

*The Vicious Cycle: Autism, Empathy, Bullying*

By John Scott Holman

"There's one thing, do you see, that's terrifying in this world, and that is that every man has his reasons."

- Octave, written, and played by Jean Renoir, in "The Rules of the Game."

"I'll walk with my head down trying to block you out 'cause I'll never impress you

I just wanna feel okay again

I'll bet you got pushed around, somebody made you cold

But the cycle ends right now 'cause you can't lead me down that road."

- From "Mean," by Taylor Swift

Do autistics lack empathy, as is often suggested? Are we uncaring? Are we so involved in our own little worlds that we disregard the needs and feelings of others? Perhaps, but if this is so, how would you describe the rest of the human race?

To suggest that someone with autism is not empathetic requires, ironically enough, an enormous lack of empathy. Autistics experience the world in a radically unusual way. They cannot be expected to express themselves as everyone else does. However, any successful relationship requires understanding, and communication. With willingness, and persistence, I believe a bridge can be built, both to and from, the notoriously isolated world of autism.

I've never appeared to be an empathetic person. I would argue, however, that empathy is not easily measured. How often do people listen to the troubles of others, smiling, and nodding, voicing their "understanding," while all the while being secretly uninterested? Are these people being empathetic? No, they are simply being polite. Yet, if an individual is incapable of participating in this hollow game of manners, they are labeled as selfish, and uncaring.

This lack of customary social interaction is, for many, the most disabling aspect of autism. While I encourage the acceptance of neurodiversity, I do understand how difficult it is to be different. I, like most, was raised to empathize discriminately. There were people I was expected to understand, and

people I was expected to vilify. This seemed very unfair, especially since I was often the victim of this twisted logic.

After years of being emotionally bullied by intolerant people, I developed an enormous amount of empathy... for minorities. If you are financially privileged, Caucasian, Christian, heterosexual, and "normal," I will likely pay you little attention, or be confrontational, and condescending. A good friend once told me that I should learn to be tolerant of intolerant people. I laughed in his face. However, weighed against *my* standards of tolerance, the majority of my family, and everyone leading "conventional" lives, happen to be extremely intolerant. This is inconvenient.

If autistics appear to be uncaring or self-involved, it is typically because they have been misunderstood, and mistreated. I've been bullied by a wide variety of people. If you want to locate a class bully, just open your yearbook, and place your finger on any random picture. Yes, some bullies stuff kids in lockers, but others wear too much makeup, or teach algebra. Some bullies even write poignant, self-deprecating blogs about autism.

Bill Gates said, "Be nice to nerds. Chances are you will be working for one someday." Nerds may be helpless when they are young, but successful adults don't care how popular you were in school, and intelligence is a valuable commodity that is not always used honorably. Some nerds can grow up to be bigger, and more powerful bullies than their own menial tormentors ever hoped to be. Think how history books might read had a little boy named Adolph been treated with more love and respect.

Jeffi, my beautiful sister, and true friend, recently told me a story, which I would like to share with you all. Jeffi was, indisputably, among the most popular girls in her high school. Yet, believe it or not, she also managed to be kind. One day she noticed a young man sitting alone at lunch. This boy had a reputation for being strange, and disturbed. It was also rumored that his parents were alcoholic, and abusive.

"Look at that loser," one of my sister's friends commented. Without a word, Jeffi lifted her lunch tray, and walked to join the lonely young man. She continued to join him every lunch break for a full week. Her friends mocked her, saying, "You're going to be the first victim of that Columbine weirdo." Instead of listening to her peers, Jeffi opened her ears to the object of their derision. She learned some very tragic things, and came to consider the young man to be very brave.

Over the course of the week, other students who didn't quite fit in at their tables began drifting over to sit with Jeffi, and her new friend. Soon, this young man, angry, confused, and struggling to survive a cruel world, had a whole new group of supportive friends. My sister may not realize it, but she probably saved that young man's life.

I know how terrible it is to feel alone, and unwanted, to be the target of ceaseless criticism, and scorn. Peers, teachers, pastors, and family members all told me I was lazy, defiant, and uncaring. I never understood why they felt this way, but I came to believe they were correct. I thought I was a bad person, and that the world would be better off without me. I gave up on myself.

I still struggle daily to prevent these emotions from overtaking me. However, I am optimistic. If this article inspires someone to be more empathetic, to step outside their comfort zone, and embrace those who may a little different, then my life does, indeed, have value. The cycle of bullying is degrading, and dehumanizing. There is nowhere that it does not occur.

Yet there is certainly hope for a more compassionate future. An online friend of mine, Corbin, is an autistic adult working part time at a special needs school, and therapy center, who has this to say, "Bullying is a learned behavior... children are never taught to properly talk about their feelings, so they take it out on other people. .. vulnerable people. I've had some terrible experiences with bullying... I am still struggling with them. However, I am watching children in my own workplace being compassionate. I've seen kindergartners show love, and respect to autistic kids in ways that I never saw as a student. I've seen kids help non-verbals use their tools to communicate, guide them to class, and encourage them to use their words. It is amazing proof that hate... is taught. "

Today, I encourage anyone reading this to be kind, both to the bullied, and the bullies... the line between them is very thin. I promise you, a little empathy, and compassion really can save a life. Be someone's hero...

We are *all* worth it.