

The Soul of Autism

A Book by Bill Stillman

Chapter 1

The World Needs Autism

“With one in 166 children being diagnosed with autism, it can no longer be called rare. We have an epidemic on our hands. Every 16 minutes, another child is diagnosed with autism.”
—Julie Krasnow, *Indianapolis Star*

The world needs autism. Of this, I am convinced. The world needs autism *now* more than ever. Don't believe me? Look around...look closely and carefully. Contemplate a global awareness. Consider the call to action we've received in recent times by way of grand-scale, devastating natural disasters and international terrorist attacks, which drastically spiked an online "rapture" index, a Christian speedometer that measures how quickly the world is careening toward the day of reckoning. Popular culture has relaxed ethical conduct so much that films and television programming have desensitized us to sex, violence, and abusive language to the point where there is no more room to push the proverbial envelope. Motion pictures such as *Saw* and its sequels, *Wolfcreek*, *The Devil's Rejects*, *Turistas*, and *Hostel* have given rise to a pornographic franchise: human beings mutilating other human beings with sadistic ardor in gratuitous, graphic depictions of torture. Witness, too, the celebrity behavior we have come to condone as acceptable due to "wardrobe malfunctions," racial rants, and sordid misconduct. Although this book was written during wartime, it is the irresponsible misbehavior of certain public figures that made top news. There is vague accountability and fewer repercussions in consequence for one's misdeeds, which may, in fact, be rewarded post "rehab." Further, the premise of most reality television is predicated upon lust, greed, manipulation, deceit, and the endeavor for physical beauty at all costs. Such cultural poison has anesthetized us to our own humanity.

Think people don't emulate what they see? A recent Associated Press article speculates there's an astounding drop in social etiquette—rudeness and amorality is on the rise. Corporate corruption has fostered employee disloyalty. E-mail has taken passive-aggressive interactions to new heights. The 2006 National Violent Crime Summit concluded that "crime is coming back" in a big way. *USA Today* recently cited an FBI estimate for a 94 percent increase in hate-crime attacks against persons with developmental disabilities. "Road rage" reports are a daily occurrence. "Happy slapping" has become the latest craze: someone physically accosts an unsuspecting victim while another perpetrator records the assault with a camera phone, and posts the attack online for all to see. Internet child sex predators are rampant, and child pornography has become more brutal, with the number of images depicting violent abuse rising fourfold since 2003. Americans are insulated with artificial complacency from heinous international human-rights violations perpetrated by megalomaniac dictators. Instead, self-absorbed and selfish behavior without consideration of others has become the norm, it would seem. A "messiah complex" has emerged; we have become a narcissistic society bent on gratifying our own needs because "it's all about me."

Violators of this pursuit are perceived as rivals. *And it's autistics that, clinically, are defined, in part, as lacking empathy and social reciprocity!*

In early 2007, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention revised its autism statistics from the previous tally of 1 in every 166 children (which excludes countless untabulated adults), now suggesting that the national figures are closer to 1 in every 150. But perhaps the reverse statistic signifies the greater epidemic: of every 150 individuals, 149 are “normal” or *neuro-typical!* We so dearly need people with autism and other differences—in their mild, unaffected manner—to lend balance to the world, and refocus us on what’s truly important. Perhaps this principle resonates most with parents who have been obliged to undergo a personal transformation as a result of their child’s diagnosis—parents who otherwise may have succumbed to the messiah complex. One mother confessed, “I think [autism] has humbled me. I think I’m a pretty good parent, and I can do that sort of stuff well; but with autism, that ego is taken down a few pegs. I think it has helped me be more accepting of people with disabilities. Not that I was a complete anti-handicapped person before, but now I think more in terms of what people can do.”

Dwindling are the days of parental shame and selfdeprecating guilt, as underscored by the mother who wrote, “Autism for me was a challenge not a defeat.” A new evolution is compelling parents to reenvision their lives, to see clearly their own transcendence, and to hold greater hope for the future. This is supported by research such as the “Qualitative Investigation of Changes in the Belief Systems of Families of Children with Autism or Down syndrome,” a document that concludes, “Although parents may grapple with lost dreams, over time positive adaptations can occur in the form of changed world views concerning life and disability, and an appreciation of the positive contributions made by children to family members and society as a whole. Parents’ experiences indicate the importance of hope and of seeing possibilities that lie ahead.”

In conjunction with the shifts observed in the introduction, one parent rejoiced and opened her heart by telling her circle of parent-friends, “I was just thinking about all the reasons I am ticked that my child is autistic and then thought, you know, if autism had not happened to our family I would not have learned so many things! So many people I would have never known! I believe it has taught me courage beyond words. As much as I hate it, it has made me a better person and better parent to my child. Anyone here feel as though you were helped on some level by this diagnosis?” She received an avalanche of glowing responses, among them were the following:

I find generally that I have a lot more patience, but what really is striking is that I am not intimidated by anything at work! People say, “Oh, this project is going to be hard” or, “This is difficult”—and inside I just laugh and think, hey, this is not difficult; everyone on this [message] board knows what difficult is. I find that I just don’t fret about a lot of trivial things at work that I used to fret about.

Autism has made me a far less selfish, far braver person. Autism has taught me to value things that I ignored in the past. Autism has shown me the better side of human nature as I observe other parents moving Heaven and Earth for their children. Autism has, in some ways, brought my husband and me even closer together. Autism has made me see what’s important in life, and it’s not the pursuit of success and money. Autism has humbled me. And that’s a good thing. Through autism, I’ve made some lifelong friendships. Autism has put my own character flaws in relief so that I can now address them. Autism has made me value my own health and what youth I have left, so I take much better care of myself. My son needs me to be healthy and energetic. Autism has made me into a far more organized person. Autism has forced me to become a better

and more efficient housekeeper, so that at least some of life's chaos is under control. Autism made me finally grow up.

Autism made me understand that I'm not in control. Autism made me feel helpless, sad, and angry! It made me look to a Higher Power to find comfort, strength, order, and hope. And after finding these things, I can't say it was autism that made me a better person, but God—and finding Him—has been a tremendous positive! My marriage is better, I have my priorities straight, it has brought me closer to God, and I honestly think I am a much better person.

Life is what happens while you're making other plans—I forget who said it. I definitely had other plans. But my life is beautiful anyway. And God gives me little and huge blessings in each day to remind me of His love. Cardinals, flowers, [my son's] amazing sense of humor and intelligence, my daughter's sense of justice and hard work, our marriage, and friends. Somehow, I'm able to keep fighting my fears and keep going.

I know God has a purpose for all of us and I feel it would almost be—dare I say—a disgrace to not use my experience to be a hope and help to others. When I see my daughter's smile, especially on those "good days," I feel I can do anything, and what I want to do is to help others.

I am amazed at what God can do with a life. I have learned that nothing is impossible. No one could have told me a couple of years ago that we would be here. There are still issues to address, and educational needs to fight for, but God has given me the wisdom and strength at each and every step. I have learned that I don't have to follow anyone else's pattern or expectations.

Autism has made me more humble. It has made me put all my faith and trust in God and remember that this life leads to the next and that [my son] is my angel here on Earth. It has also helped me think "out of the box."

Autism has taught me the meaning of true love. I know you are supposed to use that phrase for a significant other in your life, but what I feel for my niece is the truest and purest love. Autism has taught me to be selfless, it has made me see the world in a different way, and it brings compassion and spirituality to my life. It makes me appreciate the small stuff, a beautiful smile from my niece when she sees me, the way she gets a kind of smirk when you tell her she has done a good job, or when she reaches up and puts her arms around me while we sit on the couch—there is nothing better than that in life. I would not be the same person that I am without autism in my world. All these children are angels; maybe their job is to make us all into better human beings.

I feel privileged that God picked me and my husband— as he did all of you—to be parents to our kids. He knew that we would love them. The fact is that all of these children are truly amazing. They were born with some deficits, yes, but look at all the gifts they have. I look at nature and the beauty of it all because my son is obsessed with all things green and outdoors. I know that there truly is an "other side," because my son is attached to pictures of people he has never known (and will never know in this lifetime), but yet...he knows them. I stop and actually see where I'm going instead of just walking by.

"Look at all the gifts they have." There are many autistics who are silently awaiting the opportunity to share their gifts with us. What kind of gifts? The same gifts and talents we all

possess, but at higher degrees of vibration, particularly in relation to our senses. Isn't that one way to define us all uniquely—human beings functioning at different levels of vibration? It's the invisible equivalent of musical DNA. Consider that we may have not yet tapped unspoken wisdoms and truths unknown, not only from within ourselves, but from the inner sanctuary that dwells within the person with autism who lives in silence. And when you live in silence, you spend your time listening, processing, and very carefully observing—virtually a perpetual state of meditation. This is not so dissimilar from those of high-religious standing who intentionally undertake a vow of silence in order to attain a spiritual plane beyond what is typical. It is not unusual for people with autism to share their gifts in ways that some would define as spiritual and others would chalk up to mere coincidence. Well, coincidence may be so but, then, ultimately within the universal scheme, who do you think *invented* the very concept of coincidence? There is potential for us all to develop multisensory perceptive abilities in the way that a person who is blind has finely sharpened compensatory senses.

Deepak Chopra, internationally-renown spiritual practitioner, writes of a fascinating parallel that echoes the ethereal sensations of many on the autism spectrum who experience a disconnect from that which is physical:

The five senses imprison us in ways that are unconscious and invisible. Years ago, I read accounts of congenitally blind people who were given sight overnight thanks to innovative surgery. On being exposed to light for the first time, they were often completely disoriented. They wondered why people dragged black patches around with them wherever they went (we call them shadows). If asked how big a cow was standing a hundred yards away, they'd guess 3 inches tall; stairs were frightening twodimensional ladders climbing straight up the wall. Sometimes these bizarre perceptions were so disturbing that the newly sighted preferred to sit in the dark with their eyes closed. Aren't we doing the same by clinging to the world of the five senses?

I have yet to meet a person with autism who has not, in some capacity, declared their desire to give back of themselves, to share their gifts, and to teach others. In their gentle way—as befits their nature—people with autism compel us to higher standards of deference and respect for humanity. Being present with the autistic individual requires us to be calm and refrain, to be *silent* and truly listen. What do you suppose people with autism have indicated they're here to teach? The most salient themes of the human experience: tolerance, patience, sensitivity, compassion, and, of course, unconditional love. These themes consistently emerge in my work as a consultant no matter where I go.

We need people with autism in the numbers with which they've increased, especially if we're to unite in a renaissance for what is right and true and good and kind. It is coming. And the next major human rights movement to shatter myths and tear down walls of hate will be led by those meek of voice, but strong of will. The challenge is to counter the culture of fear that persists.

Countering the Culture of Fear

Autism is an industry. As regrettable as that may sound, it is the truth. In addition to major charitable organizations, there are those who profit handsomely from scientific researchbased methods, treatments, and programs that purport effectiveness as “clinically-proven” to remediate...recover...*cure* autism. To the parent hit like a ton of bricks by the diagnosis of autism, that's a powerful lure indeed. In chancing to grasp the brass ring of hope, some

families have sacrificed everything— their homes, their jobs, their marriages—to financially provide their autistic child with what they are caused to believe is *the* answer. The “answer” usually comes in the form of an intensive, high-cost treatment program, one-on-one—adult specialist to child—for 25, 40, or more hours a week with the intent to suppress and extinguish autistic quirks, tics, and traits, while reinforcing new skills usually rewarded with an earned token, a favored activity, or piece of candy.

But compliance for the sake of compliance does not equal success; were this not true, we’d be deluged with the grownup adulations of those autistics extolling the virtues of such uncompromising rituals from their childhood—and yet there are none. (To quote self-advocate Brian Henson, “Parents and professionals who constantly tell children how they ought to behave suffer from ‘oughtism.’”) If you are the autistic one engaged in a rigid regiment, your options are few. I can compel you to do what I want because I’m older than you are, I’ve asserted my control, and I’ve intimidated, coerced, or pressured you to comply. And the M&M, with its runny lacquer palmed in my unclean hand, is *not* an apt reward in exchange for your tolerance.

In our not-so-distant history of “managing” people’s severe behaviors, there was a time when your risk for not complying wasn’t the withholding of an M&M, but being physically restrained for indistinct periods, chemically restrained with sedating antipsychotic medication, being swatted over the head, having an ammonia capsule snapped open under your nostrils, being sprayed in the face with fox urine (yes, believe it), or punitively confined to seclusion. The manner in which “maladaptive behavior” was exorcised came with few limitations in an era when its victims were commonly called inmates and defectives.

Incredibly, the use of such aversives still occurs. Everytime I learn of a fresh incident of abuse, I think of the perpetrator: if only they knew the truth about autism, intellect, and spirituality. Instances of school children with autism being hit, kicked, pinched, locked in closets, strapped to chairs, and having their mouths taped shut occur with alarming frequency (see www.neurodiversity.com/abuse.html for details). And in May 2006, The Judge Rotenberg Center in Canton, Massachusetts, made news when it was reported that about half of its 250 students with developmental disabilities (including autism) were “fitted with electrodes on their arms and legs and specially wired backpacks that allow staff members to apply a 2-second [electric] jolt if they misbehave.” Documented allegations filed by one attorney included the following atrocious indignities:

- Shock was administered to the testicles of a young man named Jose causing the type of pain that no one should ever realize.
- A deaf child was regularly shocked for not listening to verbal instructions.
- One student was shocked a multiple amount of times, consecutively, for squinting.
- A student got out of her seat to go to the bathroom and was shocked; thereafter, a bowel movement was detected and the student was shocked again.
- A non-verbal, “severely retarded” student was consequated for moaning, which was her only means of communication.
- Students were tied down on boards and hours later were shocked repeatedly for behavior unrealized by the student.
- Indiscriminate, uncontrolled shock was administered mechanically to many students with no supervision at all.
- Students were burned in multiple areas of their bodies and the burns went unreported and sometimes untreated.

Such purported incidents are not relegated to the Rotenberg Center alone, and, according to news reports, “most families that send their children to the school support the limited use of shock therapy....” This is perhaps more shocking than the shocks themselves, which were compared to bee stings in one account, dispensed from a device formally called the Graduated Electronic Decelerator. The outrageous irony is that we would no sooner punish as contemptuous the involuntary tics, tremors, or spasms of those with Parkinson’s, Cerebral Palsy, or Tourette’s. Such permissiveness is not only symptomatic of our burgeoning cultural indifference, it is reflective of our historical absence of humane compassion for those deemed “different.” Hence, there has been a total breakdown in communication between respectful best practice and compliance for the sake of obedience.

Don’t most autistics thrive upon predictability, structure, and routine? Absolutely. But a strictly “outside-in” approach to managing and shaping someone into a model of conformity is not an equal partnership that begins with who they are, from where they stand. The automobile manufacturer creating a new mini-van targeting young families with small children wouldn’t dare dream of going about their business without surveying a consumer focus group of the very persons for whom the new mini-van was being designed. In autism, the reverse approach is true—few glean information to develop best practices from the experts themselves, the very persons who experience the autism.

Further, many autistics can’t transfer to real life that which they successfully reiterate back to a therapist, one-on-one in isolation—which has earned an M&M—because most autistics *don’t think that way*; they retain information best by doing in the moment, and learning in real time, as perhaps you do, too. During drills, one young man was successfully taught to repeat back his house number in response to the question, “What’s your address?” But when he eloped in to town, he could not answer the police officer who asked, “Where do you live?” because it wasn’t the same thing.

I will better learn “apple” not from a flash card, but from *experiencing* “apple” with all my senses, assimilating its beingness in total form, at the orchard, grocery, or kitchen table. Remember this parable: I hear and I forget, I see and I know, I do and I understand. If this is a partnership—a pleasing collaboration—then I, as the autistic one, am likely to transcribe the apple event (embellished with glad tidings) in home-movie format for future replay in the film vault of my mind—without cause to upset the apple cart.

Develop a respectful relationship with me, the autistic individual—one that communicates reciprocal trust—and imbed elements of my most passionate special interest throughout learning opportunities (not abstain my passion as a reward *you* control), and *I will learn and grow!* Because I so love *The Wizard of Oz*, please don’t disservice me by labeling it a compulsive obsession; *employ it* as a teaching tool to support my understanding of severe weather systems, farming and agriculture, hot air balloons, a certain breed of terrier, and counting configurations of yellow bricks—a continuum of possibilities await. It’s *that* simple, and recent studies show such reciprocal relationship-based approaches are not only successful, but also cost-effective.

This is not rocket science, though there are those who would have you believe it is. Why? Because autism is an industry. A 2006 study authored by Michael Ganz, assistant professor of society, human development, and health at the Harvard School of Public Health, is the first to comprehensively survey and document the costs of supporting someone with autism in the United States. According to the study, it can cost about \$3.2 million to take care of an autistic person throughout his or her lifetime; this translates into autism accruing costs of an estimated \$35 billion per year to society. What Ganz defined as “direct costs” were broken down into medical costs (physician and outpatient services), prescription medication, and

behavioral therapies (estimated to cost, on average, more than \$29,000 per person per year). Direct non-medical costs factored in special education, camps, and child care, which Ganz estimates to cost more than \$38,000 annually for those with “lower levels of disability,” and exceed \$43,000 for those with “higher levels.”

Ganz’s conclusions continue, “Indirect costs equal the value of lost productivity resulting from a person having autism, for example, the difference in potential income between someone with autism and someone without. It also captures the value of lost productivity for an autistic person’s parents. Examples include loss of income due to reduced work hours or not working altogether.” Annual indirect costs for persons with autism and their parents were ultimately estimated to range from more than \$39,000 to nearly \$130,000. (By comparison, the Rotenberg Center in Massachusetts is reported to receive \$50 million annually to fund services for the 150 autistic and disabled students who attend from New York State.)

Transcendence Rising

Not only are these study results staggering, they’re imposing— purposely so—intended to highlight disparity. And they assume that everyone requires “specialized,” segregated, time-intensive, and costly services. This has raised the ire of parents led to believe that more is better. A November 2006 *Newsweek* article incited one father to bemoan a “‘cure’ mindset, which relies on pseudoscience and fear mongering. Perhaps *Newsweek* can follow up with an article about the real autism epidemic—the burgeoning quack cure industry, and the unethical providers who drain parents’ resources with false promises.”

“No one can tell me that the two hours of Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) is not helping Liam,” conceded a mom who opts for a natural, flow-within-the-day approach. “I see it with my own two eyes. I follow through, and we live day-to-day life in a ‘verbal ABA’ style. I ask my therapist lots of questions. If she is working on a certain sign and limiting tantrums, I work on that as well all week. I believe my son is better off with two hours than none. It is so obvious for us. Yes, he would benefit with more hours, but I would never stop because it is not the recommended number of hours. Sorry, that is B.S...all of this stuff feeds on mommy-guilt and makes some of us feel as if our children are doomed if they don’t get 25 hours of ABA.” Still, the dangling carrot of recovery looms for many. In a May 23, 2006, open letter to the Schafer Autism Report, an Internet news service, Maureen Monihan adopted a realistic reflection based on experience:

I do know two children who recovered through intensive ABA. But, I know far more parents who tried everything. Some of their children never made any progress. Many of these children are doing very well, but definitely still have autism. We are so far from “recovery” being reality for most children. There is so much more research that needs to be done, both in how to prevent autism and how to help the majority of people who will always have autism live better lives. Maybe parents of newlydiagnosed children need to believe in “recovery” in order to find the energy to do all they can to help their child, but even today, most parents will never return to that before life. We have made progress in 10 years, but not that much.

Terry Walker, an adult with Asperger’s Syndrome, advocates the alternative. Instead of the movement for erasing all traces of one’s autism, Walker stresses a shift that implores our culture to embrace diversity. “That’s why I opt for changing the world around me,” Walker says. “I think that does more good long-term.”

So why is hardly anyone listening? Why is no one adopting the mini-van approach that values persons with autism as equal partners in planning? Surely this is the proper response to supporting the autistic individual; there are two reasons why this does not occur. First, few people want to hear from autistic self-advocates. Tokenism exists. It is shown by who is solicited to keynote a conference, or serve on an advisory board; it's politically correct to ensure representation this way. But when the rubber meets the road, persons with autism are not self-determining the very systems that propose to serve them. Why on earth not? Aren't they the keepers of untapped insights that could prove beneficial in developing autismspecific cultural competency? Of course, and if I am truly professional and altruistic in my endeavors, I am compelled to listen. But that also means I might not like what I hear. And if enough self-advocates are united in saying the same thing, I'm obliged to either refute or unveil my misgivings, conceivably to alter the way I do business—to some, that's a threat, not to mention potential loss of revenue.

"We need acceptance about who we are and the way we are. That means you have to get out of the cure mindset," says Joe Mele, an autism self-advocate, quoted in the *New York Times* article, "How About Not 'Curing' Us, Some Autistics Are Pleading." Jim Sinclair, who composed the 1993 essay, "Don't Mourn for Us," agrees about those who would wish to eradicate autism entirely. "What they're saying is their goal is to create a world that has no people like us in it." And Johnny Seitz, who used his intuitive abilities to aid Dick Clark in regaining the use of his muscles post-stroke, decries, "I do not need to be cured, I'm fine! We need to be accepted, maybe understood a little better, but not cured. We are not broken, we are different!" In reaction to the tragic, stereotyped media spins on autism's afflicted "sufferers," high-schooler Justin Mulvaney bristles, "People don't suffer from Asperger's, they suffer because they're depressed from being left out and beat up all the time." Such harassment is what brought another teenager with autism to deduce, "Only God understands me."

As the events of spring 2006 continued to coincide, a triumvirate of shocking incidents rocked the autism community. Days apart, parents took the lives of their autistic children. Absent was an aura of acceptance, pathology vanquished; these sacrificial offerings were also borne of suffering, a hellish turmoil conceived of excruciating parental agony. In an unconditional utopia, the murders, attributed by one victim's grandmother to "end her pain and the pain of her daughter..." would've been avoidable, a non-issue. Instead, the murders were romanticized by one surviving relative as "an act of love" by a parent who had exhausted all means to "recover" her child into normalcy. It's not the first time it's happened; unless we create a paradigm shift that assuages the unreasonable "recovery at any cost" myth—and absolves parental guilt ("If only I had done this, tried that...")—it surely won't be the last.

The second reason why self-advocates are not equal partners in the autism industry is that people are unassuming of intellect. There is still a very prevalent stereotype that defines many people with autism as intellectually inferior, or mentally retarded, and incapable of contributing, seen as nothing more than "trainable," possibly "educable." The 2006 *Newsweek* story on transitioning to adulthood brought this retort from a 42-year-old man with autism: "What happens when autistics grow up? Why not ask an adult autistic? Nowhere does the article talk about autistics who are now adults. It seems that not only are we ignored by organizations which claim to advocate for us, but by the media as well. Perhaps the author believes we're all in institutions, or that we have nothing important to contribute, but the overall effect is that we're treated as though we don't exist."

Julia, a mom passionate to make the case for presumption of intellect, summed it up so beautifully after being inspired by my works:

The point is to always presume intellect in your child. What this means is just because your child is non-verbal or severely autistic, don't assume that this means your child is not capable of understanding, thinking, and feeling. A lot of parents, and people in society, make the huge mistake of thinking that just because a child is autistic, and/or non-verbal, that they must be "ignorant," "stupid," or otherwise. They talk down to them and "over them."

Any child with a delay may have deficits in areas that we wish were not so, but this does not mean that the child is not smart or not able to comprehend. Think of a deaf person for example; do we consider them to be less intelligent because they are not able to hear? A person who has had a stroke may not be able to tell you what they want, but they sure can understand what you say. If your child is not mentally retarded (and many if not the majority of autistics are not), then you should always presume intelligence and treat them as such. The following is a checklist to help decipher what you should be doing:

- Talk to your child as if he was neuro-typical.
- Just because he may not act or speak the way you wish he would, it doesn't mean he doesn't understand what you say and how you say it.
- All children deserve to develop their own personality; sure, therapy can help with speech and behavioral issues, but autism is part of who your child is and that will never change. Accept it and accept them for who they are, not who you want them to be.
- Applaud what they can do. We hear so much of what our children can't and won't do; how about what they can do. My child may not pronounce words correctly, but he is very musically inclined and loves nature. He's a great helper—he helps water the "flawahs" and opens cupboard doors when I ask him to. He points to his shoes when he wants them off. He gives hugs, he laughs at funny stuff, he says "ouch" when he falls down. These are great things.

So much time is spent on the deficits of this disorder that we, as parents, sometimes forget that our children are still human beings with thoughts, feelings, and emotions. They may not be able to express them to us in the way that we want, but they still need to be heard in their own voice. I'm not bashing anyone, I just think we all (me included) need to remember that.

Toni, a New York State mom, knows autism intimately and echoes Julia's vision. Mother to a son and stepson with autism, and wife to a man with Asperger's, Toni considers the dramatically unaccountable rise in autism with a prophecy for the future. "Twenty or 30 years from now there may be more autistic people than non-autistic people. The children who will become the leaders of tomorrow will more likely than not be autistic and will possess the traits of greatness...autism is evolution!"

Considering that males are four to five times more likely to be autistic, the implication suggests a softening of aggression in this gender, inaugurating a world at peace. Toni's foresight also evokes the Biblical Beatitude, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth," further implying not evolution but *revolution*. And if studies conducted during a 20-year period by the German Psychological Association, that reflect an increasingly less-sensitive, more-dangerous culture with each succeeding generation, are valid, the autism revolution is transpiring not a moment too soon. We are in the midst of a spiritual renaissance, a time in which we all have the potential to learn and grow from one another. If you leaf through an old family photo album or view a childhood home movie, you'll see yourself as an infant, a toddler, a teen. Even though you have "morphed" physically in ways that are very different, you are still you—you've never *not* been you, even in the infant's body. We can collectively expand our thinking—our consciousness—in ways that are similar

through opportunities to demonstrate a renewed respect and an enhanced courtesy, not only for persons with disabilities, but for each other.

A New Humanity

Carol attended one of my autism presentations during which I set the tone by espousing these principles. She understood implicitly the power of seeking forgiveness as a byproduct of presuming intellect by making atonement for her unbecoming past behavior. She graciously shares her glorious awakening for us all:

My younger sister, Sally, was born in 1958. Up until age 2 1/2, Sally appeared to develop normally. She had acquired some speech and was interacting with everyone in the family. My parents first got concerned when Sally slowly lost her speech and began to exhibit some unusual mannerisms. The family physician referred them to a large hospital in New Jersey that had a special diagnostic program. Sally was diagnosed with severe mental retardation.

Sally and I were very close throughout our childhood, even sharing a room together. Somehow, I always had the sense that there was "more" to her than she could communicate. Sally was finally given the opportunity to go to school at age 9, when the right to education became a law, but her behaviors grew more and more challenging. At times she was quite aggressive. My parents struggled to do the best they could, but family life was challenging. Having friends over was difficult at best, and we were never able to go anywhere as a family because there was always concern that Sally would have a tantrum. Babysitters were out of the question.

When Sally was 16, things really got difficult. Although I had learned through the years how to soothe Sally, she was physically aggressive toward my mother. I broke up many physical altercations. After a particularly difficult period, my parents were so overwhelmed that they arranged placement for Sally at a state center for the mentally retarded.

For years, my parents visited Sally and had her home for weekends. But her behavior led to several psychiatric hospitalizations; the prescribed medications were not helpful. Sally was so upset when she needed to return to the state center after a visit, that she fought my parents all the way to the door. Although I tried to remain part of Sally's life during this time, the situation was heartbreaking. Eventually, my parents and I stopped seeing Sally. We simply couldn't handle it.

Throughout those 12 years of no contact, I felt terrible guilt, especially because I had made my career working with disabled people. Eventually in 2004, I decided that I wanted and needed to try to be part of Sally's life again. (I think that I had finally grown to a point where I thought I could deal with the emotion of the situation.) I made arrangements to visit Sally. Because I was very anxious about the visit, my husband (who had only met Sally a few times), agreed to accompany me.

During the visit, Sally did not acknowledge me. She did not look at me or give any response that would indicate that she was pleased to see me. On the way home, my husband shared that he did not think that Sally knew who I was. I was devastated, but somehow knew that this was not the case.

A month later, I visited Sally again and we went out for ice cream. She again did not respond to me and made no eye contact. I felt terrible. In despair, I found myself sharing my feelings with her. I told her that I was so very sorry for not being part of her life. I told her that I simply could not handle it at the time. I told her that I really hoped that we could again be close and that I could be part of her life. Honestly, I did not expect her to respond. But after sitting quietly for a minute or so, Sally raised her eyes to look at me. She looked deeply into my eyes for what seemed a long time (but was probably only 15 seconds). I told her that I would do my best not to let her down. I knew she understood. I reached for her hand and she responded.

As I spent time with my sister, it was again clear to me that there is much “more” to Sally than she can communicate. At the first annual Team Review Meeting I attended at the state center with my sister, a young psychologist was present. His report was brief—he had seen Sally, and reconfirmed her diagnosis of severe mental retardation. Later, we struck up a conversation and he told me that he didn’t know whether his evaluation really reflected Sally’s abilities. He shared that during the session with my sister, he remarked to someone else in the room that it was very warm, that he was very thirsty, and that he wondered if there was anywhere he could get a soda. Shortly after, Sally stood up and left the room despite his request that she stay. He assumed that she had just wandered off. A couple of minutes later, he was surprised when Sally returned carrying a can of soda, which she handed to him. I asked him if he thought this behavior was consistent with a diagnosis of severe mental retardation. He agreed that it was not and I told him that I had long questioned the mental retardation diagnosis. I told him that I suspected my sister was autistic. After some thought, he said that he was not too familiar with autism spectrum disorders, but that he would like to talk with another psychologist at the center to determine whether that person could evaluate Sally. The results of the new evaluation clearly indicate that Sally is on the autism spectrum and that the extent of mental retardation (if any) is unclear.

Sally and I now share time together and she has joined us on a family vacation to the shore and for holiday periods. Sally often makes eye contact and even shares occasional smiles or giggles. We are working to discover better ways to communicate. I am blessed to be close with my sister again, and I know that she has forgiven me.

Carol’s story illustrates how inordinately forgiving and patient so many people with autism can be when true love is at work. As you can see, it’s never too late to repair and restore damaged relationships that were a result of being unpresuming of intellect, and not interacting with a belief in one’s competence. It is only the beginning, for this pathway leads to higher ground—the opportunity for spiritual bonding beyond what we might imagine. Deepak Chopra summarizes our human potential for that which is natural, not supernatural—abilities presently inherent, yet dormant and untapped, in the many autistics who await our enrollment as equal partners:

As our favor for solid, concrete things fades away, certain fringe phenomena will become our everyday. Healing without touch will be legitimized, because altering the field can alter the human body. Telepathy and clairvoyance will seem ordinary, because time and distance are compressed to a single point in the field; intuition and epiphanies will be explained as subtle field interactions. The best outcome would be that wisdom will reemerge as a vital human capacity, for there is no doubt that our spiritual forebears were deeply in touch with the same invisible reality that still surrounds us. We have shut out that reality in our stubborn, rigid insistence on believing our senses, but seeing with the eyes of the soul is possible. In the end, a new humanity is also possible once we escape the prison to which we have sentenced

ourselves for far too long. The so-called sixth sense isn't a separate sense at all, but a new opening for human evolution with unlimited possibilities.

In contrast with the autism spectrum, a school psychologist, responding to my research, wrote, "The word autism has been given power; too much power and in the wrong ways.... Too often we create pathology by focusing on deficits rather than the abundant spiritual gifts. The universe of consciousness is large; we as humans take very small pieces of that largeness and define that as reality. We need to open to greater possibilities."

This concept brought to mind an experience I had in which I found myself interacting with a father who had been led to believe the "pathology of deficits."

A monthly meeting for a group of mostly non-verbal adults with autism had just concluded in the community center room in which we met. A birthday party was scheduled in the room immediately following us, and as we were wrapping up, a dad with three children entered the room early. One of the children was a small boy with Down syndrome. From across the room, this youngster made a bee-line directly for me, threw his arms about my waist, and embraced me with magnanimous exuberance. I knelt beside him as his dad followed up behind. I pulled out my paper keyboard and said to the boy, "Perhaps you recognize these letters from *Sesame Street*." Without hesitation, the father hastily interjected, "Oh no, he's *profoundly retarded*." My reply was just as emphatic, "Oh, I don't pay much attention to those kinds of labels." I continued, "Do you see the people in this room?" I asked as we surveyed the group of autistics, some of whom were twirling, rocking, and making errant vocalizations. "Many of them have presented at conferences or have even been published, and most of them carry the label of 'retarded.'" The man's mouth hung open and his eyes grew wide with surprise. I'd like to think it was a spiritual *a-ha!* moment for him about possibilities and potential for the son whose intellect had already been written off needlessly.

Readers often mistake my writings as focused on children only; it is not so. I'm exploring spiritual concepts as related to all persons on the autism spectrum, including adults. In fact, akin to myself, it would seem that there exists a predisposition for similarly-affected adults to have an interest in such topics. In an April-2006 online poll of persons with Asperger's Syndrome at *Wrongplanet.net*, 75 percent of those who responded indicated a long-standing intrigue with the unexplained. One individual put it into perspective by stating, "'Paranormal' and 'supernatural' are just words describing phenomena *not yet* considered normal or natural. Stuff that makes people go, 'Well, that's simply not possible.' Speech was once paranormal, but is today quite normal. So were flight, space travel, x-rays, binoculars, and photographic memory. As soon as a certain number of people start exercising a habit or technology, it ceases being supernatural."

The resistance of some to think beyond conventional boundaries may be attributed to an unease between matters of spirituality and traditional science, to which Jaime Licauco, president of the Inner Mind Development Institute, responds:

I see no conflict nor incompatibility between religion and paranormal phenomena. As a matter of fact, all religions, whether Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, or Christianity, started with a paranormal phenomenon, with a vision or contact with a supernatural or divine being.... I think the problem lies in the erroneous assumption, especially by Christian religious authorities, that everything that is paranormal or supernatural must come from a dark side. This is not true at all. Even Jesus Christ performed so many paranormal wonders, such as when he predicted the future, read people's minds, healed the sick, walked on water, changed water into wine, and revived the dead. Calling them miracles does not change their paranormal nature.... So, consciousness,

the spiritual, and the mystical are considered outside the scope of materialist science. But true science should encompass all of reality, should it not?

And it would seem that all of reality is oftentimes availed to those sensitively susceptible, as with certain persons with autism. Consider the stratospheric, vibrational intensity of one young acquaintance who produces “paranormal wonders”—as yet unrefined—related by his mother:

We found out about three years ago at a course by the Institute for Achievement of Human Potential that they know about children who are able to hear sounds most people cannot hear. Out of curiosity, we asked Colin if he could hear things that we couldn't. He mentioned turned off appliances, the garage door opener, halogen lights, and police radio. We were surprised to hear the radio part, and asked him about it. He wrote on his Facilitated Communication (FC) card that it was indeed the cause for some of his emotional crying spells he had in those days—he hears the horrible messages ambulances, firefighters, or police send. Due to his strong empathy with human beings, he just would break out in tears at times. Here are two stories we could somewhat verify.

One was a deadly car accident not too far from where we live. He suddenly started crying—moments later we heard the sirens from the fire station. When asked what was wrong with him, he said that there was an accident on Route 100, and someone had been killed. He also described some of the details the officials were saying on the radio, like an almost decapitated victim. It took Colin a while to settle down. The second story was of a more harmless nature. We were driving in our car, and a police car raced passed us with sirens and flashlights. I said aloud to my husband that I wondered where he was going, but pretty much forgot about it afterward. When we got to our destination, I used the FC card with Colin for something and he wrote down, “Mom, what is a hit-and-run?” I asked him how he came up with this question, and he facilitated that the officers in the passing police car had talked about it. So that was proof enough for me.

Colin also used to be agitated close to hospitals, and he confirmed later that he would hear all the messages between ambulances and hospitals. Similar things happen in airports, but he kind of enjoys the pilots communicating with the tower.

Please know I do not profess to speak for—or about—*all* of those on the autistic spectrum; our life experiences are unique. Further, my intent is not to glorify autistics as “messengers of God.” On the contrary, we *all* hold the capacity to employ our spiritual gifts in order to be of service to others through unlimited possibilities. But *how* we do it is what we may come to know from those who do it naturally. We have much to be learning from our autistic friends about Dr. Chopra's “new humanity.” Let's begin.

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