

**"It's Never Too Late" by Kate Goldfield**

**Category : Postsecondary Education**

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College can pose many difficult problems for those on the autistic spectrum. We find it very hard to fit into the social scheme of the campus. We have trouble making friends. We are often isolated and lonely, jealous of all the social interaction we see going on around us. It can be hard adjusting to a new schedule, a place away from home, and added responsibility for taking care of ourselves. There can be problems with academics, sensory issues on campus, and difficulties with organization. But even among all of that, there is hope. I started out college fully confident that it would be the solution to all my problems, but found this was anything but the case. After struggling for a few years, though, I began to make the social connections that I had always dreamed of. I still had problems, and still longed to be like the others, but at least I was starting to develop a sense of community. This is the story of that discovery.

#### It's Never Too Late

It's the little things, really, that make a difference in a person's life. We all know that. After going to college for four years at Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland, I know this better than most.

I was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, a high functioning form of autism, shortly before my senior year of college. A person with Asperger's Syndrome (AS) has a very hard time with social interactions, not understanding social cues or the nuances of relationships. He or she usually also has sensory issues and intense personal interests. People with AS are usually very smart, but so often experience a crushing sense of isolation and loneliness, feeling cut off from everyone around them and often going years without making a single friend.

Given this, then, it was a relief to finally receive this diagnosis and start understanding myself better. I didn't make my first friend until junior year of high school; I craved social interaction after that. I spent most of my life wishing I had friends but not knowing how to go about getting them.

When I got to college, thinking that it would be a panacea for all my social problems, I found that I had all the same difficulties that I always had had. I had chosen a college specifically for its tolerant, open minded student body, but I still found that I couldn't connect with my peers. I felt lonelier and more hopeless than I ever had before.

Slowly, though, over the course of four years, this changed for me. By the end of my four years, I felt like a part of the community. I had friends who cared about me and who I enjoyed being with. I felt supported by the people at my college. These are the moments I will never forget.

When I look back on this time, I don't think of any big, life changing events, just a lot of smaller ones that helped me get a sense of myself as a person who, yes, could have friends; who had the ability to talk to other people; who could even be liked as a person, and cared for by people other than my family. I remember walking into town one cold Saturday night, listening to "Maggie Mae" on my walkman, then tripping as I walked down a hill and scraping my hand and knee. It hurt so badly, and I

was so cold and alone out there. I walked with difficulty to the nearest building on campus, the auditorium. I entered into the warm room and sat down by the wall, exhausted, wanting to make the world go away. Suddenly, I heard the voice of my sociology professor over me, full of concern and compassion. "Kate, are you all right?" Her voice washed over me and I relaxed, and felt better immediately. Somebody cares! I thought. "I tripped and hurt my hand," I said somberly to her. "Here, let me look at it," she said, kneeling down beside me. I slowly extended my arm, and she said, "Oh, it's just a little scrape. Put a band-aid on it and you'll be fine." She smiled at me. "Okay," I said. She introduced me to her husband and told me they were seeing a political comedy show that evening. I asked her a few questions about it, and she left. With new resolve and energy, I made my way to the bathroom to clean myself up and set about planning the rest of my night.

Another night, I walked into the noisy, crowded dining hall already overwhelmed. I have trouble with noisy environments, and this was a particularly bad one. The loud voices, sound of silverware dropping to the floor, and being among so many people almost sent me over the edge. After waiting in line for pasta, extremely hungry, I discovered I had been given the wrong kind of pasta. I walked back to my seat, crying, the combined weight of all the stress that had been building up the last few hours and in the dining hall. It had become too much to handle. My friend Laura was sitting there. Usually, I hate to cry in front of others because it is awkward and they never know what to do or say. I feel all the more isolated because of that; the space between us feels a hundred times bigger. This time, though, was different. Laura put her hand on my shoulder, and just left it there for a couple minutes. The sudden feel of human touch jolted me out of my misery and made me feel connected to the human race again. Her touch communicated so much. It said, "I understand, I care, I'm here," in a way words never could have. That is one of the only times I can ever remember someone being able to make me feel better when I was upset.

Then there was my friend Allison, who I met in my freshman year intro to psychology class, who seemed to understand me and get my jokes; seemed to accept me as I was. We both had short, blonde curly hair and were short in height, and for Spirit Week one year, we both dressed up in tie-dye shirts and went as twins. Laughing my head off with Michael at lunches in Pearlstone; it was not possible to be around Michael without smiling. My freshman year roommate Lauren who said to me once in the middle of one of my ranting about how I was different and depressed by it, "Kate, I don't care if you cartwheel down Van Meter Highway singing country songs, as long as it makes you happy." The wonderful overnights in the computer lab, where I would stay there all night on weekends and talk for hours to another girl named Allison, who did the overnight shift at the lab. I felt accepted and free with her.

My psychology professor Rick, who became one of my closest friends during my junior and senior years of college. I could always count on him to make me feel special, and to listen to my woes. I tried to take every psychology course offered by Brian, who also was a good friend from the first semester of college on through my senior year. We were both intense people who felt things very deeply, and connected over this. He would let me talk on and on about things that interested me, academic and not, and I appreciated this very much.

These are the memories that I am determined to keep with me for the rest of my life. These are the memories that turned a lonely, nervous autistic girl into a far more outgoing, confident and comfortable young woman. These are the memories that changed my self perception from socially incompetent, different, and unlovable to special, cared for, and competent, at least with the people who matter, at least when I'm able to do it

in my own way, which I've discovered, is really no worse than anyone else's. During my college experience, I was part of a community for the first time. I experienced the meaning of friendship. Whatever happens to me next, in the rest of my life, I will know that at least for those four years of college, I felt connected to people. I know that it's possible. There is always hope.