

Chapter 2

Tiny Disasters: Confessions of an Autistic Professor

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ABSTRACT

In this lyric essay, the author weaves personal Autism narratives with linguistics and disability theory to illuminate the challenges and joys of being an autistic adult in today's world. As a student, a poet, a junior high teacher and finally as a university professor, the author explores the daily challenges of being out-of-sync with the norm, of living and working with sensory processing disorder, social ostracism and discrimination due to interpersonal communication issues, executive dysfunction, meltdown, shutdown, and atypical emotional expression and eye contact, amidst an ill-informed public resistant to lowering the barriers to adults with Autism. He also celebrates the joys of being autistic, his autistic "super-powers," and the ways in which his life-long struggles to understand and to feel welcome have shaped him to be a compassionate teacher, writer and community activist. The author includes anecdotes of autistic students, friends and family as well, and makes recommendations for better sensory/social environments for students and faculty alike, all in the service of greater autistic awareness, inclusion and acceptance.

TINY DISASTERS: CONFESSIONS OF AN AUTISTIC PROFESSOR

I want to help you and me and all of us to understand Autism better. If you have Autism, or if you don't have Autism, if you know someone or are married with someone or dating someone or raising someone or being raised by someone or employing someone or working for someone or teaching someone or being taught by someone or talking with someone in the grocery line, I want to help us all to understand. This is challenging because each of us autistics is so very different, and there is already so much misinformation piled in the way. Still, I can talk about some things that have happened to me or through me, and these tiny wonders and disasters may be useful in our larger conversation.

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When I was teaching a 6th grade Spanish class, I got up to pass back some papers, and my dear autistic student rushed forward to sit on my teacher stool at the front of the class. She furrowed her brow and gripped the sides of the stool, rocking and agitated, “You sit on the stool and everyone listens to you. I want to sit on the stool!”

When I was teaching in the 8th grade, at an end-of-year event with parents and teachers, one of my autistic students suddenly announced, rather loudly and with a flat affect, “You’re having an affair with Mrs. _____.” I was quite embarrassed: “No, no, I’m not, she’s married, and you can’t say things like that, and it’s not true!”

At a formal Thanksgiving dinner in Michigan, as I was passing the mashed potatoes, an autistic child pointed dramatically at me and my wife and exclaimed, “Why are they here!? You said only family. They’re not family! They’re not family!”

Each of these young people were simply speaking “the truth” as they saw it, yet by normative standards, these statements were awkward, ill-worded or poorly timed. When autistic youth commit social misdemeanors like these, we are able to understand and accommodate them. We certainly don’t punish them.

But these children have now grown up to be adults, and they will continue to make social “mistakes” like these, for the rest of their lives.

Are people so understanding of autistic adults? In my experience, the answer is *No*.

There is remarkable variety among autistic people. We are as varied as all the life in the sea and sky, yet we share common experiences as well. In many ways each of our unique personalities is shaped as a life-long negotiation between our *dna* and a world not designed for us, or by us. Our lives are in perpetual emergence as much as emergency.

When I was nineteen in Oklahoma, my first time in a bar for a college poetry reading, a woman wrote a seven digit number in blue ink on my thigh and smiled. I looked down at the number and looked back at her. I did not understand why she had done it, not for many years. But I do have a theory now. She wanted me to call the number!

What makes Autism a disability? Well, the three main areas for many of us are *interpersonal communication issues*, *sensory processing disorder*, and *executive dysfunction*. I will try to show how these three phenomena are always present in me, how they braid together, overlap, compound and magnify one another in classrooms and meetings and restaurants. I’ll be using my own life experiences to explore

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