"Ron Sandison is cut from the cloth of those who fully understand and celebrate the strengths of living boldly on the spectrum. These inspirational and loving stories should encourage all who are living, or loving someone, on the spectrum. Thank you for this resource!"

Frank W. Gaskill, PhD, host of the *Dr. G. Aspie Show*

"Everyone should read Ron's book for his heart. We have to listen to adults who showcase neurodiversity. Ron does it beautifully."

Kristine Barnett, best-selling author of *The Spark: A Mother's Story of Nurturing, Genius, and Autism*

"In this unique compilation of compelling reflections, Ron Sandison offers readers new narratives about autism and parenting. These diverse stories are an invitation to listen, ponder, pray, praise, and journey forward in faith."

Erik Carter, PhD, Cornelius Vanderbilt Professor of Special Education at Vanderbilt University

"Everyone is uniquely different, whether a family member, friend, or you yourself have a diagnosis of autism. *Views from the Spectrum* lets you into the world of many autistic individuals, their family life, and how they navigate their day-to-day lives. Every chapter gives a true, positive account and enlightens you on how each individual handles their autism and how wonderful they all really are. This book offers hope and encouragement and gives useful tips and strategies for practical parenting."

Anna Kennedy, OBE, autism ambassador

"*Views from the Spectrum* weaves stories from Ron Sandison's life, and from others with autism spectrum disorders, with biblical truths, practical advice, and spiritual guidance. He writes with great insight, honesty, and humor, combining narrative storytelling skills and theological wisdom. Families blessed with a child with autism: this is your book."

Katherine G. Hobbs, teacher, and writer and researcher for *Autism Parenting Magazine*

"Ron Sandison serves as a needed tour guide and translator for the inner mind of the autistic: a rare gift for parents of nonverbal children with autism. In a cultural landscape where the few mainstream examples of autistics are Dr. Temple Grandin and *Rain Man*, *Views from the Spectrum* offers a refreshing departure from the standard approach of fixating on the remediation of deficiencies, instead encouraging parents to harness and develop their child's unique interests and God-given gifts. Sandison celebrates achievements as unique as each individual through a hopeful show-and-tell of victory stories. Parents like me have much to learn from Ron, his mother, and the Sandison family on how to partner with God and our children to maximize their potential."

Diane Dokko Kim, disability ministry consultant and author of *Unbroken Faith: Spiritual Recovery for the Special Needs Parent*

"Ron Sandison has written another must-read book. In *Views from the Spectrum*, Ron has created a lovely introductory text for parents who are either new to autism or interested in learning more from the experts in the field: individuals on the spectrum. As usual, Ron writes about human differences from the inside out and shines a light on autism and all its beauty, gifts, challenges, and wonder. The stories are fantastic, the tone is uplifting, and the insights are beyond valuable. Get this book. Enjoy it, learn from it, and pass it on to someone else needing this powerful perspective."

Paula Kluth, PhD, author of *"You're Going to Love This Kid!"* and *Pedro's Whale*

"*Views from the Spectrum* reflects the distinctive perspective of Ron Sandison. He describes the time and energy his parents poured into him after he was diagnosed with autism so that he could develop to his full potential. Lest readers think his story is one of a kind, Sandison highlights the accomplishments of other individuals with autism in every chapter. He also weaves practical parenting advice and biblical wisdom throughout the book. This will be an encouraging resource for the autism community and an enlightening one for those who want to support them."

Jolene Philo, coauthor of *Sharing Love Abundantly in Special Needs Families*, national speaker, and host of DifferentDream.com

"Ron's book on autism is invaluable for the Christian parent, teacher, caregiver, or church leader. I love his practical explanations of the multifaceted components of autism, the personal stories he includes, and the biblical principles for parenting, educating, and loving a child with autism. This will be a resource on my shelf as a therapist and would have also been on my school counselor and teacher shelves when I worked in those roles!"

Brenda L. Yoder, LMHC, counselor, educator, licensed school counselor, and parent

"You don't have to be a person of faith to absorb Sandison's faith-based lessons for parents and individuals on the spectrum. In addition to chronicling his own life, he recounts deeply moving stories about how God, love, and perseverance have shaped the lives of people on the spectrum and their families."

Judith Newman, best-selling author of *To Siri with Love: A Mother, Her Autistic Son, and the Kindness of Machines*

"Ron Sandison offers an expert's perspective for parents of autistic children because of his personal experience of growing up with autism. Like few others, he sharply articulates the combustion of passion, family, and faith that spurs an individual with autism on to a purpose-filled life—while at the same time helping caregivers navigate autism's paradoxes. The stories of artists, athletes, and creators that Ron gathers in this book lift up the creative forces of hope and the remarkable, God-given gifts that help the autistic person to emerge and thrive. As a mother of a teenage son with autism, I am encouraged to not grow weary in my efforts to access his rich inner world, helping help him to express it outwardly for a humanity that needs to hear his voice and the voices of other autistic individuals."

Tahni Cullen, best-selling author of *Josiah's Fire: Autism Stole His Words, God Gave Him a Voice*

Views from the Spectrum

A Window into Life and Faith with Your Neurodivergent Child

RON SANDISON

KREGEL
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Views from the Spectrum: A Window into Life and Faith with Your Neurodivergent Child

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Foreword

THIS IS A valuable book written by a very qualified author.

It is not *about* autism; it is a book that *is* autism personified as told by Ron Sandison through his emergence from his own late-onset autism, and as experienced through the life journeys of twenty other individuals on the spectrum. Ron has become a trusted, plain-speaking, practical advocate for better understanding and helping persons on the spectrum develop their full potential. The twenty other individuals on the spectrum have very special skills ranging from art, poetry, music, and billiard trick mastery to video game design, NASCAR driving, tennis, and baseball.

This book convincingly points out that special skills in persons with autism are not frivolous or circus act curiosities. They are instead "islands of intactness" of various sizes and depth which, when engaged properly, especially by parents who discover, nourish, and celebrate them, can lead to improved communication, socialization, and daily living skills, eventually ending in greater independence.

My introduction to autism was sixty years ago when I had the privilege of learning about it from Dr. Leo Kanner, who first described the condition in 1943. He was a grandfatherly pediatrician who had deep respect for and insights into his patients. He lectured periodically when visiting the medical school in Madison, Wisconsin, where I was a student. I gained from him a great deal of information as well as a gentle bedside manner. It kindled my interest in autism.

My first introduction to an autistic child, however, was not quite as gentle. It was a young girl in a helmet who was banging her head on a table so hard that the rafters shook in the house where the child psychiatry department was located. Yet as I looked at her turmoil and disability, it occurred to me that somewhere, however deeply buried and hidden, there must be some islands of intactness which could be identified, approached, and used to turn adversity into opportunity for learning and healing.

I then went on to start a children's unit at a psychiatric hospital in Wisconsin. It was there that we made a concerted effort to find that island of intactness in each child. We would coax that island closer to the surface, love it, expand it, reinforce it, reward it, and celebrate it. Slowly, better language, improved socialization, increased daily living skills, and eventually greater independence would emerge.

In *Views from the Spectrum* that same basic formula is applied. Parents, grandparents, siblings, or other caregivers search for that island of intactness, whatever size and shape. Whenever discovered, they tend and grow that intactness—that is, the gifts or abilities the individual with autism has despite his or her disabilities—to its fullest extent. That search begins with love—unconditional love—and as I advise the many parents who tell me proudly about their child, "Love is a good therapist too."

There are additional elements in that helping equation that this book describes in detail: patience, untiring perseverance, advocacy, belief, optimism, faith, and hope. In a sense, *Views from the Spectrum* is really two books. The first is Ron Sandison's journey from being able at one point to say only one word, "Mum"—after losing his prior normal developmental milestones—and his inspiring trek back, guided by a loving and intuitive mom using art and a toy prairie dog to help him deal with sensory issues, develop speech, and interact socially.

The other book within this book is about the unique journeys of other persons with autism toward their more optimal fulfillment. In both cases this book, unlike so many others, provides many examples of specific "what to do and how to do it" hints, tips, and pearls for families, therapists, or other caregivers to help them reach the buried potential in each of those persons they love.

Refreshingly, the book is free of confusing "psych speak" and lofty theories. Instead it uses everyday language and provides practical ideas as a sort of user manual for parents or families so often overwhelmed and bewildered by the exceptional ability and disability they see in the same person. It advises, correctly, to concentrate on strengths rather than deficits, and to celebrate what is there rather than regret what is missing.

The numerous examples in this book underscore the fact that so often parents, using love, intuition, and creativity, come up with ways to connect with and help their child. That echoes my experience that, in many ways, parents are the real experts on their child. Therefore, professionals need to listen to Mom and Dad more closely to truly grasp the uniqueness of each individual.

Throughout this book the roles of prayer, belief, and faith are included as important elements in the goal of realizing the full potential in these persons with their curious mix of giftedness and limitation.

Overall the book provides much welcomed help and hope. Today there is increasing focus on recognizing strengths rather than deficits in persons with autism, and this book contributes mightily to the implementation of that welcome awakening. This strategy is being applied to persons wherever they appear on the spectrum, whether children or young adults, with the goal to add happiness to the help and hope that this book generously provides.

Darold A. Treffert, MD
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Introduction

Parenting a child with autism is traveling life's journey with a different map. Autism does not come with a manual. Instead, it requires a caregiver who never gives up.

—Ron Sandison

"Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the Lord, *who has compassion on you.*

—Isaiah 54:10

When I was a child, every year my dad took our family to the Detroit auto show. As an inquisitive seven-year-old, I secretly hurried off to view the newest models of vehicles. After about ten minutes checking out the Corvettes and not paying attention to my family, I suddenly realized I was lost. As panic took over, I fell to the ground and began to cry.

Seeing my distress, two kind gentlemen approached me and said, "Son, don't worry. We'll help you." They gently took my hands and led me through the aisles in search of my family.

My parents and brothers were already desperately looking for me, and after ten minutes I finally saw my dad and ran into his arms, wiping tears onto his pant leg. My mom then picked me up and held me tightly.

"Your son wandered off and was terrified," the first gentleman said.

"You need to keep an extra watch on this one," the second one told them.

My parents thanked them, holding tightly to my hands, too shaken to look at any more vehicles.

Ironically, as we began to exit the auto show, my dad noticed a six-year-old girl alone with her head down, crying. My dad asked her, "Are you lost?" She nodded her head.

"Let's find your mom." He took her hand and led her to the security office, seizing the opportunity to pay the two gentlemen's kindness forward.

As we waited for her parents to arrive, I looked at my dad and said, "Do you think her parents left her here and went home?"

My dad gently lifted my chin and looked me in the eye. "Do you think I would have left you here alone?"

"No," I replied as her parents arrived at the security office, joyfully picking her up in their loving arms. I smiled and gave my dad's hand a squeeze.

This memory always reminds me that if parents who love and care for their children will not abandon them, we can trust God will do the same. God understands our fears and worries and will provide for your child, no matter the circumstances. He will never leave nor forsake your family, so we may boldly say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid" (Hebrews 13:6).

But not being afraid is easier said than done, especially if you're raising a child with autism. Actress and motivational speaker Holly Robinson Peete, whose son RJ has autism, states, "Almost every parent of a child with autism that I have met shares the same fears and hopes. We pray our teenagers will transition into adulthood with self-reliance, a safe place to live, a job with a compassionate employer. More than anything, we want to be assured that our kids will develop the ability to self-advocate, and that they'll find a trusted community."[1]

These are basic hopes that are not easy to accomplish for everyone. It's important to acknowledge that not every child on the spectrum will progress as much as I have, but there is perspective and ground to be won in every circumstance.

Neurological Wiring

Each of us is wired neurologically different. St. Augustine, a fourth-century theologian, in his classic work *City of God*, bragged about his mentor St. Ambrose, stating, "Ambrose is a genius—he is able to read in his mind without saying words verbally."

In the fourth century, only 5 percent of the population were literate, and only 10 percent of those who were literate could read silently. Imagine how different our world would be if we were neurologically wired like people in the fourth century—you're flying in an airplane and everyone is reading his or her text messages out loud. Talk about airing dirty laundry! There'd be no need for *TMZ* gossip.

Sarah Parshall Perry, author of *Sand in My Sandwich*, wrote, "Our family's 'flavor' of autism is not the head-banging kind, but the 'Why is that lady so fat?' in a crowded grocery store kind. It is the breathing in someone's face while they speak because he has no concept of personal space kind. The kind we have is a challenge in its own right, different from those of other children on the spectrum because my children look so normal."[2]

It's often hard to remember that just because a disability isn't readily evident doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

When I experienced meltdowns as a child, I screamed and banged my head relentlessly against a cement wall, or went completely berserk, destroying everything in my path of terror. Most children are like bottled water; they get frustrated or angry and maybe a little water splashes out. As for me, I am neurologically wired like a Mountain Dew that's just been vigorously shaken—watch out!

As a young child, I also struggled with regulating my sense of fear and anxiety. When I was six years old, I feared our house would catch on fire after seeing the 1974 movie *The Towering Inferno*—I didn't sleep in my own bed for four years after this horrifying event.

Invisible Disability

Because autism is sometimes an invisible disability, it's not uncommon to have someone tell you, "Huh. Your child doesn't look autistic to me."

The proper response is, "I am glad he does not appear autistic to you. Would you like to have him over for a visit when he is experiencing a full-blown meltdown or anxiety attack?"

Well, maybe not the "proper" response, but it's surely the honest one. Parenting is tough sometimes! And it's often hard to remember that just because a disability isn't readily evident doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

There's a story I like to think about when people struggle with being empathetic toward those of us on the spectrum.

> Two wrinkly men in their late eighties are sitting next to each other on a bench. The first one gripes, "I feel so old. My knees throb from arthritis. I have constant back and neck pain. I can barely move, even with my walker, and I have the eyesight of a bat."
>
> The second one winks and replies, "I feel like a newborn baby."
>
> "What do you mean, Fred? You're nearing ninety! You're no spring chicken."
>
> "I am bald, I have no teeth, and my diaper feels like it is leaking," Fred replies.

While this anecdote is meant to make you laugh, it is also meant to remind us that if we live long enough, we are guaranteed to experience some form of disability, whether it be physical or neurological.

Daniel R. Thomson, a physical therapist, shares, "A label that everyone without a disability wears, whether knowingly or not, is *temporarily able-bodied*. It describes people who are not disabled but live one accident, disease, or event away from disability. The truth is that we are closer to the possibility of disability then we may realize."[3]

As you're assisting your child on the spectrum, it might be helpful to ask yourself how you would like to be helped in a similar situation. Figuring out how to care for a child with autism is by no means an easy task, but knowing we might face some form of helplessness in the future can lend a bit of perspective.

Deborah Reber, author of *Differently Wired*, whose teenage son Asher has Asperger's, shares the struggles of raising an atypical child: "Because there is no playbook and there are very few mentors to show us and our kids how it's done and what moving down this road with confidence, grace, and optimism looks like, fears of future unknowns will continue to be a tremendous source of stress raising atypical kids."[4]

Sometimes the job of parenting a neurodivergent child seems overwhelming, but there are things we can do. We can trust God, continue persevering, and forgive ourselves when we let our bottles get a little shaken up.

Blessings and Brokenness

As parents see their dreams for their child quickly slipping away, discouragement and hopelessness seep into their souls. It's hard enough to deal with the death of a dream without the sleepless nights, behavioral issues, doctor appointments, uneducated schools and neighbors, and myriad other struggles a parent deals with on a daily basis.

Having a child with severe autism may even cause you to question your theology of God's love. After her son Tim was born with Down syndrome, minister Stephanie Hubach reprocessed her theological beliefs and came to this conclusion: "On every level of every dimension of the human experience there is a mixture of both the blessedness of creation and the brokenness of the fall. Disability is essentially a more noticeable form of the brokenness that is common to the human experience—a normal part of life in an abnormal world. It is just a difference of degree along a spectrum that contains difficulty all along its length."[5]

Disabilities can affect a child profoundly; autism is no exception. Imagine being unable to communicate with simple sentences or becoming so overwhelmed, all you can do is kick and scream because you have no control over your body. For many children with autism, intense applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapy is required to teach basic life skills, such as tying shoes or not biting.

Mikey Brannigan won the gold medal for running the metric mile in the 2017 Paralympic Games in Rio, but as a child, he required six months of ABA therapy to learn how to walk beside his mother, Edie, instead of always running ahead of her. Edie describes her family's experience as being trapped in "Autism world."[6]

NBC Nightly News reporter Kate Snow asked Mikey, "Does autism make you a better runner?"

Mikey responded, "A better person!"[7]

Just because a child on the spectrum grows into an adult doesn't mean that meltdowns magically disappear. In fact, I still have occasional "honey badger moments" (more on that later).

Fear and Faith

I know as she was raising me, my mom experienced confusion, fear, and isolation—the dark sides of autism. But her faith in God helped her push past that fear. As Francis of Assisi stated, "All the darkness in the world can't extinguish the light from a single candle."[8] God provides his light and comfort in the darkness of autism and brings us closer to his Son, Jesus.

Diane Dokko Kim, author of *Unbroken Faith: Spiritual Recovery for the Special Needs Parent*, shares the following about raising her son Jeremy, who has autism: "But had my child been like everyone else, I wouldn't have discovered how passionately I could love, how bitterly I could weep, how desperately I could pray, or how fiercely I could fight. Disabilities demolished my pride and self-sufficiency; it remapped the boundaries of my narrow mind—and even smaller heart—to grow expanses of sorrow, surrender, and submission."[9]

Although our fear for our children and their disabilities is real, we can give thanks that in raising them, we can see disabilities give way to hidden beginnings. Autism has been a paradox for me: both blessing and suffering. As a child, I hated loud noises, yet I was always the loudest child in the room. I graduated from university with a master's degree and perfect 4.0 GPA, but in high school I could not pass Spanish or geography.

I have great attention to detail, recalling childhood memories, yet miss social cues like yawning by disinterested coworkers when I share (what I consider) my humorous psych-ward stories. I speak at more than seventy events a year on autism, yet my supervisor, Dwayne, compares my social filtering system to a child riding a bike barefoot downhill without brakes.

Arthur Fleischmann, coauthor of *Carly's Voice: Breaking Through Autism*, describes the autism paradox:

> Everything in our family was lived on extremes. When Carly was home, her presence was enormous and all-consuming. When she was gone [for respite care], I felt empty and hollow. Carly's intelligence far exceeded that of most kids, but her behavior was far below that of the mainstream. The polar extremes were exhausting. One life was too black-and-white, and I yearned for some gray—some in-between.
>
> I hoped that when Carly was away, absence would make the heart grow blinder and in time I would ache less while she was away, and be more at peace when she was home. For the time being we would have to live in a binary world—Carly here or gone—and that would have to be good enough. At least for a little while.[10]

The paradox of living between two extremes can be draining, but try not to worry. Remember that God will provide balance and stability, and you will discover beauty in the autism paradox.

A Story of Two Barns

A pastor was on vacation in the southern United States and noticed a broken and dilapidated red barn next to a field filled with thorns, thistles, and an anorexic cow. He drove another mile up the country road and saw a beautiful red barn with a garden of red roses and a ripe harvest. The pastor approached the farmer and said, "Wow, God has really blessed you with this beautiful farm!"

The farmer looked at the pastor, laughed, and said, "You should have seen the farm when it was only God here!"

Raising a child with special needs requires faith plus hard work and perseverance. St. Augustine wrote, "Pray as if everything depends on God, and work as if everything depends on us."[11]

In other words, you can't just sit around waiting for God to bless you with good fortune. You and God must work as a team.

There were many years when my life appeared more like the rundown barn next to a field of thorns than what you see of me on Facebook or the professional photo on the back of my books that makes me look like an autistic celebrity.

What to Expect

Throughout this book, I'll share many inspiring stories of faith, love, and the courage of young adults with autism and how they, alongside their families, grow closer to God. These young adults shine as mentors offering us hope and guidance to persevere with confidence and grace. With each story, you will learn how to experience God-filled moments and receive his guidance in raising your child.

> Your child is created in the image of God with a purpose and destiny.

The parents I interviewed for this book shared eight characteristics that empowered their children with autism to thrive and overcome learning challenges:

1. Recognize the issues to be tackled.
2. Focus on your child's strengths and abilities.
3. Celebrate your child's progress.
4. Keep a positive attitude.
5. Advocate fiercely for your child.
6. Learn to see the world from your child's perspective.
7. Never give up on your child.
8. Believe that God has a special plan for your child.

As you read, I want to encourage you to pray and trust your child to God. As King Solomon said, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:5–6).

Remember that God sees the road ahead of you, and he has an amazing plan for your family. Your child is created in the image of God with a purpose and destiny. As you seek God, he will empower you and give you parenting wisdom. Autism humbled my family and enabled us to grow in faith. It made us who we are. God used our struggles to help other families and bring healing. Don't hide your wounds; they're badges of perseverance.

As Romans 15:13 says, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

God's view on the spectrum is full of hope when you relentlessly pursue him in the darkness, confusion, and fear, trusting him to empower you to raise your child. You will discover God's strength is perfected in your weakness. You'll also discover new friends along the way. I pray this book will provide you with comfort and insight on your journey.

Chapter 1

Real Superheroes Don't Wear Capes

All God's giants have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on God being with them.

—J. Hudson Taylor, missionary to China

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

—Isaiah 43:2

Since you are reading this book I'm going to assume that you are a parent or caretaker of a child on the spectrum. You care deeply about that child and part of what drew you to this book is that I, myself, am on the spectrum. Yes, I'm university educated and work in the mental health field, but my best qualification by far is that I live on the spectrum. And my guess is that what you're most interested in are the hard-won successes my parents and I have uncovered.

As a parent of a child with autism and special needs, you understand firsthand the feeling of seeing your child's school office number flash across your phone while you're in an important business meeting. Or you're catching up on email when a message pops up from your child's teacher requesting a conference. Or enjoying coffee with a neighbor when her child runs up screaming because your son pulled out a chunk of her hair. Or listening attentively to your pastor's message on faith and endurance when your daughter's number appears on the monitor, a blatant sign that there is trouble in the nursery.

Curt Warner, a former running back for the Seattle Seahawks and Los Angeles Rams, whose twin sons have autism, writes:

> At times I'd get flashbacks to football games when things were going bad. Sometimes you're getting beaten and there's nothing you can do about it. No matter what you do—the game plan, substitutions, trick plays—you're still just getting a beatdown. What do you do? You have no choice, you've got to line up and try it again. Play after play. The only thing you can do is just keep going back at it and keep trying to do your best. Sometimes you just have days like that. That's pretty much what every day felt like for us for a long time.[1]

My journey with autism has been an amazing adventure of faith and hope, where my parents became my superheroes—conquering the seemingly impossible—and I became their superhero in training.

My development was normal until I reached eighteen months. I began to rapidly regress, losing my ability to communicate with words and ceasing to maintain eye contact. About 20 percent of children with autism experience a period of regression of previously acquired skills as I did, while many others have a developmental delay with communication and fine motor skills.[2]

Because my mom had two neurotypical children before me, she was quick to realize my development and communication abilities were severely delayed and immediately took me to the family pediatrician.

The pediatrician dismissed my mom's concerns, explaining, "Men are like fine wine. You have to give them time to develop. Women are like delicate flowers and blossom quickly."

My mom is not one to wait around. She immediately advocated for me to receive speech therapy. As a result, from ages two to sixteen, I received intense therapy. When I was seven years old, my speech was so delayed, my brother Chuckie bragged to his friends, "You've got to meet my brother Ronnie. I think he is from Norway since he sounds Norwegian!" For a while, Chuckie and the rest of my family were the only ones able to "interpret" my language.

As I entered kindergarten, the Rochester Community Schools specialists wanted to label me as emotionally impaired. My mom refused this label and informed the professionals, "My son's disability is not emotional but neurological." She diligently researched the top professionals for learning disabilities in the area and paid to have me retested. A neuropsychologist from Henry Ford Hospital confirmed that my disability was indeed neurological and defined as autism.

Love doesn't make everything turn out exactly the way we wish it would every time, but it does make unimaginable growth possible.

When I was diagnosed with autism in 1982, only one in every ten thousand children in the US was so diagnosed. Now one out of fifty-four children is diagnosed, with boys more than four times as often as girls.[3]

The educational specialists and doctors warned my parents that I would never read beyond a seventh-grade level, attend college, excel in athletics, or have meaningful relationships. But my mom was undeterred by these generalities and instead became more determined to help me succeed in life by developing my unique gifts. She helped me gain self-confidence through creative activities such as painting, drawing, reading, and writing short stories.

I now have a bachelor's degree in theology and psychology—earning a 3.9 GPA in the process—and a Master of Divinity with a minor in Koine

Greek from Oral Roberts University. I received an athletic scholarship for track and cross-country my freshman year of college. My wife, Kristen, and I were married on December 7, 2012. On March 20, 2016, my daughter, Makayla Marie, was born, and just a couple of weeks later, Charisma House published my first book, *A Parent's Guide to Autism: Practical Advice. Biblical Wisdom*.

My mother's intuition, persistence, perseverance, commitment, and love accomplished unfathomable things. Of course love doesn't make everything turn out exactly the way we wish it would every time, but it does make unimaginable growth possible.

Both of my parents chose to focus on my abilities and the talents God had given me and, as a result, I flourished. They lived by Dr. Temple Grandin's wisdom: "In special education, there's too much emphasis placed on the deficit and not enough on the strength."[4]

My mom believed that by having me interact with typical children my own age, I would learn essential social skills, and by developing my talents, I could gain independence and accomplish my dreams. She also knew from her research that not every child with autism will gain independence and advocacy for me would be a monumental task, but she knew it was worth the attempt.

Inspired by the wisdom books in the Bible, she often recited to me, "Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men" (Proverbs 22:29, NIV 1984). With my mom's wisdom and guidance, I homed in on my skills, which has led to a prosperous and fulfilling life.

That quick summary makes it all seem rather easy. But you and I both know it isn't.

My coworker Robert shared a humorous story about his fifteen-year-old cousin, when they were both attending his grandfather's funeral. Cousin Mark, who has Asperger's, is Protestant, has sensory smell issues, and had never been to a Catholic church. As the pallbearers carried his grandfather's casket, the priest conducting the funeral announced, "Please bow your heads and close your eyes for a moment of silence in reverence for the departed." The altar boys followed, waving the thurible as the aroma of incense quickly filled the sanctuary.

In the midst of the silence, Mark screamed, "Who the *hell* would bring incense to a funeral? What the—!" Well, you can imagine the rest.

In moments like these you don't think of the word *superhero* to describe your child. In fact, when your son or daughter demonstrates quirky behavior in public, superhero is the last thought on your mind . . . unless you're thinking you are a superhero for containing your reaction.

But a superhero can surprise you in the most unlikely moment.

Tyler Gianchetta: A Real-Life Superhero

On July 15, 2015, Susan drove her nineteen-year-old son with high-functioning autism, Tyler, to his doctor appointment in Long Island.[5] As they chatted and enjoyed the summer ride, Susan's body suddenly began to shake uncontrollably, and she became unresponsive. Within moments, their car raced like a derailed train into a tree.

Smoke from the engine instantly began to fill the car as Tyler frantically attempted to break free from the erupting inferno.

"I responded with instinct," Tyler later recalls. "I just kept thinking to myself, 'Don't let Mom die!'"

Breaking loose from his passenger seat, Tyler swiftly smashed the driver's side window with his bare hands and rescued his unconscious mom from the mangled mess.

Thirty seconds after he moved her from the wreckage, the car exploded. Thick black clouds of smoke engulfed the air as the sound of approaching sirens whined in the distance. Tyler lay by the roadside next to his mom who had a shattered hip, broken neck, cracked ribs, and burn injuries.

After being branded a hero in an interview with CBS New York, Tyler declared, "I don't know when my hand got broken. I don't know if it was from the accident or from pulling my mom out. But I can tell you right now that if it was broken pulling her out, I'd break the other hand to pull her out again because I love her so much."[6]

Tyler's surgery required fourteen screws and a small plate in his hand. Susan's doctors were unable to determine the initial cause of her passing out, which had caused the accident.

Reflecting on this moment, Tyler shares, "The hand of God was visible in two ways. First, the car was on a steep incline following the crash, giving me leverage to pull my mom from the vehicle. Second, I was able to open my passenger door. When the insurance company investigated the charred wreckage a few days later, they were unable to open my door. The claim agents were baffled that we were able to escape."

Tyler Gianchetta was developmentally delayed in his communication and fine motor skills and, at two and a half years old, he was diagnosed with high-functioning autism. The Huntington New York public school district wanted him to attend an elementary school with a special education program. "My mom told the district that I would not attend a school twenty minutes away from home, and she insisted that I attend the same school as my friends," Tyler shared. Ironically, years later Tyler served as a teacher's assistant at the very school his mom fought vigilantly for him to attend. From an early age, he persisted in overcoming the odds.

One way that Tyler found to communicate was through music. "Music saved my life," he shares. "As a child, I had trouble expressing myself. I learned self-expression through my passion for music. I learned to talk later than my peers, but I could express myself through music. No matter what I was going through, I could sing about it and feel comfort."

Michael, Tyler's dad, shares with relatives and friends, "Picture a five-year-old child running around the house in his underwear singing and performing Whitesnake's 'Here I Go Again.' That's Tyler!"

Tyler is a fierce advocate for people with disabilities. In high school, he frequently stood up to bullies who were harassing others. He recalls one time when a student was bothering a peer with autism. Tyler had the courage to walk right up and dare the kid to tease him instead because he had autism too. The kid looked completely perplexed and walked away, muttering, "You sure don't look autistic!" You can bet the fellow student with autism saw Tyler as a superhero—he swooped in and protected him from someone stronger and more powerful.

After graduating from high school, Tyler attended Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. "I chose to attend Clark because the students are accepting. For example, I wore my New York Islanders jersey to an assembly for orientation and sat next to a fellow student who was wearing his Bruins jersey. After we talked about our passion for hockey, I discovered that he also had autism and before long, I had a new friend."

Tyler graduated with bachelor degrees in mathematics and economics in 2018 from Clark University and is now a successful tax analyst. Tyler still demonstrates his superhero qualities by helping individuals with autism and special needs with their accounting.

Tyler's parents did everything possible to help Tyler thrive in life and education. Reflecting on that miraculous moment after the car crash, Tyler exclaims, "My mom has saved my life dozens of times, and I was finally able to save her life."

True superheroes willingly risk their own lives for others by sacrificing their comfort and safety.

Tyler also advises young people with autism, "Perseverance and knowing your limitations are keys to success. Don't be afraid to ask for help."

Even heroes need a helping hand sometimes.

Five Steps to Developing a Hero

Marvel and DC Comics blockbuster movies portray a superhero as possessing amazing gifts like a robotic outfit to transform a mere man into an ant warrior or a bat cape to glide undetected through Gotham City. However, a real superhero, such as Tyler, is an ordinary person who, in times of crisis, is able to draw forth an extraordinary quality of strength and courage from within to triumph in the midst of severe circumstances. True superheroes willingly risk their own lives for others by sacrificing their comfort and safety. As Jesus taught his disciples, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). And every person, no matter their struggles, can sacrifice and have abilities beyond the rest of their peers.

Tyler's story is proof that no matter what our children's struggles are, they have the capacity to be heroes—people who strive to reach their full potential and use their gifts to serve others. What they need is someone strong and heroic in their own right to guide them along. While everyone's journey will look different, I offer five pieces of advice we can all use to help our children become superheroes.

1. Know where super powers come from.

Even Superman is crippled by kryptonite and depends on others to help him. It would be foolish for him to go into battle not knowing his weakness and how to combat it. The same is true for all of us. Real life is full of pitfalls and dangers, but because of their particular struggles, children on the spectrum are especially in danger, and they need us as parents to introduce them to the ultimate power to save them.

A friend of mine, who is a pastor with three children including a son and daughter on the spectrum, encourages his children to stay positive and always trust Jesus. After watching superhero movies, he encourages them, "Jesus is the one mightier than I. He is strong enough to fight your battles. In times of trouble take refuge in him." While building cardboard castles and playing knights in armor, his neurotypical son picked up a plastic sword and said to his brother with Asperger's, "Choose your weapons!"

His brother replied, "I choose Jesus. He is the one mightier than I."

A few weeks later, this pastor took his children to *Avengers: Endgame*. On the ride back from the theater, he asked his children, "What superpower would you want?"

His son with Asperger's exclaimed, "I want Jesus."

"Why?"

"Because Jesus is mightier than I. He already won all the battles. I can take refuge in him."

Don't brush by that statement too quickly. There is powerful truth there. Real-world heroes need God to fully achieve their superhero status. So speak to your children often about God. Make him concrete by telling them the things he has done in your life and theirs. Sing them songs. Read to them from the Bible. Show them how the Bible has changed you and helped you.

2. Model your inner superhero.

Children with autism are great imitators. If you give up, your child with autism will also give up. If you continue to use your gifts to pursue making your child the hero they can be, your child will continue to reach for his full potential. The apostle Paul said, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9). Second Chronicles 15:7 encourages us, "But as for you, be strong and do not give up, for your work will be rewarded."

My mom refused to lose hope when the special education experts informed her, "Your son will never read beyond a seventh-grade level or attend college." But because she modeled a hero's attitude of never giving up, I chose to be a hero and not give up as well.

Like my mom, Julie Hornok, whose daughter Lizzie has autism, always tries to keep a hope-filled attitude. She says, "I had a choice. I could focus on what my daughter couldn't do or what she could do. Focusing on what she couldn't do had kept me from enjoying her in the moment, and she deserved better than that. She deserved to be loved and adored exactly as she was because she was an incredible little girl. The more I focused on what she could do, the more I was able to use her strengths to support her weaknesses."[7]

Reassessing your child's abilities is important for setting reachable goals. Not every child with autism will gain independence. Some will live in a group home. Your focus is on finding the next potential goal. That could be to have your nonverbal child learn to handle his aggression and not bite, or learn simple sign language to express his immediate needs.

3. Be a force to be reckoned with.

The main characteristic of every superhero is being an advocate for the weak and a person you don't want to confront in combat. When you advocate for your child's IEP or additional resources, he will learn to be an advocate for himself and others too.

Last year the hospital I work at was so understaffed that the CEO and Director of Nursing ordered mandatory overtime for the nursing staff. Being mandated by a supervisor can cause severe anxiety for an employee with autism, as it did for me. In response to the new policy, I self-advocated by having an Oakland University professor of autism write a letter requesting accommodations for my autism under the Americans with Disabilities Act. All my buddies were mandated to work late on

Friday and Saturday nights while I got to go home on time—disabilities sometimes do have benefits.

My mom modeled advocacy by making sure I received every resource from the school system I needed to succeed. Be the parent who is willing to stand up and fight for your child, and keep fighting until your child's voice is heard. Then help another parent stand up. When we all stand together, we are an overwhelming force.

4. Celebrate your child's progress by keeping a journal.

Every superhero needs someone who will share their progress with the world, and it's a rare person who doesn't like being celebrated. You have the opportunity to make your child feel like a superhero by chronicling their successes and struggles that lead to more successes. In a journal or scrapbook, recount how far they have come and the battles they have won, then share these records with your child. Lori Ashley Taylor, author of *Dragonfly: A Daughter's Emergence from Autism*, writes, "I learned to celebrate the smallest successes, because [Hannah] did make progress even when it was minuscule. We celebrated *inchstones* instead of milestones. I believe that's the reason compliments come easy for special needs parents. We notice small accomplishments in big ways."[8]

Celebrating every moment will give you and your child the encouragement to continue to the next small step.

5. Focus on ability and not labels.

Every superhero has strengths and weaknesses. We don't refer to a superhero by their weakness but by their strength. Superman is the Man of Steel, not the man prone to be sick by the kryptonite flu. My mom focused on my abilities, such as art and a powerful memory. She refused to let others' labels hold me back. This taught me to refuse labels and to be a trailblazer in life.

In fact, the labels given in autism—high and low functioning—essentially refer to a person's ability to speak. That's it. It's also true that these labels can, at times, do more harm than good. A low-functioning diagnosis might cause a person to be set aside as unreachable. Yes, a diagnosis can help parents and professionals in knowing what tools might be most effective in helping your child, but they don't tell you anything else about a person on the spectrum and all of their abilities.

Every child has a special ability. As parents, it's up to us to help our children find it and foster it. With the right guidance and support, we all have the potential to be superheroes.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Our children have unique gifts and disabilities. They are superheroes trying to figure out their abilities and learn to use them to overcome life's challenges. We should not label children but instead be their source of heroic love and support. Love will boost their self-esteem and encourage them to reach new heights.

One more note of encouragement. Like my mom, you also will have moments when you question your child's superpower abilities, and that's okay. You may be your child's hero, but you're also human. The good news is that your source for superhero powers is always available to give you support.

PRAYER AND MEDITATION

Prayer

God, open my eyes to the talents and strengths you've given my child. Bring compassionate teachers and therapists who can refine those gifts and help my child learn social skills and gain independence. Surround us with your favor and love. Teach me patience, for you are my God; I will trust in you. May your good Spirit lead me on level ground and make my steps firm. Amen.

Meditation

> When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?" the servant asked.

> “Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.”
>
> And Elisha prayed, “Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see.” Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6:15–17)

> Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels. (Hebrews 13:2 nkjv)

Chapter 2

Where Hope Can Be Found

Many things are possible for the person who has hope. Even more is possible for the person who has faith. And still more is possible for the person who knows how to love. But everything is possible for the person who practices all three virtues.

—Brother Lawrence, seventeenth-century French monk

Yes, my soul, find rest in God;
my hope comes from him.

—Psalm 62:5

American psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman discovered what he called the hopelessness complex while researching learned helplessness in 1967 at the University of Pennsylvania. Learned helplessness is a behavior that occurs when individuals experience failure enough times that they believe they are incapable of success, causing them to stop trying.

Dr. Seligman and his partner Dr. Maier were conducting electric shock experiments on dogs, a highly controversial method by today's standards. The first group of dogs received a painful shock on the right side of the lab, learning quickly to move to the left side to avoid the shock again. The second group received shocks on the left side, so they learned to move to the right. However, the third group was shocked on both sides, so they remained in their spots, intelligent enough to realize that no matter where they moved, they would feel the shock; they learned helplessness.

You and your child with autism may also feel stuck due to a hopelessness complex. At times it will feel like it doesn't matter what you do, and it's painful. Some of the causes for hopelessness include bullying, difficulty with communication from speech deficits, struggles in academics from learning disabilities, a distorted perspective of all-or-nothing thinking, sensory issues, failures in relationships, unemployment, awkward social interactions, and a fear of the future. The roots of the hopelessness complex include despair, lack of motivation, fear of trying new things, depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues.

> Faith in God empowered me to have a hope complex and overcome my insecurities.

I understand those feelings. The hopelessness complex dominated my life and thinking for many years, but faith in God empowered me to have a hope complex and overcome my insecurities. Having a hope complex was key for me in developing relationships, finding success in academics, and acquiring gainful employment. As Proverbs 13:12 says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life."

Your child too can develop a hope complex! Here are four tips that helped me. Use them as you move your child from hope*less* to hope*ful*!

1. A healthy self-efficacy is key to overcoming hopelessness.

Self-efficacy is a person's *belief* in his or her ability to execute the actions necessary to achieve desired outcomes. Notice that it has little to do with whether or not the person can actually perform an activity right now. Hope is gained when a person believes that he or she can achieve something. And people believe in themselves when other people believe in them. Austin John Jones, a young adult artist with autism, gives this advice on motivation and feeling secure:

> I know that the choices I make shape my life. Sometimes I choose to play video games on my phone when I'm with a group of people because it's easier than trying to talk or listen when a bunch of people are talking. Sometimes I go into my room when my parents have people over because it's better for me to play a video game or talk to just one person online. I do it because I don't have the confidence to sit in a conversation and try to figure it all out. It's easier to not have to worry about it. I know there are consequences when I make a choice like this (at least I am learning that with my parents' help). People might think I'm rude or not interested in them or that I don't love or care about them. But I do.
>
> Making choices can be really scary and it can leave me feeling unsteady and insecure. I want to live life to the fullest. And how can I do that? I have to have confidence in every aspect of my life but that is not easy when you are on the spectrum. I often do things differently than the people around me, and they need to understand that's just who I am. Even though I'm not always good at it, I think it's important to believe in yourself and I am trying all the time to do that.[1]

My self-esteem developed as I interacted socially and learned to express my ideas. Each time my parents encouraged me not to isolate myself in my room when they had guests over helped me achieve small successes. Those small achievements built up until I believed I could interact effectively with others. My parents took the same route of slowly building up my confidence in other areas of my life. Now I have a healthy self-efficacy that allows me to feel confident about most everything in life.

In college, my self-efficacy enabled me to travel on summer mission trips and share the good news of Jesus Christ. I felt confident to visit cool places like Madagascar, Cameroon, France, and Bulgaria and try new foods like eel, spicy toucan, and baboon gumbo. I also was chosen each trip to be the main speaker for our team. Something my early teachers would never have foreseen.

2. A hope complex sees challenges as new opportunities.

When I felt overwhelmed by college papers and assignments, my parents would ask me to share with them why I felt so stressed and what I feared. After praying for God's peace, my dad encouraged me, "Give your best and study, but don't think that you have to get perfect grades. Effort is what counts most, not a professor's grade. What does it matter if you get a C or an A on your paper? Remember, God is in control."

They were teaching me to analyze my all-or-nothing mindset. By encouraging me to verbalize obsessive thought patterns, my parents helped me see new opportunities for solving problems. Things are not just black-and-white (I either get an A or I'm a failure), but also gray (a C is a passing grade and may be the best I can do with what I had on that particular day).

When your child is faced with something that feels overwhelming, help them see it as an opportunity to reach further than they have before. You can do that by teaching your child to break down larger tasks into manageable steps. On a chart or calendar, write down the goal or deadline and work toward it, setting small goals along the way. Don't forget to offer rewards for reaching each goal. Have him or her decide in advance how much time to spend on a task. Remember, the goal is to complete the task, not to make it perfect.

3. The ability to make choices in life creates hope.

Having limited options in making choices leads to a lack of motivation. When you're unemployed, have few friends, no driver's license, and a restricted budget, you become limited in the choices you can make; this can be very depressing for anyone, let alone someone whose struggles are compounded with a disability.

If we can offer choices, though, we can create motivation which will lead to action. Brett, a gentleman in his fifties with autism, refused to leave his room at a group home for days. Staff had bite and scratch marks covering their arms from trying to force him to leave his room.

A behavioral therapist visited Brett at lunchtime and told staff, "I think I can get Brett to leave his room." She put two chairs outside his room—a hard chair and a soft chair—and said, "Brett, what chair do you want to sit in?" Brett slowly left his room and *chose* to sit in the soft chair. For years, Brett was given orders, what to do and when to do it, without choice. Given the dignity of choice, Brett was quite willing to move forward.

We also need to remember, especially with children on the spectrum, motivation is not lacking in areas of special interests. If we can incorporate choices that allow for time with their special interests, children with autism can flourish.

4. True hope comes from Christ.

As a child with autism, I often felt hopeless. My daily outlook was, "It's always darkest just before complete and utter darkness." An Eeyore-like depression clouded my every thought. Christ transformed my thinking from a hopelessness complex and gave me hope. As I read the Bible and followed Christ's call on my life, slowly the depression became more bearable. I still experience times of darkness and confusion, but I have learned to seek help from friends and place my hope in Christ.

Colossians 1:27 says, "To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." Hope is found in Christ if we follow his call.

Peter Lantz, a young man with Asperger's, took this advice to heart. By following Christ's call, he became a talented video game designer.

Peter Lantz: Using Asperger's for a Career in Video Games

While waiting for my haircut at Great Clips, I struck up a conversation with Peter Lantz, a young adult with Asperger's.[2] Peter works for an advertising company designing video games. As we waited for our haircuts, Peter shared his adventure in following Christ and divine vocation to create educational video games. He is a perfect example of how it's possible for a hope complex to turn a difficult life into a life filled with purpose—following God's call.

"I have a unique job. I work as the only game developer in an advertising agency. I code, create art, and do design work for the games we produce. Sometimes a client wants a virtual reality (VR) experience or something similar, and that's where someone like me comes in. Other times it's research and development or 'showoff' work that helps sell us as an agency. With the advancement of game-creation tools over the years, it's become feasible for one person to throw together very small games as a career.

"When I first read the job description online, it sounded like a job I didn't want. I would be the only game developer at an advertising agency, which meant no one would understand my work and how long it takes. However, when I finally went to the company's website and checked out their values, it became clear this was a strong Christian company that believed 'love was the only rule.' That statement resonated deeply inside, and I instantly suspected God was up to something. I kept seeing phrases related to 'love' everywhere I went and knew for sure God intended me to work at the company."

Peter decided to apply for the job, and with a strong recommendation and portfolio, he landed it. Having a hope complex fueled by a healthy self-efficacy helped him find gainful employment with a job he now loves.

Small Beginnings

Zechariah 4:10 says, "Do not despise these small beginnings" (NLT). In reaching his dream job, Peter had many challenges to overcome. Early in Peter's development, his parents realized by his behavior he had some form of autism and decided to homeschool him. Peter was unable to speak complete sentences until he began working with a speech therapist, then was diagnosed with Asperger's at the age of fourteen.

The DSM-5 defines Asperger's syndrome as a developmental disorder characterized by severely impaired social skills, repetitive behaviors, and often, a narrow set of interests, but not involving delayed development of linguistic and cognitive abilities. Under the DSM-5, Asperger's is part of the autism spectrum disorders.

Asperger's enables Peter to have a great ability to focus, but it comes with a cost. As Peter shared, "If I put my mind to something, it will get done, but the rest of my life always suffers. If I do work on a computer, I hardly get exercise. If I'm getting into a project, I let miscellaneous tasks fall through the cracks like replying to emails or cleaning my apartment."

Asperger's causes Peter to feel misunderstood. "I get the impression people who don't know me well think I have a secret agenda. They feel like I'm hiding something when I talk because I have trouble looking them in the eye. I also feel like I have to choose my words carefully and 'control' what their reaction will be since I am always afraid what I'm saying will be taken wrong, having messed up before in the past. It makes it look like I'm some sort of bad guy. I now know for some people it's just not my fault; they had a chip on their shoulder."

For Peter, the "small beginnings" included social awkwardness, difficulty with communication, feeling misunderstood, and learning disabilities. He was able to overcome these initial struggles with the help of his parents and by using his gifts of focus and perseverance.

After finishing home schooling, Peter attended a local tech center. He enrolled in many technical classes; the ones he enjoyed most were programming, graphic design, and 3D animation.

Peter felt 3D animation was his answer from God to getting a job that suits his natural skills. He met his mentor, Richard Vandermey, at the tech center. Richard encouraged Peter to pursue his dream of designing video games. Taking his advice, he joined a team, placing third in a national competition.

"My parents expressed concern that this industry was only for the extremely skilled, but I kept pushing them since it became a holy war of some kind for me. I knew this was where God wanted me. I knew this was what I wanted to do, so they let me enroll in Ferris State University."

College Success

Peter's parents helped prepare him for college by saving money in a college trust fund. Once enrolled at Ferris, Peter's speech therapist met with him weekly, teaching him how to analyze stories and then share his ideas in essay form. Peter's dad helped him learn to write business letters, preparing him for technical writing.

"I lived at home during college, so I got to eat my mom's delicious home cooking and save on room and board. Mentally, I may not have been ready to be independent yet, so staying at home gave me some time."

Peter's favorite college classes at Ferris State were the 3D art. He loved working with spatial relationships and creating interactive video game art. "I was the star student since the program, Digital Animation and Game Design, fit me like a glove. Within the first semester I achieved every goal I set out to do. I joined the game development club, I earned an award for my classwork, and I attended the Game Developer's Conference as a volunteer (which I ended up doing every year afterward, to this day).

"My first years of college were amazing. I learned how to work hard in front of a computer and had two extremely competent art professors directly from the game industry. One would share his knowledge of game development after class, responding to question after question I sent his way. I learned a ton those years.

"I was often given the freedom to change up assignments if I wanted to try something different in a class since I was a good student. We had a good number of group projects I had the pleasure of leading, and I learned a ton from them. I have an easier time empathizing with my boss at work, having been in similar shoes. Being a team leader means taking the well-being of others on your shoulders and being held to high standards. If you slack off, it's hard to ask the rest of the team for anything.

"My final semester, I became disillusioned with my experience. Our culture was one of intense criticism. Any time art is shown in a class, it was our practice to bring up everything wrong with it and make suggestions. Game artists do this to sharpen each other's skills, but some of the students took it too far, especially when one classmate posted a rough business card design on Facebook which criticized a fellow student's work."

Asperger's has made social interactions a challenge for Peter. "It can create tension with people, especially when I start asking questions no one would think to ask under normal circumstances, such as, 'Is humor okay with God? Should we steer this game a different direction?' Since I don't clarify what I mean by the question, this makes it hard for people to follow my line of reasoning and causes confusion.

"I tend to 'disappear' in groups of people and get interrupted when I open my mouth, due to a delay in speaking up. It might be a blessing in disguise. It's taught me to listen and observe more than talk.

"I have a goofy personality when I feel at home, and thinking in an unusual way helps me make people laugh. It helps me not disappear so much, although it can still be hard to have any part in group conversations. It doesn't help my interests are narrower than most people's . . . well, maybe not narrow, but off the beaten path."

Peter grew up dreaming about all the different kinds of video games he wanted to design. "I would try to create games using Microsoft Word. I would use the shape tools to create levels and place a circle on the level that acted as the player. This is all to say I was a creative kid growing up, and I wanted a career doing creative stuff."

Peter was finally able to make games when he downloaded Game Maker. He started creating small games; this enabled him to gain experience with coding. "My introduction to 3D art came when my friend Tyler introduced me to the still popular Roblox, a PC game where you build worlds with virtual Lego bricks that can be stretched to any length. That game got me drawing out diagrams, figuring out how to create 3D environments and vehicles with simple cubes. It matured my mind when it comes to how 3D shapes fit together. Best educational game I played."

Peter is currently designing a video game for hospital waiting rooms. "I'm working on a 3D platformer—think Super Mario 64—that has some puzzle-solving elements. It has a cool art style where we map scanned drawings onto 3D models. Its purpose is to advertise a children's hospital in a unique way and provide entertainment for kids who might be going through some hard treatments."

Hope for Employment

Parents often fear their child with autism will not have the life skills to be self-sufficient and employed. Peter is proof that the hope complex can change the outcome for people on the spectrum. But it isn't always easy, so Peter offers some tips for finding a career and being successful in it:

1. If you're passionate about a field but it looks hard to get into, just keep building your skills and hang out with people online (or, if you're lucky, in person) who do the job you want to do. Hang around the barber shop long enough, and you will get a haircut.
2. Successful, talented people are usually people who spent a ton of time developing a natural skill of theirs, but by no means did they start on top of the game. I get tired of people saying, "I can't draw," because many can draw and draw well, with a little guidance and a lot of practice.
3. Some careers are surrounded by people who say, "Yeah, nobody is talented enough for that career" (like game development), but don't give up! I grew up believing art was a "far out" job, only to meet an artist in college whose family expected him to be an artist. Now I regularly create 3D art for a living. Perspectives are all over the place due to misinformation, assumptions, or laziness.
4. We talk about being leaders a lot, but there is something to be said for being a good follower too. Managers and people in other positions of authority go through a lot of trouble to protect their underlings from office politics and put up with a ton of criticism. Give them the respect they deserve and do what you can to help.
5. Speaking of politics, stay out of those in your workplace. Don't gossip about people and instead focus on actually getting the job done. The only time to talk back at someone is to "fire a warning shot" to get their attention, but not to hurt their feelings.

Peter encourages young adults on the spectrum, "Be thankful for autism. God shines brightest in weakness, and it comes with strengths that enable us to fill certain job roles better than others would."

He adds, "Since Aspies can be workaholics, remember our work is temporary here on earth. It's not inherently bad to love working; just ensure the gain is higher than the cost. There were some projects at school I went overboard on and received little in return, other than a slightly higher grade."

While earning a college degree is one path, we must remember there are many other paths an individual can take. Technology and trade schools are also viable options and, depending on the individual, possibly better options. Degrees are still thought of as a lifelong stamp of professional competency. They tend to create a false sense of security, perpetuating the illusion that work—and the knowledge it requires—is static. It's not. My coworker Steve, a nurse with Tourette's, states, "There's a shelf life to education but not experience." Remember to lean into your son's or daughter's interests as you guide them toward gainful employment, and recognize the traditional path may not necessarily be the best.

> Many individuals with autism possess a gift for attention to detail and an intense focus, two attributes required in many professional fields.

Many young adults with Asperger's enjoy learning technology and designing computer software. The World Economic Forum predicts 65 percent of children entering primary school will end up in jobs that don't yet exist because the technology required for those careers does not yet exist.[3] This is good news since many individuals with autism possess a gift for attention to detail and an intense focus, two attributes required in many professional fields including technology and computer software design.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

A hope complex provides your child with confidence to experience life with an optimistic view of the future. You can help your children develop a hope complex by teaching self-efficacy, offering choices, seeing challenges as new opportunities, and instilling hope in Christ. As Martin Luther said, "There are times when our hope despairs; these are the times our despair must learn hope."[4]

PRAYER AND MEDITATION

Prayer

God, please develop a hope complex in my child. Hope for friendships and love. Hope for a good job and joy in work. Don't allow depression to steal our family's joy. No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame. My flesh and my heart may fail, but you're the strength of my heart and the source of my happiness and blessings. Shield our family with your compassion and grace. Open our eyes to your goodness and provision. When despair comes like a raging flood, make your hope overflow in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Meditation

> Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Romans 5:5 NKJV)
>
> Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3–5)