

Postscript to the Paperback Edition

QUITE A LOT has happened since the summer of 2006, when I wrote *Look Me in the Eye*. Back then, Asperger's was still a little-known condition. No more—2007 saw the publication of several new books and the appearance of Aspergian characters on television and in movies. Day by day, the world is becoming more aware.

The word *Asperger's* is now in common usage, and it even has an opposite: neurotypical. My story speaks to both groups, though *camps* might be a better term as they sometimes seem at war with each other. And there's even a catchall phrase for all autistic people: We're said to be "on the spectrum."

When writing *Look Me in the Eye*, I purposely did not read any other books on autism or Asperger's, because I didn't want to be influenced by them. After turning in the manuscript, though, I felt free to read everything I could find, and I did. One of the first books I read was Daniel Tammet's *Born on a Blue Day*, which went on sale in America two weeks before I brought *Look Me in the Eye* to Crown.

I was immediately struck by the parallels to my own story. Both Tammet and I describe growing up, feeling alone, struggling to fit in, and finally achieving success as adults. But there are some key

differences. For one thing, Tammet's family stayed together and supported one another—something my own family did not do. Actually, Tammet's family situation is almost the polar opposite of my own, yet we tell similar stories of overcoming childhood limitations to become successful adults. Here's an observation I found interesting: When I read his book, I felt that he expressed less emotion in his writing than I do in mine. If that's true, it's probably because he is only half my age, and I didn't develop the ability to express my feelings until I was in my forties. If I had written my story at twenty-five instead of fifty, it would have been much drier and less emotional.

I believe a similar evolution is evident in Temple Grandin's work (she's the author of *Thinking in Pictures* and *Animals in Translation*). In fact, she and I have discussed that very issue on several occasions.

This insight was inspiring to me because it shows that our brains continue to develop throughout our lives. This is completely counter to what I've often heard but never accepted: "If you're autistic, you never change." If I am any example, it is possible to teach old dogs new tricks.

In fact, my entire life exemplifies continuing change. As a kid, I was voted "most likely to fail," and indeed, I flunked out of high school. Yet only a few years later I became an engineer on one of the biggest rock 'n' roll tours in the world. Then I helped design some of the first electronic games. When I was in my thirties, I made a complete change of direction, raising a kid and starting an automobile business. And at fifty, I changed course once again, becoming a successful author.

When I wrote *Look Me in the Eye*, I wanted to show readers what it was like to grow up feeling like a freak or a misfit. I thought my book would show how people with Asperger's are different from everyone else. To my great surprise, my book actually shows the opposite: Deep down, people are very much the same. I had grown up saying to myself, "I wish I could be like the captain

of the swim team.” He was suave, polished, and everyone liked him. Now all the so-called popular people—swim-team captains, cheerleaders, class presidents, football quarterbacks—came to my events, and they spoke up. They felt like misfits too! In the end, telling others how hard it was for me to fit in has helped me fit in better by revealing the universality of my struggle.

I am fond of the quote “When you’ve met one Aspergian, you’ve met one Aspergian. We are all unique.” That may be true, but now that I’m meeting other Aspergians, I am finding that some traits I thought were unique to me are actually characteristic of Aspergians.

One of those traits is my voice. I had never realized that there was anything distinctive about it until my audiobook was released. All I knew was that *Look Me in the Eye* was my story, and I wanted to narrate it myself. A professional voice artist might have sounded more expressive than me, but I was convinced that listeners would appreciate hearing the authentic John Robison and not an imposter. My producer at Random House Audio agreed, and together we abridged the text so that it would fit into five hours and recorded it. I was very happy with the result, and I was anxious to see if listeners agreed. About a month before the book went on sale, we put a sample online and right away the e-mails began coming in.

Listeners did like the audiobook but for a totally unexpected reason. Autistic and Aspergian children recognized my voice. Listeners on the spectrum said things like “Your voice sounds like home” and “Your voice just seems familiar to my child.” Was there a distinctive voice pattern associated with Asperger’s? I began to wonder.

Then my editor got a call from Temple Grandin. “She sounds just like you,” Rachel said. When I talked to Temple myself, I was amazed by the similarity in our speech. I felt as if I were hearing myself talk.

Since that time, I’ve talked to hundreds of people on the

spectrum, as well as their parents. It has become clear that there is indeed “a voice of Asperger’s,” and that I have it. But what is it, precisely? The answer came to me last winter, during a visit with some brilliant researchers from Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, a part of Harvard Medical School. They’d been studying autism and the workings of the brain, and they gave me some startling insights.

It turns out that sentences are not formed in a single area of the brain. It’s far more complex than that. We form the concept of a sentence in one spot. Then we choose the verbs in another area and nouns in yet a third spot. The sentence is built in pieces throughout the brain, and then assembled into finished form.

For some reason, Aspergians like me experience “delays” in the transmission of those sentence fragments within the brain. That gives a slightly ragged cadence to our speech that’s quite distinct from that of normal speech. Once you begin listening for it, it’s quite recognizable.

In addition to the unique cadence of our speech, our lack of social expression is actually audible. Folks without autism make subtle changes to the rhythm and pitch of their speech to convey emotion. Aspergians like me don’t have a natural ability to do that, at least not very well, so our speech has a flat, monotonic quality. Collectively, those traits are called *prosody*.

As I write this, I am involved in a study to see if I can alter the quality of my speech. Changes in my voice could reflect changes deeper inside, perhaps in the very way I think. Stay tuned for more on this subject, which I find fascinating.

A word to teachers: My audiobook is divided into tracks, so you can easily play specific passages to students for discussion.

The most amazing thing has been the book’s impact on young people. High schools and even middle schools began using my book to teach tolerance and understanding. Special education teachers embraced and recommended it. Schools invited me to speak to their students, and the students welcomed me. To my

great surprise, my book opened up dialogues on fitting in, bullying, violence, pranks and play, and how kids treat one another.

Some parents and teachers have taken exception to the pranks in my book. As a parent, I agree that I'd be disturbed if my son did the things I did forty years ago. However, it's worth considering that no one was ever hurt by my shenanigans, and they provided a way for me to relieve frustrations harmlessly. Perhaps one message is that we need to give today's kids ways to blow off steam before they explode. And more than anything, we need more compassion and understanding in our society. There is no surer way to defuse tensions.

Because of the book's popularity with a younger audience, I was faced with an unexpected issue. The language in *Look Me in the Eye* was fine for adults, but I never meant it for kids. When I was younger, I worked in some pretty rough places with some pretty coarse people. We swore a lot, and my writing reflected that. I toned down the language when I wrote, but a rough edge remained.

The more young people I talked to, the more I realized my message was key, and the profanity stood in the way by making teachers and parents uncomfortable. Today when I speak to kids, I see myself in their struggles, and I want so much for them to have a better life than me. I resolved to clean up my language because I knew that would help me reach more young people.

To that end, I've made a few changes in this edition. I've cleaned up the language in some thirty passages to make the book appropriate for tweens and teenagers. All the pranks and tricks and wild times are still there, including passages that may be rough for a kid to read. But real life is like that, and some unfortunate kids experience things worse than I describe in my book every day. This book depicts my life as I lived it.

If you are a purist and prefer to read *Look Me in the Eye* in its original profane glory, the hardcover remains untouched.

Before I go, I'd like to address one last question: Is it possible to

know whether the thoughts expressed in my book also reflect the inner life of autistic people who have difficulty speaking for themselves? When I first appeared in public and met autistic folks who did not speak, I asked myself, *Are they like me?*

That's a very profound question, perhaps impossible to answer until the first nonverbal autistic person is able to tell us about his or her inner life. What I do know is that all of us have far more in common than we realize. I have spoken to many, many people since the release of my book, and it has become clear to me that my thoughts and feelings are not unique to me, or even to other people with autism. If it sometimes seems that way, that is because people with autism may express their feelings in ways that nonautistics find puzzling or inscrutable. Yet our underlying feelings are very often the same as those of neurotypicals. Our responses may appear totally neutral, while inside we are crying. You cannot reliably evaluate our state of mind by our outward demeanor.

One last thing: I may look and act pretty strange at times, but deep down I just want to be loved and understood for who and what I am. I want to be accepted as part of society, not an outcast or outsider. I don't want to be a genius or a freak or something on display. I wish for empathy and compassion from those around me, and I appreciate sincerity, clarity, and logicity in other people. I believe most people—autistic or not—share this wish. And now, with my newfound insight, I'm on the way to achieving that goal.

I hope you'll keep those thoughts in mind the next time you meet someone who looks or acts a little strange.