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TURNING THE BROADBAND ON

by

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IN THE BEGINNING...

I'm 43 now (in 2012). Asperger Syndrome (AS) was first recognized in the United States in 1994. Americans first became broadly aware of AS (via movies like Adam and TV shows like Parenthood and Big Bang Theory) in the 21st century. You do the arithmetic: I grew up, went to college and graduate school, and never heard of it. And, of course, neither had my family, teachers, classmates, or anyone else. Back in the 20th century, you were either Rain Man or you were normal. And that meant that if you ticked off somebody, people assumed you were doing it on purpose. This was understandable, but in many cases, including my own, it was completely wrong.

I went through an arduous training program: decades of Home-based Experiential Lifelong Learning (HELL). Teachers made fun of me and verbally attacked me and other people yelled at me. Kids spat on me, stole my stuff, and even beat me up—and I never knew why.

I never had any friends growing up. Among many other things, this meant that when I was absent from school, I suffered because the teachers expected us to get the notes from another student. That was funny because on the very same days I was absent, so were lots of other kids (at least the ones I asked when I got back). Either that or I just had a talent for picking the ones who hadn't taken notes that day. Labs were usually done in groups of two or three and group projects were also a joy for me. And by joy, I mean absolute dread. That said, I should have had a great reputation as a matchmaker of sorts. Almost every kid I asked to be my lab partner had already joined some other group.

Dates? Yes, I had lots of them and enjoyed them thoroughly. They were only \$1 a pound at the supermarket—small compensation for never having anyone to go out with in junior high and high school.

At least I wasn't too busy working to date. I guess when you have a hard time holding down a job, there has to be some upside. In ninth grade, for my Business Dynamics class, which was dedicated to teaching people how to get along in the workplace, I volunteered along with several other students to work the school bookstore during lunch break. After a short time, I got fired. No, I wasn't escorted out by security; in fact, I was the last to know. The teacher closed down the bookstore, and then re-opened it and just re-hired everyone else but me. He never told me what was going on, much less why.

The following year, I joined the volunteer team which gave each morning's announcements over the public address system. After a semester of that, I was fired once again. At least the assistant principal had the courtesy to tell me. I found out much later, again from the principal, that many students had really not taken well to my on-air style.

Wow, I was only 15 and already fired twice—and from volunteer gigs, no less. According to career expert, Marilyn Moats Kennedy, [only one-third of all employed adults have managed that](#). Is there a child prodigy category for this?

On to college. Still no friends and still no dates. Only after transferring to another university (Cornell, where I'd really wanted to go in the first place but had been denied admission the first time around) did I actually meet a young lady who went out with me. As I recall, our first date was the movie Rebel Without a Cause. We actually stayed friends, even after we stopped dating.

But still, no romantic relationships. Heck, if I'd been more entrepreneurial back then I could have raised brine shrimp in the salt water that soaked into my pillow every night.

And I sure could have used the money, because I was still having trouble on the job front. In fact, I got fired from a short-term paying job the summer before transferring to Cornell, and then twice more within six months after the move.

The following summer I was fired from a job others would have killed for, but I hated. It was a job helping the electrical workers and I got it because my dad was a union electrician in New York City. We got much better wages than many permanent workers in other industries, and the union even paid our Social Security taxes for us. I was then fired twice more at Cornell during the following year—my final year.

Half a dozen firings from paid jobs and I couldn't even drown my sorrows because I was too young to drink. Just call me Cream Cheese, 'cuz I was on a roll!

I then took a "gap year" before graduate school in Economics, during which time I was fired from three more jobs. In graduate school, I focused on schoolwork, so it was mainly professors and fellow students who were upset with me.

No girlfriends, though, but not for lack of trying. Oh, I was trying, all right, just ask anybody who was there.

There were a couple of more lost jobs (fired or left on bad terms), including a full-time retail job that lasted nearly two years and eight months (my personal best, by the way). Incidentally, that time I got canned just two weeks before my dissertation defense, so at least I had more time to prepare for that.

Mind you, I did leave a few jobs on good terms. Like the fundraising/survey job I had after my dissertation defense. I took a break from that one to take what turned out to be a very brief full-time job under a supervisor who hated my guts for reasons known only to herself. I came back and finally left the following fall to teach full-time for the fall and winter of 1999–2000 in Beijing. (To this day, I have a new perspective on "Chinese" food here in the States.)

I fouled up the China job so badly that the officials in charge of the school there decided to never again consider anyone from my graduate program. And they told my professors that, who in turn washed their hands of me. That reduced the professional value of everything I'd done since May 27, 1990 (the day I graduated from Cornell) by an order of magnitude. Few, if any, halfway-reputable places will hire an economist with no relevant work or graduate school references.

That time, I finally had a girlfriend to get upset about that. Roughly three months after my dissertation defense, in November of 1998, I met a very lovely young lady named Emily in one of the computer labs. (She was there on a one-year leave of absence from her home college.) Before 1998 was out, we were an item. And thanks to email and AOL Instant Messenger, we stayed in touch.

By the time my Beijing denouement played out, she and I were hundreds of miles apart; she was a northern Virginia native, whereas I'd returned to Long Island where I'd grown up. We had drifted apart, and she started dating a guy she knew from school. I took a job selling PCs and PC supplies to

companies—at which I lasted less than six months.

Fast forward another year, and precisely one month before 9/11, I moved to Washington, D.C. I'd found a room to rent with a nice landlady with whom I was (and still remain) on friendly terms. Emily and I got back together and after a stormy period stayed together. I took a bill-collecting job and lasted at that one for two and a half years. During that time, I moved into my own apartment for the first time at the age of 34.

You might have noticed, by the way, that I've worked many jobs I could have qualified for with much less experience and education. In other words, I was seriously underemployed. Even though I've had a Ph.D. since January 1999, the only full-time job I ever had that required any graduate education was the China job—and that was temporary. And the only other full-time job I ever had that required any kind of college degree was grading standardized test essays for two springs for Measurement, Inc., who, from what I saw, treated disabled people very well.

While I was still with the collection agency, Emily told me about something called Asperger Syndrome. I'd never heard of it, but she insisted I had it. She had Googled some of my “trickier” personality traits—like inflexibility, doing one thing at a time, and only understanding things that are told to me directly and literally—and she came up with some articles. She insisted I read certain articles and books about AS, especially works by Maxine Aston (a British counselor who helps couples with one Aspie and one NT partner). At first I insisted that I didn't have any disorder, but after reading more about AS, I eventually realized they were describing me to a tee.

I did manage to persuade Emily to accept my engagement ring. Despite some misgivings after I left the collection agency, we became husband and wife on January 20, 2005—and that's the best decision either of us ever made.

Now I've got a great marriage, good friends, and a career doing what I love.

And you can have those things, too. (Well, maybe doing what you love instead!)

If you're reading this, I'm guessing you're in one of the earlier stages of your life path.

Maybe you've been diagnosed with Autism or an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Asperger Syndrome (AS), High Functioning Autism (HFA), Nonverbal Learning Disorder (NLD or NVLD), Semantic Pragmatic Disorder (SPD), Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). Maybe you haven't been diagnosed, but you suspect it.

Or maybe, diagnosis or no diagnosis, you have many of the same issues. No problem, and welcome aboard!

MENTAL APPS

So now that we understand NT society a little better, what do we do about it?

NTs have complex if often unwritten rules, evolved over decades and centuries, for handling certain aspects of human nature:

Sex and love are the most powerful, and hence the most regulated, situations. Also, these regulations will most commonly be unwritten and generally unspoken. Trust me, in any possible setting where males and females interact, there will be expectations about the extent to which it's okay to show your interest in someone else and the appropriate ways to do so.

In a nightclub, you can approach people with impunity, make close conversation, and get in their personal space—both because it's crowded and because they're there to meet people. (Some of the other people there might like to get very close to you, indeed.) On the other hand, while hanging out at the mall you can talk to people, but not about very personal subjects at first. You should be sober and you should especially stay out of their personal space.

This also depends on where you live. In the U.S., more often in the South and Midwest and particularly in rural and suburban areas, you may find that if you're a male, it's a much better idea to either only approach females you already know personally or arrange for a mutual acquaintance to introduce you, than to just go up to whomever you want, especially if you're new to the area. Many women do not like men they don't know trying to talk to them.

And the stakes are very high precisely because the rules aren't articulated. These are the deepest parts of most people's emotions, and unlike some Aspies, NTs tend not to articulate these things. They feel, rightly or wrongly, that spelling too many things out could easily ruin the situation. This bears repeating here because even people who don't mind discussing other areas of social life are very uncomfortable talking about these situations.

So they proceed based on what they've picked up by osmosis all their lives:

How do you know she's interested in you? How can you show your interest without being too vulnerable and without harassing someone who may not in fact return your feelings? How can you let someone know you're not interested in them without upsetting them? How do you know what kind of a date or partner someone is likely to turn out to be? How can you impress the guy or girl of your dreams in a way they'll believe and that won't set up unsustainable expectations? How can you tell whether someone's interested in friendship, a relationship, a one-night stand—or something much worse? Once you know that people don't just say what's on their minds, how do you correct for that when trying to interpret what somebody is saying and doing?

And how can you make those decisions optimally when you're trying to prove to yourself you're a lovable and desirable person, perhaps strongly biased about somebody you like very much, maybe they're very attractive or you're very horny, possibly reeling from recently having been rejected or dumped? (To take a classic example, Romeo was “on the rebound” from Rosaline, who had rejected him, when he met Juliet, and as they say, the rest is history.)

And all this often comes at a turbulent time in your life—teens and early 20s. We’ve already discussed a few important biological reasons why that time is so stormy. All I can say now is, “This, too, will pass.”

It’s no surprise then that people are thinking with, well, everything but their higher brains. And by the way, that goes for you, too. This is irrationality on steroids—literal steroids—as in testosterone, along with other influences. Rational communication flies out the window, and people fly off the handle for reasons that seem mysterious to everyone else but perfectly obvious to them.

So the lines are very fine (and not in the sense of being very good), blurry, and different from person to person. (Not to mention that men and women already tend to strongly differ about these things.) You—especially as an Aspie—may not see any clear warning signs as you’re crossing them. The first warning you get may be a humiliating rejection or a breakup. Or somebody who’s obsessed with you and won’t leave you alone. Or you may even get called into the office of your boss or dean of students because you’ve been accused of harassment.

Or perhaps much worse possibilities, like somebody stalking or even sexually assaulting you. Or taking a Louisville Slugger to your car or even your skull. Self-defense expert Marc “Animal” MacYoung has pointed out that sleeping with other men’s girlfriends and wives is a very good way to get yourself on someone’s hit list—and he speaks from experience.

Facts and experience drink logic’s milkshake. Back in high school, I wanted to become a marksman. I figured I could join the school’s rifle team; they wouldn’t make people try out because how many teenagers have already had the opportunity to shoot? Remember, this was on suburban Long Island, not a rural area where people might shoot regularly from the time they’re kids.

This was all true—as far as it went. It turned out that the rifle team only had access to a small range, which meant they could only accommodate a few shooters. They did hold tryouts after all, to pick the lucky few. No, I didn’t make the cut; in fact, my shooting was so bad they actually gave me a second chance at the target. I did later on join a rifle club a bit out of town and won my marksmanship medals that way.

Those who pay the piper call the tune. That other rifle club didn’t make me try out because unlike the school’s rifle team, the club charged a membership fee. They did, of course, assess my skill level so they could start my training in the right place.

In general, when people are charging money, they take all comers. It’s when you want something for free that the other side can get a bit more selective. And when you want them to pay you—when you’re applying for a job, trying for a promotion or working to make a sale—you really need to impress the other side because you’ve got stiff competition.

Different people like different things. Younger people vs. older people, working-class high school graduates vs. upper-class professionals, Northeastern and West Coast liberals vs. Midwestern and Southern patriots, city dwellers vs. suburbanites, and, of course, individuals vs. individuals. As the theme song to *Diff’rent Strokes* went, what might be right for you may not be right for some.

Some priorities, like change and innovation alongside reliability and security, or civil liberties and due

process alongside safety and tranquility, can only be made in a whole group, not by individuals. That means different kinds of groups and cultures will cater to different kinds of people.

Different kinds of groups have different kinds of rules. Sometimes it's a cultural difference: For example, Orthodox Jews and other devoutly religious people are much stricter than average (at least in America) about when and how unrelated boys and girls may socialize.

That having been said, the United States is one of the most socially liberal societies in the world. If you travel abroad, unless it's to Canada, northern or western Europe or maybe Australia, be prepared to comply with some very rigid if unspoken rules. For example, if you're a woman, there are certain places you'd better not go without a male escort unless you want to be treated as a literal whore.

That goes for different socio-economic levels too. For example, educated middle and upper-class people tend to express themselves much more verbally and subtly than do working-class and lower-class people. Speaking softly and standing still gets you much further among doctors and lawyers than around bouncers and construction workers. On the other hand, loud talk, wide gestures, and earthy expressions may get you taken seriously by the latter but can easily scare the former.

Ruby Payne has written extensively about the different social rules followed by the poor, the middle class, and the rich. She grew up middle class and then worked with poor and rich families as a teacher and school administrator. If you live or work with many people from a class different from yours, or expect to change classes in either direction, check out her work.

In many places, if you're a man, you're expected to take your hat off indoors. But there's one major exception: If you're in a Jewish temple, you're expected to wear a certain kind of hat, and if you're an observant Jew, you may be expected to wear it everywhere else, too. That hat, a yarmulke, is widely recognized and most people in America understand the exception.

Different kinds of situations have different kinds of rules. Normally, when you see a stop sign, you stop, look to make sure there's no oncoming traffic, and then go ahead. However, if the stop sign is held by a person (usually a worker when road construction shuts off some lanes of traffic or a school bus driver picking up or letting off children), you're supposed to stop and stay there until the stop sign is removed. Watch out for situational differences.

It takes time to learn the rules in a new place. Informally if not also formally, you'll be on probation. That means if when you make a mistake, people may ignore it or just give you a gentle talking-to. Note the "gentle" part; it may be subtle.

"Good job coming in at the 9:00 a.m. start time! Just so you know, many of us like to come in between 8:00 and 8:30 just to get a little jump on things" means "Yes, the official start time is 9:00, but if you want to get anywhere, you'll be here by 8:30 at the latest to show you're enthusiastic."

"Hey, that popcorn smells interesting in the microwave! I like to bring sandwiches myself, and save the popcorn for when I get home" means "Please don't make popcorn here at work because we can all smell it." People sometimes use "I" messages as a subtle way to talk about what they expect from you.

And of course, "Hey, I like your suit!" could well mean, "This is the first time you've come here

dressed halfway decently, keep it up!” Sometimes, people compliment you the first time you do something right to encourage you to continue doing it.

You get a little less responsibility for your actions for a short time. That implies two things: (1) You need to get up to speed quickly, and (2) During this time, you also get a little less authority, meaning you should be seen more and heard less. Don’t expound on how you think things could be better managed; you haven’t been around long enough to find the bathroom without a map, much less understand why things are the way they are. If you’re getting a little slack for your foul-ups because you haven’t learned how things work yet, you’re expected to minimize your chances of fouling up by keeping your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut.

Sometimes you need to pay your dues. And that’s not just in dollars. For example, skilled trades (like electricians, plumbers, carpenters) require apprenticeships. Good luck getting a job in government, policy analysis, or certain lines of business without doing an internship or co-op while in college. And in many white-collar jobs, even once you’re a full-time worker with a college degree, they’ll have you doing chump work—filing, answering phones and similar tasks—while they watch you to see if you can be trusted with more important work.

Also, if you’re close friends with someone and visit them often, you’ll be treated as an ordinary guest at first while the rest of their family (or group of roommates, especially if they’re close friends) gets to know you and decides how much to trust you. If you’re dating someone—especially if you’re a guy dating a girl—that increases many times over. (This I know from experience!)

Bottom line: It takes time—often weeks, months or even years—for people to get to know you and trust you. Once again, trust is very important. That helps explain why so many couples originally met in high school or college and the same is true for many executives and other top-level people and their connections. That means you need to hang in there, be a good and loyal person, and expect most of your rewards to come later on.

Don’t show your emotions so much. Of course, consistent with the above, different cultures have different rules on that sort of things. In America, we’re in the middle of the spectrum. Some people, like Brazilians, tend to be very expressive, whereas other people, like Japanese and Chinese, tend to be very subtle.

Pay attention to others’ needs and wants. As Marilyn Moats Kennedy, specialist in office politics, points out, you’ll get much further by focusing on, “What can I do for them that will make them want to do it my way?” than on “What do I want and how can I make others do it that way?”

It’s a funny thing, even when what you’re offering isn’t what they want, people like it when you think of them and they trust you more. That may induce them to do it more your way next time.

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