

**"Difference Is Not A Disease" by Ari Ne'eman**

**Category : Neurodiversity**

**Published by Scott Robertson [admin] on 2006/11/24**

Who am I? An age-old question that in posing to myself might bring a response revealing that I am an avid reader, a tolerably good chess player and an occasional writer. I might also respond by saying that I am an Asperger's autistic, having one type of a broad range of autistic neurologies.

Contrary to what many people might think, the first few traits I mentioned are in no way unlikely despite the last. Also contrary to popular perception, autistics are not inarticulate wretches crying out in hopes of a cure to return us to normalcy. We are human beings, individuals in our own right. We are who we are, not in spite of being autistic but in part because of it.

We see the world in a different way than our neurotypical peers (neurotypical is a word in the autistic community meaning those of the majority neurology). This does not imply a defect, but merely a difference — one that we have just the same right to as those of a different race, nationality or religion. Due to that difference in perception, we interact socially in different ways. Yet our quirks and eccentricities should be just as legitimate as the social skills of the mainstream.

Difference in perception can often lead to exceptional skills. Many autistics are very detail-oriented and analytical, important skills in many mathematical and high-tech fields. Others are picture or spatial thinkers, meaning that they analyze information through images rather than words. This perspective can often be very helpful in engineering or art. For other autistics there is a tendency to concentrate on specific interests displaying a level of passionate fixation that, while often socially unacceptable, can lead to exceptional discoveries.

Personal experience has taught me that those who think in different ways should not be written off despite the challenges and obstacles that are often thrown in their way. For several years I was in a special education system that practiced enforced conformity. The belief was that anyone society labeled "disabled" could only go so far. Sadly, these misconceptions had the potential to become self-fulfilling prophecies. When the expectation is that people of a certain type can only reach so far, they are not provided with the same challenges and opportunities that educators give mainstreamed students.

Yet I did manage to make it out of special education by advocating for myself and refusing to believe in a myth that equated distinctiveness with inferiority. By insisting on inclusion in the same opportunities and programs as other students, I achieved academic success. In the space of a few years I went from being advised that I would have to delay my high school graduation to being an honor student who will attend college on time to study international relations.

Now, as a speaker for the New Jersey Department of Education and other organizations, I advocate for reform of the system I left. When I speak to educators, students and policymakers I stress one message: those of different neurologies can succeed not by luck, chance, or even extraordinary willpower, but by recognition of their unique abilities and methods of learning. Understanding that different styles of learning do not imply inability to learn is essential to creating a more inclusive

educational environment. With an educational system that works with us, society will see an even larger level of success for autistics and many other neuro-diverse citizens. In truth, differences in neurology often contribute to success. History supports this conclusion.

Today, experts are finding autistic traits in many of the great minds of the past such as Isaac Newton, Thomas Jefferson and Albert Einstein. These people possessed many of the traits that today can be found on the autism spectrum. Like many autistics, they viewed the world through different eyes and were not possessed of the same type of social skills as their neurotypical peers, yet they possessed highly capable intellects and used them in ways their unique perspectives made possible. Neither these greats of the past nor those of us in the present deserve to be marginalized from society or labeled as broken or diseased.

Society has developed a tendency to examine things from the point of view of a bell curve. How far away am I from normal? What can I do to fit in better? But what is on top of the bell curve? The answer is mediocrity. That is the fate of American society if we insist upon pathologizing difference and seek to "cure" it. The person who is socially isolated because he views the world in a different light may use that difference in perception to invent something revolutionary.

"I don't have any trouble thinking outside the box. I don't feel any social pressure to do things the way other people are doing them," said Vernon Smith, the 2002 Nobel Prize winner in economics and an Asperger's autistic, in a February interview with CNBC. Does it serve anyone's interests to label people like Smith diseased? Isn't respecting the other a vital part of both the American and the Jewish tradition? We do not need a cure to make us like everyone else. We need to be accepted for who we are. "We don't all have to think alike to ... live in a productive and satisfying world," said Professor Smith.

Each day the world learns more about how to recognize yet respect the differences in neurology that exist throughout our society. In February at a conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, researchers announced that many previously held ideas about autistic intelligence were mistaken. A new intelligence test discovered that even those who had previously been written off as capable of very little possessed great, untapped potential.

As society advances and we learn more about the differing kinds of neurology and intelligence, it should be our hope that we respect people for their differences and not try to enforce neurological conformity. In a day and age when we have broken down countless prejudices of the past and recognized the legitimacy of differences in race, color, creed and religion, we should be tolerant of those who think in different ways.

We should recognize what diversity of neurology has contributed to the human race and what it can bring to the future. Difference is not disability and someday, I hope, the world will recognize that those who think in different ways should be welcomed. '