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Chapter 11

A Personal Perspective on Autism and Transition



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Abstract This is a personal narrative written by a young autistic adult. She describes her childhood without a formal diagnosis of autism and her relationship with her stepbrother who was diagnosed when he was 3. Now that she is recently formally diagnosed with autism, the author reflects on her transition into adulthood, hoping for acceptance and asking that neurotypical people focus on her strengths rather than her perceived deficits or differences.

When I was about 4 years old, I was evaluated by a psychologist in order to join a gifted and talented program at a local top university. My evaluation simply ended with the psychologist telling my mother that they “did not know how to chart my conceptual abilities.” So, naturally, I was simply referred to as precocious. My academic propensities weren’t all that was “abnormal” about me growing up though. I never quite socially fit in; my interests were hyper-specific and my vocabulary was... unique for my age. Even my style was eccentric. Teachers loved me and called me “an old soul.” I was told I would find my place in middle school... then I was told I would find my place in high school... I’m still holding out hope for college. The truth is, though, adults viewed my differences from my peers as positives since these traits made me seem “mature.” I, however, only felt isolated. I spent 7 years eating my lunch in teachers’ offices because I connected better with the adults than my peers.

Despite my differences, I was never bullied or even that unpopular. According to my peers, I was simply “intimidating.” Intimidating is a weird adjective to describe a person because it’s like an insult and a compliment all rolled up into one. I was intimidating in that I had clear goals from the start of high school, I quoted philosophers and poets regularly, and I wore suits to school when all my peers were donning pajama pants and Uggs or flip-flops. This made me cool and elusive in some ways, but also unapproachable in others. People feared me in many ways, which I developed

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into a sarcastic, cold-hearted badge of honor. At the end of the day, however, I felt hurt. I also have always been incredibly direct, for better or for worse. People who got on my nerves would ask “Allannah do you not like me??” While I know logically I should lie, something in me always went with honesty in these situations—“No, I don’t like you.” “Why do people ask questions they don’t want honest answers to?” is a question I continue to ask myself. I used to also be honest about my affection towards people but oddly enough, that was scarier than my direct, yet sometimes harsh honesty. My directness about my affinity towards people scared them off, but my cold, “witty” honesty about things I disliked made people laugh. The thing is, I was never joking. Most people who asked questions like “Do you like me” and received a “No” in response thought it was a joke! Nobody really says no... But I always said what I felt unless of course, I felt something positive that would make me vulnerable. This continues today.

I’ve grown up deeply immersed in the autism community. I peer mentored students with high assistance needs for 8 years and have grown up with a stepbrother who attends a therapeutic day school for autistic children and adolescents. I always felt a deep connection to my stepbrother. Only two weeks separate our birthdays. He only ever talks about what he wants to talk about—whatever thought jumps into his head. I’ve always felt like I was actively combatting the urge to do the same. Sometimes at home, I would let my guard down in this regard. If a dinner table topic bored me I would announce “I don’t like this topic, it is uninteresting,” and I would abruptly get up and leave. I still do. If I were to say that to a group of friends, my concern (and the likely reality) is that I would be ostracized, but my family began to understand my “quirks.”

My similarities to my stepbrother were always apparent to me. When someone once asked me if I wished my stepbrother could communicate like “average” people, I asked why shouldn’t we all want to communicate like him. His way of living, being honest about his feelings and desires made so much more sense to me as opposed to the confusing landscape of social niceties and mind games that makes up “normal” teenage or even adult communication.

I’m a filmmaker—an artist—which goes against the stereotypical, albeit erroneous narrative of neurodiverse people being science or math geniuses. While I’m not too shabby at calculus, art has always been how I chose to spend my free time and express myself. I often approach social situations in a way that is more scientific than the average person, however. When I first meet somebody, I take in their style, their stance, their tone, and start theorizing about their interiority. Emotions can be difficult for me to understand, so every single external clue I can collect, I compile to inform my interactions. This process is what I believe makes me so good at visual storytelling, but it can also be exhausting. Unlike a novel, making a film only allows you to portray the external factors of a character’s thoughts or feelings (unless you employ the dreaded voice-over method... but that’s a different conversation). Sometimes, to most comfortably interact with people, I mentally write scripts. I ask myself the same questions I would ask when writing a screenplay. “What is my motivation?” “What is my relationship to the person I’m interacting with?” “What is at stake in this conversation?” Everyday conversations typically don’t have objectively high stakes

or narratively compelling motivations, but in my mind, answering those questions is a vital part of making sure my thoughts and actions aren't misconstrued.

Some part of me has always known I was neurodiverse, but since I was able to achieve so much and assimilate into mainstream society, my internal struggles were ignored or overlooked for a very long time. During the quarantine of the past year, when my daily battle to figure my peers out was no longer existent, my true self became even clearer to my family. I let down my mask and expressed the thoughts and feelings in my head which previously preoccupied and stifled me. I announced when a sound or a smell made my skin feel itchy and when I wanted a conversation to be over. I dropped the social niceties and finally felt a feeling of relief. However, my family likely felt hurt or concerned that the isolation of COVID was taking its toll. And... I wonder now how, as an adult to take off my mask, and continue to assimilate into the adult world.

I really struggle with empathy and while I can sometimes fake it based on how I think people are supposed to react, I became tired of this act over the last year which was pretty harsh on my family. I have very, very little malice in me at all but I realize that not everyone is as analytical about emotions as I am. Some people just feel hurt or sad even when it is not logical which is really hard for me to grasp. This disconnect was one of the biggest reasons I actually pursued getting evaluated. I realized what I had always feared—my true self, behind all the scripts and pretend niceties, is not someone many people like. That's not to say that neurodiverse people are unlikable or unlovable, but society is not set up to value us for who we are, and so some of us mask. Placing the burden of masking on us is frankly exhausting—something I did not realize until I finally got a break from it, but something I fear I may need to continue as I move on to a college campus, embark on a career, maybe start a relationship, and experience all of the other hallmarks of being an adult. Transitioning from adolescence into adulthood is not easy, especially for those of us who are neurodiverse. As I enter adulthood, I hope that the world around me can accept me and others like me for who I/we are focus on my/our strengths rather than my/our perceived deficits or differences.