

# Autism and the God Connection

Redefining the Autistic Experience through  
Extraordinary Accounts of Spiritual Giftedness

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# Introduction



If you're about to begin reading this book, you may be one of the 71 percent of Americans who, according to a 2003 poll, is interested in learning more about autism. You've likely seen or heard the almost-daily news reports that reference or headline the subject. Maybe someone you know has a child with autism—a friend, a coworker, a relation, yourself. If the title caught your attention, you might be curious to learn about autism and a strong spiritual connection; perhaps you've already experienced firsthand this divine association. Or are you simply open-minded enough to want to know more about autism from a completely unique perspective? I know I was. But absorbing it all was an unexpected journey, the path of which led to professional and personal revelations.

To those unfamiliar with autism, it is, from a clinical perspective, a neurological difference in how the brain is “wired.” There is no single known cause, though theories abound and current research is focused upon genetic and environmental factors. (As recently as 1997, a nursing textbook was proffering the ancient stereotype that indifferent, “refrigerator” mothers were accountable for their children's

autistic disassociation!) Autism primarily affects one's ability to communicate in ways that are effective, reliable, and universally understandable. This means many folks do not speak, or they have limited vocal capacity. These obstacles impede one's expressions of wants, needs, thoughts, and desires. This cannot help but impact the quality of one's social interactions. The challenge to sustain social relationships is another hallmark of autistic diagnosis.

Autism is also diagnosed by marked differences in fine and gross motor skills. These may include repetitive activities such as physically rocking back and forth, twirling a piece of string, flicking a light switch on and off repeatedly, or simply lacking in grace and agility of movement. (Some with autism have complained that certain physical traits are not of their volition, akin to a prolonged, involuntary shiver, sneeze, or twitch.)

Autism is a lifelong experience, and is neither contagious nor curable. It is, quite simply, a natural part of someone's being, every bit as much as eye or hair color, flesh pigmentation, and ancestral heritage—as unique and individual as each individual is unique. It manifests on a broad, multicolored spectrum that stretches from those who “appear” to be significantly challenged to those with very mild experiences. For example, I identify closely with Asperger's Syndrome especially in reflection of my childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. Asperger's is presently defined as one of autism's “cousins” on that broad spectrum. It is considered a milder, high-functioning form of that experience, and I am able to commiserate comfortably with others so identified.

## ALL THAT I AM

For me, Asperger's has meant a lifelong inability to interpret many social conventions and interactions, including humor and subtleties of innuendo in conversation. Instead, my interpretation is often very literal and concrete. At times it is like a real-life rendition of Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First?"

*Hotel front desk clerk upon check-in:*

"I hope you'll enjoy your stay, Mr. Stillman.  
Your room is right down the hall from me."

*Stillman (incredulous):*

"You mean you're staying here too?"

Asperger's has also meant my favoring topics of personal passion over relationships with people. "People" was a foreign language, and like many a tourist, one that I could employ just well enough to pass. (Example: Note to self—remarking after someone brings you a glass of H<sub>2</sub>O, "You make good water!" almost always gets a laugh or smile.) As a result, I was often overlooked, maligned, or disregarded by others and still am to some extent.

Finally, like my brothers and sisters with autism, my entire *nervous system* is intensely sensitive such that my emotions and senses "vibrate" at a frequency different than most. For instance, I was unusually sensitive as a child—extremely emotional. The melancholy lyrics to a song like "Puff the Magic Dragon" or virtually anything by Peter, Paul and Mary could cause me to become inconsolable. This was, perhaps, most memorably defined by an emancipating childhood incident.

Raised in the Episcopal church, I was once removed from my pew, at age six, because I could not control my weeping. Unbeknownst to anyone, I had been staring at a terrible, glorious stained-glass window of the crucifixion and grieving for the pain Christ must have endured. The arresting mosaic of that forlorn image etched itself indelibly upon me. And yet at some point, I became emotionally and empathically detached.

As a small boy, I often experienced the sensation of *déjà vu*. It manifested in a sudden realization that what was occurring in the moment had already been experienced exactly the same way once before. I also used to see things move out of the corner of my eye, or have prophetic dreams like the one in which I picked countless pennies up off our front lawn and, the next day in reality, did just that—wondering how on earth the coins got there to begin with. But then my family was always of the thinking that was open to unexplainable possibilities and events.

I cannot remember a time when I wasn't completely enraptured by the fantasy of *The Wizard of Oz*, and it became my foremost passion. Other childhood "sub-passions" tended toward unusual or mystic themes that held future portent. These included a fascination with gargoyles on churches and cathedrals; Greek mythology, especially Perseus and Medusa; purported "real life" monsters including Bigfoot, extraterrestrials, and the Loch Ness Monster; and Wonder Woman, from the popular 1970s television series. Unlike most teenagers of my era, I was completely disinterested in *Star Wars*, being, instead, drawn to the realism of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. I was also intrigued by stories of ghosts and what was then called "the occult." Complicating matters was

that *nowhere* in my readings of unusual phenomena such as ESP was spirituality or a benevolent Creator referenced as the foundation for any of it. This reinforced my rigid belief that any such “powers” were of impure origins.

I have always felt that something or *someone* was watching over me, offering protection where warranted. I say “where warranted” because I certainly haven’t been immune to every harmful or distressing circumstance in my life; and beginning at a young age I endured daily humiliations of varied forms—verbal and physical—from my peers because I was different. This abuse persisted through much of my school career. I now know that to have been “rescued” from those experiences would have diverted the process necessary for me to learn and grow from them. Ultimately, it made me strong. But with my own sense of self quickly eroding then, I was unable to discern such learning opportunities through the strife and muck. As I descended into this murky period, any spiritual connection was impeded, and I rejected precisely what was protecting me.

In retrospect, there was a pattern of perpetual struggle between a “light,” good, or spiritual side and a “dark,” menacing side that feeds from self-loathing. Fortunately, I’ve always relied upon an innate sense of purpose in life, a predestiny for recognition of what I had to offer the world. Something inside told me that if I could ride out the rough times things would improve, somehow, someday. Contemplating a straight razor in my darkest hour, it was that inner protective voice which prevented me from taking my own life at sixteen. It is crucial to note that it is not unusual for many young adults with autism or Asperger’s to reach this dark place and entertain suicidal ideations. Others

numb their pain and self-medicate using drugs, nicotine, and alcohol. Parents and caregivers must be especially vigilant in observing any symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. A strong spiritual foundation may well be a resource to those struggling through such times, but by the time I had reached that point I was virtually disconnected. This played out over the course of my young life and well into adulthood until I consciously aligned with an authentic source. It evolved into the light side emerging exalted and victorious. I credit those with autism for providing the nourishment that was my impetus, as you will learn.

## **SPIRITUALITY IN THE AUTISM COMMUNITY**

For years now, I've been a consultant specializing in counseling teams challenged in understanding those with different ways of being, including autism. I've been privy to interact with autistic individuals of great spiritual brilliance with a beauty that emanates from within and radiates outwardly—a mutual “knowingness,” if you will. Some of these persons or their families graciously affirmed my initial perceptions of a spiritual connection. Their anecdotes underscored the heightened awareness, innate gentleness, and exquisite sensitivity in a number of those with autism; that is, a capacity to perceive all things seen and unseen. For some, these blessings came in the form of “Gifts of the Spirit,” of which I had experienced as a child, read about, or was open to. Examples reportedly range from knowing what someone is thinking before it is said; foretelling future events that come to fruition; and enjoying special, unspoken bonds with animals. Still others are said to have perceived visions of grandparents and other



loved ones in Spirit, or even communed with angels—abilities seemingly reserved for Old World saints and prophets.

But on reconsideration, this “higher-vibration” capacity of the senses is indeed consistent with the acute, often overwhelming autistic sensitivities to sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing. There are, in fact, some individuals with autism that even react to positive ion changes in weather systems—a condition called serotonin stress reaction—which can wreak havoc on their nervous systems. In 2002, the American Academy of Neurology reported on research by scientists from the Medical College of Georgia, the University of South Carolina, and the Downtown VA Medical Center in Augusta, Georgia, that centered upon computerized brain imaging in persons with autism. Their findings of smaller but multiply-more-than-average minicolumns, a basic organizational unit of brain cells, was equable with this chronic state of overarousal thought to affect one’s capacity to discriminate between competing sensory information.

Concurrent with my own spiritual rediscovery, and shortly before the 2002 publication of my first book about the autistic experience, I began to feel compelled or “pulled” to embark upon another book. The new project would cover this little-known facet of autism that, until now, has been largely “closeted,” undiscussed, or dismissed altogether. This book is the result: a purely informational offering not intended to promulgate any new program, method, or intervention. It does, though, invite the reader to consider alternative possibilities in viewing autism through an entirely different lens.

The clinical definition of autism is not family—or individual—friendly. It is, unfortunately, oftentimes an indicator

of one's perceived deficits rather than one's strengths, gifts, and abilities. Many parents tell me their child's diagnosis is a "death sentence." Some are deeply embittered or resentful of their child's autism and the confusing, sometimes violent, behaviors that may ensue. This is a great disparity in the field. The focus so frequently becomes how to best manage and control those with autism for the sake of conformity and "normalcy" that we become oblivious to the obvious. And the obvious is the extraordinary and monumental offerings provided by those who are inherently gentle and exquisitely sensitive.

Above all, we must shatter the stereotype that those with autism *necessarily* experience intellectual impairment (i.e., mental retardation) as a direct result of the autism. If you subscribe to this concept, I will respectfully request that you suspend your disbelief because my mantra is "always presume intellect." I would also encourage your further comprehension of autism by directing you to my book, *Demystifying the Autistic Experience*. (This volume also contains additional autobiographical information for those interested in my story.)

From a theological perspective, if our souls are on a path of perpetual learning in a journey toward attaining spiritual perfection, it may be congruent that those individuals with the greatest life challenges are among the most advanced of souls. Angela, a very young girl with autistic attributes, observed, "I pray Heaven has a plan for my life. God loves people with lives like mine." Spiritually-elevated souls like Angela's have selectively chosen to be so challenged in collaboration with a Higher Power. (No wonder people with autism often use the analogy of feeling like strangers on a foreign planet—the distance from their spiritual tier to our earthly

plane is vast.) While not autistic, witness the triumphs of Helen Keller, young *Heartsongs* author Matthew Stepanek, and others over extraordinary adversity. Where so many other facets of human endurance are concerned, their souls have already “been there, done that.” Dr. Michael Newton supports this contention in his book, *Journey of Souls*, when he writes, “Souls in a high state of advancement are often found in humble circumstances on Earth.”

I speculate that many such individuals are closely protected by divine intervention during their earthly mentoring and tutorship. Please don't mistake me. I'm not suggesting that *every* person with autism possesses multisensory abilities; I don't know this to be true. But, in my experience, there *is* a magnificent preponderance of persons who do share this common thread. In reflection of Dr. Newton's research, I also suggest this may be true of many individuals who are significantly challenged in other respects. In fact, by reading this book, you may well be able to extract the word “autism” and insert any number of developmental differences and have the message remain the same; it's just that my focus here is autism.

Does this mean that all people with autism are “angelic” in their perfection and can do no wrong? Of course not. Many communicate in ways we don't understand such that we misinterpret and mislabel such outpourings as severe “behaviors.” The point is that we are *all* frail and faulty human beings charged with making the best of our lives, learning to connect with and touch others along the way. And the capacity for such inner-connectedness is hard-wired into every one of us. In his article “Fools of God,” self-advocate Nick Pentzell is

adamant when making this distinction, disallowing do-gooders' glorification, vilification, or pretentious pity:

The way people react in my presence often reveals something of their religious attitudes about disability. On the negative end, I have been seen as a punishment from God, a conduit for something demonic or supernatural by people who haven't understood my method of communication, a burden to test the faith of my caregivers, and a soul who incurred bad karma in past lives and now suffers autism. The positive views are just as preposterous; I am an emanation of Christ, an angel, a miracle, a holy innocent, and a Fool of God.

Pentzell's reality-check perspective serves to balance our overzealousness and contain our impulse to fawn artificially.

My critics will invalidate my credentials and accuse me of attempting to prey upon the fragile emotions of families desperate for a positive rationale to explain their child's autism. However, there is *absolutely nothing* I'm exploring here that's not already well known to individuals with autism, their families, friends, and relatives—albeit usually in the context of clandestine conversation. In my travels, I have invited audience members to remain after each of my autism presentations to participate in a discussion about autism and spirituality, and, inevitably, about a dozen or so people stay behind. I am never disappointed when, given a safe and comfortable forum in which to speak openly, parents and caregivers absolve themselves of amazing, joyful anecdotes, believing all the while to

have experienced them in isolation. One such anecdote was shared by Carol from central Indiana:

When the World Trade Center towers came down on September 11, 2001, I went to bed horrified, fearful, and angry. Then I remembered that Steven had not said his prayers. My son was only nine years old at the time and has high-functioning autism. Steven's prayer rocked me to the core. He said all of his "usuals" about blessings and family, then he asked God to forgive Osama bin Laden for killing people! I was speechless. This little boy who has struggled so much saw the heart of God and how saddened God was at the destruction of so many lives. I came away renewed in my own faith, especially in the amazing mind of my little boy.

This kind of affirming corroboration occurs no matter my geographic locale.

I must tell you that there are those persons with such great gifts who have cautioned me against pursuing this topic. One beloved friend with autism even advised that it was better for him and others to remain silent about it. He doesn't want to risk antagonizing others' perceptions by fueling stereotypes of "autistic behavior," only to be explained away as delusions or psychotic episodes and medicated accordingly. To those who so wish to blame that which they cannot readily explain on mental illness, please know that being autistic *does not* automatically make one mentally ill. Mental illness must be diagnosed by clusters of symptoms unusual to that person—not by

isolated or sporadic incidents. Autism, itself, is not a mental illness, but mental illness in those already vulnerable, predisposed to being exquisitely sensitive, and inherently gentle is a very real possibility *separate* from autism. Before jumping to hasty and harmful conclusions, please become educated about the most prevalent symptoms of mental health issues in people with autism: depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. (I've excluded obsessive-compulsive disorder because I feel it is misunderstood and over-prescribed; some individuals' repetitive actions or verbalizations are often a deliberate focal point in reaction to painful irritants and other environmental stimuli naturally filtered by neuro-typical folks.)

Others with autism have arbitrarily acknowledged the existence of their spiritual gifts but are, understandably, blasé or not terribly interested in giving the subject much airtime. It's there, but not overly significant in lieu of paramount issues such as self-advocacy, civil rights, and the tireless endeavor of general acceptance.

My purpose for pursuing this topic is to enlighten others about a unique and glorious facet of the autistic experience. It is in keeping with our collective pursuit of shattering myths and stereotypes about such experiences being a product of intellectual impairment or mental illness. And it speaks to the principle that people with different ways of being are often *our* teachers, here to guide our understanding of compassion, sensitivity, and unconditional love—the most vital lessons of the human condition. Many are possessed of a divine spiritual connection of which we must be open to learning about. It is time. Andrew Bloomfield, a Canadian poet with autism,

summarizes, “In my mind, loving people is loving God. I want to be able to teach others but not be a guinea pig. I like to think I can inspire others.”

I have strived to present very sensitive information in an accurate and truthful manner. I have taken great care to portray personal stories in a gentle way while concurrently offering validation. Many of the individuals involved have chosen to use pseudonyms or just first names as a protective measure. However, we have no reason to believe that their stories are not authentic. Self-advocates, parents, and caregivers of people with autism can have intensely complex lives. I don't believe for a moment that any of the good people whom I met and interviewed, or who contacted me by phone or email, gave of their precious time for personal gain or deliberately misled me. They've been most courageous to risk sharing private testimony to benefit us all. Our goal will have been achieved if their stories ring true as affirmations for parents, caregivers, and others who realize the blessed qualities of their loved ones.

I also bring to the subject my background in supporting people with different ways of being since 1987. Simultaneous with compiling this volume I immersed myself in research, including the invaluable illuminations of the most reputable and revered spiritual leaders and visionaries. Their writings have either validated my own work or provided me with concepts of which to aspire. All bear the same universal message: live to love.

I realize that spiritual giftedness in people with autism is a delicate and controversial subject. When we view this possibility from a global perspective, we establish a starting

point for growth and change to occur—if we can be open to it. Often, our fear of the unknown precludes us from accepting that which we cannot readily discern. However, we don't question our capacity to give and receive love, yet we love without factual evidence of love's authenticity. We can prove the brain's existence but not that of the human mind. Our holiest of religious beliefs may be regarded in the same light; disbelievers seek tangible proof. Similarly, the multisensory blessings of the person with autism should not be so casually explained away simply because traditional science finds them immeasurable. For such blessings are measured only in the heart.