

"Normal Is Just A Setting On A Washing Machine" by Kate Goldfield

Category : Neurodiversity

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Normal Is Just A Setting on a Washing Machine
by Kate Goldfield

I might have been the only one who didn't sleep over at Mallory's sleep-over birthday party in fifth grade. No matter, it was a miracle that I had even been invited. It was one of very few birthday parties I ever attended. When I arrived, all the other girls were sitting on their sleeping bags on the living room floor, talking excitedly. I felt a million miles away. I had no idea what to talk about. My few attempts at making conversation were painful, and I soon gave up.

When it was time for cake and ice cream, I was grateful to leave that small room and go outside. I grabbed a piece of cake and ran off to be by myself, breathing in a sigh of relief as the pressure of figuring out how to be around others was suddenly relieved. I gravitated to an old tire swing in the barn, and it is there that I smiled for the first time, laughing even. I relished the way the swinging motion of the tire felt.

Mallory appeared in the front of the barn. "What's wrong?" she asked, wondering why I wasn't at the party.

I didn't know. I had no idea what was wrong. All my life, I knew something was wrong, but I didn't know what it was until I was 21.

At recess, I would sit outside on cold, hard ground reading a book. When I did bravely venture out to the playground to go on my beloved swings, it was never with a friend. I felt like I existed in a different world from all the kids around me.

In junior high, for the first time, I became aware that everyone around me was coupled. That almost no one ever hung out alone. I wondered, why don't I have any friends? In eighth grade, I was bullied relentlessly and became the queen of crying when no one was looking.

High school involved endless entreaties to my school counselor, the therapist I was seeing, and everyone else around me about why I was so different. "You're just a quirky, a little nervous" they would tell me. I made lists upon lists of why I felt different from every person around me. I agonized over my choice of clothes, my choice of music, my lack of friends, the way I talked, what I talked about.

But I never got any answers. Not in college, when I would frequently become extremely upset when I started comparing myself to the 18-22 year olds that I lived with 24/7; instead, I tried finding other interests to throw myself into, and I made friends with the professors, who were so much easier to talk to than the students.

Until the day I flopped down at the student union couch to watch TV, and randomly found a Lifetime

movie about a boy in a residential school with autism. Fascinated, I researched the subject later online, and came across Donna Williams's books. I ordered them, as well as books by Temple Grandin, Stephen Shore, Valerie Paradiz, Liane Willey Holliday and many others. I could not stop reading books about autism and Asperger's Syndrome. For I saw in them something I had never seen anywhere else in my life, something that I didn't imagine was possible to find anywhere else: I saw myself.

A year and a half and two dozen autism-related books later, I was finally diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome. At last, I could find other people who thought like me, who spoke like me, who acted like me. I could recreate the image I had of myself into someone who actually belonged to a group, who could have friends and connections with people.

My diagnosis came right before my senior year of college. Before heading back to school in Baltimore, I came across a support group for adults with Asperger's in nearby Washington, DC. I contacted the group leader and made arrangements to attend when I got back to school.

I ended up going to every meeting they had that semester. In this group, I found a place where I felt accepted, even wanted. I could have long, involved, meaningful conversations with group members. I could share experiences with them and have them understand, see myself in everything from the stories they told to the way they talked to the sensory issues they shared. We could laugh about our social issues, our literal-mindedness and naivete; talk endlessly about our social issues, and not feel judged. I felt at home, and no longer felt like an alien.

That semester, I wrote an article about Asperger's that appeared in the Baltimore Sun, and got invited to speak at an autism conference in Philadelphia about what it was like to be an adult on the autism spectrum. During my winter break that year, I travelled to six different cities where I had family, and met people from Asperger's message boards who I knew from online in every city. I was astonished how easy it was to get along with them. The glass wall had been removed, at least when I was with my Asperger peers.

Today, while I still have my problems, I am happier and more content than I have ever been in my life. I no longer have to feel the piercing pain of wondering why I am the way I am. I have accepted myself, my strengths and my weaknesses. I am a far more confident, outgoing, enthusiastic young woman. I realize now that the goal of everyone's life is to realize their limitations and gifts and find a way to live fully within them. Every person has value, every person has something they are good at. I am proud of who I am, and want to do everything I can to help other people understand about autism spectrum disorders so that other people don't have to go through the difficulty that I had to. I want to support others with AS, and help create a world where, as a friend of mine says, normal is just a setting on a washing machine.