

# STRAIGHT TALK About **Autism**



This article appeared in the winter 2014 print and digital issues of *Autism Spectrum Quarterly*. To access the digital version, download our free app by searching on Autism Spectrum Quarterly.

## Antiques & Asperger's

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Learning opportunities sometimes present at unexpected times in unexpected places. Last summer, on a vacation trip through New England, we decided to check into a charming inn in a small town in northern Vermont. After settling in, we walked down the road to the quaint center of town. One of the first signs we spotted above the row of old shops was, "Abigail Simpson, Antiques." Upon entering the shop, we realized that we had discovered an antique collector's paradise; in fact, a genuine treasure trove!

As we meandered through the shop we noticed a middle-aged woman sitting behind a desk who appeared to be the shopkeeper. She was conversing with an elderly couple about a well-worn object while repeatedly turning it over to examine it. Although we passed in close proximity to the threesome, the shopkeeper did not acknowledge our presence. Rather, her attention remained riveted on the mysterious object, even as she intermittently looked at her computer screen while pecking at the keyboard every few seconds.

The older gentleman suddenly took the object and held it up for us to see, asking, "Excuse me, do you know what this is?" While the man addressed us, the shopkeeper remained focused on her computer. She never looked back to follow our exchange; nor was there a *hello*, an acknowledging glance, or the customary "I'll be with you soon."

We spent the next 15 minutes looking through boxes of collectibles until we heard the man say, "We really need to leave. We were just wondering..." to which the shopkeeper exclaimed in a loud surprised voice, "Oh you're not interested in buying this????!!!" The older couple looked toward us, rolled their eyes, and shook their heads in disbelief, apparently confused as to why the owner had spent so much time researching the odd-looking object. As they left, they apologized to

us, explaining with some exasperation that they had never intended to purchase the piece, but were just curious about it.

After the couple departed, Abigail turned her attention to us. We were admiring a handsome set of vintage plates, each with a detailed, hand-painted corn-on-the-cob design. "Oh those are likely pre-World War II occupied Japan pieces in the style of Majolica," she declared. When we inquired about the price she stated, "I need to do some research" and started walking to the computer. We exchanged a furtive glance. "Uh-oh" we thought, harkening back to the situation we had just witnessed, exiting the shop would not be easy! So, we told her we would be back in a half-hour after we had a bite to eat; a reasonable excuse to escape.

As we left the shop, EM, who was well past her antiquing tolerance level said, "She is breaking all the basic rules of good customer service! She didn't acknowledge us for 15 minutes, and she didn't tell us when she would be able to give us help. She certainly has a one-track mind and knows her business well, but..." To which BP responded, "Yup, she seems to be an Aspie!" EM—"Uh-huh....right!" [See Authors' Note below.]

After eating, we headed back to Abigail's, assuming that she had had enough time to complete her research. This time, with no one else in the shop, she bolted toward us and blurted out, "Yes, I was right, it is occupied Japan tableware in the Majolica style from the 1940s - \$60 for the set." We were quite impressed with the information and thought the price was very reasonable, so we told her we would take them.

We continued to look around the shop. This time Abigail followed closely behind us, almost intrusively describing in elaborate detail each piece in which we showed even minimal interest. We were blown away by her level of expertise and impressive experience. We next inquired about a striking pair

of turn-of-the-century wingback leather upholstered chairs, and she exclaimed, "\$4,000." Shocked by the price, we asked why it was so high. Once again, she gave us a precise explanation of how rare they were, turning one chair over and pointing out details revealing the high level of craftsmanship.

When we asked if the price was negotiable, she launched into a thorough and apparently well-practiced mini-lecture about her pricing philosophy and practice. "I used to be an appraiser for Sotheby's (a renowned antique auction business), and I know what fair prices are. I do not play the game of negotiating prices, as it makes no sense to do that if you set fair prices. Then things do not get complicated." This unusual response was perplexing, since part of the "game" of antiquing is the dance of negotiation, reading the subtleties of another person's nonverbal behavior and tone of voice—and coming away with the absolute best deal you can get, regardless of the stated price. On the other hand, Abigail's explanation was logical, direct, and honest. And her policy really did remove the uncertainty and "muddiness" of negotiating prices. After all, she did her research, set a fair and firm price, and that was that. When we indicated the price was beyond our range, she stated, "In an antique store in Manhattan, those would go for \$7,000." We knew she was likely spot-on.

Now that we had our fill of antiquing, we decided it was time to leave; however, since we anticipated a long drawn-out process for having our dishes packed, we devised another strategy. We asked if we could stop by the next morning at 10:30 to pick up our package, to which she responded, "10:45 would work best, but not after 11:00." Okay!

The next morning on a rainy day, we stepped back into the shop at precisely 10:45 am. With no other customers around, Abigail noticed us immediately. Leaping into action to attend to our dripping umbrellas, she extended an old misshapen aluminum lasagna tin, and directed us to drop the umbrellas in the tin, carefully placed side by side. Next, she brought over a box with our purchase, neatly sealed with clear plastic tape. She then explained in detail how she had first wrapped each of the smaller pieces with two layers of paper and then with a layer of bubble wrap, after which she used cardboard partitions to separate the smaller plates from the larger serving platter, so that they would not break in transit. We thought, *a little too much information than is necessary*, but by now we were taken with her meticulous care, sincerity, and *excellent* customer service. We took the box, expressed our appreciation, and mentioned that we really needed to leave as we had a long drive back home; however, Abigail had formulated a different plan.

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She stepped in front of us and began to take out pieces from another box announcing, "Here's some more Majolicaware!"

After we left and as we drove away—in stark contrast to our initial reaction—we discussed how impressed we were by Abigail's remarkable competence, level of knowledge, and extreme attention to detail. Our initial irritation over "too much information" had morphed into genuine respect and admiration, and despite our creative exiting strategies, we now found ourselves wishing we could linger, listen, and learn. We were amazed at how much our impression of Abigail had changed once we were able to put aside some of our social judgments, impatience, and mild irritation. We wondered how many folks who visit her shop never get to this point, bailing out as soon as they become uncomfortable with Abigail's social idiosyncracies. We also reflected on how knowing that she likely was an Aspie helped us to reframe our expectations and to adapt our own behavior, resulting in a positive encounter with this unique, charming (yes, charming!), and talented individual. We had no doubt that we would be drawn to her shop and would do business with her again at some future time.



Our story began by acknowledging how learning can occur unexpectedly in unexpected places. So, what did we learn?

- 1) ***We learned how important it is to match one's profile of abilities to one's career choice.*** A defining characteristic of people on the autism spectrum is their uneven profile of abilities. This was clearly evident in Abigail's situation. For example, her exceptional memory, attention to detail, persistence, enthusiasm for antiques, and research prowess enabled her to be very successful in the technical aspects of her business. However, her work also required skills that do not come naturally to a person on the spectrum. For example, she had difficulty with the social interface involved in greeting and interacting with customers, social multitasking, negotiating, and responding to the nonverbal signals of others. "Hard-core" antique enthusiasts who appreciate her expertise would likely overlook her limited mastery of the so-called social graces. On the other hand, her business might be impacted negatively by others who are less accepting of her social behavior.

2) **We learned that there is little tolerance for social differences relative to accepted social norms.** The question to ask, however, is: Is this really her problem, or does the problem lay with people who just don't "get" the unconventional social behaviors associated with ASD. In today's judgmental culture we tend to be offended by people who violate social expectations, attributing their actions to rudeness or arrogance. Unfortunately, this does a disservice to those who, like Abigail, seem less aware of social niceties and nuances, or less able to follow social expectations in "real-time" interactions.

There are two important approaches to counteract erroneous thinking which will help people to be more understanding of social differences and will also help those who manifest them as well.

**Need to educate the public**—Education would serve to increase awareness that there is a range of social abilities across people, and further, that those with social interaction difficulty should not be judged as rude or as having bad intentions.

**Self-awareness and disclosure**—While we acknowledge that disclosure is a personal choice, in a vocation that involves

dealing with the public, it would likely be very helpful. For example, if Abigail was aware of her social differences and felt comfortable sharing such information with others, it could help them to better understand her and to be less judgmental and more empathic toward her. To illustrate, she might share, "I tend to provide too much detail, so please excuse me if I do. It is okay to tell me that."

Clearly the solutions lie in moving toward a less judgmental and more tolerant society, and in helping persons with social challenges to be more aware of, and to receive support in understanding social conventions. Ultimately, this will result in greater success in social encounters. 

**Authors' Note:** A diagnosis of ASD should never be made based on a brief encounter, and although we acknowledge that Asperger's Disorder is no longer a formal diagnosis in DSM-5, it nonetheless remains a term in common usage by professionals as well as those in the Asperger's community. In addition, Aspie is an accepted term in autism culture.

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