DISCOVERING I’M WEIRD

The call from the teacher at Ethical Society Nursery School made my parents nervous. For the first four years of my life, they had convinced themselves my quirks and delays were just part of what made me unique. I was a little awkward, but every kid is, right? I just needed some time to break out of my shell.

The nursery school was an inviting place, just down the street from our home in St. Louis. It was the end of the school year at the Ethical Society, a time when parents looked forward to celebrating their children’s growth and achievements. Instead, my parents, Mark and Carol, walked through the neighborhood toward the school with uncertainty. Why did my teacher want them to visit the classroom to talk?

Everything changed that spring day in 1986. As Mom and Dad walked down the bright, artwork-lined hallway, they were anxious. From the serious look on my teacher’s face, they could tell something was off. This meeting wasn’t about celebrating my progress or getting ready for kindergarten.

The classroom was its usual mess when they walked in. Drawings covered the walls, shelves overflowed with toys, and round tables with little chairs were scattered throughout the room. My teacher offered Mom and Dad seats across from her at one of those kid-sized tables. She took a deep breath and began. “Thank you for coming. I wanted to talk to you about Lucky.”

My parents exchanged worried glances. Growing up, there were always little signs that I was “different” from other kids. I didn’t speak until I was three. Not a word. The pediatrician never said anything about my behavior; they just recommended Mom and Dad take me to a speech therapist. But there, the therapist told Mom and Dad not to worry. I didn’t have a speech impediment or anything. I just didn’t talk. So everybody figured I was a late bloomer who would eventually catch up.

But there were other signs. When I was two, Mom took me to an early childhood education playgroup to help me socialize. Each session began with a group activity, and for the first fifteen minutes, the moms would leave the room. While the other kids played and interacted with the teachers, I ignored the activity entirely, standing by the door, waiting. I wouldn’t move until the moms returned. My mom remembers the look I gave her when she walked back in—relieved but stern, as if to say, *Don’t do that again*. After that, everyone would sit in a circle to sing songs, kids on their moms’ laps. Except for me. I walked past Mom and sat in the teacher’s lap instead. I didn’t look at or speak to Mom until we got home for lunch.

When I finally started talking, it was in complete sentences, as if I had been storing them up for years. I talked all the time. I could go on endlessly about topics beyond my years. But socializing never came naturally—in fact, it was a disaster. I couldn’t make friends or relate to kids my age. On the playground, I was lost in my own world. While the other kids played tag or built towers with blocks, I preferred hanging around adults. I couldn’t connect with my peers, plus the adults didn’t bully me.

Back at the meeting with my parents, my teacher was gentle as she got to her point. "You need to have Lucky evaluated," she finally said.

Those words hung in the air. Mom and Dad sat in stunned silence, taking it in. This was the first time someone had suggested my differences might be more significant than my parents had thought.

My teacher explained how my struggles went beyond being a shy kid. The way I interacted—or, more precisely, didn't—with peers. How basic instructions somehow got lost on me.

Dad sat quietly, but inside he was angry at what he heard. *Evaluated for what?* he thought. *There's nothing wrong with our child. I know he has a hard time playing with other kids. But, you know, that's kids!* At the same time, he could tell that my teacher was reluctant to share the news. It was clear: For the first time, there might be a real problem. Mom and Dad finally had to reckon with the fact that their son was different—not just an introvert. I needed to be "evaluated." Which meant something was officially "wrong."

Not long after that meeting, I found myself at St. John's Hospital for an evaluation—aka testing—with an occupational therapist and psychologist. Mom volunteered with kids who had disabilities and knew a therapist there who helped arrange the testing. At that age, I didn't think much of it. Dad told me, "You're going to go meet with these people," and that was that.

The therapist tested my motor skills, spatial awareness, and ability to follow multistep instructions. But the most impactful part of that evaluation wasn't about motor skills—it was about how I learned. The therapist explained to my parents that remediation, or my ability to overcome challenges, would depend on two key things: my intelligence and my will. If I was smart enough and wanted to change badly enough, I could adapt.

As I got older, the challenges only became more apparent. In fourth grade, Community School brought in a specialist to administer the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC), a standard IQ test used to assess cognitive ability. At the time, IQ tests measured verbal abilities like vocabulary, comprehension, and reasoning, as well as nonverbal skills like spatial reasoning, visual perception, and problem-solving. It all seemed silly to me. Little did I know, those evaluations would shatter my parents' understanding of who I was. Because the results were unlike anything the evaluators had ever seen.

They explained to my parents—and me, since I was sort of a mini adult—that a learning disability was usually represented by a 20-point spread between the two halves of the IQ test. When I finished, the evaluator sat my parents down to review the results.

My spread was *68 points*.

On one end of the spectrum, I was a genius. On the other, I was considered, in the medical jargon of the time, mildly retarded.

"We've seen kids who score higher, and we've seen kids who score lower," she said, "but we have never seen a spread this big. It's hard to imagine what's going on in his mind."

She wasn't kidding.

Simple things, like forming a basic sentence with a noun and a verb, baffled me. I couldn't write a sentence to save my life. I still can't spell. I remember one time when Dad tried to help me write a story about Abraham Lincoln. We focused on the often-attributed quote, "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?" He wanted me to build a story around that idea. In reality, he basically wrote it while trying to teach me what writing was.

Meanwhile, things like math and science came easily. In third grade, we had something called McDonald's Multiplication Day. If you learned your multiplication tables, you'd get a McDonald's lunch based on how far you got. Single digits earned you a Happy Meal. If you made it through the teens multiplied by teens, you got a hot fudge sundae. Most kids took months to memorize the tables. I finished in four days. That's just how my mind worked. Plus the task had a definable goal with a real reward; I liked that.

It was social reasoning—reading cues, interpreting context, communication—where I was hopelessly lost. If the IQ test could have measured my EQ, it would have been near freezing levels.

Shocked by the assessment, Mom and Dad sent the results to another clinical psychologist who specialized in childhood development for a second opinion. They were looking for reassurance. Instead, they got the opposite. "You've got a very serious situation here," she said. "I have never seen this disparity to this degree."

The experts didn't have a name for what I had. Asperger's wasn't a term until the 1990s, and now it's no longer a diagnosis. Autism wasn't understood to be a spectrum disorder; either you were autistic or you weren't. The idea that there were high-functioning autistic children wasn't understood. Nobody back then considered that there were kids between what was considered *normal* and what people saw as nonverbal drooling. In those days, autism was often thought of as a condition where kids banged their heads against the wall and screamed—what would now be called "profound autism." That wasn't me. The only diagnosis experts could offer to explain the gap between my intellectual capacity and social capacity was "social blindness."

At the time, pervasive developmental disorder was often attributed to a cold, distant mother—an indifferent figure who failed to teach her child warmth and love. Mom was anything but that. She showed me kindness, patience, and unwavering love, doing everything in her power to connect with me even when the world struggled to understand.

As my parents wrestled to process the psychologist's grim prognosis, Dad asked her one thing before leaving. "Is there anything we can do? I mean, anything? Is there any way out of this? Is there any maturation out of this?"

Anything? His desperation was palpable.
Her answer was gentle but firm, blunt yet tinged with hope. "Generally not," she said. "But there are circumstances where if you

have two things, you can have a much better life. Number one is some- thing you can't control—you have to be highly intelligent. You either are or you're not." The message was reassuring. "And he clearly is that."

Hallelujah! Dad thought.

“The second thing,” she continued, “is that he has to want to do it. He has to want to be better. He has to want to be part of society. Lucky has to *want* it.”

Looking back, there was a third part—one the psychologist didn’t mention. For years, I would have to trust Dad when he told me that what I felt was wrong and what he was telling me was right. It meant trusting that his way would eventually help me find my place in the world.

That was all Dad needed to hear. Those five words—*Lucky has to want it*—guided Dad for the next fifteen years. He never told me that, but everything he did from that moment on was geared toward me wanting to be better. If I could just look at things a certain way, he thought, I did not have to be defined by my diagnosis.