Chapter 41. The Autistic Me and Advocacy Research for Neurodiverse Writers

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"We don't need no Autistics here."

An administrator assured me a department colleague was merely making a harmless and witty movie reference. The words sounded sincere to me, though. A series of events and statements by coworkers clarified that I was unwelcome among people I had hoped would be colleagues, mentors, and friends. The department chair said I needed to be more collegial and outgoing. The lengthy list of concerns in my annual evaluation was an inventory of Autistic traits.

To coworkers, I was a problematic new hire, constantly asking questions and getting confused. I avoided social events, attended no sporting events, and demonstrated no "school spirit."

Though I had accepted the suggestion of our dean to continue an autism-focused research agenda, colleagues recommended that I find a more "appealing" topic. I abandoned a study of blogs by Autistics, which was designed to build on my dissertation. I regret not completing that project, which might have demonstrated common experiences and writing traits among adult Autistics. Not pursuing more publications during my first year on the job was a mistake. I was deemed unproductive.

"Not a good fit," the dean noted during my review. Autistics hear that often. We don't fit. When we try to belong by mimicking others, we make more mistakes. I focused on teaching and doing precisely what was asked of me. I failed to identify what was *expected* of me, the unstated assumptions that other new junior faculty might have known. The university made a separation offer that I accepted. Halfway into my contract, I was no longer on the tenure track. The loss of that first and only tenure-track post devastated my confidence.

As an Autistic writer, I assumed my passions for writing pedagogy and technology would ensure success in higher education. Autistic perseveration—intense focus on a narrow special interest—made me an outstanding student and good researcher. My social traits and physical mannerisms, however, were an impediment to employment.

An opportunity to establish a career in higher education instead left my wife and me in a strange city, in a state far from most friends and family. My Autistic traits had resulted in misunderstandings and isolation. I hated being Autistic.

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How could I do this to my wife, getting us trapped so far from home?

Pursuing a teaching career is my Sisyphean punishment for being Neurodiverse.

In first grade, I declared myself a writer. I write almost daily. In a single week, I might work on a stage play, a story, an essay on technology, a scholarly article, and a poem. By sixth grade, I knew I wanted to teach; teachers share their passions with students. Words and technology are my passions. In junior high, I coded a text editor so I could type stories. In the 1990s, I designed digital typefaces and visual elements for an internet service.

My undergraduate degrees are in print journalism and English education. My dream was to teach classes in newspaper, yearbook, and photography while writing. The first setback came when the professor overseeing student teachers said I was off-putting and odd. In her judgment, I shouldn't teach.

Told repeatedly that Autistic traits reflect a lack of self-control and maturity, I sought to change myself. I was treated for ADHD, migraines, and seizures in the 1990s. My personal failings persisted. Why would someone so flawed insist on teaching? A psychologist said I was obsessive, in an unhealthy way, about writing and publishing technologies. I reasoned that being obsessive was perfect for graduate school. If I shouldn't teach high school, maybe I should teach at a university.

When I entered a master's program in 2004, my ambition was to study the technology of writing and publishing. My thesis explored how the design of a learning management system (LMS) exacerbated the social distances between students and instructors. Though my research did not focus on Autistic students, its origins were based on my experiences. Some Autistics find online spaces more accessible to navigate socially than physical spaces. Written expression empowers us, while spoken language includes unspoken meaning.

Completing my master's degree with honors, I entered a doctoral program in Rhetoric, Scientific, and Technical Communication. The department managed an online writing center, which I wanted to study. I wondered how students and tutors interacted and perceived each other through the platform's interface. My wife and I moved more than 2000 miles. I had to succeed—for her, my amazing partner.

Again, the boulder rolled back over me … several times.

Many people are uncomfortable around Autistics, with our lack of eye contact, poor vocal control, and unexpected movements. Erb-Duchenne palsy, base membrane dystrophy, and a history of Jacksonian seizures also complicate my movements. I also have ADHD, which is common among Autistics. I applied to work in the on-campus writing center but was advised that my tapping and rocking were distracting. For my involuntary movements and anxiety, I also faced a disciplinary hearing. A professor asserted that if I could stop the jerking, shaking, and rocking, people might not be afraid of me. After several weeks, the university cleared me of being a threat.

When I sought accommodations, the university required medical evaluations, including new brain scans, an electroencephalogram (EEG), and psychological screening. In November 2006, I endured two days of neuropsychological evaluation. The diagnostic criteria of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition—Text Revision* (*DSM-IV-TR*), brought the Autistic me into existence. Was this just another label? For an assignment in a digital composition course, I composed a blog post trying to understand the label "Autistic." That blog eventually became *The Autistic Me*.

As I completed my coursework, the Department of Rhetoric dissolved, another disorienting blow. To complete the doctorate, I had accepted my committee's suggestion to embrace Autism-related research for my dissertation. Now, half the committee needed to be replaced. I simply wanted to graduate. Completing the doctorate *almost* helped me move on from the traumatic experience of disciplinary hearings.

I quickly accepted that first tenure-track post. We moved another 1000 miles from our native California, believing this was a dream come true. But, as you read, it was just another boulder I pushed up another hill.

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After exiting the tenure-track post, I applied for posts at nearby colleges and universities, securing a visiting assistant professorship at a prestigious university for the next two years. I taught communication within the business school, which allowed me to focus on visual design as much as writing.

After my visiting appointment ended, I returned to graduate school to pursue a dream degree: an MFA in Film and Digital Technology with an emphasis on digital typography. Surely the MFA would ensure a path forward in visual and digital media, the path I had wanted to follow. I interviewed for posts in mass communication, digital media, and film. One of the schools at which I interviewed for a media production post extended an offer … teaching first-year composition.

We now had two daughters. I needed this job. Unfortunately, the combined stresses of a full teaching load, a long commute, and complicated family matters made masking my Autistic traits challenging. I recognized signs that I wasn't a "fit" within the English department. My wife and I decided to move and start over yet again. I would again chase the dream of teaching high school media courses.

Colleagues noticed me reading computer programming and economics texts. Without pause or reflection, I replied that I wanted to teach media production, programming, computer repair, or business classes. I simply had to pass the exams and complete an alternative teaching credential program.

"And you're going to pass all those exams? In those subjects?"

"Of course."

The unstated question was, "Then why are you in an English department?"

I formed no personal or professional connections at the university. Any spare time and energy went into studying and practicing for the exams. From

programming exercises in Java to solving statistics problems, I focused on a seemingly more secure path. Public schools in the Southwest face staffing shortages in technology courses, while universities increasingly rely on adjuncts and contingent faculty. If I wanted a teaching career, K12 seemed more promising than cobbling together a set of adjunct positions.

I passed the exams. We moved to Texas. I had not anticipated that school districts would request recommendations from previous teaching posts. Confident in my knowledge and skills, I had failed at something more important: networking. I secured only one letter of reference from a friend and colleague who had knowledge of my teaching.

Despite stellar teaching evaluations, kind notes from students, and positive observation reports, I struggle beyond the classroom. When my teaching schedule overlaps department meetings, I sigh with relief. Autistic academics connect on social media, where we share our passion for learning and our frustrations with academia. Being good at learning and passing exams rarely helps us navigate the social settings of higher education. Instead, our intensity becomes a barrier to success.

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Throughout these experiences, I maintained *The Autistic Me* blog. I launched the podcast while teaching business communications. I also created social media accounts to promote the content. When teaching communications, I recommend that students avoid posting details about their families or jobs. Some students asked why I blog and host a podcast, contradicting my own advice.

No matter my employment status, no matter where we have been, *The Autistic Me* content connects me to a community. I hadn't intended to continue the blog after completing the digital composition course, but I started receiving messages from Autistic adults. We shared experiences of being diagnosed and relabeled after decades of being called lazy, overly sensitive, moody, and far worse. *The Autistic Me* reaches thousands of readers and listeners. Some of my online connections work in education and have suffered repeated setbacks similar to those I've shared online.

As a first-generation university graduate, I experience "imposter syndrome" in two ways. Like other Autistics, I am an imposter in social situations and workplaces. We have internalized decades of negative comments and traumatic experiences. We cope through masking, using our emotional and physical energy to act "normal" and suppress our Autistic traits. In public situations, I mask; I do not stop being Autistic. Social challenges persist, and my misunderstandings continue to cause conflicts. Some days, an Autistic masks so well that people question the Autistic's self-identity. When a colleague says I don't seem Autistic, is that a compliment or an accusation? On other days, with too many inputs and stressors, that same Autistic melts down and cannot function. That is Autistic burnout, the result of exhaustion from masking and pushing through painful stimuli.

On Facebook, X (Twitter), and LinkedIn, #ActuallyAutistic colleagues and support each other. Among colleagues using the #AutisticInAcademia hashtag, I find encouragement to embrace an Autistic-friendly and Autistic-supportive research agenda. Some of these Autistics have joined me on the podcast, too, including Temple Grandin, Alex Plank, and Jude Morrow. This community encourages me to continue in higher education and research *because* I'm Autistic. "Nothing about us without us," Autistic self-advocates proclaim.

During past academic job interviews, hiring committee members had mentioned my blog and podcast. If I stopped creating autism-related content and archived *The Autistic Me*, would I have more success? Then, I consider my daughters. Do I want them to hide who they are? *The Autistic Me* is important to its audience and to my family.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I set aside my ambitions and became a full-time homeschool teacher. Homeschooling the girls was the best decision I've made as a parent and educator. After the pandemic, we continued homeschooling for another academic year. The girls made dramatic progress academically, returning to school ahead of many peers. I shared our experiences on the blog and podcast.

Parenthood reinforces my commitment to Neurodiversity, especially in education. Our youngest has ADHD and sensory processing disorder. A teacher banished her to the "wiggle table." How does that help a student succeed? My oldest and I share many traits. She wears a back brace for scoliosis, as I did. She has diagnoses of autism and ADHD. Already, she has endured unsupportive teachers and isolation. She also earns straight As in honors courses. I see myself in her, and I worry. Thankfully, she has friends who help her navigate school.

The girls have become self-advocates, joining my podcast and others, speaking confidently about their experiences. When a Neurodiverse 10-year-old describes the "wiggle table," people pay attention.

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After teaching my daughters, I did not want to work in another field. One of my friends chairs an academic department and has been on hiring committees. He suggested we work on interview scripts I could follow. Many Autistics use social scripts, so why not me? We practiced honest, if incomplete, answers and socially polite responses. During this job search, I resisted responding to offensive comments and inappropriate questions from potential colleagues. I actively reminded myself to accept the questions and respond politely.

"I didn't know Autistics could teach writing," I heard someone say during a teaching demonstration. The comment demonstrated ignorance, but I remained calm. I had an answer planned.

"I am a writer," I responded, "and I enjoy helping others discover their words." I also added that I know Autistic reporters, science writers, screenwriters, playwrights, and novelists.

"Can an Autistic connect to students?"

Nobody intends to be rude, I reminded myself; they simply don't understand autism.

Relying on the rehearsed interview script, I discussed how my autism and ADHD contribute to my teaching effectiveness. Teaching includes everything we do in our classrooms. I try to teach patience and understanding alongside any subject content I am expected to deliver. Students appreciate the flexibility and natural accommodations I adopt.

The structure and support that I had to create for myself as a Neurodiverse student, I provide for all students. Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, I posted all lecture notes and slides online. I prepared podcasts and screencasts of lectures, so students could listen as many times as they needed. Those practices continue, along with flexible revision policies.

I had several job interviews in 2023. Each committee asked about online education. Twice, committee members mentioned having read *The Autistic Me*. One mentioned listening to podcast episodes, including the discussion with Temple Grandin. I accepted a one-year contract at a flagship research university.

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The experiences of Neurodiverse individuals who desire careers in higher education suggest several potential research projects. I know several Autistics with doctorate degrees in rhetoric, composition studies, literature, and creative writing. How did we complete writing-intensive programs while other Autistics did not? We need evidence-based pedagogies that accommodate Neurodiversity, which means exploring how Autistic academics navigated their programs. I do not know if we share common strategies for success in graduate programs, but surveys and ethnographic research might reveal some commonalities. Neurodiverse students need advocates and mentors who share their perspectives, but many Neurodiverse potential educators and researchers leave higher education.

Once hired, too many of my Autistic colleagues have struggled to remain in education. Every university at which I have worked trains faculty to support Neurodiverse students, especially Autistic individuals. However, schools rarely consider training our colleagues to support Neurodiverse faculty. We need research projects addressing how to support Neurodiverse faculty. Also, Autistics did not lead the student-focused training sessions I attended. We are the experts on Neurodiversity and the misleadingly described "spectrum" of Autistic traits, which differ by context.

Also, I would like to revive, with careful consideration of the ethical context, a study of Autistic digital creators. Autistics face rejection within seconds, for reasons still unclear to researchers. Some suggest our language choices and speech patterns might distance us from peers. Does our writing have identifiable patterns and commonalities across the Neurodiverse community? Do we tend to

embrace first-person language more often than other writers? Do we use fewer idioms and less figurative language? The online words of Autistics are less likely to have been edited when compared to books by Autistics.

I have a list of research project concepts I hope an Autistic will lead. However, as a lecturer, my annual review will be based on teaching effectiveness, not scholarly production. Maybe I'm still pushing the boulder uphill. I will continue writing about Neurodiversity and engage in what research I can while teaching full-time. Research is a responsibility I have to other Neurodiverse students and aspiring educators; it is my advocacy for the community.