

A LIFE

MY SECOND-GRADE TEACHER never liked me much, and one assignment I turned in annoyed her so extravagantly that the red pencil with which she scrawled "See me!" broke through the lined paper. Our class had been asked to write about a recent field trip, and, as was so often the case in those days, I had noticed the wrong things...

Well, we went to Boston, Massachusetts through the town of Warrenville, Connecticut on Route 44A. It was very pretty and there was a church that reminded me of pictures of Russia from our book that is published by Time-Life. We arrived in Boston at 9.17. At 11 we went on a big tour of Boston on Gray Line 43, made by the Superior Bus Company like School Bus Six, which goes down Hunting Lodge Road where Maria lives and then on to Separatist Road and then to South Eagleville before it comes to our school. We saw lots of good things like the Boston Massacre site. The tour ended at 1.05. Before I knew it we were going home. We went through Warrenville again but it was too dark to see much. A few days later it was Easter. We got a cuckoo clock.

It is an unconventional but hardly unobservant report. In truth, I didn't care one bit about Boston on that spring day in 1963. Instead, I wanted to learn about Warrenville, a village a few miles north-east of the town of Mansfield, Connecticut, where we were then living. I had memorised the map of Mansfield, and knew all the school bus routes by heart – a litany I would sing out to anybody I could corner. But Warrenville was in the town of Ashford, for which I had no guide, and I remember the blissful sense of resolution I felt when I certified that Route 44A crossed Route 89 in the town centre, for I had long hypothesised that it might. Of such joys and pains was my childhood composed.

I received a grade of "Unsatisfactory" in social development from the school that year. I did not work to the best of my ability, did not show neatness and care in assignments, did not co-operate with the group, and did not exercise self-control. About the only positive assessment was that I

As a child, **Tim Page** was mad about maps, music and silent movies. But he was a failure at pretty much everything else. A midlife diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome helped make sense of it all.

Illustration **Simon Bosch**

worked well independently. Of course: then as now, it was all I could do.

In the years since the phrase became a cliché, I have received any number of compliments for my supposed ability to "think outside the box". Actually, it has been a struggle for me to perceive just what these "boxes" were – why they were there, why other people regarded them as important, where their borderlines might be, how to live safely within and without them. My efforts have been only partly successful: after 52 years, I am left with the melancholy sensation that my life has been spent in a perpetual state of parallel play, alongside, but distinctly apart from, the rest of humanity.

From early childhood, my memory was so acute and my wit so bleak that I was described as a genius – by my parents, by our neighbours and even, on occasion, by the same teachers who gave me failing marks. I wrapped myself in this mantle, of course, as a poetic justification for behaviour that might otherwise have been judged unhinged, and I did my best to believe in it. But the explanation made no sense. A genius at *what*? Were other "geniuses" so oblivious that they couldn't easily tell right from left and idly wet their pants into adolescence? What accounted for my rages and frustrations, for the imperious contempt I showed to people who were in a position to do me harm? Although I delighted in younger children, whom I could instruct and gently dominate, and I was thrilled when I ran across an adult willing to discuss my pet subjects, I could establish no connection with most of my classmates. My pervasive childhood memory is an excruciating awareness of my own strangeness.

Despite their roseate talk, my parents and my school put a good deal of effort into finding out precisely what was wrong with me. It was obvious that I was not "normal", especially by the straitened standards of the early 1960s. I have sometimes wondered whether the IQ scores with which I was credited were nudged upward by my father, who was both a professional educator with a keen interest in gifted children and the person who administered my most triumphant examinations. Whatever the case, while my younger brother and sister soared through school, academically and socially, I was consistently at or near the bottom of the class, and decidedly out of control – half asleep or aggressively assertive – much of the time.

And so, between the ages of seven and 15, I was given glucose-tolerance tests, anti-seizure medications, electroencephalograms and an occasional Mogadon to shut me down at night. I suffered through a summer of Bible camp; exercise regimens were begun and abandoned; and the school even brought in a psychiatrist to grill me once a week. Somehow, every June, I was promoted to the next grade, having accomplished little to deserve it. Meanwhile, the more kindly home-room teachers, knowing that I would be tormented in the playground, permitted me to spend recess periods indoors, where I memorised vast portions of the 1961 edition of the *World Book Encyclopedia*.

A brown carton in my basement contains most of the surviving documents of my childhood, and they present a pretty fair portrait of my pre-teen obsessions. There are meandering and implausible stories, none with happy endings; intricately detailed street maps of make-believe cities on which I worked silently for hours; and countless crayon drawings of grinning girls with shoulder-length hair and U-shaped smiles, their stick figures fleshed out only by exaggerated biceps. Other children collected coins or baseball cards; I tore obituaries of Sophie Tucker and David O. Selznick from *The Hartford Courant* and pasted them sloppily into a scrapbook.

In my darker moods, I think that the rest of my life can be encapsulated in a single sentence: I grew up and grew into other preoccupations, some of

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trying to impose a frame on a running river – making it a finite, enclosed work of art yet leaving its kinetic quality unsullied, leaving it flowing freely on all sides. It has been done. Steve Reich has framed the river.

Today, I find myself wondering if I would have responded so profoundly to this starkly reiterative, rigidly patterned music had I not had Asperger's syndrome. This is not an aesthetic cop-out: I can make an intellectual case for minimalism and I am hardly the only writer who has done so. But its initial appeal for me was purely visceral. As the Quakers might say, this music spoke to my condition.

IT WAS NEVER DIFFICULT FOR ME TO ARTICULATE my feelings about anything external. I've rarely run short of opinions, well-founded or otherwise. But deeper emotions reduced me (and, to some extent, reduce me still) to aching silence, especially when I feared that I would be exposed, misunderstood or ridiculed.

I empathised with Rostand's Cyrano (a serious rival to Ferdinand the Bull in my private pantheon of literary heroes), who was too terrified to utter the crucial words to the woman he loved. I suffer little stage fright when it comes to public speaking or appearances on radio or television, but I continue to find unstructured participation in small social gatherings agonising. It would be easier for me to improvise an epic poem at a sold-out Yankee Stadium than to approach an attractive stranger across the room and strike up a conversation.

Falling in love surprised me; I had never imagined sustained contentment, and certainly not in the company of another person. Yet here it was:

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even making the bed together in the morning, an act that had hitherto struck me as Sisyphean, took on meaning, as the prelude to another gloriously ordinary day, to be followed by tea, the newspapers, a couple of hours of work and then lunch in the neighbourhood.

While it lasted, everything was enhanced; I just wish this were the time and place to write that first happy ending.

The fact that my understanding of affection, comradeship and human empathy has been hard-won rather than being wired in from the start does not make these feelings less genuine. I am still friends with most of the people I was friends with 30 years ago and I worry about them daily (here I concur with Virgil Thomson, who once said that worry was one form of prayer he found acceptable). My intimates, new and old, are permanent fixtures in my experience, and that some of them – too many – are no longer living has not diminished my devotion.

I've transcended Harry Lauder and horehounds, and my passions range widely, if spottily, through any number of fields. Laughter, meditation, therapy, Valium, antidepressants, liberal helpings of wine and beer, loyal and patient friends, forgiving children, a congenial work situation that allows me to spend much of my time alone – all these have helped me to carry on. Overstimulation remains a positive horror, and I am most comfortable in dark or neutral clothing, under grey skies.

I thrive on routines: I like to walk into the same restaurants, sit in the same seats and order the same meals, and I took it personally when the PanAm Building in New York started passing itself off as MetLife.

THERE IS NO CURE FOR ASPERGER'S SYNDROME and there is even some question whether it should be considered an affliction or merely a "difference" – one of many human variants. The reporter Amy Harmon wrote in *The New York Times* that some autistics view themselves as part of "an ad hoc human rights movement" and view autism itself as "an integral part of their identities, much more like a skin than a shell, and not one they care to shed". A group called Aspies for Freedom runs a website that celebrates what it calls "neurodiversity", arguing that there are advantages as well as disadvantages in an autistic condition.

I apply Romain Rolland's practical credo – "pessimism of the intelligence; optimism of the will" – to my aspirations, but I cannot pretend that Asperger's has not made much of my existence miserable and isolated (how *will* I get to sleep tonight?). I hope that young Aspies, informed by recent literature on the subject, will find the world somewhat less challenging.

By now, I am fairly used to myself, and my symptoms bloom publicly only on rare occasions. Waiting for the bill after a lunch in Washington in 2005, I realised that it was both the 140th anniversary of Lincoln's assassination and exactly 40 years since the murderers of the Clutter family (of *In Cold Blood* fame) were put to death in Kansas. I doubt that my companion was equally thrilled by this coincidence, especially when elaborated upon in such sudden, bursting detail in the middle of a lovely spring day, but at least I controlled the temptation to launch into a lengthy exculpation of Mrs Surratt [one of John Wilkes Booth's co-conspirators in Lincoln's murder]. I count that as progress. **GW**