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## PROLOGUE

Dr Emiliios LEMONIATIS MBBS, BSc, AKC, MRCPsych

*Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist at The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, London*

Richard has impressed me both as a person and as a writer. In meeting and getting to know him I discovered someone who has had to learn about the rules of being a human almost from scratch... acquiring them the hard way, diligently writing about this journey for us all to see.

His book is a testament to the heart and spirit of people who have autism - a subject that is often overlooked by the media and some professionals working in this area.

I find it significant that most people are interested in the 'autistic mind' but clearly Richard reminds us of the importance of his heart which feels both pleasure and suffering like any other. Following his heart, along with his wish to understand and be understood, Richard used his intellect to map out a way of living that he uses and refines every day in being within his world. Fortunately, his propensity for sharing has allowed him to develop and offer this gift to the many clients he works with and those reading this book.

Not everything we read here is straightforward or easy to understand and that is wonderfully deliberate. Richard makes an audience wrestle with trials and tribulations to understand his own experiences and that of others like him.

This is not an autobiography in the traditional sense but a sharing of a state of mind - an invitation to both understand and communicate. It is also a subtle offer to many neuro-typical readers that through the course of absorbing his story they begin to change both personally and, if necessary, professionally.

## Testimonials

Richard Maguire is one of the most inspirational people I've had the privilege to know. Diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome as an adult, many might consider Richard to be 'mildly affected' by autism. He has extraordinary skills as a trainer, a wonderful sense of humour, drives a car, holds down a job and is married with a son. On the face of it, his life does not seem to have been overly troubled by autism. This outward appearance belies the extreme nature of the difficulties he faces and needs to overcome daily in order to succeed. Richard is a highly valued core member of our Autistic Training Team at Autism Oxford and I hope that his book reaches into the hearts and minds of those who can make a difference to people who, like him, live as actors on life's neuro-typical stage.

*Kathy Erangey, BPhil Autism, PE Cert ASC  
Managing Director - Autism Oxford, UK [www.autismoxford.org.uk](http://www.autismoxford.org.uk)*

Of all the autobiographies by people with autism that I've read, 'I Dream in Autism' is different. It isn't just an account of the author's (often painful) experiences but takes one right into the centre of what it feels like to be on the autistic spectrum. From the beginning Richard invites the reader into his head, to share his sensory distortions and goes on, 'Are we sitting uncomfortably? Then we are ready to begin.' My attention was grabbed. The ensuing text is long, meandering and at the same time, absolutely riveting. Personally, I find his technical descriptions of his cameras fascinating, especially where he is able to relate these to his ability to crystallise how he feels. Holding emotions through a viewfinder was a new idea to me and there were many others. Every teacher should read this book.

I Dream in Autism tells us just how misleading some current ideas about autism are:

1. People with autism do not feel emotion. Wrong!
2. People with autism do not have a sense of humour. Wrong!
3. Children with autism are 'lazy', 'naughty', 'stupid'. Wrong!
4. That 'being quiet' necessarily indicates improved behaviour rather than deeper withdrawal. Wrong. (I wrote this in a report about a child a few weeks ago before reading this book. I was told she was more tolerant of children kicking the patterns she was assembling on the floor and this indicated an improvement.)

*Phoebe Caldwell DSc*

**For my wife Julie**

**And my son Joshua**

***I love you both more than words can say***

*You cannot teach a man anything, you can only help him find it within himself.*

*Galileo Galilei*

*I never teach my pupils, I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn.*

*Albert Einstein*

*Outside of school, though, we were often defined by our disabilities. We were 'handicapped' a bit like a species. Often when people have a disability, it's the disability that other people see rather than all the other abilities that coexist with their particular difficulty. It's why we talk about people being 'disabled' rather than having a disability.*

*One of the reasons that people are branded by their disability is that the dominant conception of ability is so narrow. But the limitations of this conception affect everyone in education, not just those with 'special needs'.*

*These days, anyone whose real strengths lie outside the restricted field of academic work can find being at school a dispiriting experience and emerge from it wondering if they have any significant aptitudes at all.*

*Sir Ken Robinson*

*A Simple Trust - quiet, simple, unspoken, understood... void of complexity, free of ambiguity, all social cues removed. Spoken in the silence. Take time and be still, practice serenity in simplicity. This is really all that is needed to come along side autistic people. It helps with distressed neuro typical people also.*

*Richard Maguire [www.autismlivetraining.com](http://www.autismlivetraining.com)*

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*(Not quite alphabetical... not quite in order... not quite conforming... just like autism)*

## INTRODUCTION

### AUTISM – IT'S LIFE BUT NOT AS WE KNOW IT

I have wanted to write a book on autism for many years. I am autistic and have worked with autistic people for decades. Being autistic and focused means I have sought to understand autism and how the autistic life is lived. The answer is 'differently'. We piece together sounds, sights and feelings in real-time. Autistic development, senses and processing are unique to each autistic individual. We develop along paths quite distinct to each one of us. Yet, in all of this, there are crossed paths and ways of learning. Many people who are not autistic can sense the life of autism and become very good at communicating with autistic people. I have worked with and trained hundreds of these people.

I use my own experiences in this book as they are the ones I can describe most fully. It also means I need not be concerned about confidentiality. Every view is my own. I have written about selected times and themes, along with specific sections on employment and observations from the perspective of how things evolve for me, and the significant factors people overlook that are important to us autistics.

Each chapter is as it is - some long, some short. I have written my book in this way to replicate the fragmentation in the autistic mind. As you read, you will pick up a common theme: there is no order. Start at the back, front or middle – it's your choice. I wanted to give you that freedom of choice as it conveys how I approach thought. The content is shaped by what people find useful in the training, education and family work I do as an autistic counsellor and training consultant. Often, in my written prose, I will seek to paint a picture with words that describes how precise and confusing the autistic life is. I have spent over thirty years working with learning disabled people suffering from many syndromes, but specialised in autism mentoring, as I am defined by my autism... and my results.

In my work, I will always place central emphasis on promoting a positive culture around autism and building up relationships that allows autistic adults to feel valued and happy about themselves. I also help neuro typical (what you would describe as 'normal')

colleagues to deepen their understanding and empathy for autistic service users. When this compassion and way of working is internalised, neuro typical people can appreciate that developing relationships with autistic individuals and their close/extended families, friends, employers – you name it... is a happy experience with constructive outcomes.

The autistic life I know best is my own and it's my trusted resource in the work I do. I knew nothing of autism until 1985 when I worked with an autistic person. It clicked right there and then - I recognised how similar we were and accepted it. (Being diagnosed in adulthood I am now a working partner of Autism Oxford. Autism was not widely understood when I was a child in the mid-1960s but as you read this book you will see how it has become the foundations of my work for over thirty years.) Autism has its own life, feel and energy. To know autism is to know this life. Nowadays, I am delighted to celebrate my idioms, meltdowns, stimming (repetitive stimulating such as leg jerking or frantic walking), OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder), erratic behaviour and many other wonderful nuances that maketh me. I have almost died because of them. But, thankfully, I was one of the lucky ones that survived.

I have spent years writing this book in order to tell you how public and private organisations use my experience and findings to help others gain success and triumph over this inelegant mantle. So, let's get started... Firstly, I need to put you in my head. I want you to notice the noises of the world around you – whether you are on a train or watching television or tucked up in bed, it doesn't matter. Just pay attention to every single noise in your immediate vicinity. Next, you need to feel the impurities from the breath of strangers on your skin – it doesn't have to be anyone around you but think back and obsess about those you walked past earlier today. Did you wince or wash it off? Good – almost there. Now I need you to glance at the light source above you (single bulb or vast expanse of sky) and shy away from its intensity. And finally, start to feel anxious in every moment. Okay, job done.

Are we sitting uncomfortably? Then I can begin.

In a world that overloads us with sound and information, we autistic people see detail with piercing clarity. People ask us about these details and assume we understand the whole, but

in actual fact we are still working on the whole while seeing the minute details – sometimes we can't see past those details. Problems arise when people assume we see everything this clearly, but a lot of life is a big mystery and we need time to make sense of it. Autistic individuals have a deep thought process that operates very slowly and steadily. It starts with unravelling the details to 'get there'. Neuro typical people make these connections almost instantly, leaving our actions to be mistaken for rudeness.

*Growing up with Enigma* is the first chapter in this book. It gives a personal view on my developmental years with autism. Other autistic lives will differ to mine but we share the same anxieties and uneven progress. Interestingly enough, when young, we autistics quickly learn to 'fake it' and act exactly like the people we see around us. Or we become passive hoping not to get noticed. Anxiety always kicks in, and we want to run away with the 'fight or flight' emotions that give us so much pain. Often it's a combination of these things at various times.

The way through varies for each one of us but we need to be able to process life, communicate and feel good about who we are. That requires a sensitive approach and an amount of knowledge on autism. I do not profess to have the answers or claim any cures for behaviour reasoning, I simply tell my tale. Go on into the book with the spirit of being autistic – rejoice in repetition, understand and feel intense passion for emotional and intellectual output. Explore and gain insights for use in a life centred on being different and if you want to know about the title the answer is in there too.



## GROWING UP WITH AN ENIGMA

*Enigma: inexplicable occurrence or situation ([www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com))*

Inexplicable occurrences and situations have been my life's setting. I have a store of information in my head. Holding this information is a constant, necessary weight. Every day, I trawl through masses of sensory information and memories to seek a plan for tackling the day ahead. Life makes more sense as years pass, and gradually I have put together many mental forms and templates for understanding it – enabling how I can act in the world.

Interpretation of details, making mental templates, building up a mind-matrix of understandings and actions are something I help a lot of autistic people to do. With these in place, an autistic person is on the way to what I call '**initiation**' (the point at which there is enough of a matrix for them to make their way in life effectively). Until that point, we are often stuck in an overload of processing intricate details without any means of direction.

I have initiated my life and seen other autistic people initiate. It's like witnessing the launch of a space rocket, seeing them experience a blast of confidence shot deep into their core. A lifetime of details come together into a discernible and useable matrix and the person is off in a purposeful direction quickly, decisively and with a good deal of happiness.

The next thing to facilitate is a series of further matrixes to deal with things when life goes wrong - being let down by people and how to modify a matrix to take changed circumstances into account.

Here is how I started out. I was born autistic. My earliest memories are of enigmatic situations, behaviours and communications. Life was, and still is, a series of confusing details that are not easy to put together into a whole or even to recognise as details needing connection. It's like having a head full of raw experiences without interpretation or understanding. As an adult, I have amassed a large framework of understandings against which to check the sensory details of life. I use this knowledge to build up concepts and to see life as a whole. But as a child, life was a frightening and incomprehensible procession of details. People had an expectation that I could make sense of this and react, but I had no

idea - I had to work it out in the long dark nights when the house was still and no one interrupted me. Life, when everyone was awake, made no sense.

I remember being invited to a birthday party (late 1960's), in a neighbour's house along with my baby sister and Mum. Lots of children were there and it was fun, noisy, energetic and confusing. I was distracted from the party by the hexagonal paving slabs outside, the tessellating pattern of blue and black on the living room carpet and the contrast between carpet and parquet flooring in the dining room. The children wanted me to play, but the only game I understood was 'What time is it Mr Wolf?', a simple game involving walking gingerly towards Paul, who was being Mr Wolf, and pretending to freeze when he turned to look at us. If he saw movement we were out of the game. The winner had to get to the finish line and safely out of the wolf's way.

I knew this game because it had simple rules. Normally I was advised, criticised and chastised at parties. However, I do recall some words from the adults, 'Go on Richard' or 'Go now Richard'. What they did not know was that I really did want to go, but the G-Plan furniture and the configuration of colour tone on the carpet captured my attention. And I loved the way the patterns moved from different viewpoints - they always fitted. The social necessity of playing Mr Wolf became lost in the noise as I admired the designs on the floor and felt captivated by the profile of the dining table legs. No one else did this but me. Why were adults saying 'Come on!' or 'Go now Richard!?' I just couldn't work it out.

Thankfully, nothing unpleasant happened, such as me being told off, and the party carried on, a distant rumble of moments and expectations. I got through it well enough and enjoyed myself. The food was great - I could sit and chill on my own with a colourful paper plate full of party food. I could be an observer, feeling the atmosphere of the party. I could perceive fun and happiness if I didn't have to move - that would have overloaded my processing, meaning I could not sense the party to enjoy it. Adults showed signs that they accepted my stillness. It was okay to be still when eating. I had no idea why, it just worked.

Before we moved to Aylesbury on my fourth birthday, I remember being confused and not sure of what was going on at my own party. What was my role? I was told it was my

birthday. Great! I would get presents and people would make a fuss of me. I remember feeling happy about this and seeing lots of food. Then the children came. I had already met some of them. However, I could not recognise or place most of them as I don't remember faces. My mother expressed concern that I did not know who each of the children were.

I remember being given presents and becoming confused with a feeling of being overloaded. Most of my interactions with the other children were distant and I went very quiet. They soon lost interest in me and went to do something else. That day I had lots of attention, but I felt unable to deal with it. Knowing what to say did not come into this since I had no idea I needed to say anything at all and a very good idea that something wasn't right. My head reeled with strain from children moving in my peripheral vision. I recognised the noise as speech, but could not comprehend words and meanings when directed at me. Speech went everywhere like a ringing babble. I knew when I was being spoken to sometimes though, as my mother would tell me that someone had come to say hello. She also did this when I was given presents.

I had no concept of dealing with receiving gifts. I remember clearly unwrapping one present - it was two Matchbox cars. I loved Matchbox cars. Whoever bought it for me knew what I liked and I was very pleased. But two cars? I felt greedy and that confused me. A present was singular but here I was holding two. I remember looking at them thinking I should not accept double gifts. I offered one of the toy cars to the boy who had given them to me feeling happy with my action and assuming that he would be happy too, but he didn't seem to know what to do, nor did I. My mum spoke to me and said I was going to keep both cars they were my present. I got the impression I had done something wrong.

I knew I did things wrong and felt disapproval from people many times. I was getting used to this and the embarrassment of regularly making mistakes. I felt pain at my party as I knew things were going badly. They always did when groups of people were around. On reflection, I can see my child-self had no grasp of how to behave at a party or the rules and behaviours that went with it. This party cemented for me an expectation that life was a series of embarrassing experiences to be endured. I was constantly being told I was old enough to know better, followed by expressions of disapproval, sanctions and

punishments... and, at school, bullying. Yet I simply did not have the social ability to process society's expectations. From that day, I learned to be passive. It led to fewer chastisements and less embarrassment. This would set the standard for most of the rest of my life. I decided to be like wallpaper and not to be social since the consequence of social gatherings hurt. I craved a pain-free life and to reach that basic goal I endured a lonely, longing existence.

I have come across many autistic adults who grew up like me. A retrenchment into a small interior world is preferable to one of social interaction and the inevitable hurt that accompanies each attempt. But this can be overcome. It takes time and a lot of confidence-building, guidance and honest appraisal. Quiet behaviour from an autistic child is not always good - check the context. This retreat into oneself builds up an uncontainable pressure of anger, anxiety, frustration and masses of things that do not get said. Explosive meltdowns will happen, maybe years later.

Existing in a passive fashion meant I could put lots of chastisements away. I disengaged and led an internal life. It also meant I did not learn much socially and acquired the label 'quiet'. Many years later, when my wife reintroduced me to someone who knew me at school she was amazed saying that I used to be so silent that she was concerned about me. I was not all right, I was in pain and did not want to attract more by risking interactions with people. I was also out of practice at having relationships with anyone outside of my immediate family. And I had no any idea what to do about it.

My fourth birthday party was a turning point - the start of my withdrawal. I did not have birthday parties after that. Birthdays had presents and a birthday meal with my family, but this was a treat instead of a party. My parents knew I was not good at parties. I did not have enough friends to make a party anyway; I had no friends to invite.

The following September I started school, which brought a whole new host of horrors. Children ignored or bullied me - they certainly didn't want to be my friend. I learned from some children that even if they wanted to be friends with me they would avoid the opportunity to be seen in my company. I was untouchable as a friend and made so

unpopular that no one would come out and say they liked me. With the joint acceptance of life being a roundabout of confusing experiences and withdrawal being my modus operandi I set off into a sad and quiet childhood.

Unsurprisingly, the distance between me and interacting with other people deepened over the years until it was impossible to hope for a normal friend. I really wanted friends like everyone else and to be sociable. I knew I was interesting, sincere and friendly but realised nobody else cared about me. Feeling unable to communicate on any meaningful level with most people intensified daily. Instead, I looked forward to family social events, but when they happened I found them confusing too. Demands of expectation overwhelmed me as I tried to get a handle on recognising a face, matching that up with their name, avoiding looking at the weave on their knitted jumper, being blinded by flickering kitchen lights, other family members asking questions at the same time. Hearing a tutting noise and being told to leave the room. Shame on me.

I felt lost, unable to know where I would fit in, and continued to seek out quiet spaces away from the masses of people. I had no openings for conversation and that has still not changed. If anyone did approach me to talk I could try to engage in my way and get deep into a subject that interested me before noticing that my relative had stopped listening. Then I would try to talk about something else, getting back to the original subject later thinking it was not finished. But they weren't bothered about odd little me - they were so mercurial in their attention span that I lost all means of understanding what was happening.

Eventually, I would feel as if I had failed and withdraw into my quiet world away from the noise and social prickle of festive or family gatherings. Being out of it was painful, lonely and unfulfilling - as was being in it. I was criticised for my social faux pas (committed frequently, causing embarrassment and drawing down social opprobrium). I really did not understand what was happening, or what to do. I couldn't read other people's body language or learn from them how to operate in a social context. Acceptable behaviours became incomprehensible blurs, resulting in people being surprised, shocked or critical of me.

Occasionally, I saw that my idiosyncratic conduct amused people and that's when I realised they were not being nice. Their own ignorance of my autistic state meant they were burdened with me and trying their best to cope with a boy who seemed different to the point of distastefulness. I was just someone to be dealt with or taught a lesson. I hated being laughed at and was often called a freak, dippy, strange, dilly daydream and stupid. These are adults and family. I believed every word they said. I felt their looks of disdain and knew I was being tolerated but not liked. Inside me the pain was intense as I struggled with being different to other children, and with the fact that I was not liked or accepted.

Aware that I could not behave or use language like a 'normal' person, I began employing the only accessible human behaviour models I could – characters in TV programmes. My first and last observational study was the cast of Scooby Doo. I started identifying myself with Shaggy and Scooby. Velma appealed to me because of her intelligence and rigorous ways of working things out, just like my ways of thinking. Eventually, I married a woman very like Velma. My wife Julie only speaks after a lot of thought and makes logical sense when she does. So, as a boy, I tried copying these TV characters, but with little success, returning to being very quiet and avoiding the company of others.

I have never been able to learn much from 'live people' as they give off too much to process. This made getting on with people when I was young very hard. I recall frequently losing ground in the social arena via a sickening and out of control process. I just could not keep up. I tried ever so hard, but just could not digest the information overload, and that frightened me. I did not want to be like this, yet no matter how I tried, I lost more ground, becoming extensively out of touch. I did not ask for this to happen. I wanted to be 'normal' like everyone else.

Another watershed moment was at the house of one of my mother's colleagues - 'Auntie Nell' as I knew her. There was a gathering... I think she had retired. Other teachers (my mother was a teacher) were there, along with my family. The downstairs of Nell's half-timbered cottage was full of people, hot and noisy. Groups of adults were moving around the building with noise coming out of them – greeting me and shaking my hand – but as I was unable to carry on a conversation, they left me alone. My family got on with talking to

guests and I was left looking at the old oak beams and the open fire, reflecting on how I was no good at these kind of gatherings. I was also sure now that I was a very boring person. This was how I understood my lack of social ability. I was boring and no good to anyone - people saw this and left me alone. Their minds and motives were a conundrum to me and I carried these convictions with me for decades.

I was convinced that I was a dull young man that no one wanted to be burdened with. A large amount of hope left me and I pondered my future. How lonely would I be? How could I live this life of isolation? What of any ambitions? I did not have any belief back then that I was intelligent and could turn my hand to build wonderful things. I just stood in that room, knowing I was growing up and wondering how would I get anywhere in life by being alone, boring, and in pain. While thinking through this bleak vision, I noticed that Nell's dog didn't come near me. I usually attracted animals and knew this dog well, but as feeling of poor self-worth settled on my seven-year-old shoulders I became inconsolable with silent grief - even the dog didn't want me. I felt wooden and dead inside.

As the days and months passed, I became more concerned about what was happening. I seemed to be drifting away from people. I knew that they did not find me cute anymore, which had been my failsafe as a young child, getting me out of lots of difficulties. My parents had different expectations of me now. I had observed growth and reflected on the stages of life – disturbed and dejected children have the space to recognize this. They are different and told it is wrong. I saw my peers moving into new ventures that I was unable to follow without a mental framework for comprehending and enabling normal living. I observed well, I could commentate, but I neither understood nor coped in company.

The enigmas in life grew as I grew. I hoped to learn how to get on with other people and thought if I applied myself well enough maybe I could catch up. This did not happen. I had no basis for identifying what was happening to me and why I was different. If only there was a diagnosis of high functioning autism, dyspraxia and dyslexia in the 1970s... Instead, I was just told I was naughty and maladjusted. People said I did not try hard enough. I heard the word 'lazy' far too often and it crushed my spirit. They did not know I tried so very hard to survive every single day without being told off. Slowly and surely their own framework for

approval pushed me into a broken mould. I became convinced that 'lazy' referred to my inability to develop. Life became a round of criticisms and being ignored. I had very few openings for love and fun.

I grew up in a typical suburban Home Counties scenario. English middle-class life involves a measure of anxiety about being better than the neighbours. Lots of this involves status management (dinner parties, driving the right car, having a higher than normal profile job) and high academic expectations of your children. It's a stupid culture, dictated by frightened people forced to compete using table manners and out-of-date ethics, usually steeped in Victorian morals. Everyone lived behind the façade of perfection. All had a path to follow and it was expected that the children would become respectable members of society – doctors, lawyers, teachers etc.

My parents discussed their children at every opportunity. What would we become? The question was brought out at social and family gatherings by other acquaintances too and then raised lots more at home for good measure. Expectation is laced on children. I saw parents discussing their children's development - saying what they had achieved and what they would go on to do as adults. It seemed to me that we were valued for what we did and what we would do. Simply finding a role to enjoy and be happy was not enough. Achievements mattered, in exams most of all. Our futures and earning potential were debated and aligned with the world of work from when we were young.

I watched mothers vie for a higher status by acknowledging (politely) their offsprings' achievements. We did not seem to be valued for who we were and it incensed me. We were held up and paraded at social gatherings - looking well dressed, well behaved and intellectually capable of appreciating the 'finer things' in life - not pop music or pop culture. We all loved pop music but parents quashed this in polite company. And when it came to discussing me, my parents had little to talk about... I was a quiet, underachieving oddity. No musical prowess, no academic achievements.

I was certainly not neat! I hated wearing posh clothes due to my intensive sensory needs. When I could be scrubbed up for social events, I was depressed and surly, hating it all and



hating the clothes I was told to wear. I would usually back up into a corner wanting to go home or get out on my bicycle. I use to analyse middle class life, hating the snobbery, pretence and value put on things that had no intrinsic worth. I wanted to be valued for being me. Some part of me would have liked to gain achievements for my parents to brag about, but I reckon they were as troubled as me. I am sure they had no idea why their obviously intelligent son achieved so little, got so grumpy and withdrew in every social situation.

Of course, I felt pressured to do better, and became convinced that this was the way to develop as a person. I thought that doing things made people interesting and popular. As I couldn't read the social skills that really made people affable, I modelled an idea that being good at music, cultural activities and exam success made people fun, interesting and socially acceptable. This set my social development back years, intensifying feelings of loneliness. I could not talk about music, culture and academic things. I could talk about bicycles but no one else thought this was important.

It was a grey existence being on the margins of middle class life. I wore a grey school uniform and hated it. (I still do.) I looked at my school jumper and decided my existence was just as grey. I had no place to get a purchase on life. No point of fun and acceptance. I lived in a dreary, fog like, drizzle-filled life. Lonely, very lonely.

Don't feel sorry for me, though. This is not a whinge. This is an open window into the mind of a child who was as frightened of himself as he was of the fear he coaxed from others by surviving in the only way he knew. There was some comfort gained from being young. I knew I would be cared for and could still get off the hook by 'not knowing any better'. I also knew I was growing up. Ever year took me closer to adulthood. The pain grew greater with the awareness that I would reach physical maturity without the wherewithal to get on in adult life. I was behind my contemporaries in understanding the twists and turns of culture. I also knew I was not stupid but somehow felt unable to deploy my intelligence. I often observed other intelligent children in my classes at school showing their brilliance and getting respect for this. They were able to be bright and popular. I was bright and bullied or ignored - both hurt in different ways.

The spiral of being unable to understand why I was losing out continued. I just knew I was missing out on everything. I could see others gain popularity and tried to catch up, but fell flat. I knew where I wanted to get to, but the way there made no sense. More than that, I could get no understanding of 'normality' to materialise in my consciousness – I had no framework to operate by, because of all the interferences from other avenues. Sensory overload cramped my hearing and sight; anxiety fed my awkward mannerisms. I was aware I behaved in one way and my peers another. Believe me, I tried to be normal, whatever that was, but my head, heart and soul could not comprehend what to do. More than that, I had a total block. I spent ages trying to work out what was happening, unable to rationalise anything internally and sick with worry. The only information I had to go on was feedback from other people – and it was not good feedback.

At school I was called slow, lazy and stupid. I was often excluded from school events – by being ostracised or by missing out because of the inevitable detentions. The teachers were okay, but not really interested in helping me. They viewed me as eccentric and dealt with me in a reasonable way. The trouble was that the other children would pick up on my differences and attempt to speed me up in class whenever my attention wandered. This led to cruel songs and cutting verbal abuse - they had a handle on me that they could use to wind me up. One taunt was to chant to the tune of Tulips from Amsterdam, which started 'It's true, I know, Richard's so slow'. This was sung repeatedly in the playground. Not one teacher stopped it. I reacted with incredible anger that caused them to sing it more. In class, I would see other areas of enquiry related to subjects and drop my focus on the lesson - my head full up of interest and questions. Or I would be infuriated by my classmates and their taunts.

At home my parents expressed concern over my lack of progress, despite my obvious intelligence. Laziness was an obvious answer given their ignorance of my condition. All in all, I received negative and despondent feedback from my parents. I contemplated their negativity and became convinced that I actually was bad, lazy and no good to anyone. I also thought about occasions like the gathering at Auntie Nell's house and the loss of hope they

engendered. I was unable to see any hope for my future and saw myself sliding out of human society. This trapped me into a sense of worthlessness and hopelessness.

Birthdays came and went, quietly without much in the way of celebration – I still did not have friends to attend parties. I felt at each birthday that I, too, was slipping away, out of life and into oblivion. Looking into my future was painful as it reflected more agony - an adult me, rejected, overlooked and finding no love or fulfilment. I felt pain from being an intelligent and talented person with no possibility of enjoyment from all the potential I carried. I faced a future of entrapment in a dull life lived between loneliness and rejection. I knew a route to happiness existed... somewhere. I did not know the means of being happy, or what it would feel like, as my own existence was a sort of grey limbo and I did what I needed to do to get by. But I had a small grain of hope within me, an undefined hope that things would get better. I hadn't a clue how, but I needed to hope.

Decades later I do have happiness, friends and family. Today I work with autistic people who are living with the pain I had. And I tell them 'There is hope'. An autistic person lost in the wilderness of enigma and separation from all that is life-affirming wants the same thing - someone to believe in them. Someone who can communicate and help them learn in the autistic way where happiness is to be found.

So much of happiness in society is learned the neuro typical way. This leaves the autistic person sitting on an island of incomprehension and emotional distance. A useful way of learning is through instruction, practice and un-judgemental feedback. We so often need a brick of a person who will not criticise us and is able to see our beauty and talent. In a one-to-one relationship, with structured learning, we can practise life, have fun doing it and find fulfilment. We really do need the same things as neuro typical people. We share the same humanity and need of relationships. Inside we are full of love. That love is normally shown and expressed in the majority – so neuro typical culture is our difficulty. We live alongside and do not comprehend the workings of this culture. We appear distant, maybe aloof. This impression is a misreading of our incomprehension of the enigma that is neuro typical life. We bounce off it and are unable to get through the layers between us - communication, love and affirming rapport. We pace, cry, hurt and despair on the outside of human life,

receiving disapproving messages and rejection. This becomes the central hurting place of incomprehension and break in relationships.

Lots of the autistic life is lived like this, surrounded by people who have different ways of approaching life to us. We set off into the same situations, then see and get interested in different things and different ways of seeing life. Other people appear out of a moving fog of humanity, form, noise and colour. It becomes apparent at times that they want to interact with us but we don't notice the cues and signs that they want to interact – hence we do not respond as they expect us to. We are racking our brains for the right things to do and say. They become baffled by our actions, turning the interaction into an awkward moment that is internally fraught for the autistic person. We seek an exit strategy or simply cannot proceed. It all goes wrong.

The trouble is that we like the person who approached us and wanted to get on well with them. We are often sad that things do not go well and cannot work out how to put things right. We try to get out and about without experiencing these difficult interactions. Going places can become easier if we have prepared for it beforehand, and have had our confidence built to cope with an awareness of the unexpected at all times.

Cultures that surround us are interesting and incredible. When embarking on my teens I was spellbound and fascinated by the youth and pop culture around me. I understood it in an autistic way - I was a complete outsider wanting in on this exciting music and fashion. I just did not have a clue where to begin. This showed in the way I dressed and what I did. What I really wanted were guidelines and logical explanations of these cultures and how I could access them – just like the physical and mental frameworks I build for clients today.

I also wanted to know how to dance, as I enjoy feeling the music resonating deep down in my soul, but have no idea how to connect physically with this, so avoided discos for fear of being made fun of for not knowing what to do. I had plenty of taunting outside of social events and knew it would be intensified if I went out with other teenagers.

I recall one evening when a local disco was on. My sister went. Dad and I waited in the car and I so wanted to go in, but stayed sitting, as if frozen in my seat. I knew if I could understand what was going on and get in I would be happy, but didn't have a clue about how to tackle the situation. The culture among my contemporaries had moved on in a way and with a speed I could not have foreseen. I remember my dad saying that I should try the disco. He said there were lots of people my own age in there and I would make friends. I replied that I did not know what to do. My sister told me my uncoordinated attempt to dance was unacceptable and I would have to learn properly. She was right and I knew it. I said to my dad that I would go to discos and parties if I could learn what to do, and by that I meant being taught in a logical way. He said that if I went in I would learn (this would be okay for a non-autistic neuro typical person who knew the rules). No one was aware of my autism back in 1980 and we drove home in silence. I felt deeply grieved for the missed opportunity, but couldn't face the ridicule of judgmental individuals.

I also wanted a girlfriend and realised this was impossible – I was not cool. Girls said they would never go out with me. I accepted this and lived my closed life. How to get a girlfriend was beyond me, yet I knew I had so much love to share. I wanted the closeness of this sort of relationship, and ached to feel cherished by someone. Because I had not been out with a girl it was often assumed I was homosexual. I endured hate taunts that gave me insights into the suffering gay people tolerate because of their sexuality. This targeted animosity helped me to develop a strong sense of empathy for minority causes – me being one. I have carried this sense of justice on into adult life. In this respect, being autistic helps a lot. I am not bothered about getting attacked for standing up for people who are vulnerable. I believe in equality amongst all people - this is logical and right in my autistic mind. I do not comprehend the need to define others as different and to loathe them for it. I feel the hurt and know just how horrid it is to be put down for something, anything that is different from the norm.

I had no idea about the politics used to conduct life. I frequently watched television news and wondered why people lied – saying one thing but meaning another. I also did not understand why people were not literal – they never did what they said they would do, or they acted in a way that was inconsistent with a belief they supposedly held. I also could not

get to grips with the viewpoints of different newspapers. I thought that if there is an event then there is one truth and the public need to know that truth. I did not understand the nature of biased reporting. Being an autistic thinker means I took everyone at his or her word, becoming confused and annoyed when they failed to deliver promises.

I still put everything people say to me into a framework, but today I factor in the probability that they may not say what they mean. I need to work out various scenarios based on the likelihoods of alternative interpretations. This involves a huge amount of mental processing. Being in social situations can be tiring and I regularly need to remove myself for moments of restorative brain space. I have cottoned on to the fact that neuro typical people communicate with more than words and learned how to spot the thousands of non-verbal means of communication people use.

I watched myself on a CCTV recording at work once and became struck by my absence of body language. I was like a statue compared to the other two people in the film. I studied non-verbal communication and how it augments or changes the meaning of the words people use and became astute at recognising these actions. I never study in the way 'normal' people do it. I use everyday opportunities allowing for observation, logic and contemplation before cross-referencing it on my database of social signals to empathise and interpret these signals. 'Normal' people simply smile and start a conversation.

At times in my life, I have used this cultural crossover from autistic to normal to achieve aims in negotiations. Being autistic means I have a good poker face - I will give nothing away. I used to be a union steward and this technique helped immensely. I could unnerve people opposed to me by not playing the game and standing up for what is right. Sometimes people would remark on how hard I negotiated – not giving an inch. Inside I knew I was just being autistic and playing straight down the middle.

I was keen to leave my teen years behind in one sense, but knew I was not getting anywhere in life and needed a mentor – which would never happen. Nowadays, I am mentor to many young adults and see the same situations developing, only here we handle them with objectives and targets that build up self-esteem to allow exploration of conversation.

Imagine that! Having a conversation and being able to process it for long enough to feel valued!

As I grew up, I did find a rare bit of company - I used to inhabit the bicycle sheds at break times to escape the bullies. This was far enough away from the playground and the politics going on there. Interesting and unusual students would gather in the cycle sheds talking about all sorts of subjects. For a precious moment I was accepted as I fixed their bicycles. I am an expert at bike maintenance and worked out that I could get on with people one-to-one by offering a skill they wanted. I also knew a lot about people from observing them. I didn't talk much and was my usual introverted self but people love a captive audience. They thrive in talking about themselves - some would open up to me with their deepest thoughts and issues.

I started to find out more about what was going on than the chatty people in the playground. As I repaired inner tubes and straightened spokes or oiled chains, no one felt the need to put on a front. They seemed to realise that I did not merit such things. However, back in the classroom they would completely blank me in front of their friends - it was bad for their ego to be associated with me. I had one particularly good cycle shed visitor - a girl called Clare. She was not like lots of the other girls. She had a kindly countenance, genuine warmth and was in no way superficial. Clare was a real help in my loneliest teenage times. I knew I would never be accepted by the 'group' but I could see a friendly face in Clare. I lost touch with her after school and only found out where she was immediately before she moved to New Zealand. I would have loved to get to know her and catch up on life in between. I hope you are happy Clare.

It's strange, but a lot of people memorably close to me are in reality as far away as New Zealand. I often do not have the required matrix of conversational procedures for contacting them. They may be close but I lack the cognitive set up to make contact. There are still a lot of gaps in my matrixes. Sometimes I am too tired to repair them, or act, once I have made the cognitive connections and practiced the words. I may be a few feet from you and wholly incapable of making contact.

I muddle through explanations of situations to myself after they happen. When I do get an understanding, I will try and commit it to memory and place it within my mental matrix for next time. At the same time I need many sub-matrixes for every permutation on that situation, as I am aware it will not be exactly the same next time. When the next time does appear, I am able to trawl my memory to find a cognitive match for the situation – making further adaptations for the here and now. If the situation moves too fast, it may have a new variable I did not foresee or I may experience sensory overloaded and my cognitive abilities will break down. If I am overloaded, I am unable to process anything. Sensory breakdown is the most frequent reason I cannot interact and I stumble at the first step. At these times I am quiet and withdrawn, or I go into what I call 'slug mode' and crawl along quietly on some old routines trying to maintain a presence for a time at least. Slug mode is horrid, I hurt a lot and feel pretty horrid and want to go away and cry, but instead I sweat it out pretending I am okay.

I do not think anyone who knows me understands how hard daily interactions are and how much information I can't gather from their mannerisms, or how broken down my senses are through overload and the feeling of anxiety that causes. Life is disconcerting, broken up and largely incomprehensible, only able to be solved later in the quiet when I can do my processing and work out what is going on.



## BEING A VISUAL THINKER AND USING WORDS

My life is lived in films - I run them in my head, long ones and short ones. They are often run in quick succession and sometimes it's as if they are running concurrently. All information taken in is converted to visuals to be processed and worked on. Once I am clear with their content and meaning they are filed and fitted into the totality of my memory bank. I can overlay these films onto reality, like a head-up display. It takes a lot of processing so normally they play in my head. Words follow the actions at key points in the memory cinema. Repetition is important - thoughts are rehearsed into my memory and words added where necessary, altered a little sometimes on each repetition. Every thought is modelled, run and re-run. I insert variables and cross-reference, link up with other thoughts, make connections and synthesise new thoughts into new visual scenarios. These too can be run to model and test how they work. Thoughts tumble over and over, as if they are in a great, turning drum. New ones are inserted, others displaced and some forgotten.

I must know the inner workings of everything I see and do, building visual models for as much as I can. When I was a child I did this for everything in my life. I recall back in the late 1960's examining the floor, sills and mechanics of my dad's car. I wanted to know if it was made from solid metal, and if the floor was a single sheet of metal or if it had further layers and structures underneath. I did not think the floor would be strong enough if it were a single sheet of thin metal and I worked out the pressed channels in the floor gave three dimensions and stiffness. I wondered why the sills and box sections were hollow and went to find out why. This led me on to learning about tubes and that a structure with three dimensions that is hollow in the middle is as stiff as one that is solid and of the same dimensions, but much lighter.

Today, forty years later, if I can see under a car I will stop to look. I am still transfixed by structures and how they deal with forces. I am also interested in how better materials, pressing techniques and computer aided design have resulted in fewer panels and joins in every generation of cars. I like finding out about high strength steels and where they go in relation to car body shells. I walk to work past a car dealer where transporters are parked

outside regularly, allowing me to stop and examine the assembly process. Every time I do this, I recall being a four-year-old examining my dad's MK II Cortina, tapping the vehicle doors, looking underneath and making the first models of cars in my head.

From my dad's car, I learned how to analyse and visualise a mechanism's inner components. Then I moved on to discover which parts of the structure were load bearing and which were not. From there I graduated to observing the development of everything - houses, ships, the planet, the freezer, my bicycle, our garden fence, the structures in wood, trees and smaller plants... then bones, crystals and micro assembly, then grass and plant stems, model aeroplanes, real aeroplanes, tractors with their load bearing transmissions, pens, cakes, eggs, clothing fibres and weaves, glue and glued joints, tyres, furniture, ceilings and roof beams, so on and so forth. Throughout the years of my childhood, I built up a library of visual understandings of structures. As far back as I can remember I would project and rotate visual models of things in my head like a computer simulation. I can subject them to different forces and model their behaviour, plastic deformity and failure modes.

Even today, when I buy a car, I have to inspect every joint in its entirety. I take parts off and remove the trim to see inside. I must see all the fragments of engineering connected together in the vehicle and read a manual so I can analyse the parts in the engine and gearbox that I am physically not able to see. I know exactly how the engine in my current car is made – it's a clever design using lots of aluminium and as little metal as possible. I have examined every piece of webbing cast into the block, making it stiff and light. I rev up the engine to feel the forces going through it. There is a resonance in the crankshaft and cam chains that I am sure was not intended when the engine was designed, but is a product of a lack of stiffness, causing cam chains and tensioners to fail.

I build up a visual model of all the lines of force and resonance in the engine and transmission. I have watched all sorts of lubricant fluids operate to understand their effectiveness. I researched the preferred oils used by mechanics, watched liquids flowing, studied shafts and bearings, dismantled oil pumps, checked out the oil return system, assessed the air spaces in the engine, looked at engine cross sections. At any speed I can visually replicate what is going on in my car engine, including the oil flow, combustion and

gas flow. I have checked out the exhaust and assessed what it is doing in relation to back pressure, gas management, resonance, sound insulation, silencing and releasing gases to the air. It's hard work driving and knowing all this is going on.

I have spent hours studying tyre manufacture and the formations in tyres, the banding and layering of a tyre. I have examined all the areas of tyres and explored what they do including their variant degrees of contribution to the suspension on my car and how forces are managed. Movement, compliance in the bushes, arcs of movement, passive steering, geometry, sound insulation and strengths, stiffness and thicknesses of materials.

As I drive, I visually model my car working. It took me years to visually model valve timing and phases on a four cylinder engine but I was obsessed and use all this visualisation every time I drive. Its hard mental work, but I can always get the best out of my car. The level of detail I undertake to discover and log these details is much more than I have written here but I think you can get the idea. All this effort to drive a K11 Nissan Micra! This is how an autistic person operates – remember that when you give one a lift or ask about their interests. When I buy another car, I will be studying it in exactly the same way. My car is old with a moon-shot-mileage clocked up and I want to hold on to it as long as possible, I have it mapped in my mind though many images, some with sound. Before the Micra I drove Citroen 2CVs, five of them. I mapped them all out in my mind too with the same intricate effort and am still a member of the owners' club.

I took great interested in understanding all the materials used in my house and endeavoured to research how it all works together. I have seen under the floors, in the roof, behind the plaster and studied how our humble Victorian home is built straight onto levelled-off clay (with no foundations!). Lime mortar makes the building resilient and flexible - its strength being in elasticity and absorption of forces. The house moves and breathes in a similar way to trees. This building has stood for over 130 years, yet nothing in its design has failed and I know why (in minute detail). I can rotate, up end and examine our house in my mind in flawless, mentally catalogued detail. I wonder how 'normal' people view their houses.

Then on to my bicycles. I know their assembly in even more painstaking detail. I examine tubes, joints, machining, spokes, drive train efficiency, materials, lubrication and the synergy of the whole bicycle in relation to the rider. Don't forget, I spent a lot of time on my own as a young person with no friends. This was a way of coping with my unusual life.

One of my bicycles folds in half - a Brompton. It's delightfully clever and efficient. I can see that the hinges are at points of maximum strength and folding practicality. All its manufacturing arrangements are designed with great simplicity, strength, ease of use and durability. Another in my collection is a Moulton bicycle with triangulated and separable space frame, small wheels and full suspension. No part of the Moulton's structure is redundant. It is massively stiff and very efficient. The suspension is designed for road use and works at high frequencies, allowing high pressure tyres to be efficient with a comfortable ride. I study the frame and can see all the ways it deals with forces and loads. I see and feel the whole machine in action from any angle in my mind when I ride it.

The third bicycle is a Bob Jackson - a traditional layout diamond framed machine with large wheels. It is unique, bespoke and finished beautifully. Again there is a synergy between the machine and me; I feel so alive and am eager to get on with going anywhere. You would need to be a bicycle enthusiast to understand what the Reynolds 531 ST tube set is and what this does for ride quality and feel, but trust me, it works like nothing else; the bike is like a living organism when in use. I know how the tubes are cold drawn. They have no seams or inconsistencies and the ideal tube structure, bringing out the best properties of steel.

Then I have an old Raleigh Lenton an elegantly simple sports touring bicycle from 1950. A good old friend. Yes, these machines became my steadfast companions.

I have Brooks' leather saddles on all four bicycles. I researched and learned about the composition of the stitch and properties of skin, which has been tanned and made into saddles. I know how these saddles are broken-in by my movements and how they are shaped to my own body and joint peculiarities. I took time to see just how my muscles and

skeleton work in relation to the bicycles and how different types of saddles help with posture or positioning.

I live in a world of vivid colour and form. All thoughts, emotions and senses are translated and processed in form and colours first, words second. Words are my second language, I think and process everything in pictures and colours with their accompanying tastes, using words alongside pictures to discern and describe finer details. This use of words helps me to anchor memories and make plans. I have wondered if this is because words are not natural, and the process of making, ordering and using them requires thought, helping to tease things out. Pinning up visuals with words, like notices on a corkboard, kind of works. The words are immobile yet the visuals they hold move with life, carrying meaning, feelings and love.

Learning to use words was hard and still requires much preparation, thought and effort. I try to stock up on the words needed for each day the night before. There are ways of conveying precise meanings that do not use words, but words are the preferred way of communicating used by people everywhere. To be taken seriously and viewed as intelligent I must use spoken words. Written ones are even harder.

Using words requires a five-stage process. Words are:

1. Heard
2. Translated into visuals
3. Processed and understood
4. Translated back to words
5. Spoken

I cannot speak an image. I wish I could. Words are rehearsed and put into memory singly or in phrases, many thousands of them. Visuals pass over them, picking up the words, editing them mentally and speaking them as sentences while the film runs in my mind and soul. Words are pins, things precise points, pieces of exact meaning. None is abstract. Abstracts, feelings, emotions, thoughts and my soul are all in pictures. I find words frustratingly lacking in visual meaning. I remember sitting an oral examination for English at school. I surprised

the examiners by saying that I thought written works were boring at first sight and they need to be worked on through reading to uncover their splendour and interest. The examiners did not expect that answer and awarded me a good mark for the critique I gave of writing as an artform. I reflected on that exam for decades; now I know I was commenting from the viewpoint of a visual autistic thinker. I can take in visual art naturally and appreciate it from first sight. When connecting with written art I must work on it.

In the process of engaging with something that is such hard work I think I get more from the art when I have finally comprehended it. That could be the work of minutes to years, analysing, interpreting and processing. I have also developed a way of being very eloquent with words, written or spoken. This eloquence is the result of a lifetime of struggle with words in any form. I think that what did not come easily has become something I have worked hard on and have applied myself to. As a result, I give thoughtful and hard won expression in the form of words. Every word counts and has been crafted and used with thought, I have to wrestle with articulation and language and I think I have developed a deep respect for words.

It's not that I like words or using them. I use them well because I must and the process is hard. So, I have written a book. I have wanted to write a book since I was small. I have been looking for subject, material and technique until I realised it was already inside my head. I just needed to tell the world how I felt. I wrote about feeling trapped by non-autistic people and their judgement so that families with autistic relatives and friends can start to understand.

For decades I have listened to BBC Radio 4. Programmes such as *Open Book*, *A Good Read* and *Book Club*. I can rarely read a book in one sitting because of the effort and memory needed to log the information in my own unique system – it can get too much and too complex, but I read bits of books seeking what I can from them. I had years of reading as I retreated into myself and my world without social interaction.

BBC Radio 4 is a medium I use to channel information into picture building - insights about books and writing, listening to authors as they describe the writing process. Describing

narrative, their characters and where their stories take them while being written are valued help in the struggle to express my work in normal written form. I am grappling with voice and narrative as I listen, eager to capture my stories in the right words. These stories that are stored in my head as films have been shared with published authors, who say there are good stories that could be written well. So I hope I am doing some justice to my message of hope. I still do not have a 'gestalt' (over all understanding), for narrating a story, however I am working on this and have been for decades. I desperately want to tell adults and children stories of life and all that does not make sense. Because it does make sense when explored through the characters. Well, sort of sense...

I believe human lives are not finished while we live, nor should a story be finished. My stories are steeped in the lives of the people I work with and focus on offering them help from someone that has been there - me. The characters can live and engage with what does and does not work for them and maybe it only works as a shadow of what it could be. The characters develop even though they barely exist. They stay alive and their life is just that... life, given that it is the expression where they find themselves that matters. Many plots and settings are dark and lack meaning. If the significance of their tale is found it still doesn't explain much and leaves them unfulfilled. In the darkness, characters have to be creative, dig in, gain traction for survival and carry on using their main resource - hope. The stories progress to points in life where a hard won improvement or juncture is met. And that's it – arrival, with or without understanding, then life goes on.

The theme I explore is being human and having a happy fulfilling existence – that is powerful and creative in itself, and even if all influence over life or a grip on reality slips for a time, the living of life matters. Living life is good even if it hurts or ceases to make sense. The resolve to live is central to my stories. A lot of the explorations are of my autistic world and realising that with planning and hope there is an opportunity to be content - I must engage, try and trust in myself. That is good, living is good, and life must be worked at. Just like writing, and the innovative workings out of understanding life. This, for me, makes words a source of more life, better life and a life that can be communicated and grown into new relationships over time. The protagonists in my stories face goodness knows what every day to stay in the human race (and in doing this they must choose life) - even if they do not understand it or

see a purpose. Like my childhood and teenage years, by persisting, they live life as they grow until for a fortunate few it becomes a good thing. My job is to walk with them and keep the characters developing with enough confidence to bring about success.

I am a visual thinker forced to use words. Thank you BBC for giving me words and the life that goes with them. Most days I listen to Radio 4 to do what I call 'mining for words'. I refresh and add to my word library in my visual notice board, ready for use in the right context.

The use of words did not come easily. Firstly, I copied what people said, but that didn't work well as I had no idea of how to issue words correctly. The words belonged to the person speaking them and I felt they should remain in that context. It is unusual when a child uses adult forms of words but no one told me that. I found adults easier to listen to, as they normally spoke slowly and in lower pitches. Children moved too much, spoke fast and lacked the arrangement that adults used in speech. It is often observed that autistic children sound like adults when speaking. Learning words from adults is easier as they are more precise and predictable - they have a better command of meaning and a richer vocabulary.

As explained, I spend a lot of time building matrixes to form a basis for every part of life. This is the same with words. Conversation for me requires comprehensive and structured matrixes, plus a lot of side loops containing understandings for subtexts and deviations from the main subject. That's a lot of work, so to help I pre-prepare practise and memorise thousands of sentences and sound bites (yes really), keeping them stored for use so I can appear to be speaking spontaneously. When I learned that people do not give you the time to prepare words I decided to have a bank of scenarios readily available. That involves hours of preparation for every day and uses a lot of memory. I get tired in conversation very quickly.

I can remember sometime in the mid 1970s wondering why I couldn't keep up in conversations and why I got caught out a lot with no words to speak. Back then, I had no idea I produced speech differently and was told I was the same as everyone else but a bit more stupid. I was also described as slow and lazy until I believed them. Top tip – don't say



any of these things to an autistic child or even imply they are sub-standard, as your words will be taken into adulthood and held close in the form of destroyed self-esteem. Autistics take you at your word – we literally take the words from your mouth and believe them. We have to work hard trying to cope with everyday life and those negative comments are often at the root of suicide attempts later in life. Think about that before jumping in with criticism.

So, back we go to the mid 1970s. I knew that I was slow with words of any sort because of the elements of my condition, yet I was unaware of any condition. People around me could box me in with words. Deep in my soul I had words, but was paralyzed to argue. The person I knew who was fast and comprehensive with words was my mother, so I listened intently with an aim to be quicker than her. She was a safe bet to study as she was around me a lot, and if I modelled my vocabulary on her eloquence I would get misunderstood and bullied less. I applied myself to the understanding of conversations, words, their placement and use, then recorded conversations in my head and analysed them.

I also listened to hours of BBC Radio 4, wondering why people did not believe the words politicians used, aware that the commentators dug deeper for the real meanings. The *Today* programme showed that people did not say what they meant - especially politicians. However, it would be decades before I learned that people did this in all areas of life - seeking to deceive others for unknown reasons. Being a truth speaker, I learned those lessons the hard way. I understood that politicians lied, but being true to my autistic nature I did not generalise that insight. Teaching people to generalise forms a large part of the mentoring work I do. We autistics do not generalise naturally. Instead we like to use many sub-rules explaining the real sub-text inconsistencies with life and communication. That means carrying lots of rules about everything and its variables, then accessing a mental database of rules quickly in every social situation in order to respond.

I must have been about ten or eleven when I thought I had mastered speech well enough to hold my own. That worked reasonably well with adults interested in a subject, but not so well in general talking or at school, but it was a milestone in building interaction skills.

In this section, have written about the use of words - only spoken or written words. Intonation and expression are still mysteries to me. I know people use them, but all I hear are voices going up and down. Intonation and emphasis carries no meaning for me. I act on words alone. This is the autistic way of receiving and using language. I have been trying all my life to make visual connections to tone and emphasis in speech, and had a few attempts based around mouth shapes, observing when people use emphasis, but these are incomplete and tenuous. I do not have a cognitive handle on tone and emphasis, I look for signs people are doing this – an audible clue. I am a visual thinker and can only understand things to any depth through visuals.

Please don't try to interpret the monotone speech of autistic people in any way as you will learn nothing about our mood or feelings from the way we deliver words. Many of us, me included, have learned to copy intonation and emphasis because we have learned it's expected in some situations. We are acting out an alien form of communication - for your benefit. We realise non-autistic people want and expect these things. We find people are nicer to us when we do this and believe what we are saying. It's like speaking a foreign language at the same time as speaking English.

Between learning from my mum and Radio 4, I built up a mental lexicon and could read complicated texts. At aged eleven I read books for sixteen-year-olds, which was all down to consciously collecting and learning words.

I like words for their precise meanings. Making words work is like carving something functional out of solid material or building a precisely engineered model. It's a technical exercise full of correctness. This is fine as a discipline, but lacks in feeling - an intriguing intellectual exercise, well crafted but lacking. I had no idea of how to develop words and language into the flowing feeling thing I observed in other people. For years I did not know I could do this, the possibility had never been shown to me. Again, that is something I do in my mentoring work. I show autistic people how they can use language with fun, love and the possibilities that go with it.

Even at my engagement party (many years later), my darling wife-to-be, Julie, entertained as well as she could, but I felt exhausted and went to hang out by the wall at the front of the house. Julie came with me, enjoying the quiet. Later we were called back to see family friends and guests in the back garden, where I was asked to make a speech. My response... complete silence. I became frozen to the spot. I had not mentally prepared for this as I did not expect it. I had nothing to use from my vast word database to say how deeply I loved the beautiful young woman, agreeing to be by my side until death do us part. I articulated nothing. I just wanted to die or be swallowed up by the ground.

Faces turned to me. They became still, expecting something from me, and I knew they would be upset if I did not address them, but I was helpless. Public speaking was not something I did in everyday life - all I had ever heard was conversations. There was no model from anything else in my head for this sort of speaking. So I removed myself from the scene with overwhelming feelings of shame. Only with time can I see that it was not my shame to bear. Julie simply slipped her hand in mine and held it tightly, accepting me for who I was, not what the world wanted to see. I hid from family and friends, feeling the weight of judgement upon me as Julie's love fell around me like warm summer rain. Thank you my angel. I adore you more every day and don't tell you enough.

It's not down to persistence, by the way, that I have survived. I put myself up for things and maintain an open life, ready to action whatever happens. That's how I have made connections and got myself into employment - a bit like driving along a road in fog... no overview but prepared to turn off when the next road appears. This happened when I trained to be a Methodist Preacher. I felt a calling to lead people in, encourage and help them understand their faith. In my autistic fashion I appeared at my local church one day saying I was called to do this and ready, because I was.

I remember being asked which preacher I would like to train with, and had no idea, as I don't remember faces well, so couldn't make an informed choice. I had no name to quote either, but I indicated who the person was and that turned out to be the best thing to do. The preacher was called Vic. He was very experienced, passionate and methodical. Just right to train an exceptionally detail-focused autistic person. We got on well. My next piece of

luck came when Vic's wife Marjorie came to a service - I didn't know it but she had recently retired from a teaching career at a London stage school. Marjorie made an appraisal of my speaking form and told me how I was doing. I loved that, it was incredibly useful information. She said I spoke in a monotone voice and needed to slow down a bit, showing me how to inject intonation and styles of speaking. She even offered to train me which made me very pleased – someone bothering to help!

We met weekly for voice exercises, understanding theories of approaching speech, breathing exercises to overcome panic and projection of sound. I saw how to behave and was actually allowed a freedom to 'act' in front of people! This was mind-blowing stuff - how to lead an activity, how to cope and deal with mistakes (without anyone else knowing). After a few months I was voice trained. I could throw my voice, add emotion, ad lib, verbally prepare and practise speaking. It was a revelation and I am very grateful to the time Marjorie spent with me. If only I had been armed with these skills from a younger age, I would have been able to make friends. Naturally, I include this gentle help to all my clients today – old or young. You are never too late to learn!

If you have seen the film *The Kings Speech* you will have seen a story in which Lionel Logue teaches King George VI how to speak. I was trained in exactly the same way, with the same effect. Having a reliable voice is a wonderful thing. It gives you freedom of expression.

Twenty years later I have a well-tuned public voice that's a joy to use. To speak publicly involves using the whole of the body in the best way, including diaphragm breathing, holding the head right, using sinuses, tongue and face to project a versatile, clear human voice. It's something I put my soul into and practice lots (far more than would be apparent when I am speaking). The aim is to appear quite natural, while actually working at a high level of professional competence. This is a skill actors have - they can bring characters alive and the whole thing looks organic and natural complete with emotion - everything woven together to make the character live.

Entrance is of first importance and Marjorie showed me how to step up in front of people. She showed me that their first impression of me and my competence is formed right there

and then. That first fraction of a second sets the whole presentation up. One cannot wholly retrieve things if the entrance is not right. Marjorie said the entrance is the point at which the performance peaks. It must be spot on or what follows cannot be as good as it could or should be. A fraction of a second, right at the start, to get everything right. No pressure then... I recognise this trained skill in speakers now and respect what they do. They are so professional in appearing not to be using any skill - and that's what I strive for in my speaking work.

When I am speaking professionally, people are paying good money to hear me – often shocked at an autistic person seeming 'normal'. That's why I talk – more autistic people need to be heard. Autistic novels need to be written by autistics, not non-autistics. Autism-centred plays need to be played by autistic actors, not 'normal' people. My audience deserves value for money and is captivated by my insight into an autistic mind, spoken straight from an autistic mouth. Marjorie helped me no end with my confidence in doing this. She said that the audience are expecting something good, and since the person at the front is supposedly going to deliver something good to the audience, I had not only their permission, but also their willingness, to give me the time and space to perform. They would wait and want the best. That information is good for calming nerves when out in public. I step up to the mark, fulfil and exceed the audience's expectations. They always remark afterwards about my not using notes or a PowerPoint presentation. Too right I don't use notes, I have rehearsed properly! Any impression I give of being relaxed, with everything flowing naturally, is wholly down to Marjorie's training practice and preparation. And as for PowerPoint - I have a question... do you ever see an actor using PowerPoint, or a script, when they are performing?

I sometimes use computers to help when words are needed physically. Yesterday, I wrote over two thousand words for this book and also read a few emails. I spoke a handful of words to people on the telephone, but writing was the hardest way to use words and I was exhausted by the end of the day. The finished manuscript for this book is over ninety thousand words that needed editing, shaping, and proofing. You needed to know this as a normal person reading autistic work.

There is a letter for me in the post today. It will remain unread for a day or two as I work up to reading it - getting my head in the right place to become tuned for its content. Emails continually eat at my word capacity - even to see if it can be deleted, I must read words. Luckily, my PR agent is a Myers Briggs INFJ type individual who operates with minimal communications - especially for me, ensuring she gets straight to the point (thank you Annie Penn, I am so glad we met). But there is very little respite from words for me, and my capacity to use them gets stretched thin until I become very tired - an uncomfortable, messed up brain 'washed-out' sort of tired.

Spoken words get me through life but I use a certain amount before needing to stop and retreat somewhere silent to re-group myself. There is no need to tie up my vision with seeing and decoding letters to make up words. When I read, I have to scan every word in detail and think about it to be sure I have the right word. Letters are tiring, as are written words. They contain no shape until read and processed into a vision. On the other hand, I love Chinese and Japanese calligraphy for the expressive brush strokes, textures, different depths of ink and beautifully crafted, instantly visual written language via pictogram structure.

The last two paragraphs took so much out of my brain that I have needed a two-hour break before coming back to the computer. They took one and a half hours to write. This rate of writing is typical, and how many hours do you think I have put into this book? While having a break I lay down to stare at the ceiling in a quiet place, going through meditative techniques and shutting my brain chatter off. I reckon I'm good for another hour of writing. To keep things in order and give me visual interest I open up my web browser and search for visuals to re-tune senses using Flickr - a photo sharing website. I hold lots of visuals there, including my own photo stream (Richard Maguire cycle.nut66) and look up things that hold my concentration. At the moment I am looking for images made using a Leica Summar 50mm f2 lens. I like the finesse and 3D quality of images made using this lens. I do not have one and intend to buy one with a Leica screw mount body to use it on. I use this as motivation as well - if this book makes enough money I want to buy a Leica Summar and camera body, as well as help non-autistic people live alongside and work with autistic individuals - that's my goal. I'm a simple soul.

Now for a quick jumping off point - like any human, autistic people need motivation. For us, this motivation will come from our specific and passionate interests. For me, a Leica camera and lens works as my obsessive passion; for another autistic person something else will do as well. I could also be motivated by discussing the *Lord of the Rings* books. (Not the films! Don't forget autistic people are singular in interests and I will not move from the books to the films in a conversation, because they are two vastly different subjects.) Mainly our motivation comes from being passionate about what we do and wanting to make a perfect job of it. We are not bothered about things being hard, we will work through that - our lives are hard and need to be worked through every day with meticulous detail and point-to-point planning. We do not do generalisations, we do many details instead (and that's hard).