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Fighting Neurelitis

Mark A. Foster*

*mfoster@jccc.edu

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Abstract

The author discusses prejudices against alternative perceptions of reality.

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FIGHTING NEURELITISM

by Mark A. Foster



My earliest memory is of lying in a stroller in the park which separated the two sides of Pelham Parkway, one of the main streets in the northern part of New York City's the Bronx. Our home on Wallace Avenue was only a block away. I recall one day when a woman leaned into the carriage, and I couldn't have been more than a year old, and she made a cutesy face while staring at me. I had the feelings of one who had been violated. I cried and cried until she went away.

Autism would probably seem a peculiar condition to most others. For me, at this stage of my life, it is one I find extraordinarily pleasurable. The special interests, the preoccupations, which have colored all the stages of my life have, as most other autistics would also likely admit, provided considerable joy and, at times, even ecstasy. Indeed, if someone handed me a magic pill, and I only had to take one to be instantly changed from an Asperger's autistic into a more neurotypical individual, I would politely, and almost reflexively, return it.

That does not mean I have always found being an autistic easy. Although I cannot presently conceive of a downside, it was clearly not always this way. My childhood was enormously painful. Like many autistics, I had awful sensory problems. Certain sounds, even thinking about those sounds, would result in the most horrific panic attacks. Heights were unbearable, and the feeling of wind on my face, especially while in my family's car, was practically as traumatic.

Ultimately, I suppose I was, like many others I have recently



encountered, simply born ahead of my time. Asperger's autism was not added until the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV) of the American Psychiatric Association in 1994, and I was not personally diagnosed as an autistic until the middle of 2007. I was diagnosed, in the early 1960s, under the DSM-I.

Like many autistics of my generation, the diagnosis I received was childhood schizophrenia. Indeed, autism was not even a category in the nosological (classification) system of the DSM-I. Since they had not yet devised a way to explain people like myself, they made us all psychotic. That was the common construction of the time. Yet, by today's standards, I exhibited none of the usual symptoms of schizophrenia, the hallucinations, auditory or visual, and the delusions, nor was I, in any sense I can tell, out of touch with reality. In fact, I was very much in touch with my reality – often, in light of the constant bullying I received, painfully so.

The diagnosis came with a price. For most of my childhood, I was drugged. Thorazine is the one I remember by name, but there were many others. Then, when I was 11, I was committed by my psychiatrist to a psychiatric hospital for about a month and a half. The attendants in that place were like animals. They viciously beat the children, including me, seemingly on a whim. While in that awful facility, I received a battery of about eight electroconvulsive treatments. They destroyed my memory, almost entirely, for the next year.

Growing up, my self-concept was quite low. My parents were very emotionally abusive toward me, and my father occasionally abused me physically, as well. My mother, for instance, repeatedly called me selfish. "How could I have given birth to such a selfish person like you," she said on one occasion. One would think that she, knowing about my medical history, would have known better. Still, I try not to be judgmental. My father was himself recently diagnosed as an Asperger's autistic, and my mother, I believe, had severe, though undiagnosed, OCD.

My first experience of receiving genuine respect was from joining a new religion at the age of 14. There, and for the first time, I was honored for my intelligence and for my knowledge. The positive reinforcement I received from my fellow religionists is what ultimately persuaded me to pursue an academic career, and I turned two of my principal special interests as a child, theory and religion, into my sociological specializations. Although I am a good professor, I believe, I do still have some problems in relating to my students. However, I am continually improving.