

# The Soul of Autism

A Book by Bill Stillman

## Chapter five

### Ancestral Allies

*“One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.”  
—The Little Prince*

On Father’s Day, June 18, 2006, I was gathered with some friends, a group of individuals who do not speak but, instead, type with varying degrees of physical support. On this particular day, we had a visiting author join us with a writing assignment for the group. The group was asked to compose their thoughts about someone meaningful in their lives.

Also joining us that Sunday afternoon was a newcomer, a teenage boy with autism named Aaron. He was accompanied to the gathering by his mother, father, and a staff support aide. It was an anxious time for Aaron: a new environment with foreign sights, sounds, and smells, and new friends who, while welcoming, required growing accustomed to. For the first hour, Aaron fidgeted, paced, and couldn’t seem to relax or focus, understandably so. I offered to support him to type, but he seemed distracted.

Once the writing assignment was made, the family left with Aaron and moved into the quiet hallway outside our community center meeting room. I eventually joined them to ensure everything was alright and to reoffer my assistance to Aaron. By now, his anxiety had quelled enough to allow me to be present by his side, and we began the dance of communication, with me supporting his hand to type at his portable keyboard device.

As Aaron pecked out each individual letter, I gave sturdy, upward resistance as he pushed down against my hold to succinctly stroke the keypad. After each touch, I forcibly pulled his hand back to “clear the register” and give him time to motor-plan the next letter. Still mindful of the assignment, Aaron began to concentrate on the task at hand. Not surprisingly, he chose to write about his grandfather; but not just any grandfather, as the following transcript reveals:

Aaron: I love my grandfather. He is forgiving.

Mother: Maybe we should clarify which grandfather.

Aaron: I love his blue eyes.

Stillman: Is the grandfather with blue eyes in Spirit? Has he passed?

Mother: Yes.

Stillman: Then that’s the one.

Father: What is his name?

Aaron: His name is love. He is helping others learn [sic] about love.

Stillman: Do you still see him?

Aaron: Yes. He is here today.

Aaron's mother explained that this particular grandfather had known Aaron only briefly as an infant before he passed. It was his father's father, and Aaron's dad confirmed that the grandfather had indeed passed on Father's Day—*observed that very Sunday*. The mother also said that when Aaron first began to type, he was forthcoming in sharing this kind of information about loved ones who had passed on.

During my experience with Aaron, no eerie lights flared nor did the chords of foreboding organ music cue, and Rod Serling did not emerge from the shadows to proffer his commentary. It *just happened*, simply and naturally and honestly. And yet, what might predispose some people on the autism spectrum to be privy to a mystical experience such as Aaron's and not others? There's nothing to support any of this in the autism research, save my own speculations on states of altered consciousness in *Autism and the God Connection*, in which I correspond autistic characteristics with cutting-edge spiritual science. For leads, I'd have to delve through studies stretching back to the 1940s—the very era during which Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger were engrossed in defining autism for the first time.

"Unusual Sensitivities in Very Young Children" is the paper contributed by Paul Bergman, MD and Sibylle K. Escalona, MD, and published in *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 1949. Their findings collected observations of certain children, ranging in age from 3 months to 7 years old, who appeared to be sensory-defensive to environmental stimuli such as textures, temperatures, sounds, odors, and even colors. If you know autism intimately, you can accurately predict the consistent reactions of the studied children to such stimuli: they covered their eyes and ears, and rhythmically rocked their bodies to avert the hurtful assault on their nervous systems—precisely the self-regulation techniques commonly employed by autistics! Indeed, prior to its 1994 revision, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders* indicated such uncompromising sensory extremes as a distinguishing clinical trait of autism.

In my review of the parapsychology literature of this nature, it is curious that many other researchers describe autisticlike sensitivities without identifying subjects as autistic; and the acute degree of environmental-stress reaction first noted by Bergman and Escalona is referred to therein as *hyperesthesia*. In addition, I came upon a reference to another autistic experience called *synaesthesia*, when the borders of sensory function blur, overlap, and become cross-modal, causing an individual to, for example, "hear" colors, "smell" music, or "taste" shapes. These faculties are often linked to paranormal events, visions, and dreams. Further, Ernest Hartmann's *Boundaries of the Mind* coins two personality types via "thick" and "thin" boundaries: the latter group is open, vulnerable, and sensitive, with the autistic-like ability to immerse in an aspect of their lives—sometimes losing sense of time and space—in an experience known as *absorption*, which is also common to those with autism.

Most recently, Michael Jawer weaves such principles into his study "Environmental Sensitivity: Inquiry into a Possible Link with Apparitional Experience" published in the January 2006 *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*. (Apparitional experience is herein defined as those experiences expanding beyond ordinary sensory perception, including precognition, telepathy, and a "general presence.") Jawer's questionnaire survey of adults included markers for those prone to "unusual sensitivity to light or sound" (a frequent indicator) as well as physical and mental health-related issues. Michael Jawer's conclusions draw many comparisons to the fragile way of being for many autistics that appear severely incapacitated. He states, "Persons who are

extraordinarily sensitive *should* exhibit greater susceptibility” to ailments commonly associated with autism, such as allergies, chronic pain and fatigue, migraines, Irritable Bowel Syndrome, and possible electromagnetic influences. The majority of sensitive *males* who responded to the survey (remember that autism is four to five times greater in this gender) characterized themselves as “introverted or restrained,” not unlike any number of men with Asperger’s Syndrome.

As I explained to Aaron’s parents that Father’s Day, what Aaron had just communicated—his firsthand account of communions with his deceased grandfather—was very much in keeping with the reports shared with me by parents and caregivers from all over the country; there’s no denying the very strong grandparent bond experienced by a number of autistic individuals who are so sensitively inclined. For those unfamiliar with this concept, the following several anecdotes are examples very typical of those relationships made known to me on a routine basis.

Mary, from northeastern Pennsylvania, says of her son Andrew’s extrasensory perception:

Andrew’s dad, Barry, has been doing family-tree research, and discovered that his great-great-grandfather emigrated from Wales and fought in the Civil War. On our way to the Outer Banks for our vacation, we decided to stop in Chancellorsville to check out one of the battlefields where [the great-great-grandfather] fought. While there, Barry and I commented how much my father would have enjoyed learning about this family connection to the Civil War because he was a Civil War scholar. We then said maybe he was with us there in Spirit. (My father died the year before Andrew was born.) As we were leaving the battlefield, Andrew said, “Bye George.” My dad’s name was George, and never do we refer to him by his given name; just as “my/your dad” or, “your grandfather.” I guess he was there with us, and Andrew knew it!

Julia’s son, Adam, who has an affinity for plant life, also has an attachment to pictures of deceased grandparents and great-grandparents. Of this, Julia writes:

Some he has met, some he has not. These are the only pictures that he takes an interest in, and carries around periodically. Oddly enough, he will only carry them around when it falls on the anniversary of their death. This might seem odd, weird, or unsettling to some people, but in my house it’s pretty common.

I think my son is surrounded by a special light that others see as well. I envy his view on the world. Do I feel sorry for him? No. I feel sorry for the numerous parents that I have come into contact with that can’t see past the label of “autism”; parents who are so stressed, they can only see their children for what they can’t do and not what they can do. I feel that these children are here for a purpose, and only time will tell what that may be.

Debbi, from Ohio, shares that her father-in-Spirit once appeared to her in a nightly vision with foreknowledge of her future daughter’s special needs:

My father passed away when I was only 2 years old. I have no real memories of him; I had pictures, but no memories. Shortly after I was married, I was sleeping one night. I awoke and plain as day, standing at the foot of my bed, was the minister that had married my husband and me. We were married in Medina, Ohio (my husband’s home town), and were currently living in Bolivar, which is close to Canton.

The minister proceeded to tell me that my father needed to talk to me; that I needed to remember what he was saying to me as it would be very important one day. The next thing I knew, there stood my dad at the foot of my bed. It was so bizarre, as he was moving and talking. I remember thinking, "This is what my dad talks like." He told me many things: that he was sorry he had to leave me so soon; that he was proud of the person I had become; then he told me, "This is what you need to remember." He then stated, "We have a very special child chosen for you." He then continued, "This child will change your life, and make you very proud." He kept stressing how important it was for me to remember that.

I then woke up my husband and told him about it. I remember saying that it felt so real, like it was really him, but it couldn't be real because the minister that married us was still alive. So I decided it was just a very nice dream. The next day my husband was speaking to his parents in Medina. I noticed him become very quiet and turn a bit pale. He then hung up and told me that the minister who married us had passed away unexpectedly the day before, early in the day. To say we were shocked is an understatement.

A few years later, I became pregnant; no problems were expected, and all tests revealed a healthy baby. Then Elizabeth was born with Down syndrome as well as a multitude of health problems. It looked as if she would not make it; I just kept remembering my father's words and knew she would make it—and she did. Everything he said has come true. She has changed my life, and I am a much better person because of her. To say she has made us proud is an understatement, and boy, is she special. To this day, whenever we are in a tight spot with Elizabeth, I feel my dad's presence so strongly. I know he is her spiritual protector.

Claire, a Pennsylvania parent, and mom to 7-year-old son, Tommy, who has high-functioning autism, shares another common autistic occurrence:

Since Tommy was born, he always seemed to have someone "entertaining" him. I noticed that when he woke for feedings, he would stare up past me while I fed him, and would coo and smile at someone I couldn't see. After months of this, I finally asked my husband if he noticed it, and he said yes. Then he told me that the recliner we used to sit in to feed Tommy was in the exact spot that my deceased father-in-law would sit every evening to watch TV. I concluded then and there that Tommy's grandfather was watching over him.

One night when Tommy just would not go back to sleep, and continued to giggle and coo, I turned and looked over my shoulder to the spot where Tommy was looking, and said, "Alright Pap, Tommy needs to go to bed now," and Tommy promptly stopped his playing and drifted off to sleep. I was stunned and a little frightened. Later, when Trevor [another son on the autism spectrum] was an infant, he too played with his Pap. As they got older, they would sometimes seem to be talking to someone I couldn't see, in gibberish I couldn't understand. But there was definitely a "conversation."

## Perpetual Planes of Learning

As you may have surmised from these samples, the overwhelming majority of incidents involving autistic capacity for interaction with deceased grandparents-in-Spirit almost always pertain to a

grandfather, 66 percent by my calculation (from a random sample of three dozen reports). Interestingly, 53 percent of these spiritual connections come from a mother's side of the family—63 percent being reports of the mother's father or grandfather, and only 22 percent being the mother's mother or grandmother; likened with less than 30 percent from father's side, and a smattering where the genealogy was unknown to me because I hadn't thought it relevant to inquire. Even if grandfather and grandchild with autism never before met (because he passed before the child was born), the association is there, similarly evidenced by the autistic one preoccupied with the grandpa's picture, seemingly engaged in playful exchange with someone "invisible;" or drawing strength and perseverance from the grandpa's spiritual presence. By comparison, the protective presence of a grandmother-in-Spirit often takes on a maternal aspect, particularly tending to, coddling, and adoring the autistic toddler in the manner that Sabina's son perceives her deceased grandmother in the following example:

He had been looking at a picture of my grandmother (and my namesake) and asked me, "Does your grandmother still send you pennies from Heaven?" My answer was "No, but she sends me blessings everyday." I was very taken by his question because, as a child, my grandmother would always send a birthday card and taped inside was a penny equal to my age at the time (five years=five pennies, and so on). I had never told my son about these cards until after he had asked his profound question. He, of course, informed me that he already knew that.

What was the purpose of this, I pondered, particularly where grandfathers were concerned? If we can accept that these relationships exist, what is their intention—comfort, love, security in an intolerant world? And is the relationship onesided or two-sided? In other words, is the autistic individual the exclusive recipient of whatever spiritual wisdom is imparted, or does the deceased grandfather benefit as well? I began to wonder in these ways because of what I received from Ursula, of New York, mom to teenage son Singen, who has Asperger's Syndrome:

A [very sensitive person] told me that my grandfather was with Singen now; he has been helping Singen learn responsibility and independence, and Singen has been teaching my grandfather patience. She said I would see a great improvement in Singen through the year. Well, it's been another school year, and Singen has shown great improvement in his ability to get his homework completed, and in taking care of himself. I told Singen that his great-grandpa Bradley was with him. I have to laugh because my grandfather was not a very patient man, and it warms my heart to think that my son is teaching him patience.

It is fascinating to speculate that, even in Spirit, our loved ones are imperfect and remain on a perpetual journey of spiritual education, such that the interactive relationship between grandparent and autistic grandchild is *reciprocal*—a learning opportunity, in varying degrees, for both parties. Could it be that, in order to advance, grandparents-in-Spirit are required to study the most basic themes of the autistic experience: patience, tolerance, acceptance, sensitivity, and unconditional love?

For further exploration of this theory, I interviewed my dear friend Renee, a lovely young woman in her 30s with autism and Down syndrome who lives in silence, but communicates her true intellect through typing. (Renee has observed that "people don't appreciate the value of silence.") She relishes the irony of her deceiving exterior—which may be ignored or disregarded by others—that masks her keen intuition and unspoken knowledge. It is this foresight that enables Renee to perceive her place in the universe, granting temperance for adults similar to herself for whom recreational opportunities too often consist of Strawberry Shortcake puzzles, Little Golden Books, and *Lady and the Tramp* videos.

I yearned to speak with Renee because she had previously indicated to me that her mother's father, who had passed on, was "always available" to her. Renee was most gracious in accommodating my queries; her communication came hard and fast, and she seemed filled with an impassioned desire to convey her impressions to all. I began by asking her how it is that grandfathers appear most accessible to her and others. She replied:

If a male is not a common male then he is usually accessible. My grandfather was a typical male who had manly hobbies like hunting, but the older he got the more gentle he became, and insightful always; just had to get a little older to lose the macho side. But he always was a man with open emotions.

He is still learning from me. He says he watches closely but that's the other thing that goes with what I said; he was always a humble person, not too proud to listen and learn. I know he was always that way—even before I knew him. I've heard mom say that she was allowed to disagree with him, and did, and it didn't make him angry like that sort of thing made my dad's dad angry.

I next asked Renee what her grandfather is continuing to learn from her, if anything, even in his transformed state. She replied:

That I can communicate with him in a way he only glimpsed when he was alive on Earth. He knows I perceive things he never realized even though I facilitated [communication] a few years before he died. He knows how I feel before I perceive myself telling him, and I look to him for strength in a way he never before knew I did; but he was too humble to see his effect on me until the clutter of this world was cleared away. Now he says it's the kind of thing that's crystal clear.

Renee's semantics connote Singen's grandfatherly tutorship, as well as Aaron's observation that his deceased grandfather is "forgiving," among others. The conclusion being contended is that some men—headstrong, even obstinate, "man's man" males—who mellowed later in life, were also candidates for a unique, intentional, and reciprocal relationship with their autistic grandchildren. (This contention is made all the more curious in contrast to my previous speculation that one purpose served by autism is a tempering of the male gender.) In reverse, the sublime implications were stunning: if some autistics could align in synchronous entrainment with plants, animals, and human beings, still others were also capable of the same divine synchrony with loved ones (grandfathers)-in- Spirit; a real-time, one-on-one glorious manifestation of love, harmonious and pure—each learning from one another. It was a mind-boggling prospect.

By extension, this philosophy begged a dark inquiry: if our very sensitive loved ones on the autism spectrum perceive and interact with divine entities, including grandparents-in- Spirit, might they be as equally open in perceiving low-energy apparitions of ill intent?

Spirit of Ma'at

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