

I have struggled for a very, very long time. I have had to fight for my right to have dreams, my right to be seen as someone who can contribute to the world. Sometimes, simply the right to exist. I often feel that I am not where I think I should be, and I have to live with the constant fear of never getting there, the self-doubt that plagues my thoughts from time to time—echoing the words that the so-called “experts” told my parents in meetings long ago.

The above paragraph was one that I wrote three years ago. The sentiment within it rings nearly as true today as it did then, but it is tinged with a different meaning now. A young man with Asperger’s Syndrome so strongly identified with it that he kept this piece of my writing among his own. I learned of this from his mother, who recently contacted me to tell me that her son—who also suffered from depression—committed suicide this year.

There are far too many individuals with Asperger’s syndrome who commit suicide each year. The rate among persons on the spectrum is higher than that among neurotypicals, but I am not speaking in percentages—to me, even one person with AS who kills themselves is “too many.” I think about this young man, who was almost the same age as I am, and how he struggled for a very, very long time as well. I think of how my writing meant something to him, how it helped him, even for a brief period, and I am grateful.

But I also feel guilty.

This isn’t the first time I’ve thought of my fellow brothers and sister on the spectrum who have fallen before their time. Wondered why or how it is that I have had the means to survive, while so many others didn’t. We all went through very similar struggles—social isolation, awkwardness, being ostracized or outright ignored, all through elementary, middle, and high school. I had thoughts of killing myself starting in fourth grade, on and off for

eight years, and after graduating high school and going to college, these thoughts finally stopped.

So why didn't I go through with it? Why am I still here?

Because they need me to be. To tell you what they can't.

Two weeks ago, I went to my ten year high school reunion. This was not an event that I ever expected to attend; in fact, if you'd asked me even a couple of years ago if I thought I would go, my reply would have come in the form of incredulous laughter. Like many individuals on the spectrum, I had an extremely difficult time in high school. I was teased and tormented by my peers on an almost daily basis, told to my face to kill myself, and generally disregarded as a person. I often felt as though I wasn't worth speaking to, and most days it was a running contest as to which was worse: being bullied, or being ignored.

The bullying began in elementary school, worsened in junior high, and plateau'd into a consistent, prolonged, steady living hell for the duration of high school. Academics and a love of learning were the only things that made me want to stay in school, and both of these suffered as a result of the social problems that I experienced. I began to believe that it would never end, and that these four years would go on forever. Once they came to their inevitable end, the world—which previously had moved at a snail's pace—suddenly sped up, as if a stretched rubber band snapping free.

"Free" is what I was; free from the constraints and limitations of a small school filled with small minds; free from the caustic prediction made by "experts" and told to my parents not long after I was first diagnosed—that I would never be able to attend a normal high school, let alone graduate. College was a-calling, and with it came many highs and lows, joys and frustrations, and the burden of a whole new set of expectations—my own.

The difference between high school and college was the difference between believing I could not do anything, and believing I should be able to do everything. “Well, you’re so high-functioning. I wouldn’t have known you had Asperger’s unless you told me” became the mantra I was to hear so often—first from others, then from the voice inside my own head. I leaped and bounded, grew emotionally, mentally as the years went on, had my intellect remarked upon, so much so that I began to set very high standards for myself.

Yet there were (and still are) times when even the simplest tasks elude me—the stuff of “common sense,” as the saying goes. When I would trip and stumble over these—and I did, quite often, especially in college—I would become extremely frustrated with myself. “I should be able to do this. Why can’t I just do it?! What’s wrong with me?” was the phrase most oft echoing inside my head. And this sense of unrelenting pride prevented me from the one course of action that I should have taken: Asking for help.

Of everything that I have learned since going to college, living on my own, going to graduate school, and now starting my own business, the most valuable lesson has been learning how and when to ask for help. Everyone needs help, at one time or another. It’s virtually impossible to navigate through this world without even briefly relying on someone. But to my mind, asking for help was a sign of weakness. It meant that I couldn’t really do the things everyone believed I should be able to do—things I believed I should be able to do. In truth, asking for help shows strength, rather than weakness. It is a sign of self-awareness, of knowing where your difficulties lie and being willing to openly address them.

I had the opportunity to speak about this and other strategies to overcoming obstacles when I spoke to a group of graduating students with Asperger’s Syndrome, first at the commencement ceremony for the Gersh Academy on Long Island in 2008, and then one for Chapel Haven in Connecticut earlier this year. I also imparted to them the importance of

being self-advocates, of raising up your voice and being able to speak for yourself—as well as on behalf of those who cannot.

Although I have been speaking at autism conferences since the age of 14, speaking to a group of my peers was a life-changing experience. It gave me the sense that my voice had the power to reach others and to help them, which lie in stark contrast to how I'd felt for the majority of my life up until then. The beginnings of this came when I was one of almost 70 individuals on the autism spectrum interviewed for a documentary called *Normal People Scare Me*. It has been five years since this documentary was released, and still people have recognized me from it and told me how wonderful everything I had to say was.

I received even greater affirmation of this when I read my “Letter to My Younger Self” and spoke to a group of 300 sixth graders and 300 eighth graders—a *notoriously* difficult audience—in Bedford, New York two years ago, and the end of my speech was met with thunderous applause. The students treated me like a rock star—watch out, Keith Richards—and swarmed me afterwards, clamoring to speak to me and tell me how much they'd enjoyed my speech.

The seed had officially been planted. The confidence that I had begun to acquire when I started college was further bolstered by these experiences. I found that, by talking about what I had gone through as a kid, it served as a catharsis for me, on one level, and for the audiences to whom I spoke, as an illuminated path to the place where things really *do* get better. And still, my journey was not finished, but instead took me to where even more doors were to open: graduate school.

When you are the one student in a Master's program for Applied Behavior Analysis who has Asperger's Syndrome, you are bound to stand out. I never fully knew what drew me to ABA, but two years after graduating college and still not having figured out what I wanted

to do when I grew up, graduate school suddenly seemed a very viable option. I enrolled in 2007, and graduated in May of this year. Sandwiched in between those four years were some of the most extraordinary experiences of my life. It was one of my professors who first put me in touch with Linda Meyer here at Autism New Jersey.

I met Nicole Turon-Diaz, the woman who became my business manager, through a screening of *Normal People Scare Me* that she held at my college just after I'd started my first year. Nicole and I have become close friends, and we're currently sharing an office together in Fairfield, out of which we run our respective LLCs.

I developed a relationship with Autism Speaks through another connection—Linda Walder-Fiddle, who invited me to a meeting following a "Town Hall" for AFAA (Advancing Futures for Adults with Autism). As a result of this, my contact at Autism Speaks came to call on me for several successive speaking engagements, and it was he who referred me to a colleague of his who needed a self-advocate to sit on a panel of autism experts, for a World Autism Awareness Day event at the United Nations this year.

For a girl who once didn't have a voice, this was quite an accomplishment.

Each and every step that I have taken along this journey has been one that I know I have taken because I fought for it. I fought to overcome the seemingly insurmountable obstacles of my diagnosis, and now view my Asperger's Syndrome as an asset, instead of a liability. The goals that I have set are meaningful and achievable, through not only my own hard work, but that of the people who love and support me.

As a college coach for students with Asperger's Syndrome, I know I will look into their eyes from across my desk and see a person not unlike myself, walking the path that I once traversed. I'll see the doubt, the worry, and the fear that I felt, and will use what I have learned to help them find their way, as I have now found mine.