were mysterious. The other kids didn't seem to like me at all. I was gregarious and wanted to show everyone that I could read already and had done so by reading all of my sibling's text books. Right away I attracted attention in the Christmas concert by standing up in the audience and singing loudly "Oh, Canaduck".

The next lesson came when I was told I was "stuck up" because I used big words.

I was told that nobody understood me, therefore I was making up words that were not regular language. I now know that was hyperlexia, and echolalia. I also realized that arithmetic did not make sense to me. Art was my favourite subject. I tried to skip arithmetic by creating a medical fictitious emergency to get to art more quickly. I told the teacher I couldn't breathe, but she sent me to the medical room and therefore I missed the art class.

I always skipped and ran everywhere so my parents were summoned to the school.

They were told running wasn't allowed and they needed to stop me. My parents said it wasn't possible because I ran everywhere and needed to! They did stop my skipping but the principal allowed the running. I went up the school ramp past the older grades where the bigger text books were stacked on desks and shelves. I wanted them so I begged different teachers to borrow them and some of them let me do so as long as they were returned.

I often left school and walked home because I thought that our birds and cat missed me. I put graham crackers with peanut butter and mustard in the budgies' cage. When my mother came home from work early one day, she found me up in the tree.

Ever curious I explored our property which included four acres. We had four horses and a myriad of other creatures that I found, like salamanders, worms, shrews and bugs. I was also allowed to whistle incessantly at the dinner table which annoyed my siblings but I craved whistling and singing.

There were two traumatic experiences with fire when I was a four year old child. One was the fire that always erupted out of our oven when my mother was grilling steak for my father which caused me to scream and cry and I needed to be moved. The other incident was a neighbour's house burning down. Someone lifted me up to see out of the window. The glass was hot to touch and I had nightmares about this for years. The fire was traveling along the telephone wires and there was a bucket brigade formed. We stayed inside and watched in fear. Falling asleep was difficult after this episode.

I hated leotards. They felt bad. I couldn't stand tags on my clothing, any where. I couldn't stand fortrel or clothing that didn't breathe. Wool was impossible to wear but I was expected to wear it. I often removed my shirt and went outside in the hot sun and ended up very sunburned.

My dad had an airplane and once we flew across four provinces over the mountains to visit relatives. I was allowed to sit on my mom's lap and Dad let me hold the controls in front of her and told me that I was flying the plane. So I thought that I did.

In Grade one I told my class that we had a ranch that grew a wheat crop on the prairies. I also told my class that it was my birthday and invited some classmates. It wasn't my birthday but I had always wanted a party like the only one that I had been to at a neighbour's house. There had been a cake with nickels baked into it and a nice icing. Songs were sung and tea was served with lots of milk and sugar. I had not told my mother so imagine her surprise when children knocked on the door and declared that they were there for my party. They had come with bags of candy to share and wanted to come into our home. My mother apologized to them and sent them away. I watched out the window and saw the kids sitting in the ditch sharing the candy. Mom was very angry with me and so I was sent to bed with no supper.

At home I sang, hummed and whistled, continuously.

One day we went to town in our car with our mother. I watched out the window as we started across the bridge. There was ice flowing in the river. I stood up to see the chunks of ice flowing by beneath. I grabbed the steering wheel from my mother's hands. We crashed into the bridge and dangled there, above the river. The tow truck came and we were carefully extracted.

I always hung out of the car window when I was left in there. I shouted hello to everyone I saw on the street. Of course the doors were not locked so someone reached in for me and took me with them. My Grandfather who was the sheriff was called. Grandpa knew exactly where to find me as a First Nations lady had done this before. When Grandpa came to get me I was happily sitting, drinking tea and eating biscuits thick with honey. The lady had been charmed by my hair that was thick, red and curly. I was fine and had an adventure that I have never forgotten. Grandpa was very respected and loved by the First Nations in the town.

Mom told me we were moving at the end of Grade Three. She said that we would be in a country school, but I was afraid of change. We had to take bus to school every morning and the kids in my new school didn't like me at all. I had trouble playing with the kids as once again I was teased for using big words. The girl that sat behind me knocked me out of my desk and sat on my face. That was what cruelty smelled like and nobody came to help.

I sat at the back of the class to get away, but then I couldn't see. The teacher called my parents and said she thought I needed to go to an eye doctor. She was correct and we traveled a long way to another town where they found I was very near-sighted. I got my first pair of horn rimmed glasses. In later years I found out that myopia is often associated with the oxygen tents that children were exposed to in their early years.

I also had an awkward gait, difficulty running and playing ball. I still tried to run and remember feeling tired and weak while doing so. I was determined to persist. I ran in races and sometimes got a ribbon for third place and I tried vaulting awkwardly and high jumping as well but had a very unusual launch. Once again I was ridiculed but this time I fought back. The boys decided that I was a farm kid that smelled bad and therefore needed to be kicked and punched. The boys weren't expecting me to lean over grab their arms and flip them to the ground. After a few times of attempting to hurt me, they gave up.

My dad had taught me something's from the judo he learned in the army and as a policeman. I was tall and thin which made me a target. My dad also gave me very large books to read like The Source by James A Michener which inspired me to have an interest and love for archeology. On my own I looked for many books and had a ravenous appetite for them. Dad always asked me what I thought of the books once I read them. I started to write my first book when I was in Grade Four. The teacher didn't like it as she thought I was writing about things a child couldn't know about and shouldn't know about.

My dad came home one day and brought a box with him. In the box which he handed to me, I could hear scrabbeling. I saw a beak poking out of the top and when I opened the box out came two geese. I was in heaven. We had left without my cat but this helped me so much. I didn't feel so lost and alone. The geese were great companions and followed me everywhere. I went into the long creek that traversed our farm with the geese always following me. I had a goose pen to maintain and keep clean and I had a chicken coop also to take care of and eggs to collect and the barn to help clean. There were cats in the barn with kittens too.

My cat actually showed up later, which meant that he had travelled many miles to find me. He was hurt and showed up to be looked after.

On the farm we learned how to bale hay and stack it. We had calves to raise as well and pigs to feed. I watched a different kind of life unfold and I turned away from the children that were unkind although relationships would never be easy. Part of the farm life was startling as well. We were told as kids to go out and knockdown the swallows nests in the barn. Which we did and then got swarmed with mites. I loved the biggest pig named Wilbur but one day he disappeared. I didn't understand until bacon appeared on my plate. My mom tried to tell me that Wilbur would want me to eat him. I left the table.

I often ate things like the grain in the granary and the salt from the salt licks around the property which were for the cattle. I ate the dog food crumbles. I found a meadow across the road where I could lay under the aspens on the soft moss and I could see the blue sky above me. I slept there where nobody could find me. I loved patterns and clouds. I counted the tiles in the ceilings in the hospital rooms I stayed in over the years and I was hypnotized by cloud formations and sunsets. Dad took me to airports where they had weather stations and he taught me rudimentary cloud formations. To this day clouds are one of my joys.

We had a dog that got hit on the highway and always had a crooked back after that. Another dog had puppies which also got hit and killed one by one. Our chickens also escaped and were struck on the highway.

\ For money to buy treats we travelled along the road collecting beer bottles in gunny sacks and when they were full after hours of collecting, Mom would bring the truck to pick us up and take us to the bottle depot. With our money we chose treats like chips and pop which probably was why my teeth were so bad. I needed many cavities filled and ended up with severe abscesses. I had severe earaches as well. One of these resulted in mastoiditis and another hospital stay. When I was nine years old I was hospitalized again for a tonsillectomy for very bad tonsils that needed to be removed. The adenoids were removed as well. The doctor that removed them took part of my uvula which he shouldn't have. As a family we had many challenges.

I learned to never say I was bored because there was weeding to be done and cream to be made and wool that needed carding. We left the farm and I was heartbroken.

We moved to a small village near the mountains where I began a new school. We bought a mobile home and lived in town. We rented property out of town for the horses and my geese. We fenced the property but someone poached the geese, one by one. It broke my heart.

My school year began with trepidation. When I walked along a path through a vacant lot to school I found out that there were bullies in the new town too. The kids threw sharp pinecones at my head. It hurt badly when I was hit. They also jumped out from behind the trees and beat me up.

I was desperately lonely, but my animals and the trees offered me respite. I discovered a library in the village and I made one friend, although her brother was quite mean to her and me as well. She was much younger and had no friends either. The kids were mean to her as well. Books were comforting and reading was a great escape. Once again I found an escape in books and I went up the mountain above where we lived. I would spend hours up there exploring in the wilderness. I also tried fishing with a pole that I fashioned from a stick. My dad gave me fishing line and weights to add to the line. I was gone often from sunrise to sunset. If I wasn't getting books from the library I was up the mountain.

When I went off to the library I often fell and sprained my ankles over and over. I quite often was laying in the ditch when my mom came looking for me. I went to school with tensor bandages. Because of my tall, thin build I was called "stovepipe" and when the kids discovered that I had blonde streaks in my hair, I was called "rally stripe". I withdrew from people. I felt safer near animals and in the trees under cover. I rode my bike down a dirt road when I really wanted to get away. I rode miles away from town. I fell off of that bike a lot as my coordination was always poor.

One day I went into my grade seven classroom late because I was afraid to walk to school. The entire class turned around and thirty kids groaned loudly and the teacher did not stop them. I got my first pair of wire-framed glasses and once again I was an object to jeer at. I didn't know that my dad was a boss in the town. He had logging trucks and an airplane that meant he employed many people there. Of course that also made me a target, but I didn't know that then.

The main radio was in our trailer for the logging trucks to call into when they were on the road. It was so Dad could track their miles and whereabouts as they travelled into the valley. Often the drivers would hang the handset out of the window so we could hear wolves howling. The driver's thought that was funny.

Sometimes Dad took me up to one of the landings that he had cleared and I could go into the cedar forest there. It was perfect for vanishing. I loved that smell and the trees and any wildlife we saw. I felt much more alive when I was away from civilization.

Once again we were going to move. This time it was into a city. I knew I didn't belong anywhere. People didn't think like me. A new school was terrifying. We arrived in the summer, the first thing I did was to climb the hills above our house. Nobody warned me that there was cactus up there. I found that out when I sat down, quite a rude introduction. There was a junior high school that we had to take another long bus ride to get to. When the bus dropped us off I didn't understand what to do or where to go. The other kids seemed to know, so I followed them but they headed toward a place where everyone was smoking. Some staff came out and took us all to the office and they picked our courses out for us.

I ended up in Creative writing and Drama and also PE which I didn't want to take. We needed gym strip and I was so embarrassed. I didn't have any and I did not want to be around anyone. I saw my dad drinking wine at home and taking pills for a headache so the next day I took a mason jar of wine on the bus with me and I also put a bottle of headache pills in my pocket. I swallowed them all on the bus with the wine. I passed out as soon as I got off the bus.

I was in the medical room for hours before they called my mom to come and get me. I was in big trouble. But I wouldn't answer any questions. Not from her or them. I was once again very lost and alone.

I always wondered why I was different than other people. I wasn't interested in the stuff other kids and I liked to be alone. It's hard to be alone when one is pushed into things like dancing with people in gym class. I hated the music they chose. I loved the jazz, and classics my dad played and some other kinds of music, but most of all I loved books. Other kids were smoking, drinking and taking drugs. We had to go to school on shift with another school. I was taking creative writing which I loved and I liked the drama class because I didn't have to be me.

I could "monologue" about the facts that I had accumulated, whether people wanted to listen or not. The 'fact library' in my brain filing cabinet was readily available and isolated me further. The children weren't interested.

I started failing in school and a teacher reached out to me. She said "What is happening with you, I know you are very smart and I think you could pass this test." I did.

There was a girl I felt sorry for. I asked my mom if she could stay with us. She had nowhere to go. She came to the house one day, her boyfriend had broken her fingers and her face was black and blue and he had butted his cigarettes on her arms. She stayed for awhile but eventually went to her father and step-mother's home. She was abused there as well and I learned that she was damaged and eventually was on drugs. She was a very gifted artist and only wanted to paint and draw.

Grade ten, eleven and twelve were confusing as well and in Grade twelve I was fortunate to find a teacher that allowed me to do bird-watching and agriculture as my projects. I had an amazing teacher that taught us English Literature and another that taught me History.

Some things now made sense to me, but still not people. Mom made me go to a psychiatrist after I attempted to run through the front window. I couldn't talk about why I did that. I could only print which I now know is selective mutism and I still experience this. Sometimes I cannot articulate even though I can write my feelings. Over the years I have discovered many things through copious amounts of reading. I researched everything I could on a variety of topics that piqued my curiosity.

My first job was babysitting. My second job was in a restaurant waiting tables

My experience with machines on the farm became employment for me as I was hired to drive a one hundred ton trucks in an open pit mine eventually I drove one hundred and seventy ton trucks and progressed to operating electric shovels to load the trucks. The shovels started at a fifteen yard bucket and eventually a twenty-two yard bucket. I became a safety steward. I dressed like a man, steel toed boots and jeans and a parka when needed and a rain slicker when required. My long hair in a pony-tail or braid and no make-up ever. I had grease and gear-tac in my hair and oil and grease on my hands. I was dirty and didn't like the smell of diesel smoke and the huge amounts of dust. Once again I faced ridicule as I was a woman in a non-typical job. There were many foul comments written about me on the bathroom walls. I scrubbed them off. I had IBS (irritable bowel syndrome) as a result of the stress I endured. Gossip was cruel and vindictive. I began smoking and drinking until I found out that I would get bronchitis and couldn't remember episodes in the pub. I stopped smoking and drinking.

I did enjoy loading the trucks and became good at was I was doing. The work was quite well paying. I learned a huge amount about rocks and how to mine them. I worked a lot of overtime, many afternoon and graveyard shifts, most people did not want to work them so I did. I liked the fact that there were less people around in the darker hours.

The mine was a larger farm in my mind and I would come to regret working there when I became more environmentally aware. I felt sorrow when I saw what an open pit mine did to the terrain and creatures. I quit the mine with the idea of going to college to become a nurse.

I did upgrading at the college and took the Biology and Chemistry and Math that I needed. I stopped my schooling four months shy of graduating as a nurse, as I chose to stay at home to nurse my children.

I was passionate about animals, and humans and biology, words and science and psychology, and history. Eventually I encountered my own physical and mental challenges. I learned through the years to come, that my relationships with people and my unusual likes and dislikes, and the avoidance of strong smells and loud sounds had reasons. I found them in books. I found myself explained and I had answers for the things that I had always wondered about.

I had a litany of allergies and food intolerances. I have had many medical diagnoses, this included MCTD (Mixed Connective Tissue Disease) and Osteoporosis and M.S. (Multiple Sclerosis), as well as different Arthritis's and circulatory challenges and heart issues. Then there is PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and Depression and Anxiety as well as Celiac Disease.

I also have chemical sensitivities.

My first classes in University I encountered a professor who targeted me for yawning in his class. I solved that by getting up and leaving after telling him it was a boring class and I transferred out of it. I now know it was the fluorescent lights that affected me. They cause me great fatigue, they still bother me.

There was a reason for my need for solitude and for my melt downs and my need to escape confrontations. This is called sensory overload. It is why I prefer peace and quiet. As the years passed and I had a family, my passion was reignited for learning. I read everything I could about parenting. I also learned about Cesarean Sections (of which I had four) and breast feeding (I became a La Leche League Leader). I studied cancer as one child was born with it and his twin died inutero.

Again I began to read and research. Through my research, I discovered I am on the autism spectrum. I am self-determined. I was so happy and relieved that there were answers to many questions and large parts of my life that finally made sense. Since I have become comfortable with my knowledge, I have discussed this with many psychologists and they all say the same thing. Yes, they agree with me and say to me now, because of your age there probably is no point in getting an “official” diagnosis.

I have been accused of not having emotions but I disagree. If anything I have deeper emotions than many people and many, sensitivities. One bishop at a church I belonged to called me “Iron Lady” because he didn’t see me cry when my son died. I left that church. Oh, I cried. I have had many people die in my arms and I cry.

I investigated my own spiritual self and read more things like the Old and New Testament. I read the Koran and learned about Buddhism, both traditional and Zen. I have looked at Judaism and find many interesting commonalities in all religions. They all agree on the tenet to love one another. I definitely believe that, although I can see how challenging it is to get along even in our own homes. I meditate and use mindful applications of everything I incorporate into my psyche, like my own Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT).

I remain an eager student. I believe in inclusion not exclusion. Over the years I have become keenly interested in Human Rights and the need to speak up and out and to advocate for people and creatures that have been oppressed. I have learned many adaptations that have helped me on my journey. I continue to learn new things about myself and Aspergers. The list of books below has been helpful and I continue on my path of discovery.

- The Complete Guide to Asperger’s Syndrome by Tony Attwood
- Pretending to be Normal by Lianne Holliday Willey
- Asperger’s on the Job by Rudy Simone
- ASPERGIRLS by Rudy Simone
- 22 Things a Woman with Asperger’s Syndrome Wants Her Partner to Know by Rudy Simone
- Girls Growing Up on the Spectrum by Shana Nichols with Marie Moravek and Sandra Pulver Tetenbaum
- Kids in The Syndrome Mix of ADHD, Asperger’s, Tourettes, Bipolar, and More by Martin L. Kutscher M.D.
- ADHD Living Without Brakes by Martin L.Kutscher M.D.
- Organizing the Disorganized Child by Martin L Kutscher and Marcella Moran
- ADHD Book Living Right Now by Martin L. Kutscher M.D.
- Helping a Child with Nonverbal Learning Disorder or Asperger’s Disorder by Kathryn Stewart, PHD (Orion Academy)
- You Mean I’m Not Lazy, Stupid or Crazy?
- ADD by Kate Kelley and Peggy Ramundo
- Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism by Dr. Temple Grandin
- Animals in Translation by Dr. Temple Grandin
- Animals Make Us Human by Dr. Temple Grandin
- The Way I See It by Dr. Temple Grandin
- Emergence: Labeled Autistic by Dr. Temple Grandin
- Anthony’s Story by Leornora Gregory-Collura

> “The mine was a larger farm in my mind and I would come to regret working there when I became more environmentally aware. I felt sorrow when I saw what an open pit mine did to the terrain and creatures.”

Accentuate the Positive
by Iris Gray

Accentuate the Positive

When a new person asks a person with Asperger's to describe Asperger's Syndrome, we usually say something about having difficulties with social skills. We may use words like "socially awkward" or "social disability" or "having problems in social situations." We may mention sensory issues, like having hypersensitive hearing or not being able to wear certain fabrics or eat certain types of foods because of the texture. If we're being really elaborate, we might also include motor skills difficulties or clumsiness.

Why don't we ever talk about the positive things? Many of us are hyperlexic. That means we're very good with words. We might have huge vocabularies. Many of us are good writers. There's also a well-earned stereotype of people with autism spectrum conditions being computer nerds. There are many who work in the computer industry. There are also lots of us in the more traditional sciences. Some of us are math geniuses.

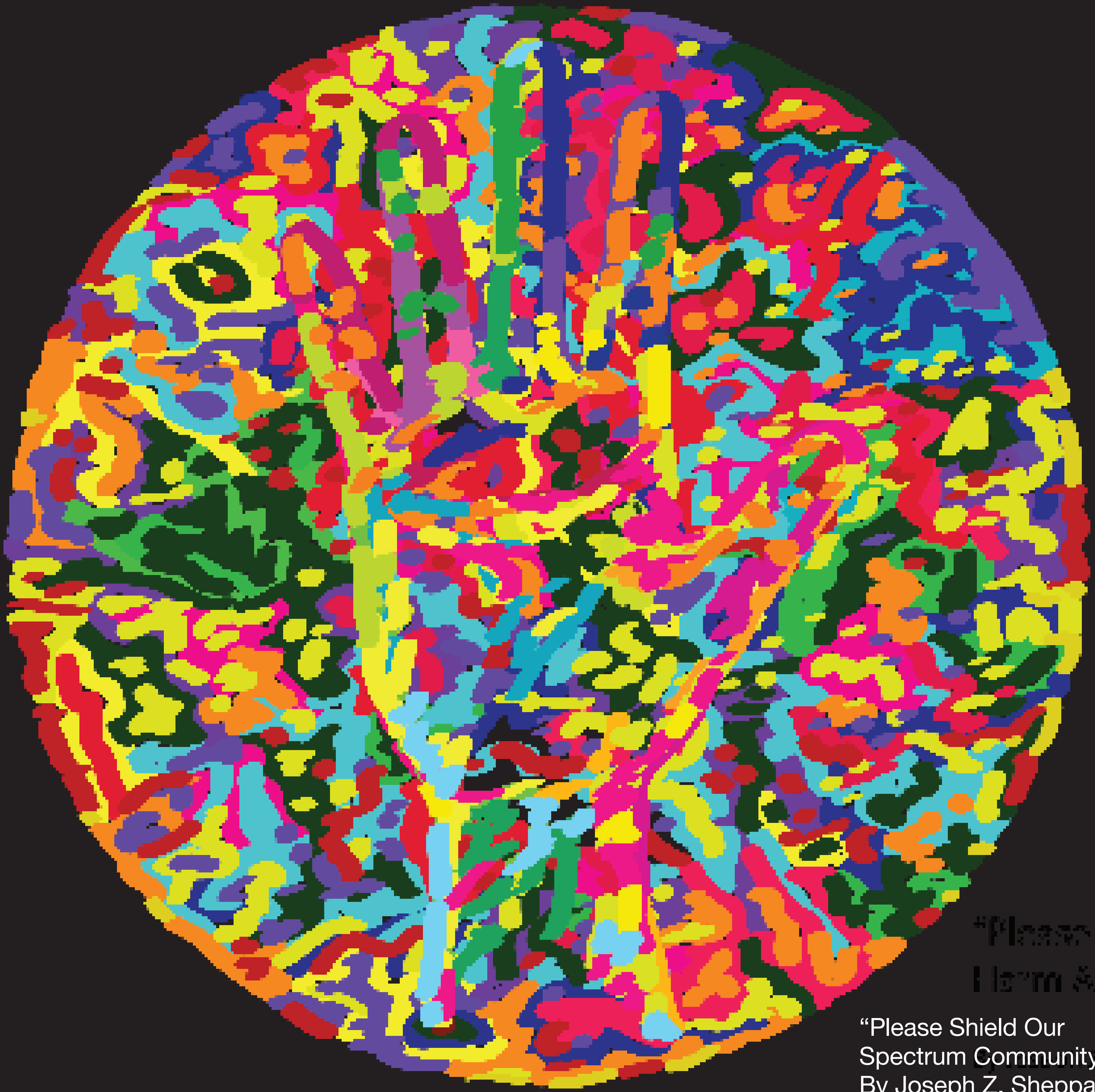
Why don't we ever say, when asked about Asperger's, "It means I'm good with words. I have a huge vocabulary. I also have some problems with social skills and sensory issues." Why do we always list the negatives and never the positives?

I'm sure if we focused only on the positives people wouldn't understand what Asperger's is. They wouldn't comprehend the very real challenges that people with Asperger's face in social situations or the problems that we have in environments that trigger our sensory defensiveness. No one is going to say that being a math genius or a computer nerd or a writer with a huge vocabulary is a disability, and, of course, if you're looking for help, you're going to have to tell people why you need help.

I'm not saying we should deny that we have challenges, but why should our challenges be all we ever talk about? Why don't we ever talk about the positives? Yes, I can be very awkward in social situations. I can also sit down and explain complex subjects in terms that are simple for everyday people to understand. Yes, I have such sensitive hearing that sounds that don't bother other people can send me running from the room with my hands over my ears. I can also write some great stories and blog posts. Yes, I am clumsy enough to trip over thin air. I also happen to be a good speaker.

Let's focus a bit more on the positives, shall we?

> **"Let's focus a bit more on the positives, shall we?"**



“Please Shield Our
Spectrum Community”
By Joseph Z. Sheppard

THANK YOU

We greatly appreciate all who have sponsored our events and made our journal so special. Our readers have made our effort worthwhile. We hope even more authors with autism submit journal entries for next year's Autism's Own journal. This journal truly belongs to us, the autism community, as our own.