

Mildly Autistic

He had always known that he was different. Or, at the very least, had been highly suspicious of it. Some boys run. Some play. Some laugh. And some cry.

He thought.

And he planned.

And he connected his plans with his thoughts. And he saw the world through these connections, random pieces trying to stick together, thousands of puzzles sorting by the second.

He hit the accelerator and the car sped up...and so did his mind. The brain was always going fast, faster than needed most of the time. In the car, he could lay off the gas, maybe apply the brakes, but his mind wasn't like his car. Mental coasting wasn't an option.

Most of his thoughts were *without* feelings. They were analysis. They were patterns and computations, crisscrossing lines of reason. His world was numbers, formulas, and architecture. Everything made sense.

He did *have* emotions. And he *could* access them. He could display them if required—for effect or...communication. And he could read the feelings within others quite accurately. But this was a deliberate process. Being *emotional* was unnatural, a tedious labor requiring intense concentration.

However, this current situation represented a *considerable* improvement over childhood. Life had gotten much better. The first step had been the biggest—realizing the world didn't understand him.

“How do you feel Tim?” A drama teacher asked many years ago.

After a brief analysis, Tim answered, “I feel happy.”

It was the truth.

In that moment, Tim *did* feel happy. But...his answer didn't *feel* happy. Tim didn't smile when he said it. He didn't engage the emotion of *happiness* in his reply. So his true and honest message of contentment did not get conveyed.

“Well, you don't *seem* very happy.” The teacher responded.

This frightened Tim. He *knew* things were about to go badly. They always did at times like this. Whenever feelings got involved, someone got mad, mad at him. He was never sure why or how to prevent it, so he

usually froze. His *lack* of interactivity was often misinterpreted as obstinance.

“Are you *even* listening to me?” The teacher glared, stood up, and walked intensely towards him.

Tim’s paralyzed gaze fixated on the floor. He was scared but he did not show it. His eyes did not water. His arms did not shake. His voice did not waiver. In fact, he slightly chuckled when he spoke, a nervous twitch that was immediately perceived as flagrant disregard.

“You don’t know how to listen!” The teacher sprayed the words. Tim felt the small, unintentional droplets of saliva mist over the side of his cheek. “Go to the office until you can learn some respect.”

Tim walked calmly toward the door, avoiding eye contact while most his classmates smirked. Tim generally made little eye contact. He made less when frightened. He *appeared* defiant.

“I don’t need you.”

“I don’t care about any of you.”

Tim conveyed these messages while walking calmly out of class. He conveyed them by his failure to engage the feelings within the room. Humans interpret a failure to acknowledge emotional discourse as an uncaring act. Tim hadn’t learned that yet. He didn’t *mean* to say, “I don’t care about you.” He wasn’t trying to be disrespectful. He was genuinely afraid and wanted to fit in.

If someone had asked him, “Tim, do you care about your classmates?” Tim would have flatly answered, “Yes.” And he would have meant it but no one would have believed him because Tim’s *flat* yes gave the impression that he really didn’t care.

What Tim didn’t know in those days is how you’re supposed to say, “I feel happy.” But he would learn. He would learn that you’re supposed to say, “I feel happy,” with a smile on your face. And not just any smile, it has to be a genuine smile, what researchers call a *Duchenne Smile* after the French physician Guillaume Duchenne, who studied physiology of facial expressions more than 200 years ago.

He would learn the difference between a forced smile and a *Duchenne Smile* is the involuntary contraction of two muscles surrounding the eyes—the *orbicularis oculi*. These muscles pull the cheeks upwards—

providing the “crow’s feet” wrinkles so many anti-aging creams espouse to vanquish.

The *orbicularis oculi* are involuntary muscles. You cannot flex them intentionally. They are only activated by accessing happiness while smiling. You have to channel *real* happiness, even for a moment, if you want to take a convincing photograph.

It took Tim a long time to learn how to pose for pictures. He learned you have to find a happy memory. Access it intentionally. And then, purposefully run that happiness through your face at exactly the moment photographer quips, “Say cheese.”

It was a deliberate process but it was *not* fake. Tim felt happy and he was accessing *real* memories of joy. But the *accessing* and *expression* was conscious and unnatural. His *modus operandi* was functional communication without emotional conveyance or reception.

Tim learned to pose for photographs around the age of ten. At age fifteen, he learned to access and display *compassion* when people were sad. He never quite figured out how to show a girl he was interested. Thankfully for him, he came across a beautiful and kind woman who was somewhat enamored by his intellectual analyses of rodent mating rituals.

One of Tim’s greatest accomplishments was learning to keep his mouth shut during discussions. For the longest time, he was under the impression that every discourse was an open forum of facts without emotional connection. The only thing that mattered was the logical connectedness of the argument. His responses were calculations and analyses.

This caused him to frequently miss emotional undertones and fail to respond with appropriate concern during intense discussions. He didn’t understand why you couldn’t discuss religion, politics, abortion, or any topic with anybody. His coolness could be mistaken for arrogance and sometimes he would relentlessly bombard people with proofs and arguments, eventually causing them to concede, withdraw, or most likely, make some excuse, and then suddenly stop hanging around him. He later learned it made him look like a know-it-all who didn’t care if people were tired of hearing him speak or hurt by what was spoken.

There were a lot of years of psychotherapy, a lot of journals, a lot of analysis of himself and others. Tim would constantly explore how he felt and how others made him feel. With time, his expertise into emotions

improved. He learned to read them. He learned to access them. And most importantly, he learned to consciously turn them on in appropriate settings.

It hadn't been easy. There had been a lot of nightmares through the process, a lot of tornadoes.

When something bad is happening and you don't know how to fix it, you try to figure it out in your dreams. When you feel you have no control, you dream about problems without solutions: an exam you don't study for, a natural disaster you cannot stop, a fall into an empty space.

Tim dreamt about purple tornadoes. He would see seven or eight of them at a time, far off in the distance, slowly moving toward him. The moment he saw them, he knew they were coming for him. No matter where he ran, no matter what he did, they were coming—all of them together.

Purple is an unusual color—chromatically and emotionally. It is a strange, unsure mixture of two strong but opposite hues—red and blue. It carries neither the strength nor definition of either. It is fire *and* water, rage *and* sorrow. It is *oddly* intense and almost impossible to read.

Tim pulled into his driveway, walked up to the front door, accessed a little happiness and said, "Honey, I'm home."

His wife rounded a corner and gave him a warm hug and he intentionally processed all of the affection it contained.

"I love you," he told her, and, even after all these years, his delivery was a little blunt.

But that didn't matter to her.

And that made Tim *very* happy. It had been a long time since he had seen any purple tornadoes.

But...they still showed up from time to time.