

# It would be Nice to be able to Say 'I knew'

by E. Sandy Powell, aka Sparky

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It would be nice to be able to say 'I knew.' To be able to say I knew I wasn't the neurotypical I seemed to be. But the truth is, I didn't. I never knew ... until I was 72.

I had clues along the way. I know I know (ha! *I think I know*) that you would love to hear the list of traits or behaviors that nail me autistic. Right there! That is one of them: I think I know how others see a situation or what they might want, yet even when I think I know, I'm probably mistaken, and being mistaken will always surprise me.

My 'running-on thoughts' is another; one word zips to a next in my mind, high speed, on and on.

Ah but you will find long lists of attributes online, with broader representation than mine may depict, just be sure to seek out those written by others who are on the spectrum themselves, as with Paul Micallef's voluminous work documenting "Aspergers From The Inside." What *I* want to share in the collection of 'what it's like' is how in the world I came to recognize that I'm on the spectrum ... so *seriously* late in life. I.e., how did my discovery come about? I began this writing to try to make sense myself. Once I got farther in, another purpose emerged: I have no idea (and that 'not knowing' and not being able to figure out 'if an answer would be knowable' is another indicator) ... *but perhaps* my story might be of value to others. Perhaps by a person nearer my age who has wondered through his/her/their life but reads 'late diagnosis' stories mostly of 20 and 30-year olds. Or perhaps by parents who might have some questions about their child.

I have to laugh as I invite you to step inside my mind/experience: my route was not chronological nor ordered. More often than not it was me just having a hoot, then trip/bam! I'd run right into some new eye openers. Articles, links to 'Aspergers' or 'Autism' came rolling in over the course of a year, unexpectedly, random, seemingly insignificant but pulsating, as if turning me to glance as I passed by a mirror: 'oh my gosh, is that me!'

Many of the insights came muted, subtly framed, not what I would have expected in a life-changing revelation.

Here's one such image that stands out from high school, only recently remembered. Of all the pages on which I was included in the yearbooks, my 'shell necklace' would never have shown up. What was pictured were my regular contortions, knowing I must smile even wearing that thin strand of 'pearls' - so *not me* - over a plain dark sweater I can't imagine having owned. I might have had a hint of my atypical self back then if I'd given heed to the shakiness I felt - yep, physical shudders throughout my upper body - the few times I tried to go through with wearing a cockle shell that I'd threaded onto a short gold chain. Even holding it in mind as 'my shell necklace' felt like too great a reveal. I was 'with it' enough to know I should have gotten a golden 'jump ring' (they're called) to open and slip through the hole at the top

Here's how: a thought/memory might start at one place, but then, according to links with smells, tastes, sensations of any kind, my mind will grab 'liketies' completely outside of any linear sequence. If a conversation, interaction or event triggers my mind to some past emotionally-packed something or other, then step aside! '*Incoming*' become bullet trains roaring into my mind from behind me, in front of me, from every angle around the turntable. Without controls. Oh what I have to work at holding back! And if/when I'm emotionally shaky already and any suggestion, any segment of a movie or somebody else's experience 'triggers' me ~ kabaam! There sets off the series of unbidden similar instances; these days, might be from 40 years back, might be 68 years ago, might even be last March or last month. Single-frame but fuzzy worded images pop to mind, one after another till I somehow either get blessedly distracted *or* I make a tremendous effort to take my innermost giant scissors and cut that incoming feed. Still I have to fight not setting about processing all that's just come through. Sorting. Organizing. Clarifying or occasionally dismissing the importance for my life now. I've thought I was a 'slow thinker' but really there's just so much to process. What my mind has 'grabbed' can be hard to ignore.

of the shell so the chain could run through that eyelet, allowing the shell to sit flat on my breastbone. But in my mind, if I did what was 'right' in what could possibly have passed as jewelry, *or* in terms of 'look' which others seemed to have so much fun caring about, then I would be giving affront to the natural fall-as-it-may shell and my more intimate connection with its life, tumbling on shore.

Some would say teenage minds work like that. They go all inward and weird over the tiniest things.

But it takes only a bit of listening to those on the spectrum to become open to the clues and clues and clues. No set of behaviors make a person autistic, no one person's line-up is parallel to another's either (though at various points, many of us will run absolutely congruent); it's the sum of one's ways, one's processings - no, that's not quite all either. It's more like the conglomeration of my idiosyncrasies, which are vibrating through my inner 'wiring' that place me undeniably on that autistic continuum. And yes, all that stems in my brain.

I'll tell you in a bit how I really tried to disconnect from that current. ;-)

But first, for me, the hints were there, way back.

What would you say of a 4th-grader who runs, sobbing, out of the theater, much to the embarrassment of her folks, when the massive stone blocks are about to be pulled over some ragged workers? I have images in my mind, sometimes clear, mostly fuzzied, which hold even now the emotions I felt at the time: the rows of seats in front of us; the movie goes I had to scoot past to get out to the aisle; my collapsing carriage as I stumbled myself, up to the foyer ... I feel all those in me *as if I was* in the theater just last week. I think, though I'm not sure, I ran through the lobby and out the door altogether, which would have been a grave violation of our family's agreements. I rarely went against my parents' wishes. I lost my senses though in *The Ten Commandments* as I wanted more than anything to undo those emaciated workers' deaths. In that moment, popcorn afoot, I could not tell the difference between a semi-historical depiction on the screen and the suffering of those bare-boned bodies. We know, I gather, through copious recent studies, that a belief that 'people on the spectrum lack empathy' is a myth, an old way that ASD professionals traditionally viewed the varied atypicals' responses, through 'disorder'-alerted neurotypical eyes. I may have been running to get away from the pain, but I was also desperately running because I felt those men's pain on the screen as if it was real. And because that scene was so intensely emotive, I lost my normal learned control. I let my emotions move me.

Ordinarily, by then in my childhood I didn't. And even though movies were among my great loves\* I resisted, then capitulated, and ended up crushed again when some in my family went to see *The Blob* a year or two later.

There was no way I could understand 'special effects.' I experienced the Blob as pure *panic*. Nay, terror. I was probably 11 at the time. I knew such emotions weren't allowed: if my parents approved a particular movie, then it must be okay, so what I was feeling must not have been valid. That *The Ten Commandments* and *The Blob* triggered such emotion in me to be vivid still, 60+ years later, speaks to how hard I had to work to survive family outings.

\* No surprise that my favorite movie is *Stranger than Fiction* in which the 'odd' accountant works through the entire movie to rewrite his own ending.

Lest you veer any bit otherwise though, I do also know: I had good parents who did the very best they could, for what many would consider my enviable childhood ... so yes/no, telling *my* truth then was not an option. In more ways than one, from the back seat, I kept quiet.

If at any point in reading you find yourself impatient, maybe this - my style - will serve as reminder. If you are close to someone who is on the spectrum, someone who loves and/or needs you, I hope that you will remember my offering here. You are not necessarily going to get (from them) a delivery that syncs with *your* best feel-good way, if you are neurotypical. *And* it's not our, the atypicals' responsibility to make all the adjustments for you to be comfortable. Remember, I operate out of a world where everything is connected, so all these pieces are necessary for letting you in on my recognition ... Plus, I've silenced myself for 72 years, for goodness sake! ;-) Alternately, you can read a textbook chapter or short article by a professional who happens to be neurotypical but what that person has to say will fall far short of having any relevance to *my* 'coming out' and possibly not to your family member's either.

I will never know how it came about that I lived for years believing that one of our camping trips ended with the brakes going out on our way down from Hurricane Ridge, the Olympic Mountains. I may have experienced *the possibility* of such as so close to reality that in my memory it became real. Clear as if last summer, I can see myself scrunched, alongside my unfazed brothers in the backseat of that old two-tone green long-bodied Chevy, my body frozen as I stared toward the abyss. Yet my mind was traveling a mile a minute, trying in vain to plan how I would save everyone in my family.

**I may have experienced the possibility of such as so close to reality that in my mind it became real.**

**Heads up: approaching a defining moment here ~ & this one Dad-verified as he recalled too, about 2 years ago.**

It was well before any trying road trips that I first got the message that my perceptions and resultant choices were going to be 'wrong.' I was five. Our neighborhood's infamous DJ was in mid elementary, at least several years older than I. Our whole gang of kids on the block was traumatized by DJ's tearing through on his bike, my feeling-recall is of leaping out of his way. One day our gang, 8 boys and I, were having a fine time in our backyard. Collaboration of the most amazing sandworks village! Right as we were finishing, DJ came barging into the yard, uninvited. With barely a pause he proceeded to stomp through our sandbox. Nobody, not even the older boys, did anything other than pull back in shock. But me, almost the littlest, lone (girl) me, I had had it! I stood up, hopped higher onto the corner brace of the sandbox, squared off, and smacked that DJ straight in the mouth. I don't recall my hand hurting. I do recall feeling really really good.



That justice-served though was short-lived, wrenched from me when Dad got home. After conferring with Mom (or so he recalls), that's when the event turned on me; I was made to march alongside my dad over to DJ's. It must have been more than a long block away as DJ didn't live on our street. (And marching, I was not.) I remember standing on a front

step. There must have been some means of calling the parents to the door, by bell or knocker I don't know. I can't recall my voice. I actually don't know how I would have gotten the words out, but I do know, and within the last year or two my dad confirmed: yes, Dad did make me apologize to DJ and to DJ's parents! I doubt in those less litigious days that Dad would've been concerned that the family might sue him because I had knocked out DJ's two front teeth (or loose, I don't really know). Dad told me though that he believed, and still does ... er, did as Dad died recently, though I tried to set him straight ;- ) ... that insisting I apologize was the right thing to do. It was certainly a defining moment for me.

(Sadly, no adults I knew in those days had insights or skills with which to gradually win over DJ for our safety and his safely playing with the kids he must've so wanted for friends.)

For me though, as you can imagine, the message was different than what Dad intended. I had no Golden Rule glow as we walked home, my knees shaking a plenty. I must have been furious. Humiliated for sure. The take-home I got: First of all, 'No one believes you.' So 'No one is going to stand up for you.' Further I was shown, and this might not have seeped into my marrow had my mind been wired more typically, even when you know something with absolute certainty, 'You must not stand up for yourself. And if you do, you may well be shamed and made to apologize.'

I suspect that's when 'masking' in the psychological sense became my best friend. No matter that I had a whole body-full of alternate expressions inside me which only came out in secret or not at all. Immediately I get a flash as I'm writing, of *delish* times, whisperings, down one narrow bedroom where I played pretend with the lahhnng cardboard house I'd fashioned. A string of boxes lined side by side, my cardboard tabbing linked them up. I can smell those old floorboards which I only got to stretch out on for a few months before we moved that year. Autistic masking is hiding one's feelings and inclinations and preferences from others as I hid my pretend family in that hooked-together house, in order to endure. And just this moment I realize too, I had no dolls at that time; all the family members in my pretend play were without actual form. Sad for me, it wasn't long before my box house lineup got commandeered for real family use as we moved our household once again.

A much healthier, even age-appropriate response would have been to shriek my head off many times along the way, certainly if I thought our brakes were going out on a mountain road with no guardrails. (I may have.) But overall I had learned well to keep hidden my responses to life events, and whether I actually had cried out or not, the amount I held in was massive. A full array of emotions and ways of looking at things that seemed normal to me from my interior world, weren't acceptable within my insular family. And secreting my autistic responses suppressed my developing any better coping mechanisms. Especially way later in life, when adult stresses would build and I had not known how to create an adult support system (nor known why one would be good when single-parenting), there would be times when I would totally lose it. Angry outbursts, followed by emotional guilting of those within my reach to avoid the additional anguish of looking at my own part in the dramas (which I surely did *feel* lots too), served me as releases and justifications ... but not those I loved.

No matter how devoted my wanting and trying to be a wonderful mom, I passed things on to my kids. Unsettledness *was* the standard in my growing up. And that was heck for an autistic girl. Right before the next of my family-of-origin moves, I must've been 11 then too, almost 12, I had been drawing a picture of our Christmas tree. I can remember fondly the feeling of the squishy square hassock depressing under my pad of paper. My intention: to draw every needle exactly as I saw it. One limb was coming along just fine when my dad got word that he was transferred again and before I knew it the tree was out for garbage pickup and Dad was on his way to the next town to find us a new rental. I would be very surprised if anyone knew how important that tree, that drawing had been to me ... and how much I felt I was losing a part of myself, yet again.

Only two in the teaching world let me know that they saw the confusion underneath my puffed up presentations. Earlier that beginning of sixth grade, the young man teacher spotted the inner me right away. I had never gotten the hang of *playing at recess*. Oh I liked jacks, jumping rope, even square ball. It was the social aspect that had me shrinking to the sidelines. *And* the way Mary Kay's ponytail bounced so high on her head with those beautiful big bows was torture to me as my ponytail slumped into a rubberband-tangled mess.

Even if I had owned a wide grosgrained ribbon and managed somehow to keep my hair tucked, I would not have had a clue how to fit in. I was completely incapable of girl chat (and remain so to this day ;-).

Mr. Mueller let me stay in at recess working out extra challenging math problems and encouraging me as I came up with things that thrilled me, such as designing my own numbers systems. or writing penpals overseas. Sadly, I never got to thank him. You know that Christmas we moved? Yep, the way I recall it, we were out of there and into a new school by the first of the year, without goodbye to that dear teacher. I've always regretted that it didn't occur to me early on in adulthood when I might

have still found him (and before that Port Townsend school district office lost records so far back); I made searches several times, but eventually had to give up trying to connect with my Mr. Mueller. Some things that might be easier for a neurotypical to chock up to 'that's life,' may be harder for an autistic like me. I wouldn't know. ;-)

Another insightful one, my Social Studies teacher in 7th grade. Mrs. Wilkison, reached out to me too. Only she scared me with her stern advice: 'You need to get in the shower each night and yell as loud as you can before you give yourself a nervous breakdown.' That teacher though did also find 'my ways' refreshing, commenting on my enthusiasm for learning, how I often begged to try something above and beyond what was expected. I'd get an idea and have to run with it. The play I wrote, something about Abraham Lincoln's life, was like that, and by far not the only instance. What I suspect she said: 'Yes you certainly may write a play and if it's good enough' (I vaguely remember that line) 'and if we have time' (or some other qualifying yada yadas) we might be able to produce it.' What I internalized: 'Write a play and we'll produce it.' How was it that my folks didn't notice I was in over my head trying to keep up with my masked self that pleased them so but really always wanting more to be off on some project, as in sewing elaborate period doll clothes - I finally got dollies - the time justified 'for History' assignment. All that my natural exuberance brought on landed on top of those perceived parental expectations! Gads.

Certainly very few 'out there' would've known I wasn't who I had camouflaged my *self* to be. And with time, that self got lost. What I looked like budding into my teens: a 'cute' girl, I think that term would have been used (though hearing any 'cute' now makes me cringe); physically active (we had no girls sports in my day or I would have played as I had heaps of energy); cheerleader for two of the 'big' sports several years; active in an array of school clubs *and* Scouts *and* church youth group (as well as adult choir); academically in 'the top ten' ... scurrying scurrying to keep favor, while the me I really was essentially lost form to the point she couldn't locate in her tightly wound body the nerve of that little girl she'd been, full of spunk.



I suspect the reason my most valued high school prize was that of "Best Thespian" my senior year was because whenever I could land a role, I got to step out of my pretend skin and climb inside and embody a completely different character. I was good at that since my own moorings had gotten so frayed.

I've another of these 'pop-up' windows, like old slide images that return to help me see my whole: somewhere midway in my high school cheerleading, I was standing in front of our school's bleachers, encouraging the crowd with the appropriate offensive/then defensive chants. (I was a cheerleader who, yes, prided myself in *comprehending those plays*.) I no longer know which upperclassman it was who, with more kindness than my actions warranted, through something in his hand motions and strong but tender demeanor alone, helped me 'tone it down' enough to drop my totally obnoxious insistence that the crowd was required to cheer. In my mind, it was my job/our job, 'the 12th man's' and mine: we were losing, the team/the school depended on us to help them on. But having those autistic innards, once I stepped inside a commitment, then I had to give it everything in me. And that made me an in-their-face annoying pain-in-the-neck to the folks who had simply come out for some Friday night football. I can almost twirl the dial back in time into that young man's eyes reaching out to me. He helped me understand I was going too far, I only partially catch myself now when 'doing my job' links arms with anything smacking of calls for justice, or standing up for someone not being heard; I know I can/do go overboard into other people's territory and choices, even though I work hard to not.

That hassock returns in another of our living rooms when I was older. Junior high. I remember entreating my folks to allow me to sit off to the side while the adults talked, instead of my playing outdoors with the one family friends who'd visited all our years, also three boys and a girl my age which in the adults' eyes made us best buddies. We were not. I remember that hassock sagging more than usual as I sunk, in that the adults weren't talking about important things anymore than my 'sort of' cousins were outside. Even back then I was wanting to 'go deep,' know how minds work.

My youngest brother was a better mind-reader than the adults as he and I would ponder whether we saw the same colors or not and *how could we ever know!* So, right about the time I was swearing off our folks as 'enlightened beings,' enter stage left another couple. It's normal of course to begin individuating as a young teen, and to attract another role model into one's world. I needed someone to interpret life itself, as beyond my role as family princess, day-to-day life threw me. Others might have seen though, the 'magical world' into which I was invited, this pair, temporary replacement for my genuinely good parents, presented themselves as so 'knowing' ... only to take advantage of my naive nature.

Since I wasn't grounded, since I was affected so by others' influence, sometimes I benefitted, as from that upperclassman in the bleachers. Other times what might have been talked through, instead stamped me in whatever form I then saw it, for life. More on that in a minute.

Because we moved so many times in my early years, I didn't have the sense of being known in the neighborhood (except for our gang when I was five). So in sixth grade, second school/town/and home, I can see in my mind even now where I stood on that broken sidewalk, two boys confronting me with: 'Are you Eskimo or what?!' I didn't know the boys. By that time I might have had bows in my hair; I would've been in a dress, pretty much like other girls. I never understood what those boys saw in me. But after the first shock of perhaps having my slightly darker skin and Scottish cheekbones being mistaken for what apparently to them was some questionable/unacceptable heritage, their mis-take has served me all through life. Because of my sensitive nature, from then on I was able to *feel* for people who were different from the norm, or rather from the privileged majority, in whatever way. Admittedly that feeling extended only through rather superficial insight, not into being able to really empathize with the cruel or deadly experiences other kids have met with. Neither did I ever get to the point of equating my being 'different' to anything internal, certainly not neurologically in the ways I do embrace my atypical self now.

I'm pretty sure though, that early taunting and my assuming I must be different from who I believed I was, did add yet another layer to my confusion in sorting out: 'What is showing?' 'What do I keep hidden?' and 'How do I hide what is absolutely important in order that I be able to function?' I already knew at some level, functioning wasn't going to include me being me.

You might be wondering what is the difference between adaptive behavior which masking provides for autistic kids and that put together by those who have experienced childhood trauma? Mind you, I am not saying I was 'a traumatized kid,' not in any way compared to what we know that children who have been physically or sexually abused have to deal with. I'm also intrigued: what about the interplay between masking one's mind's quirks to keep self-protectively hidden one's real self from over-enthused, praising, expectantious parents who have not learned to listen well or respond to what I'd think would be obvious to them?



Though I wouldn't call the string I'm about to unreel 'trauma,' (an atypical) psychologist might laugh at my insisting denial. I do know on the day of my birth and for ten days thereafter I was only allowed one morning/one evening each 15-to-20 minutes visit into my mom's arms. Somewhere I have a photo of my birth hospital in the late 1940s. Many my age will relate. More full than this depiction even, the short-staffed hospital was overwhelmed with babies; the nurses were doing their best to get round to everyone. Our ten days apart was prescribed bed rest for my mom.

Then upon our arriving 'home' (my family staying for a time with my paternal grandparents), my mom immediately came down with the flu, so my grandma who was known for her laudable care of plants (of children ... not so much) did keep my tiny body alive until Mom recovered. I wonder if that began my mom's perfectly-acceptable, given the times, skirting us to 'not be a bother' which also set the dial for keeping things pleasant for my dad, but which created two worlds. In one we *lived* with mom, in the other we cleaned up, and shushed. I may have gone about tuning to my own channel ... yay you kiddo! ... right up until I punched DJ.

Another story from Mom that's come back to me recently: I was a year and a half. My mom took my older brother and me to drop something off at a friend's. Either my young mom's rushing to get home to make Dad's lunch, or a faulty emergency brake itself ... who knows what caused our car to roll down an incline and *almost* over a 50-foot drop-off onto the highway. It's said adults don't have recall of experiences from the first few years, but I do *re-feel* my mom's shock and guilt as she turned in horror, the car sliding backwards at speed. On her face, *that look*: her children about to die! Those experiences, perhaps because of my wiring, arrested my sensitive-self development, sticking with me, and to a degree my own children, sometimes conversely, in their growing up.

Much later, of course, my longing to be seen not as I appeared in family portraits, but as I was inside, made me vulnerable too. Terribly so. I have written other places online about having been groomed by that couple in high school and molested by that my favorite teacher's husband over a two-year period. My teacher and her husband projected onto me far more charm and imagination than my locked-down self could possibly have had. For my fresh focus here on my being autistic, I want merely to point to the passageways from those relationships that keyed into my sacred inner self. My innocent self's connections to artistry and to the natural world - the very love of nature encouraged through my family's regular excursions into the outdoors - got tainted by that teacher and her husband's violations. I escaped him at graduation, but I see now how his contriving through my core preferences to art and nature *and* my being autistic, set up inhibiting evolution of my sensuality and sexuality overall, through most of my adulthood. I attribute situations I get in to difficulty understanding and interpreting others people's expressions and actions; certainly that carried to the hilt in my relations with that couple. My being woefully naive *is* a part of what comes with the territory of *my* being autistic. Unfortunately and oh so common, I carried the shame and guilt of having been in that situation, for a lifetime ...till now.

Had it been known I was autistic, would any adult have aided me with the discerning I so lacked? It doesn't help to ask questions like that, unless my posing could open the eyes of a parent these decades later, to see that a child might be sliding too close to thin ice if they're acting like something has too great an influence. Realizing how this could happen, perhaps a parent would do something to help the child put up her/his/their own guard rails so she/he/they could 'get back home' (to self) without being scathed.

The last on this string of what any psychologist might not be able to affirm in my denying there was trauma in my growing up ( ;-) big breath), I am not going into in depth as I would if in therapy; it's not mine alone to unpack. Since the experience was pivotal though, I include the part that affected me so profoundly: simply put, when I was 19 my family submitted to two counseling sessions. (Qualifier needed: my dad signed us up reluctantly: 'why would such a perfect pleasant family need it?'). And after the second session, our counseling was abruptly terminated at a time that would've been a breakthrough for me. The whys are complicated. What applies here is that, still securely masked, I never spoke up about how close I knew we were to understanding dynamics which I thought could have benefitted all of us. Instead I shut down. My inner upset was certainly normal as to me, the counselors were really 'onto something.' What wasn't so 'normal' was that afterwards my mind pulled its own plug. Soon, though I wasn't aware of any step-by-step blurring out, *I lost all memory of having grown up in my family*. Within a few short years I could not access anything of our sitting together around the table, not of my mom's and my what I know were warm often giggly talks, nothing of our family hikes and holidays, nor anything of my school years. Even those of high school which I knew had been incredibly full and one would think memorable times ~ all gone from my recall. For more than four decades ... family gatherings ... I knew those six were my family all right, beyond that - blank. Yes, I would try, but I had no recall of any conversation or camaraderie, conflict or coming home feeling. It wasn't until about 6 years ago through recollections with former high school classmates that *their* memories began loosening access to my own. Many fun times even - Girl Scout camps for instance - have returned to my consciousness. Many more are slowly coming into mind now that I'm going through this long working my way through understanding having always been autistic.

And as those early memories started to surface, I had time to reflect on the loss, especially feeling the pain my having blocked out childhood had caused my mom, her death 28 years ago. In earnest I began sorting through my past. One of my first shocks: I finally could see directly my inability to recognize faces. Though I had no inkling at the time, prosopagnosia would be my first indicator that something was 'different' in my wiring. It had never occurred to me why, if I got introduced to you in the morning and then saw you again an hour later, I wouldn't have a clue that we've just met (not unless I'd gone to lengths to mentally log 'she/he/they're wearing a grey cap, worn boots, light jeans and a blue flannel shirt,' etc.). I have adapted over the years by writing down people's names immediately following introductions, along with some distinguishing features that could spark recall. Usually it takes me coming into contact with someone several times before I'm able to know a person's face. I used to try to sidestep that 'defect.' Now I ask for help in remembering for our next meeting.

And here's the hint that finally got through to me that something was really 'wrong' with me. That's how I first saw it, as something unbelievably, disturbingly '*wrong*.' That's not how I've since learned to view the instance. Now I can admit to this with such tenderness for the dear person I have been all my life. Oh how hard it is for a self to not realize the way her/his/their mind is wired. I was set free - albeit in an incredibly painful way - from how my latching-on perceptions can lock in differently than what other people see.

So, let's start with what comes to mind, what do *you* picture when I say 'mud flats'? First, it will help you to know I live on the Pacific coast, mainland USA, and part of my growing up was near a particular mudflats connected to salt water. But in my adulthood for years and years I had been driving long hours to visit my son and family, always looking forward to the halfway mark, a wildlife preserve on a narrow strip of road abutting a wide sweep of those kind of silty flats. Sometimes water filled that area, other times there was only mud, mucky or parched, depending. The first time I noticed the differences - yes, *years* ago - my mind clicked to the many tidal regions I've known and loved, watching the ebbs and flows. The changes in this body were dramatic. My mind 'went to' the joy of all tidal activity I'd ever admired and felt drawn into.

So as I'd be coming up to that narrow strip of highway after 4 hours on the road, excitement would rise in me. I have no idea when this thought began, but I would definitely start wondering ahead of time 'if the tide was going to be in or out.' I cannot revisit this section without tears making it hard for me to type. Can you imagine the shame I felt when it first dawned on me, *after many years* ... 'wait a minute! I'm at least two hours inland from the coast, and well beyond a small coastal range. There is no tide here!' (That sentence would've reverberated within my skull, complete with expletives.) *How could that happen?* How could it be that I would not see something so discernible!

It was another good long while later but eventually *I* also *saw* a similar in-taking of something 'out there' in a way that excited me - so it clicked in - but in a way that didn't jive with what I actually could know or even wanted. In this instance, it's very possible that the way my mind processed lovelies actually cost me millions (though only in potential income, not even close to my 'actually' being able to create, considering my lack of social and networking skills of value for entrepreneurs). Years back I had jumped through all the difficult and expensive hoops to acquire a trademark, but even though the <sup>TM</sup> officer wrote pointedly asking if I wanted to trademark the word "wom" along with my "Beyond the roar," I responded 'No, thank you, I want everyone to have use of the word *wom*' which I had come up with as an alternative to my gender's identifier. (Get it? man/wom, equal and balanced. And "beyond the roar ... I am wom." (Some measure of life success: my Beyond the roar book got archived in the Kinsey Institute, for real.) Smiling irony ;-)) Humor makes this sharing barely possible. You can't imagine how many times in the subsequent 10 years I put myself down for not seeing: leaving the word public at that point only made it available *for someone else to trademark*. ... Which is of course what happened, along with my receiving an L.A. attorney's notice to cease and desist selling my own 'wom' T-shirts.



Even now for just a second I am loathe to admit that perceptive failure that led me to such business flop, but self-hatred's finally fleeting and quickly shifts to knowing: this now-recognized tendency in me does not discount nor take away from my skills even now in my 70s, researching and writing (about government and politics for instance). More along these lines in my reframing life as an autistic, Part Two.

It's taken me a lot of wearing years - finally to the bottom drawer - of using up the 300 shirts I had printed. Sheesh. ;-)

What did it feel like to first have those hints that my mind is wired atypically? You'll forgive me in a best-try image. I don't mean any disrespect to those who have less than 2 legs; this is the closest I could come. It would be as if I had been going through life believing I have two legs, trying to do everything. For some things like writing, my delusion would've been a non-issue (mostly), but in so many other ways I would've kept coming up short and had no idea why. Then one day, into my 7th decade, on an obscure side path I had taken only to compensate for some apparent but confusing lack in perceptions, I suddenly noticed that I have but one leg. I don't mean this in a disabled way. Just that -- *no wonder* I've had a hard time of it! If I'd known, I could have gotten a prosthetic limb, or used crutches at least, as needed. I could have made my own accommodations, taken rests, and for some situations, asked for a little understanding.

It doesn't make much neurotypical sense that growing up I could be so devoted to Abraham Lincoln whose birthday and characteristics of honesty, truth-seeking, and forthrightness (while appreciating complexities) I share, while at the same time be so naive. In Part Two I may sort that ... or not. ;-)

Well, this sure shines a beam on the amount of 'emotional courage,' as I am beholden to Brené Brown for having dubbed it, that it took me to begin treating my autistic self with the understanding I've needed all my life.



# I am Autistic, Part Two

## Lights Come On, Life Looks Different

by E. Sandy Powell, aka Sparky

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Owning the good stuff, living with 'I'm on the spectrum' more fully at age 73

Once I put aside the priority I'd set in recent years, of coming to grips with all that added up to who I was, then I started contemplating: what could I make of the rest of my life? Even considering these new insights into my mind's workings, I knew I had adequate enough intellect. I also knew much of my life I'd been baffled internally, and misunderstood 'out there,' my most precious parts regularly disregarded. But I didn't think I lacked all ability to use my smarts. And I wasn't worried over my mystifying aspects coming to light or that I might be prime for even more puzzling-to-me mental 'disorder.' Thankfully, as my 'I am autistic' recognition set in, I could and did start seeing more of the bright sides of - unexpectedly - my own growing up and especially of my years raising my kids. Things were making more sense. If, like me, you have undervalued, even undone whole aspects of your life such as your entire artistic or in other ways uniquely personal accomplishments, I would like to assert here, for us, all that is worth a reframing. And as long as I'm doing this reframing I want to be sure I get it right, not 'right' as a standard, not even for other autistics, but right for me, for how I continue my life: I wrote and published as I did, not with '*and* as an autistic' (as if that might add shimmer to my gray), but rather *because I'm autistic*.

What I have done has come from the autistic I am. *So*, having at it: a fresh look at the contributions that I had always thought my life would include, now viewed quite the opposite of the failures I had believed them to be. Same 25-year writing life, different way of seeing. My writing was almost like another character in my life-becoming as it helped me, inch by inch (measured in book spines) come from deep within to get to the backside and finally open that seriously rusted-shut door to be able to bring my inner self out into the light. I would like to show you how the succession of what I wrote brought me to where I am now. If I had worked all these years in some medium other than words, I believe my recognition could be followed with trail markers along those paths as well. I am giving my 25+ writing years their due, and through doing, I am also honoring, if this fits, all that has been in you and not seen/heard fully yet.

Because I am remembering more, I can now crawl inside how good Mom and I felt that my *Geranium Morning*, put out by a medium-sized Upper Midwest publisher, was one of the first to be used in family bereavement centers across the country. Mom also cradled, as our hearts filled, the notice I received regarding recognition for *Daisy*, a book for children who are abused, next in Lerner's Contemporary Concerns Series. *Daisy* was chosen by the National Council for the Social Studies and the Children's Book Council. And the following year my book *A Chance to Grow* on a family who is homeless was used in Oregon as a training tool for adults heading to the front lines. Unfortunately, that series folded just as *Daisy* was released, even before my third in the series came out. Very nearly no one had a chance to use the book the NCSS/CBC valued. More than 'I had felt' ... in reality without any publisher's marketing, those two books' existence had been nullified. I did land a few book contracts after that, but none as satisfying as those three along with my first book before them, *Heart to Heart Caregiving*. Eventually, hopes high, I switched to self-publishing. Anyone besides the person I was then might have advised me otherwise *as my nature is not well-suited to being overlooked*, which I would be without well-executed marketing and that wasn't something I could effect. However, *I did* write and publish seven more books of which I am unequivocally proud. You see how I have started believing those weren't merely failures after all.

I wrote *Alone and Gutsy, at 58*. As a high schooler I could not even put a title on a paper I turned in, had to have a friend pen it for me, so I was especially proud of the cover *I designed* for this autobiographical novel in which I wrote an unaccomplished author out of her agony, and her aloneness. ;-) Surprisingly, released of my own self-torture, I kept writing ... and finally finished, including my painted portions of the illustrations and another cover design, *Hope for Our World*, which I considered then and still may be my magnum opus, having taken 36 years to complete. (Bonus: the other-worldly story of how the artist who became dear friend, Алена Распопова in Ukraine and I were drawn to each other is on my website. It's worth a read!) Then I thought for sure, Earth-Sister-of-the-Skye would help restore our planet. ;-) Ha! Let's not bother with how many copies I sold. 9

Our local Library Board Chair liked *This Day*, the fiction I'd put out honoring religious diversity, written for middle elementary ages. *This Day* with my inclusion of children of lesser-known faiths, as well as recognition of agnostics, came about because an author friend, knowing my track record getting contracts on contemporary themes, had challenged me to write about religious intolerance. (I like how, with tenderness, I shifted focus from *intolerance* to *honoring our differences*. ;-)) which allowed me to write the story, then share the book with interdenominational leaders.

So when the head of the library board asked me to write on mental illness ... well, I said 'no way!' just as I had at first to my friend's earlier request on intolerance. But ... my actual autistic mind went on its zippy-do trippin' and *I got drawn in*, my interest brewing around mental *differences* instead. I knew I wasn't going to dip deep into the topic of mental illness, but I also knew there was something about being misperceived as mentally ill or 'imbecilic' that I wanted to explore. In retrospect it was likely my fear of that common misdiagnosing beginning to surface. (This was, by the way, well before I had my 'ah ha' over 'no tides in the interior.')

The timing was such too that I had the oddly (oinked ;-)) inspiration from another author (of *Swine Not!*) for me to just have a lark and try my hand at adult fiction, a feel-good series that I wasn't finding through interlibrary loans for my own reading delight. So I set about inviting into my life the characters who revolved around an older woman and her singular home on a coast like mine. (Most people would say I was 'creating them' ... but I'm very clear, my experience with this bunch was definitely 'getting to know.')

Two of the characters embodied the idiosyncrasies I was letting emerge from within me ... but while I was writing the series, the link with my personal identity stayed shielded beyond my awareness. A good thing too as I wouldn't have been able to spend those four years writing *through the lane to St. Anne ... Book One* through *Book Four* if I'd let myself see there was anything intimately me in their story. The offbeat selfie dance videos I started to indulge in during that time also ~ "Happy," "Living in the Moment" and "What a Feeling!" ~ *show* how it was *for me* to live in a world, with a group of people whose interactions made sense to me. Including a world where the characters Lorena and Chet were as much a part of and cared for as anyone else. And oh for the bouncing and flapping in those selfie dances!

In the 4-book series, Celeste has taken her closest friend's grown daughter under her wing. Celeste's way of embracing Lorena, creating a world in which Lorena and her friend Chet could be themselves, stayed utterly devoid of labels. Lorena and Chet were simply and wholly accepted in the group of people who orbit Celeste. Through the course of the series it becomes known that the child born to Lorena also has a physical condition that might in yet another way set her apart. Lorena is adamant, I mean 'wild mama' ferocious in protecting Aggie from tests that might bring life-altering focus on her differentness. To Lorena, Aggie is who she is, and as her mother Lorena would stand up for Aggie in knowing she was just fine exactly as she was.

The reality though, 'back in the world' ... these four books ended up attracting few readers (at that point ;-), even close to home for the most part. So once again, I let those triggers that go off in me wrench at my heart. It was, however, *through giving life to those characters whom I grew to love so, and standing by them when few others would, that I could open to and love the atypical, autistic I am* yet didn't yet know I was. That's a pretty sweet story, I think!

Then, even *because of* some physical challenges I was creating in *letting myself also feel* the sadness and aloneness I'd made for myself through disappointment over what *felt like* disregard, came the beginnings of my investigating mind/body connections. The more I learned about the brain, the more open I became to those random incomings that proved so critical to my ultimate recognition of my full ID ...

There it was, and at that point I still hadn't seen it: my own *not needing fixing*. Which leads me to what a blessing it was for me that the knowledge that came nationally/internationally about autism didn't reach my world while I was growing up. Had my autism been spotted by a teacher, my family's response would've been denial. No, 'no one in *our* family could possibly be autistic!' If pressed, their natural reliance on traditional medical professionals surely would've branded mine a 'disorder,' one they would've needed to 'treat.' Or I might have been accepted as proudly 'high functioning' and made to hold the burden of that expectation too. (Even nominal researching now shows there is no such thing as high and low functioning; an apparently 'high functioning' person can

Once I'd glimpsed a sliver of a possibility that there was something in my mental makeup that was behind all these connecting bits and pieces, slowly I began to notice articles about people with Aspergers. After I'd finished my adult fiction series, I started moving and being a little more in touch with the *unconstricted* body I'd been as two-to-five-year-old me. As I remembered more of my growing up, regrets weren't far off about how my unrecognized autism had played into single parenting my three children for those 27 years. I always led my resumés with "proud and happy single mom" which was true. *I was*, wildly happy being their mom, but it was, also wildly, much more complicated than that.

have to painfully maintain the mask, leading to even harder periods of 'losing it.') Masking my differences? I'd say that was pretty darn smart of me! Who knows how unretrievable my self would've become if I had let *her* out to the disregard of others.



Ah! Doesn't it look like that foot wants to move!

As I started 'to see' some of the spectrum, I got hooked on "Parenthood," a TV series new to me (since I choose to not own a TV). I watched archived episode after episode, taken in by the youngest boy who was autistic, but also because of the kind of openness, with feelings and life-story admissions that went on in those grown kids' lives, so opposite from my own family of origin, and to a fair degree missing in how I had raised my kids. Eventually I got to Season 4 when one of the adults discovers he's on the spectrum alongside the boy. I *loved* how the writers/director and cast had fashioned that adult autistic character! (Yet his portrayal only mirroring *to a point*, as I had a good twenty years on the single dad Hank.)

Sorry for the show-spoiler Through watching 'Hank's' coming to terms and self-acceptance, along with reading a ton and watching video documentaries featuring autistic individuals, I really got to wondering about myself: 'Hmm, maybe I should take a test, see where I land.' I got up my nerve/did/scored 43. Not long after, I took a different test, 43 again. This might be new to you as it was to me: according to "Interpreting AQ Test (Autism Spectrum Quotient) Results: 32-50 indicates a strong likelihood of Asperger syndrome or autism." I was getting more than a little antsy. I had this belief that it would be better for some in my immediate family if we could be assured that I simply had a mishmash of history I was working through, and *not* that at 72 I was finding out I'm autistic. So I located 'the master test' Psychologist Simon Baron-Cohen had designed: an AQ, with more categories, more variance allowed in the answering than in the shorter tests I had taken. I was careful, answering honestly as my autistic self always must (honesty-to-a-fault, one more indicator I'm on the spectrum), being sure I didn't try to weight the outcome either direction. Dang if I didn't come out a 44.

And that's when I gave up and decided ... well at that point I was only *beginning to accept* yet not very long later, come to revel in the autistic me I am. *Sometimes*. ;-) I talked with each of my adult kids pretty early on in my discovery. I'd been so concerned, not wanting to add to the challenges I knew they had growing up with me as their mom. Wouldn't I just make it worse and would my family believe me anyway? After all these years of being misperceived, misunderstood, and even mocked some, did I want to avail myself to this exposure too? Oddly to me, my kids all had figured this out a while back. Don't know why I should be surprised: I am so often the last to 'get something,' though in this case, it was no joke. None of us understood much about being autistic when I had the talk with each of them, but I did feel their support and openness to hear more.

Because I hadn't chosen a career that matched my skillset or at least with skills I might possibly develop, I had always been on the scrappy end of providing for my kids and me. In that context, I would often meet up with what I saw as inequities. It wouldn't make sense to me why, when what we needed was right next to a sale item in jumbo size for instance, and I could only afford the regular. 'How come we couldn't get a break too!' It strikes me now as having been so unnecessary that I suffered any additional anguish in the supermarket. I think I met on that inner battlefield for much of my kids' growing up, skirmishing *internally* without seeing clearly the unique qualities in me on which I might've actually capitalized, to our benefit.

As it was, I'd listened, at a particularly vulnerable time in my 20s, to advice that didn't see *me* in any meaningful way. All that was noticed was the surface: 'She's so good with kids, she should go into teaching.' I *was* good with kids, mostly one-on-one, especially those having a hard time. *And* that only got me in trouble, all through my lame-ass teaching career. I was always wanting to help spring kids free ;-). Running my own home child caregiving business for five years, was the place *I fit* in the field of education. (Oh did I love and understand those 'troublesome twos.' ;-). From 7 AM to 4 PM, I had 6 kids ages five and under in my care. I played to my strengths, actualizing everything I knew and understood about children, following my instincts. We did alllll sorts of messy projects and pretend and outings, and the simplest of play that let them be ... kids. Indulge me as I note too, my older two were young teens through that golden era of my youngest's early days, so add one iteration of that after another, like carting my little one with me into the evenings, getting my oldest daughter to and from play practice, and watching my son over at the bike shed then taking him some weekends to his freestyle bike competitions.

I'd like to linger over JOBS here because I have come to believe this may be the most important area of support for someone who is autistic: to genuinely help figure out what work is suited for that individual, not for autistics in general (as we're all different), but for a person in particular. For instance, with a more expanded version of my being able to zoom in and give my all to something/someone, that 'latching on' quality also made me very good at some jobs, like working in all aspects of the fish cannery in my youth, especially the egg house where my bosses were men from Japan who spoke virtually no English. They demonstrated. I copied. Since I didn't have to read their expressions, other than seeing their nodding pleasure in my ability to do one task, laying those roe just the way they wanted, over and again, with speed, their appreciation came across loud and clear.

Well after my kids were on their own, I did walk right off the street into another job in which I excelled, one with similar repetitive tasks, long hours, no interruptions, a job that gave me this learned-late insight into my being really well suited for some kinds of work. It was a summer of emergency. The Buying Team leader took a risk in hiring me; seeing I was a willing nose-down worker, she soon had me managing all data entries of the (west side) Biscuit Fire, millions and millions of dollars in total. This type of focused repetitive work would've been a better match for me than the traditionally scripted teaching path I'd taken, which was a good fit in terms of my volumes of thought about 'what's good for kids' 'how people learn,' yet a lousy choice when considering how I would do in a tightly structured environment which might be at odds with what particular kids need. I was in some cases not hired back, in another traumatic instance fired from teaching a class I loved. I never worked in a long-standing full-time position in any schools, so that misplacement also earned me a pitiful income, both then and now. With the Buying Team, I could do that one-on-one well, in fact I became the Buying Team Leader's 'one' right hand, even seeing patterns ahead so that supplies or crews sometimes got diverted just in time on my recommendation. I was not, I'll admit, appreciated by all of the over-stressed Buyers. Same was true in the fish cannery, my high energy setting too high a standard which the longtime old timers knew could not be sustained, not by them. I didn't see how a person like me could work *too hard* to get along within a crew. Who knows, I might've been a good accountant. Filling in numbers; advising about abiding by the law. Perfect! I'm okay that this awareness is late ... for me. Maybe you or someone you know is going to fare better.

In my life, what's changed? What's different now that I know? And how am I moving forward, at 73?

**Shame has lifted.**

**And I don't apologize for how I'm wired.**

I am ever so grateful to have come in contact with those who are sharing how it is to be on the spectrum. Though I want to/and have begun being able to apologize if/when my actions hurt someone, trying to tune to how a situation was for the other person. (I'm working on this anyway.) I no longer *torture myself* with all the things I've wished I would've or could've done differently. (Mostly. I don't replay them into the ground. ;-). And, there are infinite small things I now understand. Like not being able to wear tight clothing. Oh my mix of emotions in not wearing a bra, for instance! That's always been because of my wiring, not because I'm being difficult or purposely embarrassing, or some other "F" assumption\* I imagine has been made. (\*I meant feminist there ;-)

Letting myself off the hook, at least somewhat, has allowed me to see, value and applaud more of what and how *I have been*. One thing I did well was listen to and encourage my kids' special interests as they were growing up - the three being so different from each other. And always always I believed in and stood by them through their school years. Not being quite as hard on myself has also allowed more of the really delightful times to come back into our family memory, and *I'm* more able to enjoy the good I gave and was for them too. I am outsizably happy that each of my kids has married, dear dear people to me and loves for them, and as couples they're raising my grandchildren, in different ways, yes - in ways that are best for their families. Plus, we're all in touch, including scribing our family circle more widely as fits ours. Now that's saying a lot 'these days.'

However, I'm not about to gloss over or secret away all that was/*is me* anymore. Imagine what happens when more than one trigger are set off simultaneously. It simply *takes me* longer to release myself from the throes of the emotions on fire. (This would've been helpful information to have back in my single-parenting years. I could've/would've known more about my need to step back, take time to process what's going on internally *before* responding.) I do still get caught in this reactionary trap.

I'm getting better at realizing what's going on in me. But honestly, sometimes in the last six months, when that reactive - defenses up! - hits, I've had a *harder* time and sadly failed at stepping back/taking the distance, simply

because I'm so much more involved in this self-discovery stage. I like looking at how 'this affects that.' Flipping full permission 'on' at my main breaker box, not needing to keep in the dark anymore, can also bring about unexpected bursts that may cause circuit failure. I had one just the other day at the grocery store, trying to get my cartfull through the self-checkout stand, a line forming behind me, the voice on the machine repeating after every pause (from my not seeing clearly what with my COVID-19 protective gear). I hit zero-holding-back when after about the sixth automaton message 'if you're done with your purchases, proceed to pay options' -- I leaned over and yelled out loud in the machine's face: "I will let you know when I'm done! Stop badgering me!" *And* I loved that I felt no need to look around, note reactions. For maybe the first time in my adult life, I let myself be wholly autistically unmasked melting down! I don't know if I've felt that good since way back when I punched DJ.



During the coronavirus cautions?  
Yep, I went out with a cake cover  
on my head, a sign on the back  
"I thought you'all might be ready  
for a laugh. Feel free!"

**All the trying, gone.**

... No, not gone, just much much less.

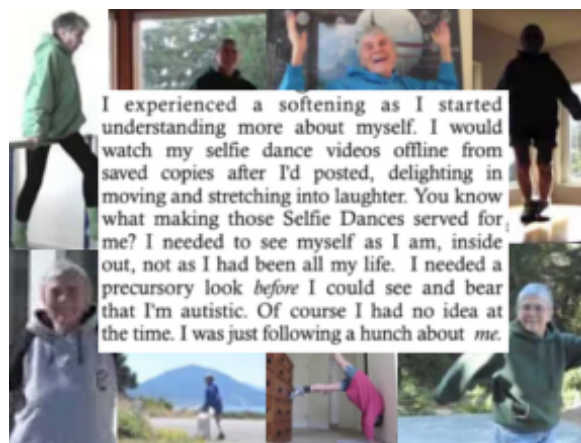
As I've been writing 'what it's like to have found out I'm autistic at 72' I am mellowing - in a deep appreciation of myself and others too. For decades I had muddied the waters in relationships, especially those most dear to me by focusing on the unsettling aspects of myself as a mom without knowing what was behind my cover, anxious a lot of the time, not able to 'read' people, sensitive, over-sensitive, feeling unappreciated, leaning emotionally on my kids rather than being able to create a network of adult support for myself. Now, all of that I understand as part of the package that I was. And still am (messing up lots of the time). Yet what I was and always have been is really really good at being a mom, a gram/an understanding grandma, when I was/am in my safe place internally, and calm enough on the outside. Now I see who I fully was, how I botched things, and what I *did* accomplish. Even with all the failed and even hurtful aspects of some/maybe much of my parenting, I'm not sure, I really truly did single parent my three kids into their own happy and married adulthoods with kids of their own, me *single-parenting, all the while never knowing I am autistic. Dang.* ;-) Self-hug!

I can now look at the whole of who I was and am letting myself be who I am, mostly without the masking (not to be confused with the COVID-19 awareness protective face gear I do wear, with gladness). Though I still experience stunning spaces, when something I've missed gets in the way of my communicating, I'm more forgiving of those gaps. My 'coming out' so to speak, getting to value my quirks more, has also allowed more cognitive functioning than I was ever able to access. (Ain't it hard to think though with that clamp so tight on one's head!) In the recent ten years and especially in the last couple, I have been able to research, assimilate and then articulate in writing, and just lately in speech, my often unique sense of a phenomenon, a national event, or the like. My speaking up now and feeling confident in discerning facts, while staying somewhat light, trying to stay kind, unexaggerated, always honest ... I'm proud of my progressions. I feel so much less defensive so I'm getting practice in putting myself out there and not minding when others disagree. In fact, I welcome discussions - I've always been hungry for verbal interchange - though I no longer abide any name-calling nor generalizing through labeling whole groups of people. It's been exciting times to have my mind working well.

*And* to be so wholly loving when my triggers from old or my quirks do sometimes call for attention. Here's a for instance: *just this morning* I finally 'get' why it bothers me soooo much, when people say they care or indicate in various ways that they're so upset about an injustice, but they DO nothing, or they seem to me to not even be looking for the ways that they could do something, even something that meshes well with their particular styles and beliefs. This is directly related to an aspect of my autistic nature: I cannot abide things being said they're one way when clearly clearly I see they are not. Platitudinal pleasantries gauzing across what someone really thinks or feels. This natural autistic bent has been exacerbated, having been cut off as I see now in revelations of my family-of-origin. On the one hand, we were presented as 'the perfect family' but what I saw, as do most young

adults, was a family dysfunctional as hell. (It would've been better for me if we'd just acknowledged we had a lot of problems. And maybe laughed about them.) I love all of me now whatever the insights, spot on or 'off base.' And I do so much more to honor my perceptions, while, I hope, learning how to be kind to those who 'plug me in' or who see things differently. (Still working on this! ;-)) Though my life, and I hope relations, are on the upswing, I don't want to forget, for several months after my 'on the spectrum' test, I did stop doing any writing/dance (almost), and still haven't picked up and carried on with my drawing *because* of discovering the inner part of me - the part just like wearing the shell on this outside - if I carried on while being conscious of being autistic, I would be letting others see me, no longer masked. Terrifying to be myself, write/dance/draw with consciousness. ;-)

It was quite one thing to make selfie dance videos just because I wanted to. Just because I was allowing myself to Move and Be 'Free to Be Me' in ways I never had, simply enjoying the heck out of it. But to do so, to carry on with my work, basically without much of a cheering section, while knowing I am an artist who is autistic. Goodness. *Oh Sophia!* How can I? ... How can I not.



I'm finally able to look at the specifics of my nature and not see them as negatives. They are indicators of how my mind is wired and how that translates into interacting with others and in the world. Much of my growing up and even parenting histories might not look that out of the norm. But for one who has masked her autistic self all her life, more peeling back is necessary to really get the picture.

That is likely yet to come, in the living.



And sure enough, as I finished this section, a flood of new insights come tumbling in. Two seem worth including, in case anyone is experiencing a similar processing this late in life. Gentle on, eh:

At about six months, I'd be writing a word, either typing or writing longhand, and I'd find a couple of the letters came out out of order. It's most disconcerting with handwriting. How does my mind do that? Try to handwrite speedily in cursive and mix up *teh letters*! I have a theory: since I did complete this article and had reached out to a clinical psychologist for signposts toward publication, as well as sharing with my first two readers, i.e., I had crossed into 'I am out there now' ... internally I was beyond the shock, more or less [still a year later ... *more like less!*] somewhat on into 'How will I be now?' What will I let out if I no longer mask autistic me? This mis-ordering of letters as I write seems to me a neurological safety valve. A letting off sparks in my wiring. For so many years/decades, I kept a lid on who I was, and for my own protection I kept awareness of that masking from myself as well. In the past year I've been lifting that lid, peeking in at the corners, lifting my cover so to speak. And that is causing a bit of transmission confusion. Whew, this is good, writing out so often brings insight. Right now I feel less inclined to be alarmed at 'what's going on in my brain?' and more thankful that my body/brain/mind is doing so well. I was allowing little spits and spurts in short-circuiting to go off as I move forward, in order to not short-circuit altogether from this wonder-filled awareness of my core ID.

It's no surprise that the area of adjustment in which I'm most eager to see self-improvement, the one that I care about most, relating to my family and friends, is the one in which I am needing to give myself, and hopefully be accepted through, the most time. Not long ago I was blown away by how easy it was to get help on a business call. When I began the conversation with the customer service rep who was ready to answer my list of questions, I quickly explained I've recently learned I'm autistic and that is causing a bit of mix-up in my mind. The customer rep was so gracious and receptive; she understood I wasn't being difficult if/when I had to ask her to repeat her answer a couple of times; I just needed a little help.

With family especially, it may take a while. I want to be able to press pause and wait until I'm in a clear state, if I've had something triggered in me. If/when I still don't, I know only too well, my listening will be full of static and any request is going to come across as emotional wangling. My kids are right; I often used that 'guilting them' when I'd feel in too tight a spot and I really really *knew* I needed something. My simple asking would've seemed to me like I was being a bother though. I want to learn how to say what I need with people close to me, as I did with the customer service rep, in a way that allows for those I care about to assist if they can *but also so they are free to decline, feel they can* let me in on what's going on for them too. I am blessed to have family who do care and believe the working through is worth it. I do think it's going to get easier. I hope. Some days I do still despair over my abilities. But I can't expect to shake off a lifetime of anxious habitual responses in one year ... not 2020 anyway!

Okay, wasn't I heading forward?! I'm ready for some final fun here, (leaving aside parallel construction which I do truly ordinarily love ;-), I'm going to switch gears into a letting fire, free flowing incomplete listing of indicators that *I* am autistic. My list only lines up, in parts with those it does, certainly not any comprehensive list of what it's like to be autistic. Ha! There is none! ;-)

~ I'm often not able to tell what someone means.

~ And to figure out what someone means by means of an emoticon? Ha! I cannot tell you what any of those emoji expressions are saying. I might get 2% of them right. And then I'm only mad guessing. ;-)

~ small talk, casual talk unless I've practiced it, as with what works okay with neighbors I see out walking They get the thinnest sliver of who I am, and vice versa, too, because I am absolutely horrible at helping a light conversation along. What I'm more likely to do is dive us so deep that the person on the other side of what might've been a conversation has to find some way to bail. 'Wait!' I almost hear them saying after my blunder, 'I don't have time or interest to examine *all that* with you.'

~ My all-time worst experiences of being on the spectrum was the best and worst in one. The unconscious, at times very conscious 'latching on.' (That may not have made sense. I'm not sure it did to me.)

~ honesty to a fault

~ seeing details

~ valuing integrity

~ intense concern regarding justice/equality, needing *to do* to help right wrongs, as now regarding racial injustice

~ anxiousness until I make a plan (over and over again, with each new thing that comes up or comes into my mind)

~ impossibility of being in new social situations = painful; 'old' social settings too = often painful ;-)  
I can get shaky just getting ready to go to the store ... and that was before the pandemic!

~ even managing light greetings with ease (even if I've accessed some social grace, inside I'll be churning)

~ sensitivity to noise (fans going stir me up, even the kind in the fridge or above the stove; music playing - I get wired!)

~ I absolutely cannot stand classical music (*I know*, I 'should' feel bad about that - Ha! *Now* I don't feel a n y apology for letting others play the classical channels and me staying faarr away!!)

~ sensitivity to smells - It's taken me a long time to be able to ask to not be hugged when people are wearing scents like perfume or aftershave or certain essential oils ... I will feel as if I'm being slimed and I almost always have to take a shower immediately after if I don't communicate my need to keep a physical space soon enough.

Some things I have learned to put in the 'I'll never understand this' box and move on.

~ I will spend hours of my time reading or listening to what someone else has written or done. It's impossible for me to understand when others don't give me that interest in return. ;-)

~ Still I can get a charge from things I have put in the box! And I have to start over with a **bigger box**. ;-)

~ never completely getting what I mean out the first time, so I'm known for my PS's to emails or conversations Sometimes I'll return days later to straighten out something I've said or how someone has taken what I've said differently than what I meant; I will bother myself inordinately if I don't attempt to straighten things.

~ following the rules, obeying the law and finding it nearly intolerable when others don't ... not nearly, *actually*

~ *bothered when people generalize about people/groups, feeling a need to defend those generalized about*

~ I'll be the last one to get a joke.

~ not recognizing sarcasm, and when I eventually do, whether it's directed towards me or others, sarcasm seems/feels cruel

~ loving numbers (Someday someone is going to mention to me their delight in Chet's sharing 'time' with Lorena ... and then loll with me through that I had to write four books in my series to honor up the two of them ;-)

and their fun over time. Four books, mind you, no more. And next time you see your phone lit up at 12:34 know that if I've seen too I will be Celeste-like shouting out 1 2 3 4 ! for dear Chet and Lorena.)

~ ability to wear the same clothes, nothing adorned nor with mixed colors

~ inability to blend smoothly into a group discussion or messaging group chat

~ processing things at my own speed, sometimes making all kinds of connections at once, other times taking a long long time to sort through something

~ complete inability to summarize a book, a movie, a conversation

~ related: inability to define a word, which means I'm horrible at crossword puzzles, even though I LOVE WORDS

~ not understanding abbreviations; I had to look up ASD for this article. ;-)

~ I make jokes to myself, constantly, often in my fiction series, which no one else seems to get, and sometimes it bothers me ... that once or twice it would be so nice to hear a 'That cracked me up.' or 'Did you mean that as double entendre?' (Ha! No, triple.) (Grammarians, don't get all in a twit! *I know.*)

~ inability to meet someone new and know how to not dead-end a conversation

~ I know adults who can't go through one nonsensical made-up game with young ones; I can marathon in silliness ... sometimes in my mind just with myself. ;-)

~ I can also listen to little ones' earliest chatter, usually understand before others do; or sit with a three-year-old, for example, just sit while she draws or colors or Legos, no need to say a word, long stretches no words, but know we are supremely together, even when it's on Skype for an hour and a half straight.

~ inability to make decisions (If anybody cares, I can recall Mom and I standing in a Safeway checkout line. Mom was kind and patient, generally speaking. I can remember her exasperation with me though when, *as a teenager* I could not decide whether I would be happier during our Disney special TV night if I picked the Nibs for my one candy treat, or the Good 'n Plenty. I REALLY could not decide. How was it that neither of us thought to buy two and split the small box and bag in half for the following week. My mind knows accommodating now. ;-)

~ ease and ability to sit and email 57+ senators in one sitting, many many many days in recent years

~ difficulty in not keeping irritation to myself when others applaud my efforts but *seem* to do nothing themselves

~ fascination with numbers/counting (*had* to pogo stick to 100); even slicing cheese, I count the slices onto the cutting board, not out loud, in my head; or I count the 4 steps from one level to another in this house (I almost never don't count 1, 2, 3, 4). (I don't mind double negatives, especially with numbers ;-)

I count when I'm most comfortable with myself. I let myself count. (Hmm, new thought: I'll bet that's a kind of stimming.) I love numbers.

~ My mind (silently) whirrs as with the overlays in *Stranger than Fiction* or *The Good Doctor*. Mine are instances that get connected in a web going back decades and sometimes into possible futures based on summations from past experiences all in clickety click ticker tape like old computer clicking feedout in something like words only not ... from my mind.

~ OCD-like lining up pencils is no way *the indicator* of my being autistic. Yet I feel that proclivity in satisfaction, emphasis on *feel*, in color-coding my shirts onto same-color hangers might be considered peculiar, *or* the back-and-forth wonderings if I left my one pink hanger at my daughter's, prized hanger I used to own that matched my one pink shirt. The obsessivenesses, a shade of the 'latching on' *is* an indicator. None of those would mean I'm autistic, but one might look for the line-up. (Yeah, that was a joke.) It's not uncommon, for instance, for me to have to drive back up the hill to be sure I closed the garage door ... more than one time on my way out of town. (I really *do try* to pay attention, but I also sometimes have to include proofs to myself that all's clear. ... Never mind! Too much explaining - welcome to my mind!)

~ Patterns can bother me. If I'm needing calming, I notice I prefer things that are smoothed out. Colors. Patterns. Harmonies. I used to be able to wear my hipster underwear with the diagonal pattern on good days, but since the COVID-19 hit, those are just too jangling, too much a match to the upsetting news. And I find this hilarious - this morning I am at the back of that drawer, needing to wear just that pair as I've put off doing wash, and I see, omgosh, those lines *aren't diagonal*, it's the juxtaposition of shading that makes the pattern jump. Like strobe lights in a bowling alley.



~ In other instances, I do see things some people don't see. Like spotting an owl pellet on a fencepost (even when we rarely have an owl near, so I wouldn't have been looking for it). Others pass by nature notes that I savor.

~ A part of my autism is still having a hard time when I experience the triggers set off in me from early in life.

It might be helpful if I could with more precision detail how I am coping better, integrating all this better. Ha! I'm going to use this last moment here to say from my giggly inner little girl self: Nope! Not gonna happen! Not right now. My experience, updated to the moment of sharing this writing, it may only be in the 'coming out' now that I finally am able to move beyond the shock. I realize I've left out a whole lot of how hard it's been to keep all this mostly to myself. 2020 has been quite a year all right!

Through all though, I sure am happy to be me. I'm so glad to know I'm autistic! And *that*, my friends and family, is 'quite enough.' (Ha ha! If you don't recognize the turn of phrase, yes, two words there were directly Mary Poppins, credit to -dare I call her a kindred spirit- Pamela Travers, though I cannot this moment put a hand on my copy to know if those were her words originally. Yup. Stuff like that tickles me - being sure I never ever, if I'm aware, slight the likes of a P.L. Travers - and calls for me to give regard. ;-) ESP

If you're interested in more about my work:

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(with individual book links to amazon, or youtube if you're inclined to laugh *with me* in dance)

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