Ability:

Emerging from the Social Constraints on Neurodivergence and Disability

Front cover and interior illustrations and photographs by Andrew Coltrin. That is an actual scan of Andrew's brain on page 10. If you find anything troubling in there, please let me know. Back cover by Star Coltrin. All rights reserved. Multiple copies available at bulk discounts. Please enquire for more information.

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Preface

A little over four years ago, at the suggestion of a fellow autistic zinester and publisher, Joe Biel, I put together a zine compiling what I had learned from my own diagnosis journey. I called it ***a is for aspergers***. No capital letters. No apostrophe. Just my own thoughts on how best to explain the many terms and concepts I felt it would be helpful for other people to know more about. I arranged it in the form of a glossary, with definitions of terms arranged alphabetically. These were my own definitions seasoned with my personal commentary.

I released my zine out into the world and got an amazing amount of positive feedback. Parents told me it helped them understand their children. Autistic teens told me it helped them understand why their parents didn't understand them. Lots of people liked the way I added humor and sensitivity to what was for them a very scary topic.

The zine was picked up by distros on both sides of the Atlantic. I made new contacts, impressed new friends and old, and grew more comfortable with my own sense of identity as an autistic person. It was wonderful.

It was also all wrong. Not 100% wrong. The zine just wasn't as perfect as I'd have liked it to be. This is actually a normal feeling for an author to have. But on top of that, I immediately found myself disagreeing with some of the things I'd written. I wanted to write a revision or follow up, but, for some reason, had real trouble finding the inspiration over the next four years.

As luck would have it, this past October I was approached by Anna Stenning. She explained a bit about her research into autistic life writing at the University of Leeds. It all sounded very interesting. She then asked me if I'd be up for writing another zine.

Of course I would.

This zine is arranged differently. It's a series of thematically linked vignettes that can either be read straight through as a single narrative, or the pages many be browsed and enjoyed in no particular order. Reader's choice.

A is for Ability

I'm choosing to focus on the the word 'ability'. I am not denying the problems of 'ablist' and 'disablist' attitudes that others so justly fight against. It makes me angry. And I just can no longer be angry all the time when I talk about autism and neurodiversity.

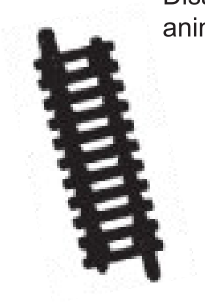
The anger actually makes it harder for me to function. My joints become inflamed and my vision becomes clouded with auras. My tinnitus and irritability get way worse. To be effective I have to come at this work from another direction.

I need different language, so I'm reclaiming the word 'ability'. Traditionally, the literature about autism and the other varieties of neurodivergence have relied pretty heavily on medical language. Words like *diagnosis* and *disability, deficit* and *disorder,* riddle their pages. They are also pretty loaded, leading the conversatation to how terrible life can be when someone is disabled. It's hard not to become angry or frightened just reading it. We are missing out on some really important truths when we get stuck on all these 'd'-words.

First of all, it sets us up for the very false assumption that disability is a rare thing. It is not. Historically, at the beginning of the 2020s, we have an opportunity to be honest with ourselves about how common disability truly is.

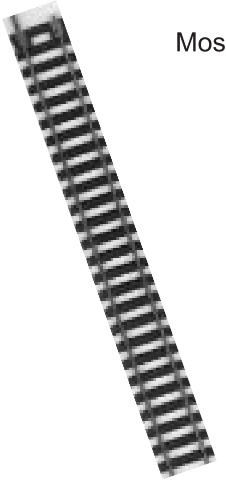
In the time of the COVID pandemic, *we've all been disabled*. None of us can do all the things we want to. All of us have difficult feelings about the way we feel limited. And some of us actually find it's a relief to be able to wear a mask in public.

Disability is a very normal experience in the course of any animal's life. Face it.



The nature of ability is not permanent. It isn't even how we start out in life. Look at a newborn baby. Any baby. They have almost no ability. They can breathe and scream and poop. That's it. A lot of them aren't even able to eat right at the beginning.

And yet no one thinks of newborns as disabled… mostly.

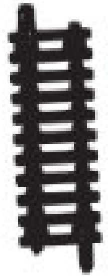


Mostly we don't think of them as disabled.

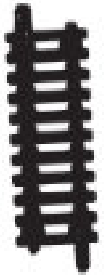
My aunt Dorothy was born severely affected by cerebral palsy back in 1958. It was a different time. My grandparents did what they could, but they were also told by doctors and experts not to expect much. Dorothy was the 11th child of 12, so they already had a lot to do. Everyone assumed a lifetime of diapers was what would happen. However, a few years down the line when my grandmother was potty training the youngest, my uncle Bobbie, Dorothy expressed an interest in learning, too. And she did. Rather quickly.

She gained an important, essential ability because my grandmother listened to her. People don't always listen.

This wasn't a miracle and it wasn't the single thing that added full functionality to her life. Dorothy's motor skills and speech articulation were very impacted. She spent most of her life in a wheelchair. Most people assumed she was intellectually as well as physically disabled, and didn't bother to listen to her. People make a lot of assumptions when you're in a wheelchair.



People also make a lot of assumptions when you're not in a wheelchair. It's not obvious to others that I have frequent periods of inability. I can manage them most of the time, but they are very real. And it took me decades to figure out how to structure my life in a way to maximize my 'abled' times. I'm hoping to have a few decades more before my ability wanes with age, but it could come sooner. I could have another year like 2012, when multiple major life stressors led to sensory issues so extreme I thought I was going blind.

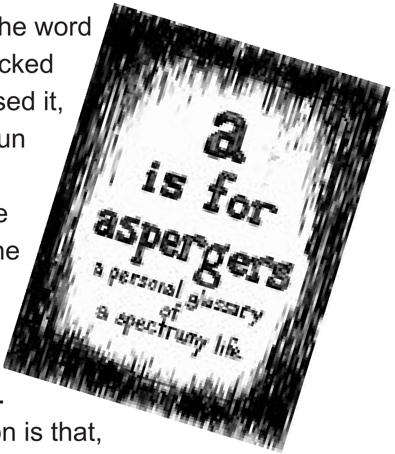


Luckily, that wasn't the case. But it was very hard to let myself take the time I needed to recover. I was very new in my understanding of my autistic nature. I was still looking at my life through a disability lens. I was still hating myself for not being able to do everything.

Honestly, this pandemic has been a real relief. I'm just like everybody else. Nobody is able to do everything. We're all only able to do some things. For now let's put aside the 'd'-words and focus on what we can do.

goodbye, aspergers?

When I wrote ***a is for aspergers*** I was being a little cutesy with the title. I definitely wanted to get away from words like ‘syndrome’ and ‘disorder’ in how I was presenting myself. The terminology of autism was changing within the diagnostic manuals. Within autistic communities there were also conversations about how do we best represent ourselves.



In an effort to be approachable, I used the word ‘spectrumy’ on the cover. It’s a word I picked up on Twitter. I don’t remember who posed it, or I’d give them credit. I thought it was fun and mostly harmless. I tried it out as something clever that would lead people into the book. For a while I even used the word ‘spectrumy in conversation.

I don’t anymore. I’ve changed my mind about that word, and the word Asperger. For multiple reasons. The biggest reason is that, terms like “Asperger’s” and “on the spectrum” are the things people say when they are afraid to use the word autism.

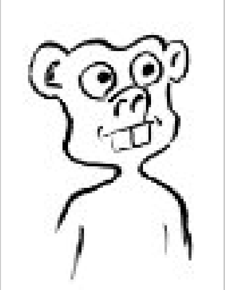
I’m tired of that. I’m tired of being afraid when I talk about who I am.

When I talked to Kirsten Lindsmith, who was involved in Alex Plank’s YouTube series “Autism Talk TV,” I asked her about how she feels about disclosing her autism with new people. She didn’t miss a beat when she told me she was “autism forward” when starting a new job. Better to put it out front so when an issue comes up people know what they’re dealing with.

Disclosure…

…has been a real bugbear for me. When to disclose? When not to disclose? Who am I safe around? Is autism part of my public self, or only my private self? The disclosure bugbear really had me on the run when I wrote that previous zine.

bugbear - a cause of obsessive fear, irritation, or loathing. Not to be confused with Booger Bear, pictured below.



I created an alter ego, Partly Robot, to credit as the author of ***a is for aspergers***. I buried my name in the copyright notice I don’t feel the best about that choice either. But… that’s where I was at.

I was still in the autism closet. I had only disclosed my autism to my family, close friends, and a few people at work. I was confused and scared and afraid people would think less of me if they knew I was “on the spectrum.”

But living in that closet didn’t serve me well. All it did was create another layer of anxiety on top of all the other layers I was struggling with.

I wrote ***a is for aspergers*** completely alone, in the metaphorical dark, and sometimes in an actual closet during my breaks at my day job. When I started this zine, I knew I wanted to come from a place of strength, not a place of fear. And I didn’t want to write from the confines of a closet again.

With that in mind, I reached out to other autistic people. I even conducted a few fumbling interviews. I intentionally sought out autistic people with different life experiences who were of different genders and ages than myself. I wanted to make sure I wasn’t just a crazy old man shouting from my cave.

The more people I talked to, the more I knew I belonged with them. And the more I knew Kirsten’s stance of being “autism forward” was one I wanted to take. I don’t want to hide behind euphemisms like “Asperger’s” or “being on the spectrum.”

In print and online people describe the differences between autistics and neurotypicals as being very much like cultural differences. This, might be oversimplifying, but it's not entirely wrong. I'm not sure there is an overarching autism culture as much as there is an autistic through-line in humanity that crosses cultural divides.

Almost every time I find myself in conversation with other autistic people, no matter their culture or national background, I find myself refreshingly at ease. As if I'm in familiar territory no matter how far from home I may be. Knowing that the person I'm talking to will still accept me if I stutter or stim or start to monologue. Knowing that it's someone I can actually be myself around.

Âû is for Autistic Identity

That acceptance of your true self, your true identity is very important. When I was hiding in the closet, I was avoiding any situation where I ran the risk of not being accepted.

One of the most frustrating things is when you tell someone you're autistic and they turn around and try to explain to you why you're wrong. It's almost as bad as having your humanity questioned. Having experienced both of these humiliations, it was quite terrifying for me to think about leaving the comfort of that closet.

But the closet was lonely. Despite the stereotypes, I do like being in the company of other people. I don't always understand them, and they don't always understand me. But I've always craved their acceptance and understanding.

And the very real thing that I had to learn is that no one is going to accept or understand me until I understand and accept myself.

That's what being "autism forward" means to me. It's not a cultural standpoint. It's not a radical activist attitude. It is simply knowing yourself and not hiding it – it's an identity.

A few years ago I began noticing people putting the suffix Âû after their names. I found it very interesting, It was definitely an autism forward identity marker. Those accents make the letters say their name, so it's pronounced "ay-you." Easy!

La Lionne Âû at the Âutistic Ûnion Facebook page was happy to tell me more:

"Why the symbol of Âû: Well, not only is Âû the first 2 letters in Âûtism, and also the abbreviation for Âutistic Ûnion, but it is also the periodical symbol for gold.

Gold (specifically the element) is a powerful representation of all Âûtistic people. Gold is one of the most valuable alloys in existence - not just in monetary ways but a larger number of ways that most people don't know, realize, or appreciate.

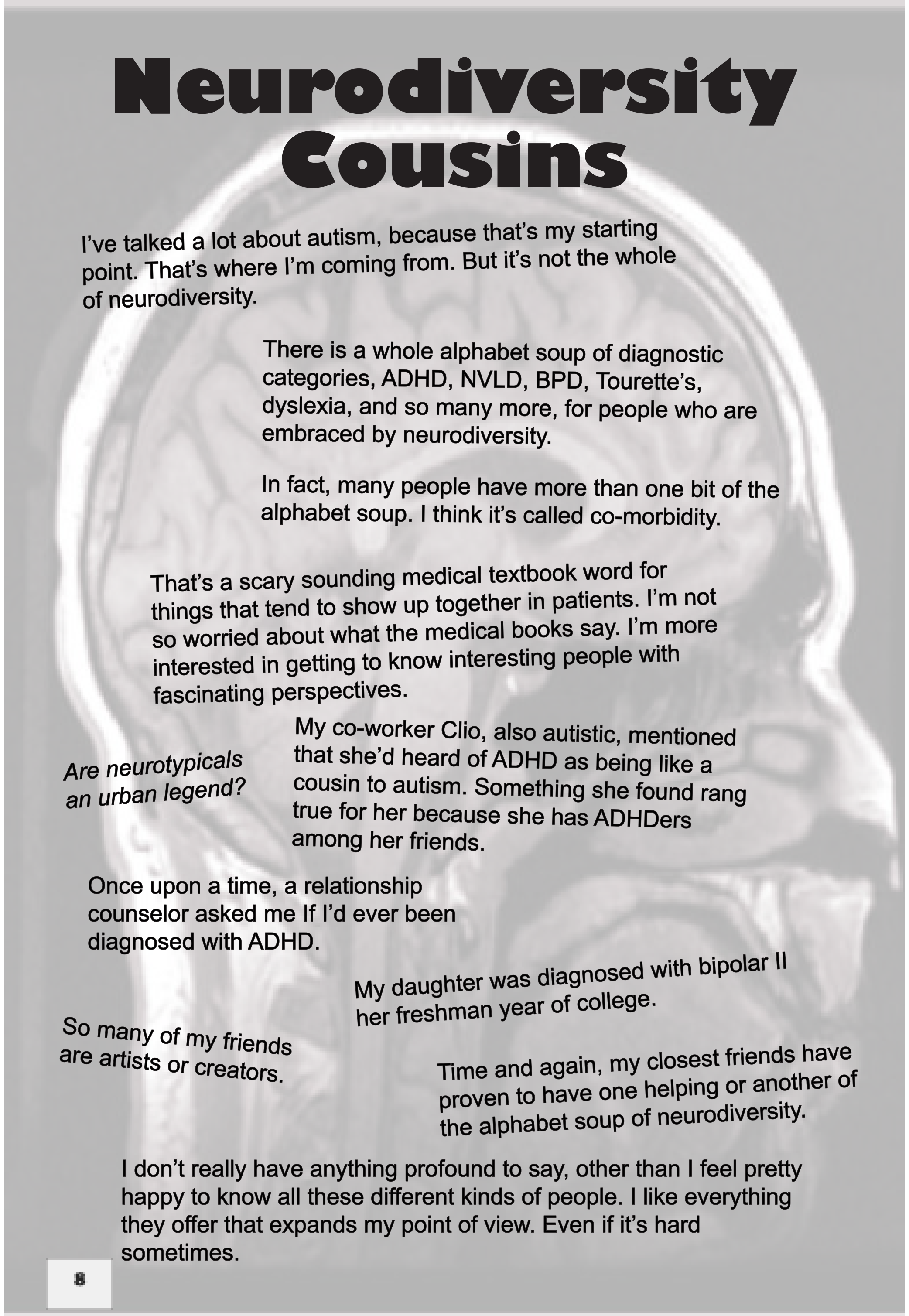
Gold doesn't tarnish over time, is non-toxic, conducts electricity, and its versatility makes it invaluable. It comes in all forms and colors, and exists in almost every aspect of life. Currency, decor, cosmetics, computers, cell phones, dentistry, glassmaking, aerospace, electronics, jewelry, building, manufacturing, food and drink, and the list goes on.

Gold is also found in a variety of ways. Whether discovering lost treasures, finding it gathering in a river, or digging deep into the earth to find the hidden. Gold is found almost everywhere. And there's the gold that is found and remains unrecognized, because its encrusted with soil and other things that render it hidden from those without to expertise to recognize what they are looking at.

For those reasons, and more, we feel that that represents who were are. We are everywhere - in every form and color. We are woven throughout life in places where we are lauded and places where we are not even recognized. Vital in every part of life, we aren't going away and are just looking for where want to be. We are spotted as being different, but not always recognized for who we are or our true value/s. Each and everyone of us are unique and valuable in our own way.

All pure gold.

That's why "Pure gold, baby" has been one of my taglines."



Neurodiversity Cousins

I’ve talked a lot about autism, because that’s my starting point. That’s where I’m coming from. But it’s not the whole of neurodiversity.

There is a whole alphabet soup of diagnostic categories, ADHD, NVLD, BPD, Tourette’s, dyslexia, and so many more, for people who are embraced by neurodiversity.

In fact, many people have more than one bit of the alphabet soup. I think it’s called co-morbidity.

That’s a scary sounding medical textbook word for things that tend to show up together in patients. I’m not so worried about what the medical books say. I’m more interested in getting to know interesting people with fascinating perspectives.

Are neurotypicals an urban legend?

My co-worker Clio, also autistic, mentioned that she’d heard of ADHD as being like a cousin to autism. Something she found rang true for her because she has ADHDers among her friends.

Once upon a time, a relationship counselor asked me If I’d ever been diagnosed with ADHD.

My daughter was diagnosed with bipolar II her freshman year of college.

So many of my friends are artists or creators.

Time and again, my closest friends have proven to have one helping or another of the alphabet soup of neurodiversity.

I don’t really have anything profound to say, other than I feel pretty happy to know all these different kinds of people. I like everything they offer that expands my point of view. Even if it’s hard sometimes.

I hope that neurodiversity cousins and others feel welcomed and respected by this zine. Even in our differences, we still have a lot in common. The more we share openly with ourselves and others, the more tools we find to help us manage all the things. There are so many things.

For example,

the thing no one tells you …

Whether you were diagnosed as a child or as an adult, or never formally diagnosed with anything, there is still a lot dishonesty that needs to be overcome. The biggest piece of dishonesty that I see in the US education system is that privacy is more important than reality. This is a reflection of a warped social value we have that, with the right amount of practice and applied work ethic, everyone should be able to perform in society as indistinguishable from peers.

This is a lie that the USA tells itself. It is in line with the 19th Century story of immigrant assimilation into a big, culturally indistinct melting pot. It’s the lie that makes it harder for us to understand why someone would want to speak a different language at home. It’s the lie that makes everyone who knows they don’t measure up quietly hate themselves. I’m sure lots of countries have similar lies, but the United States has it bad right now.

The main result is an allistic society that doesn’t honestly accept people for who they are and tries to train them to be who they aren’t.

A lot of kids who receive special services don’t know why. A lot of them have not even been told they have a disability.

When you don’t know that most other people really aren’t trying as hard as you are to “be normal,” it’s devastating. You feel like a failure as a person. You avoid anything that makes you feel overwhelmed or uncomfortable. You withdraw. You melt down. Your body rebels against you. Your sensory issues become magnified.

And then you feel even more like of a failure as a person.

Is it a wonder then that autistic people have a higher rate of death by suicide than the overall population?

The Trouble With Social Skills Education

I was diagnosed well into adulthood, but I work in schools. In fact, it was working in schools that gave me the impetus to seek out my diagnosis. During one miserable year I worked as a Language Arts Teacher at a charter school. In a classroom full of twenty-four 7th grade students, the only one whose peer-to-peer social interactions I could actually understand was the one with autism listed on his IEP.

It was a clue. Not the first clue. Not the last one either.

The more I worked in schools, the more I worked with autistic students. And the more I worked with autistic students, the more I figured out about myself.

I was a secret agent for a long time. I was not as open about being autistic as I am now. I hid it a lot of times. Mostly, I observed and tried to do no harm.

But I saw over and over again practices that I disagreed with. One of them was the social skills classes.

See, from my perspective, most of the the 24 students in that 7th grade class were demonstrating the worst social skills in the world. Only the autistic student was getting social skills instruction in school. And he was very confused as to why the other 23 were not behaving the way Ms Peggy was teaching him in his social skills class.

As I moved from working as a teacher to working as a special education paraprofessional, I kept seeing confused and frustrated teenagers forced to take social skills classes that they obviously found demeaning and painful..

I've also seen autistic students be reprimanded for behaviors that were clearly in response to disruptive behaviors that neurotypical students were engaged in.

The biggest reason I need to come out as autistic in my day job is so I can point out when "social skills instruction" becomes gaslighting.

Because I have become very upset at work over this and I need my colleagues to know where it comes from.

And it's not just my isolated opinion as one autistic person. I talked to autistic adults who had received special education services in childhood.

One of them, Clio, stated that she felt social skills instruction in schools tended to be very gendered. This wasn't something I was expecting. She explained that boys who spent a lot of time on their own at recess were often encouraged to join other boys in sports, while girls were guided towards other, more traditionally feminine activities.

Another individual, Sam, said that they always felt the questions in social skills classes must have some trick involved. Often the question posed would have a very obvious answer. Sam's gut feeling would be that a teacher wouldn't be asking them a question if the answer was obvious. So Sam would spend a long time forming a response as they looked for more difficult answer that wasn't there. This kind of ordeal would make Sam feel less confident in how to handle hypothetical social situations presented in the social skills class.

Clio, who also works in special education,had this to add:

> ***I feel like there is a difference between social skills as in "how not to make people miserable" and "how to get what you want without hitting someone" and social skills as in "how to be indistinguishable from peers." A lot of people conflate expected behavior with non-harmful behavior, rather than acknowledging that sometimes what is unexpected doesn't hurt anyone.***

Failing at 'Normal' **is not** Failing at Life

Originally I wanted to make a section called Making your Meltdowns Work for You. It was going to be a humorous look at an unavoidable aspect of my life: meltdowns.

They are embarrassing, painful, distressing, and often make make me feel like I'll never be able to 'person' again.

You see, it's just like I was talking about on the previous page.

So meltdowns are pretty much what happens when a combination of stress, sensory bombardment, confusion, anxiety, hunger, or whatever else life might be throwing at me that is just too much.

It's happened in grocery stores and campgrounds. Bus stops, airport security lines. Even at my job. Any time too much has been on my mind to keep it from screaming to the top.

One time the pharmacy switched manufacturers on my meds and they did not work right. I had a full blown lapse of reason in a rental car office. I accused the manager of "trying to destroy me." (He was only trying to overcharge me.) But I was not able to advocate for myself well. Luckily I realized what I needed was to take a long walk and had no business driving a car in that state of mind. The manager was more than happy to cancel the rental.

Every time it happens I get scared that I can't possibly survive in this world alone.

But I'm not alone. I've made sure to cultivate a group of caring and understanding folks in my life. And I've learned that the more honest I am with myself, the more I communicate what's going on with those close to me, the more I look for the signs and indications that a meltdown might be coming on, the better I am at getting through them. I'm not saying it's easy, just that it's possible.

Visual Language

You know that old autism stereotype, "thinking in pictures." It's not really true for all of us. For some of us it's music. For some it's math. For some their thinking happens on a level of abstraction I could never explain. For me, I definitely do a lot of visual thinking. It can take me a long time to put my thoughts into words. Drawing is almost always part of my writing process. Before I figured out I was autistic, I became fixated on the comic book as an medium of self-expression. Rather than write about how comics are an important part of how I figure things out, I thought I'd just show you.


Drew, Why are you talking about me like I'm not even here?
Sorry, Booger Bear. Sometimes I forget who's in the room.
Weird
And what's all this talk about ability?
Well, about ten years ago, I figured out that I have a... a... ...disability.
Only, I don't like to think of it that way.
A disability? All I see is that you've got gray hair now.
The gray hair is new, but I've always had autism. It's why I've always had trouble with certain things.
But Drew, You can't be disabled. You have a job.
And a college degree.
Why do people say things like that?
Woah! What's that face?
No... It's complicated.
Sometimes I make weird faces when I'm thinking real hard.
Are you mad at me?
Making "normal" faces takes some brain power.
But you've stumbled onto my point. So much of the public conversation about autism and other neurodiversities focuses on symptoms and struggles.. 'disabilities.'
I'm tired of feeling submerged in all the disability-centered neurodiversity narratives out there.
Stories full of deficit-based diagnoses, denial, loneliness, and anger. Can't we talk about something else when we talk about autism?

Emerging, Not Curing

I have to credit Kirsten Lindsmith for expressing the powerful statement that "anyone can emerge from disability." I want to clarify the context a bit. Kirsten was specifically talking about the clashing viewpoints of "cure" vs. "never cure" among some people in the autism world.

She elaborated: "*This to me is a counter from the idea of "cure" or "overcoming disability" since cure is impossible and the overcome wording implies something too permanent for my liking. I mean this in the sense that even if you are disabled, and will ALWAYS be disabled, you can emerge from your shell and be a part of the world. Like, working through it instead of around it, if that makes sense*."

It totally makes sense to me. This idea that, with the right supports, anyone can emerge from disability is amazingly powerful. And it needs to be understood that there are varying degrees of disability. This is not a being unrealistic about the extent of some people's physical, neurological, or societal limitations. Rather it's something to aspire to. If anyone can find tools or therapies that help them emerge from any of the the obstacles to their ability, it's a good thing.

More from my chat with Kirsten Lindsmith...

When I started this project, I made it a priority to get some perspectives from autistic people of different ages and gender than myself. I first became aware of Kirsten several years ago through her participation in Alex Plank's "Autism Talk TV" web series. I talked with her by phone on March 1st, 2021. Our talk was really helpful in confirming my thoughts in a lot of areas.

One difference in our experiences is that Kirsten was diagnosed much younger than I was, when she was a freshman in college. I asked if she was offered any useful supports as a result. She registered with Disability Services at her school, but they weren't exactly helpful.

"I was assigned a case worker who would ask, 'What do you need?' I don't know what I need, I have a disability that makes it hard for me to know what I need."

Disability Services offered what they knew how to do: note-taking assistance and extra time on assignments. But, note-taking wasn't the problem, and who doesn't love extended deadlines? The sensory bombardment from being in a crowded lecture hall or laboratory classroom were providing the barriers to success in classes, not her ability to learn the academic content.

Kirsten went on to talk about how many of the disabling aspects to being autistic really stem from factors in the physical, social, cultural and infrastructural environments .

"For example: My friend whose son couldn't be "potty trained" even as a teenager solved the problem by installing a Japanese squat toilet for him. Overhead lights hurt me, but if I'm allowed to turn off the overhead lights and turn on a lamp instead, I can be comfortable in an office. Hand-flapping isn't disabling, unless other people think you're weird because of it and then them treating you badly is the "disability." And so on."

Practice vs. Study

My gut feel is that an artificial environment like a classroom really isn't the best place to learn the skills for navigating social environments. The best social skills teaching I have seen has been embedded in Community Based Education (CBE) outings.

For two years I worked in a really excellent autism program at a high school in Tucson, Arizona. Community outings were a regular part of the program. They involved very simple things like going to a hardware store and asking where to find an item, then purchasing it. And, as we went, we would notice things in the environment that might cause sensory issues or safety concerns and figure out strategies. We'd anticipate, model, scaffold, and pull back. As they progressed through the program some students would volunteer at local organizations and take internships that lead to jobs after high school.

This is what I consider successful social skills instruction. It was instruction that built abilities that were useful to students outside of the sheltered environment of the classroom.

As someone who was undiagnosed and academically competent in high school, I struggled with all of these social skills well into adulthood. My biggest wish for my younger self is that I could have had help getting this specific kind of practice and knowledge. As it is, I had to figure it out on my own.

Are friends steam powered?

Now, for no other reason then because I like it, a picture of the Southern Pacific steam locomotive X4449. This steam engine was a point of pride for my family. A picture of it hung in our living room for years. That locomotive was kind of like a family member.

True Story.

When I was little I wanted to be R2-D2

Later on I really identified with Marvin the Paranoid Android from *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. And Hal-9000, while not strictly a robot, was pretty cool. But Siri gets on my nerves. I try and try, but some robots are just lame. I guess that's why I'm only Partly Robot.

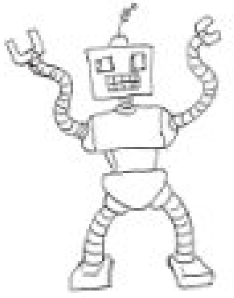
Robots are interesting. One of the autistic stereotypes is robot-like behavior. But it's not really actual robots that the stereotype is referencing. It's fictional robots, like the ones Isaac Asimov wrote about. I have a robot vacuum cleaner at home. The silly thing violates Asimov's First Law of Robotics every time it runs over my foot. Actual robots and fictional ones are very different. We would be wise to remember this.

Fiction is actually a very important way humans encode, relay, and decode sophisticated cultural and social information. And it's fun.

Or are friends electric?

It has been argued elsewhere that a lot of fiction authors through the ages were possibly autistic. It has also been argued elsewhere that reading fiction actually improves empathy skills.

Fine. Probably true. But I have other fish to fry.



First of all, I need to go on the record with what I'm afraid might be a very controversial stance: Lt. Data from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is not my favorite fictional robot.

He tries far too hard to be human. He's okay, but he's kind of stuck on the 'there's only one way to be human' paradigm.

My favorite fictional robot is Abed Nadir on the television show *Community*. He's not actually a robot. But he has a very non-traditional set of social skills, based largely on his knowledge of movie and TV tropes. He reminds me of myself when I was in community college. He doesn't try to be a human. He is a human. He just has very unique and interesting ways of connecting to the rest of his community. His friends value him and love him. He doesn't compromise who he is, even if he kind of acts like a robot sometimes. Just like R2-D2. We could hang out.

The longer finale piece about identity, pronouns, gender, and why it's so important to have the right language to be who you are

As I began researching this project on redefining ability, the intersectionality between trans and autistic identities presented itself again and again. I've talked to adult autistic people who identify themselves as gender non-conforming, or are trans, or, in the case of myself, I've long thought of myself as the non-gendered pilot of a gendered meat robot. Sort of confused and ambivalent toward gender.

There is also a common language processing glitch among autistics, usually more pronounced among children who haven't learned how to compensate for it yet, that confuses binary word pairs. Young autistics will often say 'I' when they mean 'you,' or vice versa. Or directional word pairs will get flipped. I guarantee you that, intellectually, I do very much know the profound difference between left and right and what those words signify. But if I am speaking aloud while also performing another task involving any sort of brain power, odds are my mouth will say "right" when I mean "left."

And, when other people are speaking about people not present, I can very quickly lose track of who they are talking about if they rely too heavily on third person pronouns. And if they are talking in a group and say "you," well, I could spend hours trying to solve the puzzle of which "you" they are talking about because, odds are, I wasn't following their eyes.

Which brings up my confusion with the use of the word *they* as a third-person singular pronoun. Which is to say, *they* isn't personal enough for my liking if you're talking about a specific person. It's fine if you are talking about an undefined *them*, I can handle *they* being used as a totally vague placeholder for someone of whose identity I am not sure. But if you use *they* to refer to a single, specific person, I get almost exactly as confused as I do with right and left. Which is publicly embarrassing for me. And also publicly embarrassing for the non-binary identifying person for whom singular *they* is their preferred pronoun.

And that's my biggest problem with singular *they*... I have a language processing glitch that already makes it harder for me to say the right pronouns. It is not their problem, it is my problem. I have the ability to take ownership of it. I have the power to set aside my public embarrassment and say "I apologize. I really do want to call you what you want to be called. I just have a speaking tic that messes up my words from time to time."

The more I meet and interact with people who take *they/them* as their pronouns, the easier it gets. I give myself a lot of permission to make mistakes if I know I'm trying to learn. At the same time, learning these new pronoun usages is causing me to explore my own relationship with the pronouns I go by.

You know I hate to ask...

A younger me first explored the internet in the days of dial-up connections and baud squawks. At the time, when all you had was text, I reveled in the thought that my mind was finally in a place that was free from gender and sex. I was naïve. The internet proved to be no such place. I resigned myself to the realities of my meat robot.

... But are electric friends gendered?

But now, after another quarter century as the non-gendered pilot of a gendered meat robot, I find myself wondering what pronoun really makes sense for myself. Mostly I let people call me by “he/him” because it’s easy. It doesn’t hurt me and I don’t have to explain anything. I don’t feel like it’s entirely accurate, but it doesn’t get in my way either. My meat robot has light skin and male genitalia which means more doors are opened to me than are closed in this world.

It’s pretty fucked up.

I have an easy way to fit in as normal because I don’t have to do anything to prove a maleness that is visibly presented by my body. One of the few times it posed a problem was when a housemate laughed at me when I expressed interest in going to the lesbian bar she was talking about.

And I suppose there was that year I stayed home from work to care for my infant daughter. So many random middle-aged women came up to me in public to make sure I was competent to be left alone with a child.

At the time these things were confusing. But they weren’t every day. If every day I were questioned about my ability to be in a space or take on a role just because my behaviors did not conform to the dominant culture’s expectations of me based on the meat robot I’m piloting, I’d feel harassed and persecuted.

I don’t want anyone to feel harassed and persecuted because I mess up their pronouns. I’m scared I’ll mess up and upset people. I’ll try my best. I’ll also wonder and explore.

I’ve found that curiosity is often the best approach to difficult situations. So I’ll ask more questions. Not all of them are rhetorical. Of course, some of them are.To begin with…

What is the function of a pronoun?

Is the purpose of a pronoun to confirm gender? No. It’s just a placeholder word to help the language flow quickly.

Other languages have fuller sets of case and gender markers that make the nouns and adjectives and verbs agree. Those are languages in which all the nouns have genders (in some languages those genders don’t actually align with biological sex, but more with status and function). English has lost a lot of those markers.

Over the centuries English speakers have absorbed too many words from too many other languages to bother keeping up with gender agreement between nouns and the adjectives that describe them. The only place English still has gender is in the personal pronouns.

Which means, in English, personal pronouns are very personal.

So why don’t we expand them?

Why do we let the grammar books and the academic publishing style guides prevent our set of personal pronouns from growing and becoming more precise and useful?

I suppose this precision problem is another reason I feel ambivalent about using singular *they*. I feel like adding more meanings to *they* makes it less precise as a word. It feels more like a compromise rather than progress. But, again, this is my problem, not their problem. *They* is not the pronoun I choose for me. *They* doesn't match with my concept of myself any more than *he* does, so using it does not solve a problem for me.

However, not everything is about me.

For many other people, it's not just a question of perceived grammatical awkwardness. For them, as my friend Heidi Esbensen put it, "it's a matter of life or death." .

Heidi has worked with trans and queer and all the colors of the rainbow, both professionally and in volunteer work, for years and years. I talked with Heidi and her trans-masculine non-binary identifying teenager, E, about the importance of others recognizing and validating identity in language. And I again apologize for any of my misuse of the language on this topic as I am still learning.

When I talk about trans and non-binary and gender non-conforming people, I am trying to not leave anyone out. I mean to include anyone who feels the traditional gendered social constructs do not fit them. E pointed out their experience at a GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) Summit where six different genders were in the gender neutral restroom at the same time.

I want people of all six of those genders, and any others, to know I'm thinking about them as I write this. I'll try to use the right words, but like I said before, left and right still confuse me sometimes.

Luckily, talking to Heidi and E was anything but confusing. In many ways it was like looking into a mirror. They (plural) recounted instance after instance of trans experiences I could relate to as an autistic person.

One of the first things Heidi mentioned was the higher rate of death by suicide among trans people. Which, as I mentioned earlier, is also a trend among autistic people.

Trans people also suffer from the rigors of the social performance of "passing" just to get by in the world. The stakes for passing are incredibly high. Trans people are regularly the targets of challenges to both their identity and their physicality. This struggle to pass sounds familiar to many autistic people who've felt the need to use their social masking skills to get through a trip to the grocery store or a day of work. The exhaustion and burnout from trying to fit into a social world that refuses to accept the core of your identity is very much a common issue for trans and autistic people alike.

In fact, for almost every point of social struggle trans and non-binary people have, there is similar social struggle for autistic people. This is not at all surprising to me. I suspected it before this research, and have had it continually affirmed: there is a huge intersectionality between gender issues and autism issues.

How does using the right pronoun affect ability?

Over the course of our talk, Heidi was able to give me an answer that I can find no fault with. “Ability to function in society increases when you can be who you are. You’re not going to be successful if you are constantly expending all your effort trying to pass for something you’re not.”

So using the right pronouns for people is a really big deal. We allow people to function to their best ability when we allow them to be their true selves. This non-gendered pilot of a gendered meat robot is really happy with that answer. But what is my best pronoun?

I’m still thinking about it. Some people use *xe* or *ey* or *co*. Those all sound pretty cool. I might try them out. But I also start to think about how my identity is Partly Robot. Maybe it’s time for some robot pronouns. I think *bot* would make a good pronoun for robots. I asked Heidi’s younger offspring, Smalls, and they suggested adding *botty* for girl robots, which was something I hadn’t thought of. I was assuming bot would be a non-binary pronoun. But hey, why not? If robots want to identify as female, who am I to stop them? And then I thought of a new option. A pronoun that has more to do with a different aspect of identity aside from sex. A true non-binary autistic pronoun.

For a few years now I’ve noticed that some autistic people have been adding the Autistic Union identifier, Âû, to the ends of their names. Pronounced like “ay-you.” It has potential. It’s short, simple, specific, and personal. It definitely appeals to the non-gendered pilot part of my identity. So maybe that could work for me. Âû as a non-gendered autistic pronoun.

Those circumflex accents are going to be tough with an American keyboard though. Maybe I’ll drop them eventually, or maybe I’ll switch to a European keyboard layout.

The meat robot part of my identity is a little worried about confusing people, so I think I’ll double the pronouns up. I’ve seen people do that.

I think this works for me: he/him/Âû.

Recently, one of the counselors at my day job offered to make all the staff preferred pronoun buttons, I asked for the one pictured to the right.

Wearing it led to a lot of really positive conversations with my coworkers. A lot of them didn’t know before this that I was autistic. People make a lot of assumptions. The button helped challenge assumptions in a quiet, simple way. It was amazing to feel my identity validated just by wearing a button. Of course, I work in a school where the greater situational context was that of supporting students who have challenges expressing their own gender identities. But the overlap is real.

Could Âû actually come into use as a pronoun? Or is it doing fine just hanging out as an autistic identity marker? Only time will tell. I think there’s is a lot of potential. English is a super flexible language. There are so many possible variations: she/her/Âû, they/them/Âû, ze/Âû, just plain Âû.

Other autistics out there, what do you think? Want to join me in this experiment to make a new pronoun for us? Worst case, people will get confused. Best case, people will know that we insist on being who we are. And if we can be who we are, we can save all that energy we waste on pretending to be someone else.

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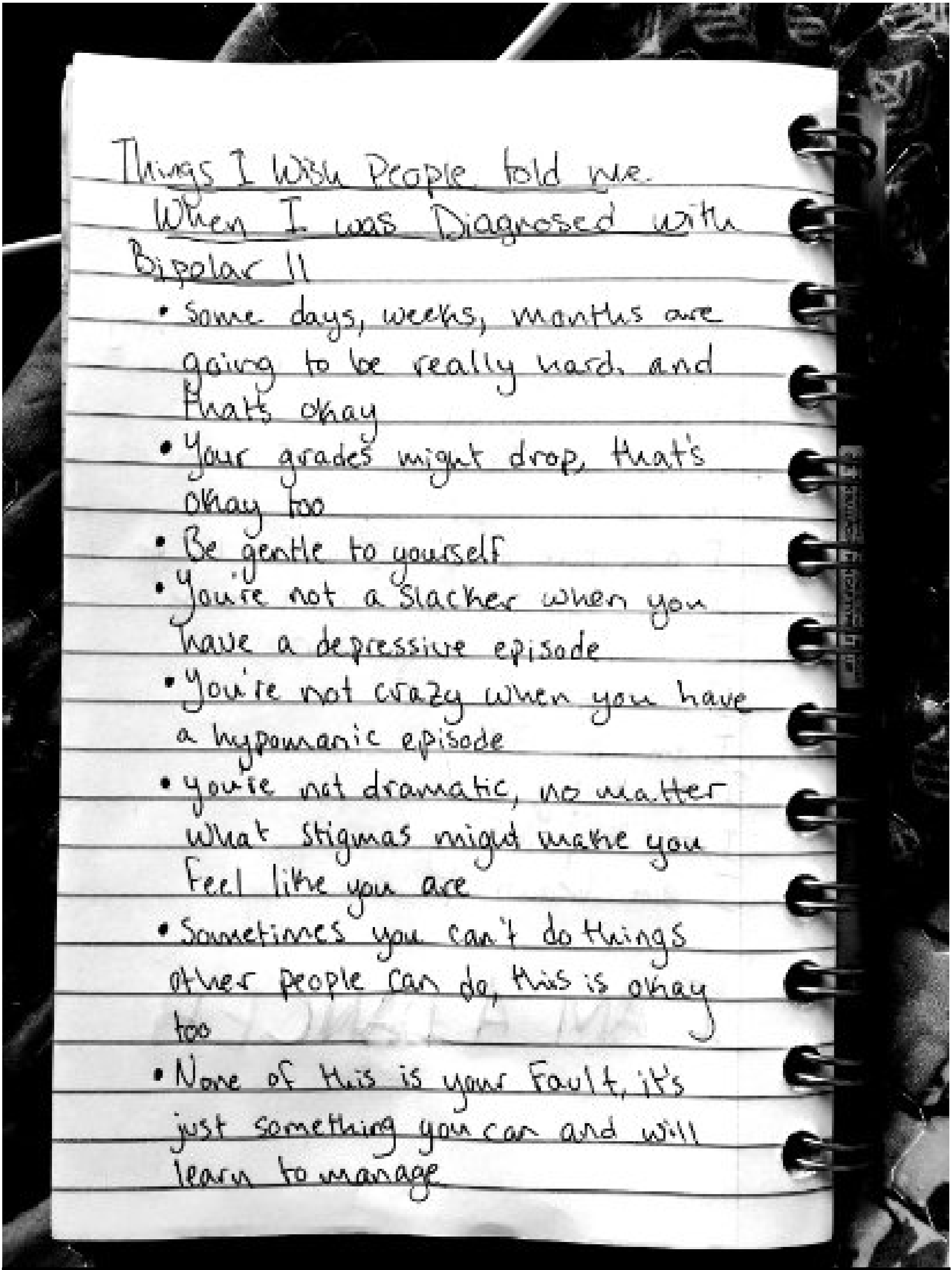
-Andrew, a.k.a. Partly Robot

Post Script: It’s hard to feel finished when I keep learning new things. Since composing the text I have learned a couple amazing new terms. One is **autigender** as a non-binary autistic gender identity. Another is **enby** as a term for a non-binary person. It’s simple, flows off the tongue, and could easily be used as a noun or adjective (or even as a pronoun). I better send this off to be printed before I learn a bunch more new things and want to include them, too.

Additional copies of this zine and my other zines, as well as Sasquatch Defender stickers, and information on my ongoing science fiction serial *Larry the Horrible Time Traveler,* can be found on my website:

www.partlyrobot.com



Things I Wish People told me When I was Diagnosed with Bipolar II

- Some days, weeks, months are going to be really hard, and that's okay
- Your grades might drop, that's okay too
- Be gentle to yourself
- You're not a slacker when you have a depressive episode
- You're not crazy when you have a hypomanic episode
- you're not dramatic, no matter what stigmas might make you feel like you are
- Sometimes you can't do things other people can do, this is okay too
- None of this is your fault, it's just something you can and will learn to manage