

Uniquely Human:
Understanding and Supporting Autistic
and Neurodivergent Children

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www.barryprizant.com
www.uniquelyhuman.com
www.SCERTS.com

Sources for Presentation

My Four Worlds of Autism

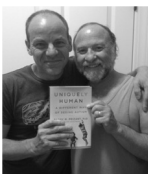
Caregiving world – 6 years as residential counselor;
25 years of parent retreat weekend, longitudinal
relationships with families (35 + years)

Academic/research world – SLP in Comm. Disorders and
in Psychiatry (Brown Univ. Medical School), developer of
evidence-based approach (SCERTS); 150+ publications

Service Provision world – SLP in schools, hospitals and
school consultant nationally/internationally

First person world of autism – sharing time, learning from
and collaborating with autistic people and their families;
Uniquely Human: The Podcast

Michael John Carley



Becca Lory



Stephen Shore
Elaine Hall



Ros Blackburn



Dena Gassner



Temple Grandin



Uniquely Human: The Podcast

www.uniquelyhuman.com

Interviews with 50+ autistic/neurodivergent people



There’s a quiet
revolution going on in
autism

(that’s not so quiet anymore!)

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

NeuroTribes

The Legacy of Autism
and the Future of Neurodiversity

STEVE SILBERMAN

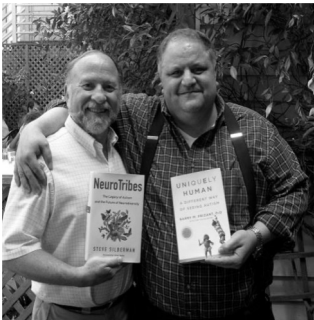
Foreword by Oliver Sacks

UPDATED AND EXPANDED EDITION

UNIQUELY
HUMAN

A DIFFERENT WAY
OF SEEING AUTISM

BARRY M. PRIZANT, Ph.D.



OVERCOMING AUTISM??


Greta Thunberg



Kodi Lee



Brilliant and talented, “DESPITE” their autism,
or “DUE”, at least in part, to their autism?



1971

Me



Autism Society of America
Self-Advocate Panel- 2017

Me



Why “Uniquely Human”?

- **Behavior in autism**
 - Has been misunderstood/dehumanized
- **Deep interests and strengths**
 - referred to as obsessive
 - solution? -reduce or eliminate
- **Behavior judged as inappropriate without asking**

WHY?



Focus on Three Issues

1. Understanding the behavior of autistic and neurodivergent children- their challenges and experience
2. Debunking the belief that autism is a tragedy for the child and family
3. Debunking the belief that ASD is only within the child or person

**De-humanizing Autistic People
Lovaas' Concept of Autism (1974)**

- *"Autistic children are severely disturbed. They show no signs of warmth toward others.*
- *You start pretty much from scratch when you work with an autistic child. You have a person in the physical sense — they have hair, a nose and a mouth — but they are not people in the psychological sense"*

(Ivar Lovaas, Psychology Today, 1974)



**Common descriptions of the behavior of
autistic and neurodivergent persons**



Non-compliant/stubborn

Manipulative

Rude

Bizarre/Avoidant

Deviant/Challenging

Obsessive/Self-stimulatory

Non-functional

Meaningless/Irrelevant


Perseverative

Non-communicative

Top 10 Awesome Attributes of People with Autism

People with Autism...

1. Rarely Lie
2. Live in the Moment
3. Rarely Judge Others
4. Are Passionate
5. Are Not Tied to Social Expectations
6. Have Terrific Memories
7. Are Less Materialistic
8. Have Fewer Hidden Agendas
9. Can Help Others See the World More Clearly
10. Can Have an Advantage in Life when their Special Interests are Applied to their Career



Lisa Jo Rudy



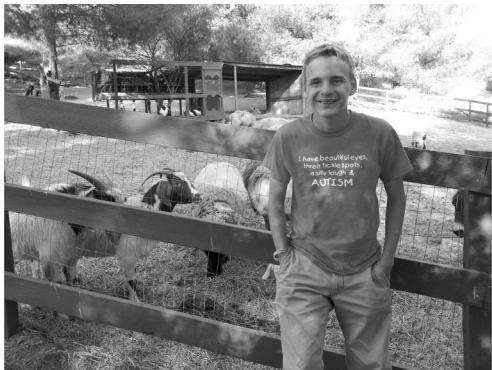
Restrictive, repetitive pattern of behavior or Self-regulatory Strategy



Non-functional Autistic “Stim”
or Self-regulatory strategy







"Self-stims" = Self-regulation

- Stephen Shore, Ed.D.



*"I love when science and
research catches up to the
autistic experience."*

*- Judy Endow, Autistic Writer,
Social Worker, Consultant and Mother*

What We've Learned from Experience and Research


- There is no such thing as autistic behavior
- it is all human behavior.
- Behavioral patterns best understood as
reactions to confusion, stress, anxiety, or even
great excitement and joy
- are often attempts to communicate,
regulate one's emotions and cope
- We need to ask WHY? (The "DEEP" WHY)

- **Passions are a well-spring of opportunity and
offer many possibilities**

On Strengths and Passions, and Enthusiasms



temple grandin, ph.d in animal behavior
author with autism



"Not obsessions,
ENTHUSIASMS!"

- Clara Claiborne Park,
Ph.D.

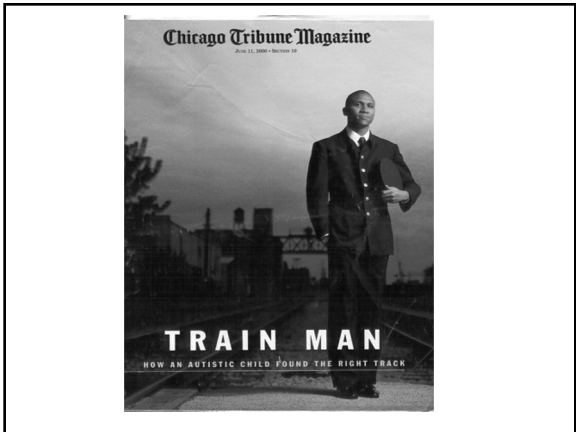
1924-2010

Author of "The Siege" and
"Exiting Nirvana"

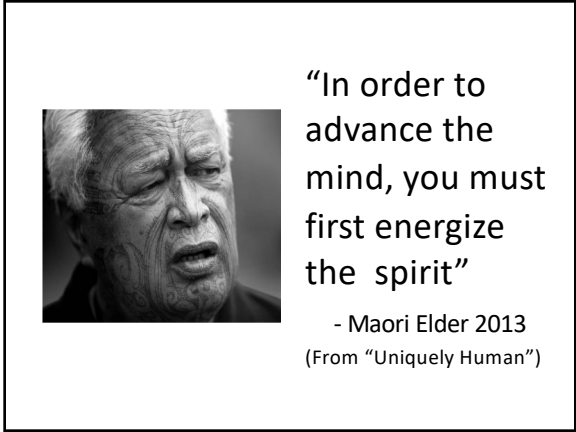
Co-founder of Autism Society
of America (c. 1965)

Artist: Jessy Park









“In order to
advance the
mind, you must
first energize
the spirit”
- Maori Elder 2013
(From “Uniquely Human”)

Debunking the Tragedy Myth

**"Autism destroys the lives of millions of
children and shatters their families"**

- Robert F. Kennedy Jr. (2015)

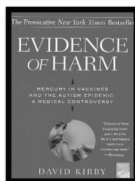
"Blind Tom"

Thomas Wiggins 1846-1908

***"Here is a monstrosity...
the soul of some
unfortunate defunct
musician misbehaving
on earth".***

***"I think of him
marvelously gifted by
nature. He is an angel
sent by God."***





***"Autism is a lost,
hellish world"***

David Kirby,
"Evidence of Harm"
(2005)



The notion of autism as a tragedy

"I employed the term
"holocaust ... as I struggled to
find an expression to convey
the catastrophic tragedy of
autism which has now
destroyed the lives of over 20
million children and shattered
their families."

— Robert Kennedy Jr. Quote (4/7/15)



Self-Advocacy

Dear Mr. Kennedy,
I strongly object to your statement
regarding autistic children. Not all their
lives have been shattered and not all their
families have been destroyed. I should know
because I have autism and my life's good
and I still have a family that loves me.
So on behalf of myself and all my friends
with autism, I ask you to support autistic
children in the future rather than insult them.
Anything you can do to help them instead of
hurting them would be appreciated.

vs. Autism as a Tragedy

- *"Some call it autism, others call it despair and sorrow. I happen to call it hope, beauty and fascination".*

— Mother of Michael, 9 years old, from her blog

- *"Asperger's is not a disease. It's a way of being. There is no cure, nor is there a need for one. There is, however, a need for knowledge"*

— John Elder Robison, autistic adult

- *"The people who have been most helpful to us are those who do not take away our hope. We have learned to keep away from the 'doom and gloom' crowd".*

— Father of 8 year old boy

Autism is not a Tragedy...

– but when coupled with

- chronic biomedical conditions
- poverty/socioeconomic stress on the family
- mental health challenges
- societal ignorance
- lack of understanding and appropriate supports

There may be tragic consequences.



(Prizant, United Nations, "On Autonomy and Self-Determination", 2017)

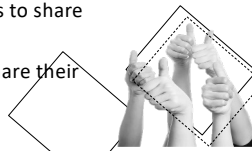
Actions that schools can take

- Disability and autism awareness programs
- Autistic students talking about autism, and providing input for their school programming
- Parents/family members talking with students and staff
- Autistic adults consulting to schools



Actions that schools can take

- Celebrate success and "show off" abilities of students with ASD
- Talk and teach about well-known, accomplished autistic people (Temple Grandin, Dan Ackyrod, A. Einstein, Daryl Hannah, N. Tesla, Greta Thunberg)
- Share positive stories from the media
- Invite parents of graduates to share their success stories
- Invite autistic people to share their stories



Challenge Pathologizing Language

“Thank you for helping parents like myself and for changing the language that we use to describe our loved ones. Because of your podcast I went into my IEP listening to the language that was being used by school officials and instead of feeling sad and defeated I felt empowered and positive!!”

Challenge Pathologizing Language

“When they began with all the things my son couldn’t do I quickly and confidently said, ‘Do you know last year he was hitting himself and running away from the school psychologist and this year he sat and answered two questions?’ That was amazing and what I call progress!!!”

Challenge Pathologizing Language

“What could they say to a proud mother who was unwilling to buy into all the negativity! NOT MUCH!. I continued with my enthusiastic language regarding my 14 year old who is always doing his very best. I felt in control. I wouldn’t allow what I perceived as being negative comments regarding my star student!!!”

The pressure to “Fix”



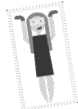
Debunking the Myth that Autism is Only Within a Person

***Autism is a Shared
Human Experience!!***



Consequences: “Autism is only within the person”

- We set goals and procedures to change autistic people, we don’t reflect on and change what we do.
- We do not provide appropriate supports. Supports are viewed as “crutches” that a person does not need.



Consequences:

“Autism is only within the person”

- Progress is measured by how much we change the behavior of the person.
- The burden is on autistic people to change. If they do not make “progress”, it is their fault or the parent’s fault, or the child is just too “impaired”.



Consequences:

“Autism is only within the person”

What do autistic people say?

“Have high expectations for autistic persons but with appropriate, and when necessary, high levels of support”.

- Ros Blackburn

“The best way to help an autistic person change for the better is for non-autistics to change their attitudes and actions”.

- Michael John Carley

What we’ve learned –

Autism is a shared HUMAN Experience

This shared experience presents

1. Challenges



2. Tremendous potential for growth for the individual, families, school communities and society



"I tried so hard to change him (my 40 yr. old son, Tariq), and in the end, he changed me. He made me become a better version of myself—a better man, a better father, and a better partner. This is the journey I am still on".

– Dr. Robert Naseef, Father and Psychologist



Autism is a **SHARED** Human Experience

Becomes part of the fabric of life for all involved

Educators
Service Providers

Families

Autistic people



Attitude is the mind's paintbrush: It colors all we see

"I have a blind husband and two autistic children. People look at us like we're weird.

But I think we really are 'hip'!
So be 'hip', like we really are"




Justin Canha

"Everybody's Miracles"



"Everybody's Miracles"

*Raise your hand if knowing or
having an autistic person in your
life has enhanced your life, and
contributed to your
own personal growth*



UNIQUELY
HUMAN

THE PODCAST


CONNECT WITH US!





linkin.bio/uniquelyhuman

Why a Uniquely Human Perspective?



A deeper understanding builds trust with autistic people and families

Makes our communities more humane and caring

Makes us all better people

Why a Uniquely Human Perspective?



Tolerance

↓

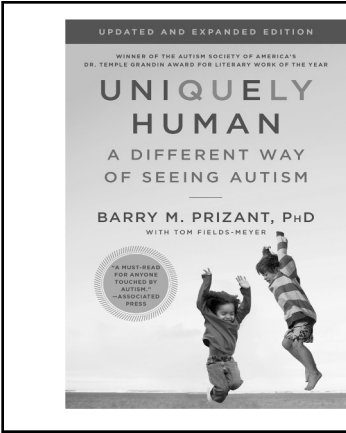
Acceptance

↓

Appreciation

↓

Gratitude



Recipient -
Autism Society of
America's
“Dr. Temple
Grandin Award
for Outstanding
Literary Work in
Autism”

Uniquely Human: The Podcast

www.uniquelyhuman.com



The Miracle Project – New England



STE

SPECTRUM
THEATRE
ENSEMBLE

A Neurodiverse Theatre Company



Learn about our world. Collaborate with us. Support change.

For more information and resources:

WWW.UNIQUELYHUMAN.COM

WWW.BARRYPRIZANT.COM

WWW.SCERTS.COM

*Uniquely Human:
A Different Way of Seeing Autism
(Simon & Schuster, 2022)*
