

My Neurodiverse Universe

When I was in my early teens, a family friend remarked, “Do you ever feel like everyone else is in on a big secret, and maybe someday they’ll let you in on it?” That was exactly how I felt. I still feel that way, like I’m a visitor from an alien planet, or like I’m looking through a glass wall at other people.

That’s because I’m neurodiverse. I’ve been diagnosed with both ADHD and Asperger’s syndrome, which is also known as Autism Spectrum Disorder (I prefer the word “difference.”) I’ve been called lots of other things – spacy, airhead, slow (how I hate that word), *diff*-rent (the ultimate Minnesota insult), and weird. (I’m thinking of reclaiming “weird”.)

Neurodiverse people aren’t trying to be difficult, and most of us have average or above-average intelligence. We just learn differently. We express ourselves differently. We have a different view of the world that is rooted in our biology and shaped by our experiences. Let me tell you about mine.

Life didn’t start out too badly. I grew up in a middle-class home with a mom and dad and three siblings and various pets and playmates. I started reading when I was four and could read a newspaper by the time other kids were stumbling through Sally, Dick and Jane. In grade school, I tended to be academically ahead of my age group.

Yet I fell behind in other ways. Gym class was a disaster. I had trouble following our Coke-guzzling gym teacher’s instructions and lacked any semblance of coordination. This made me a phys. ed. pariah. And my attempts to make friends were often rebuffed. As other kids became more socially discerning, I would suddenly find myself ditched by yesterday’s best friend. I was often the butt of jokes and an easy target for bullying.

Adults made my life harder too. Teachers would order me to look them in the eye. They’d call me out for being unable to pay attention in class, or forgetting rules. One teacher would actually come up behind me and shake me when I’d lose focus. And my parents didn’t know what to do with me, either. They couldn’t deal with my meltdowns and mistakes. That was before anyone knew about ADHD or ASD.

I finally received both diagnoses in midlife. This was after years of lost jobs, broken friendships, and failed relationships. ADHD explained my struggles with focus, organization, short-term memory, and my tendency to be impulsive: Yes! I’ll buy that shiny thing! Yes! I’ll tell you this random, unedited thought I had! And being on the autism spectrum explains the way I interface with the world. Social interactions are like a second language for me. I don’t always understand what other people want or expect. I may not view things or do things like other people. I may take someone else too literally, or they may misinterpret my irony. If someone tries to give me verbal instructions, what I may hear is: “Blah blah blah Blah blah.”

Yet I've been blessed, too. Although I'm like a giant nerve ending, sensitivity has its upside, too. Colors and design, whether found in nature or artist-created, can make me ecstatic. I virtually float to the music of Judy Collins or become energized by Galician folk dances. The smell of pine trees in the woods fills me with possibilities. I rejoice in the power of words.

I'm lucky to be a part of several families – Faith, my friends, and my siblings. I've had to do a lot of forgiving of my family and they've apparently forgiven me, too. And sometimes, I still have to forgive myself.

Forgiveness is a gift from God that's not always easy to accept. My faith in God, which seems like a slippery bar of soap at times, helps keep me going. God reminds me that I have a purpose and that everyone I meet is a child of God. He/she gives me compassion that I would not otherwise have. I would rather have God's grace than be "normal" and successful.

Finally, I'd like to share some ways to help people who are neurodiverse. Don't: patronize, judge, or assume they are breaking social rules to be obnoxious. Don't allow kids to be bullied (or to bully others). Don't assume neurotypical people are dumb or incapable of understanding. Do: include them, respect their opinions and ideas, work with them to understand what you want to accomplish. Do protect kids from teachers and other adults who don't tolerate them or can't work with them effectively.

Thank you for listening.