

# Introduction: Towards Acceptance

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*by Ari Ne'eman*

Ten years ago, the neurodiversity movement was a far cry from what it is today. Despite great trials and tribulations, the recent years have been good to our community. Increasingly, Autistic adults have looked at the broad scope of the disability rights movement and its successes and rightfully asked, "Why not us?" Just as important, we are finally beginning to see a real groundswell of family and professional supporters that see the value of the self-advocate perspective in changing the way our society approaches the autism spectrum. We've come a long way.

As of this writing, April 2013 is only a month away. For as long as I can remember, Autistic people have had to approach the month of April with an almost existential dread. The start of April meant an outpouring of autism awareness rhetoric

heralding Autistic people as eternal children, diseased, broken, empty, and imprisoned, putting our families through unimaginable suffering and single-handedly creating the greatest public health crisis of our time. More devastating than AIDS, more expensive than cancer, and more common than diabetes: if your child stacked blocks or didn't make eye contact, it was the end of the world.

Parents talked about their desire to kill their Autistic child while the child played at their feet. Other parents watched this and then actually did.

Awareness kills.

But a new day is dawning. Some of us have survived to adulthood, and more and more, we're making our voices heard. We aren't tragedies. We aren't victims, and we aren't monsters, and we aren't going anywhere. We are family members, friends, community members, employees, students, and fellow citizens. We can speak for ourselves, and we have things to say. We're Autistic. And we have a right to live in this world.

Awareness kills, but acceptance can change everything.

In a world where autism is not feared but *accepted*, Autistic people go to school with our neighbors, control our own lives, work and live in the community, and are listened to and respected, however we communicate. In a world where autism is not dreaded, watched for, cringed away from, and screened out, Autistic people are valued as Autistic citizens and supported in living full, meaningful lives as contributing members of our community. In a world where neurological diversity is valued and Autistic people are embraced, Autistic people are seen as, well, people. And in a world where Autistic people are accepted, we don't just survive--we thrive.

Every day, every time an Autistic person speaks, every time our community demands to be heard, we get an inch closer to that world. Day by day, we inch closer to acceptance.

We aren't there yet. Autism still evokes horror and dread in most conversations. Awareness is still the name of the game. I still dread April. But with my friends at my side, my community at my back, and the words in this book in my head, I know we can get through to the other side of someday--together.

We're closer than we have ever been, though there is still much to do. The road is long, but we'll get there together.