

## PREFACE

### The Power of a Message

The Autism conversation, relatively speaking, is young. The first Autism diagnosis was conceived in 1943.

The first Autism diagnosis was published within DSM (“Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders” - *For the record, I hate the term disorder*) in 1980.

The movie, Rain Man was released in 1988. This movie introduced a largely unknown term, Autism, into our mainstream lexicon. Dustin Hoffman played the character, Raymond, a young adult Autistic dude who demonstrated remarkable savant abilities.

*Savant syndrome represents up to \*37% of those diagnosed with Autism. Although the movie Rain Man did not provide the full picture, it was effective in propelling the Autism conversation into the public square.*

My son, TJ was born in 1992. Indicators of his Autism became apparent in 1994. We began general early intervention programs at the age of three.

His first “quasi-diagnosis”, Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD) with Autistic Tendencies, was provided by a neurologist in 1996.

At that time, most of the neurologists wanted to soft peddle the Autism diagnosis with a PDD qualifier. There was a general negative connotation with the term, Autism, and a big fear of the unknown associated with an Autism diagnosis.

Although the term now had some recognition among society, it was still a seemingly rare diagnosis. You may have heard or read about it, but you just could not believe that it was impacting *your* family!

The primary energy at that time was directed towards the research and treatment of Autism. There was even considerable anticipation that a cure should and would be found soon, if only we tried hard enough.

In hindsight, it is easy to see that there was very little, if any, energy being directed towards accepting and embracing that individual, as a whole and complete human being. “We just had to fix this!”

The motivation to “fix this” came from a place of great love, there should be no mistaking that. I do think it is important to take note, that even from a place of great love, if we are not careful, “fix this” can quickly overshadow acceptance.

I have never met anybody who did not want whole and complete acceptance for who they are, right here, right now, in this moment. I just haven't.

Research and learning have and continue to bring tremendous benefit to the Autism community. If everybody were like me, I think that we probably would have done too much accepting, and we probably would not have benefitted from much of the heroic research that has taken place.

We need research, but I can tell you, from behind the eyes of Autism, *yes, I am also diagnosed on the Spectrum*, that holy cow, do we also need acceptance, even more!

I believe that this book will help all who are impacted, from every side of this Autism conversation, to have more confidence in acceptance, as we journey towards growth and learning together.

So then, what is the state of the Autism conversation among society as a whole today, and where should we go from here?

I am convinced, after thousands of interviews, interviews that have included many psychologists, neurologists, therapists, specialists, teachers, fellow travelers on the Autism Spectrum and a whole lot of you normie types, that the intense focus on research and treatment during those early years has had lasting impact on general perceptions about Autism today.

From the outside, and from the perspective of any new Autism parent, it would appear that Autism is incredibly complex. So complex, in fact, that one really cannot begin to understand Autism until you have fully immersed yourself in study and research.

Hundreds of books have been written, and entire industries have popped up out of nowhere, dedicated to treating the impacts of Autism. If I were to observe all of that from the outside, it would all look pretty complicated to me too.

This myth of hopeless complexity serves to create a wall of separation between Autistic individuals and the world at large. How can we truly connect at an authentic place of humanity if we believe there is a fog of overwhelming complexity that separates us?

This limiting message is one that is unhelpful, and thankfully, one that is also false!

In my professional background, I have spent more than twenty years working within the mass retail and ecommerce trade channels.

My specific responsibilities have included product development, retail packaging development, marketing strategy and leading sales presentations, pitching products to the largest retail chain store buyers in North America.

Within the mass retail environment, it is understood that you only get a fraction of a second for a mass retail consumer to glance at your product, among many other products on a retail shelf, to recognize what the product is, to understand the benefit of that product, and to have confidence that the product actually delivers the promised benefit.

That is a lot that needs to happen within a fraction of a second. Why? Because we are busy, super busy, overwhelmed with the constant flow of information, and with an endless list of things to-do. You know it, I know it, no surprise there.

I have also had the experience of building, from scratch, a successful independent packing, shipping, and printing retail business. During that process I hired an excellent consultant and with his guidance, created a beautiful store, located in a fantastic area known as “The Golden Triangle”. The area was poised for big growth, and that growth did eventually materialize.

People were convinced that my business was a franchise because it looked very polished. It had tasteful and perfectly matching neon signage throughout the store. It was named, “The Mail Depot”. Catchy, no? I had a corner location with a full glass front and side, allowing great visibility into the business from the parking lot and also from a busy nearby intersection.

Of course, it took a month longer than planned to get opened due to contractor, and permit delays.

Opening day was so exciting for me. I had been immersed in the project for months, all that was left to do was to smile, shake hands, and to open up that revenue spigot!

Funny thing though, when I clicked that dead bolt open there was actually near silence, and not much business activity.

I learned something on that day. There are things that happen right in front of us constantly, all day long, that we really do not see. We have so much on our plates that we tend to look right past the right now.

Over the next several weeks I pounded the pavement. I spent a lot more on advertising than I had planned, and I handed out a lot of flyers. Eventually, the business became seen, became known and became successful. Our Golden Retriever “greeter puppy” didn’t hurt.

Both my mass retail, and my small business experience have impacted the way that I view our current state of messaging relative to Autism.

The Autism Awareness mantra has had a positive effect over the past twenty years or so. Generally speaking, there is a greater awareness of Autism. No question about that.

However, it begs the question, aware of what?

The message that truly matters is not the one that I am sending, the message that matters is the one that is being received.

Through my research, it is clear that a large number of people are resigned to a belief that Autism is, generally speaking, overwhelmingly complex.

I am convinced that most people have hearts that are in the right place. Most people intend well. Most people yearn to be kind and to do well by others. When most people hear “Autism Awareness”, it is my impression that people think, “Yeah! That is great stuff! I am all down for that!”.

But it doesn’t stop there. At a subconscious level, people are thinking, “Yes, I really WANT to be aware! I should probably read some good books on Autism, and then, my awareness will really begin to happen”.

Then there is that next level of subconscious that whispers, “But what about all of those unanswered emails and that to-do list? I can’t read those books right now, but one of these days, I’d like to do that!”.

And one level deeper, the true belief whispers, “It won’t happen, it sucks, but it won’t happen”.

And with that, we move on and we forget about Autism Awareness until the next time that we think about Autism Awareness, and the cycle repeats.

Autism Awareness is a fine message however it seems to me that Autism Awareness in actuality serves to elicit a lot of guilt, and only a little bit of action.

I have always been uncomfortable attending gripe sessions cleverly disguised as Autism Support Groups. Not all of the groups were like that, but many of them were. I don’t say this to discount the challenges, sometimes the overwhelming challenges that Autism families encounter. I say this because, let’s face it, griping and guiltning are easy traps to fall into. The one thing that griping and guiltning the public large accomplishes, with absolute certainty, is that those behaviors build a wider societal canyon for our kids to cross.

There is a better way.

The message that inspires positive and lasting change is the one that will win hearts and minds.

Over the past five years, I have conducted more than 7,000 informal focus groups on the topics that are covered within this book.

In the beginning, I was timid about my thesis relating to the Simplicity of Autism. I have approached every one of these conversations from an angle of, “What am I missing here?”.

The feedback, the hope, and the affirmation that has resulted from these encounters has provided me with assurance that this is a message that is on point, and one that can profoundly change lives for the better.

This book will offer bare bones and pointed insight, insight that will reframe common societal misconceptions about Autism.

For those of you who want to go deeper into supporting science, I have included some research links within this book.

In addition to insight, I hope that you will find love, hope and optimism infused throughout these pages. This is a good news message about Autism. At its most basic level, the story of Autism is one about a unique bunch people who, in my view, just so happen to make planet earth an infinitely better place.

Autism is often viewed as a mysterious life experience. In truth, it is not mysterious at all.

This book is not about treating, counseling, intervening, curing, or changing any person who is on the Autism Spectrum. There are good people who dedicate their lives to doing that sort of work, but that is not my mission.

I am primarily focused on the whole and complete acceptance of the individual, here and now, today, because when that sort of acceptance and understanding are truly commonplace, a world of opportunities are made possible.

Wouldn't it be great if you could encounter Autistic individuals in **social settings**, possessing full confidence that you are understanding what you are looking at? You are not cautiously timid, not a little bit taken aback. You are comfortable and you are confident in your ability to connect with that individual at a most basic level of humanity.

Wouldn't it be great if you, as an **employer** could be fully comfortable and confident as you interact with, manage, and collaborate with any Autistic individual who might share your work environment.

And **parents**, when you receive that new Autism diagnosis for your child, a diagnosis that you never contemplated, wouldn't it be great to have confidence, clarity and conviction in supporting and advocating for your child from the very beginning?

When my son was diagnosed, I questioned if I really knew who he was. Suddenly it seemed like I needed an expert to tell me who he was. I felt like I did not have a confident grasp on anything at that point.

I was, however, wrong. I had it backwards. I knew full well who my son was and who he is, but with the introduction of an Autism Spectrum Diagnosis, I initially questioned everything.

Today, when I read new information, attend conferences or view informative videos about Autism, I understand that this sort of information can help us better understand elements of *nuance* about our kids.

No expert, no study or educational video can tell us **who** our kids are. That is an inside job, and our kids are counting on us to make that job our highest priority and our first priority.

When we do that job well, then we can evaluate any new information that might specifically benefit our Autism journey. Knowing, understanding, accepting and embracing our kids as our first priority prepares us to retain new information that is helpful, and also to leave behind information that is unhelpful and/or not applicable.

This book will deliver life affirming benefits for any person who is encountering Autistic individuals, at any level of relationship in your daily life.

This book is a foundational and enlightening resource that any employer should read before you hire, manage and/or work with any individual on the Autism Spectrum.

And parents, yes, when you get that initial Autism Diagnosis for your child, please read this book right away. I guarantee that you will step into this journey with rock solid insight, insight that will place your feet firmly underneath you from the outset.

There is plenty of snake oil out there, people making fantastical claims regarding Autism treatments. Some of them might be tempting. Evaluating these treatments, with insights that are offered from behind the eyes of Autism, will provide you with clarity and guidance.

So, parents, family, friend's employers and acquaintances of Autistic individuals, let me just say, "You've got this!" I will prove it in the pages that follow.

My promise to you.

\*<https://molecularautism.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13229-018-0237-1>