

Radio Towers

by Atlas Etienne

Sometimes people say online, “Stop making your autism your entire identity.” When people encounter me, with my flapping hands and noise-cancelling headphones, I wonder if that thought crosses their minds. My previous best friend hinted at that line of thought when I wouldn’t shut up about my Autistic friends on campus, as if he didn’t also lay claim to the title. But see, he was hesitant to be open or proud of being autistic; I can’t blame him, when I once felt the same.

The media has been the primary source of autism knowledge for a lot of people, but these characters, like Sheldon Cooper or the oft-cited Rain Man movie, represent a pretty small proportion of autistic people. Did you know that one of the professors in the English department is openly Autistic? How much do you think you know about autism? What assumptions do you still have about our lives? Now that I know (and can explain) better, I sometimes wish people would ask me what the experience of being A/autistic is like. And if they did, I’d have to warn them about the rant they’d be in for, so are they sure they’re ready for what I have to say? And maybe they’d change their mind, but I’d hope they’d let me talk anyway.

This is what I would tell them:

I’ve seen a lot of Autistic people refer to us as having a different operating system, like if most people use Windows or Mac, we run on Linux, and it works well for some things, but not quite the same things Mac or Windows are suited for. No better or worse, but surely different, and things don’t always translate well. I identify with this analogy the way I identify with androids, aliens, and changelings; close, but not my experience. Every autistic person feels it differently, so let me tell you what it’s like for me.

When I leave for the hour-long drive to the university campus in the morning, I must prepare myself. The fastest pathway starts with a maze of dirt roads, each with their own roadkill problem, and the loss of innocent life makes my chest ache. I have to leave my house a few minutes early whenever possible in case turtles are trying to cross the road; one time, I could save two turtles but not the third, who had already been hit. I cried on the way to class, mourning the creature in the small shell who wouldn’t even be there later, because turtles are resilient, and it takes more than road rash to stop them.

In elementary school I was afraid of most things; I was smart enough to know that horror movies were not reality, but logic didn’t stop the pounding of my heart or the surge of adrenaline I felt when I saw shadows moving in the hallway or when I closed my eyes and had intrusive memories of whatever had scared me, back to torment from within my own mind. Up to around that same age, I was a sleepwalker, and my pediatrician called it a side effect of being “gifted”;

my brain didn't turn off, he said. This did not do anything to help my parents when I almost sleepwalked out of the house and into the street. In any event, none of my pediatricians believed that someone could be both autistic and "gifted" around that time, so I didn't have the label that explained everything about me. They refused to believe I had ADHD until I got the diagnosis officially at age 20.

"Everything about me" refers to things like being incredibly gullible or having an almost obsessive interest in Hannah Montana for about two years. It refers to asking my uncle's girlfriend if she was pregnant again because she had gained a few pounds following her last child (in my defense, she *did* have another baby within a year of this comment). "Everything about me" also refers to the painful parts of being Autistic.

The most painful part of being Autistic is that everyone else knows that there's something quite different, odd, *weird* about you. Something wrong, even. Because you're meant to stop flapping your hands at a certain age, and you're supposed to outgrow your interests and understand how to be the gender everyone thinks you are. You're not supposed to care about bugs or pillows or a cool rock. You're not supposed to be upfront and ask people if they wanna be friends and what they're okay with, you're just supposed to intuit how many texts are too many and what times are too early or too late. You're just supposed to know, but you don't; you're missing the internal database that translates it for you, so you have to build it yourself, slowly, messily. And once people notice these things, once they see that you have to learn what is so natural to them, they make decisions about you, and it rarely ends well for you.

So when I tell people that more than 100 kids actively disliked me by the end of 5th grade, they assume it's an exaggeration, or that I must've done something to cause it. I struggle to blame my former classmates, but it took me until the end of high school to stop blaming myself, changing everything about myself as that number continued to grow. So when Irma and Elizabeth said I'd do better if I did my hair just *this* way, with the swoopy bangs, I let them, and then at PE, I changed it back because I didn't like it. When my classmates didn't like the not-uniform-but-technically-not-against-dress-code pants I wore, I switched to something more plain.

So many of my formative years were spent desperately trying to fit their definition of a human, or at least to be invisible enough that they didn't notice how different I was. In trying to match their definition of a human, I couldn't please them, and I stopped being able to please myself, or even be myself. That's the thing nobody tells you about being a "high-masking" autistic: even if you're bad at it, and you can't blend in for shit, you will keep trying until you lose yourself, and so now, I've had to spend the last four years trying to figure out who I am and what I want, free of other people's opinions. The hard part has been questioning what is actually annoying, awkward, bad, harmful, irritating, unusual, or weird, and then finding a way to break out of that judgmental mindset. One phrase that was off-limits until 2023? "I enjoy being friends with you."

So why have pride in being Autistic? Well, here's the thing:

When I talk about my Autistic friends and people ask why it matters that these friends are also Autistic, I should probably tell them that it's just nice to have people who get it, and being around them reminds me of being my core self, back when I was young and unwounded, smiling wide and loving openly. Some of my friends don't open up about their pre-college days or past friendships, which tells me that there's something fucked up chilling below the surface of who they are, like how I never asked Grandpa Larry about his war stories. Sometimes you just know a person isn't ready to talk about *it*. I think of the suppressed flinches, the avoidance of those topics, and I understand it so well that my own scars ache and burn. That hurt turns to anger as the core of me takes over, shouting, "How dare anyone hurt MY friend!" They were not mine yet, but that hardly matters; my urge to protect them is an acknowledgement that none of the mistreatment and hurt inflicted on any of us was ever okay or excusable.

But more than that, this misery is not the whole experience. I flap my hands because when I'm stressed it feels like relief, like letting out a breath I've been holding for way too long. When I'm already happy it feels like I'm letting the extra energy out through my fingertips. My emotions are like tidal waves, which is just fine when they're positive emotions. I care too much about inanimate objects like plush toys and pillows and this old glass bowl we've had for as long as I can remember, because they have a purpose and a history; someone spent time and energy learning how to make these things and then actually *did* it. Somebody loves it and believes it has utility. I see as much beauty in the manmade as in the natural, to the point that I've almost cried looking at a radio tower before and not because I have any particular feelings about radio towers, but because a group of people learned how to make these things, and then they created it, its own brand of perfection. The entire history of the human race went into that construction. How is that not beautiful?

... Did I just infodump about a radio tower? That's how you know I'm Autistic.