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A Path to Passion

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A Path to Passion

Terri Robson

Abstract

In the Autistic world in which many of us live, very little is discussed about entrepreneurship. This can be done if one finds an interest one is passionate about. With the help of professionals, friends and family, a business can be set up and run successfully. This article discusses my journey to this goal, the trials worked through and endured, as well as the success I have achieved. It is my hope from this telling of my story that others get the inspiration to create a dream and follow it.

Resumé

Dans le monde autiste dans lequel beaucoup d'entre nous vivent, on parle très peu de l'esprit d'entreprise. Il est pourtant possible de le faire si l'on trouve un intérêt qui nous passionne. Avec l'aide de professionnels, d'amis et de la famille, on peut créer une entreprise et la gérer avec succès. Cet article traite de mon parcours vers cet objectif, des épreuves traversées et endurées, ainsi que du succès que j'ai obtenu. J'espère qu'en racontant mon histoire, d'autres personnes trouveront l'inspiration pour créer un rêve et le réaliser.

Keywords

Passion, Entrepreneurship, Success, Strength

Mots Clés

Passion, Entrepreneuriat, Succès, Force

¹ Awkward Spirit: Looking Beyond the Mask, Canada

Being diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome (AS) was the start of a hard, wondrous journey in my life, though little did I know it at the time. Prior to the age of 33 I just knew I was different and somehow did not fit in. Jobs were hard to retain, but I had no clue as to why. Getting them was easy for me, keeping them on the other hand... Luckily, I loved to learn and so I worked hard in school: First my high school matriculation, second the Music Merchandising Diploma at Red Deer College. When I completed my diploma, I went to Ottawa for work. To this day I cannot tell you what the job was, let alone why I was let go.

When I returned from Ottawa, I was looking for another opportunity in the music industry. I couldn't find any positions I felt suited for, so I went in a different direction to another adventure. I went to work for a Harley Davidson Motorcycle Dealership. If I thought I didn't fit in before I definitely did not fit with this crowd. They are a society unto their own. The dealership also had another business; they sold jobber (not original) parts to Harley dealerships across Canada. Because of this I was given the opportunity to take the Partsperson Apprenticeship through Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) and Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT). This involved a number of work hours, somewhere between 1200 and 1600 per year, if I remember correctly. Each period of hours was followed by 6 weeks of school, for years 1 and 2, with year 3 requiring 8 weeks. Upon completion of the requisite number of hours and schooling, I wrote an apprenticeship exam. A minimum grade, which I cannot remember, was necessary in order to receive your Journeyman Parts Certificate. During the 3-year work and school time, you are referred to as an apprentice. I received my Journeyman's certificate in 1984. I continued to work at the dealership for another year or so.

For the next six years I worked a variety of jobs. I drove a delivery van, worked in the parts and accounting departments of an appliance repair company, and other forgotten jobs. I still had not decided what to do when I grew up. Throughout these years after high school, the many different jobs afforded me the opportunity to learn a variety of different skills that I have since been able to utilize, including learning what not to do. I must not have learned some things well enough however, as I apparently kept making some of the same mistakes. (Where was that filter when I needed it?)

I decided at this point in my life to become a teacher; someone suggested I'd be good at it. So off I went to university. I received my Education degree and began searching for a teaching job. Not an easy thing to get. 40 or 50 resumes, 6 interviews and finally a job. Yay. It turns out, not so much. I was a half-time teacher with more than a full-time load. It was ridiculous. Also, I spent more time in the principal's office as a teacher, than I did in 12 years as a student. Apparently, I had a lot to learn. Problems with students for which I had not been trained; a parent threatening me; another parent questioning my sexuality. I had no clue as to how to handle these situations, but I did the best I could. Anyway, I digress. At the end of the year my contract was not renewed; in a way I was relieved. I didn't think I was cut out for teaching. Thinking back on it, I realize I was never given the opportunity to show people, let alone myself, what a good teacher I can be.

I continued to move from job to job. I never seemed to find the right fit. I didn't fit in because I didn't dress as a "typical" woman. I spoke my mind too honestly, without beating around the bush or being nicey-nice. I was too outspoken about things that I knew would be beneficial to the company. And I thought I didn't like change.

I'd been doing a lot of accounting work at these various jobs, so I decided to work towards my designation as a professional accountant. I took courses at night while I continued to work. Aspies, as a rule, see things very black and white. Management accounting is all grey. I barely passed the class. There ended my dream of being an accountant. I continued working in accounting for another couple of years. I lost another job - it was brutal. My self esteem could not handle any more rejection, firing, being let go for whatever reason. I was done. 11 jobs in 9 years. Too much. Oftentimes, I did not receive a reason as to why I was let go. I was just sent packing. No opportunities to grow and learn from my mistakes. I wasn't told what my mistakes were. How does one fix a problem if they don't know what it is? Time to take a break from the stress of the job and all kinds of rejection. I didn't work for a number of years. I needed time to regroup and find my focus again.

After a couple of years or so I became involved in a program with a company that helps individuals with disabilities find employment. It was during this period I decided to strike out on my own. The idea came out of conversations with professional peers. I decided it was time to tell my story, much as I've done here. At this point in time little of society knew much about Asperger Syndrome; it had been in the DSM-IV about 12 years. My thought at the time (it still is): "awareness, understanding and acceptance". The more people who become aware of AS, the more understanding (with the help of lived experience sharing) and the more accepting people become. It was time to take another step in my journey. I would start a company and see where it goes.

When it came to setting up my company there were a few things I needed to do before I got up and rolling: think of a name for my company; research sole proprietorships and limited companies; research GST numbers and determine whether or not to get one; acquire start up funds; and decide on an accounting system/program. Some tough decisions but I worked it through with the help of some great friends.

When I set up my company, I chose to be a sole proprietor. This means I am the only person who owns the company; all liability is mine alone. I have no partners nor are others involved. It's always been just me. Sometimes a friend comes to my speaking engagements to help me control my anxiety, provide moral support, and give feedback. It's important I get critical feedback; it makes me a better speaker. Because of this I can connect with my audience better and help them understand Asperger Syndrome from an Aspie's point of view. Having Awkward Spirit become a limited company wasn't a sound business decision. I couldn't afford the cost of incorporation and with the intention of making a difference rather than a lot of money, I'd feel an obligation to partners/shareholders I didn't want to be burdened with. Generally, there are two or more partners, and people have shares in the company, which requires paying out dividends.

I decided to name the company Awkward Spirit: Looking Beyond the Mask. I often times feel like an awkward spirit when I'm around other people, so the name is very fitting. Looking Beyond the Mask has a double meaning for me. At its core, Asperger Syndrome is a social-communication disorder. Approximately 95% of communication in the world is non-verbal. People with AS and other communication disorders do not "get" non-verbals. To Aspies it's like other people are wearing masks and we can't see their expressions. The other half of this equation is we want the rest of society to look beyond our mask and see the person underneath.

I had an initial outlay of cash in order to start up: researching a trade name to ensure I

wasn't using another company's; purchasing cheques after I had set up a business bank account; purchasing accounting software and a few other office supplies as well. Oh, and then comes the added expense of business cards and brochures (luckily, I was able to do most of the writing, design work and layout myself). Then comes the website - not an inexpensive endeavour. I was fortunate enough to have a friend who writes code. She created my website (I did the writing), and after many tweaks it was done. When I had thoughts of starting a company, I had no idea how much was involved. I didn't do enough research beforehand; therefore, I learned on the fly. I didn't form my company to make a ton of money. I wanted to make a difference to as many people as possible in many different walks of life. As a result of my decision, some years I have barely broke even, and others I made money. One must remember; however, the government wants its share in the form of taxes. Too late I realized I had not been putting money away (about 30% is a good idea) and wham, I got a big tax bill come April. I was surprised, and not in a good way. It took me quite a while to pay the taxes because some of my presentations were free and others did not pay much. I was okay with that. I was and still am making a difference today. I did learn a valuable lesson: don't be so excited that you earned a lot of money and spend it all. It's not all yours.

Opening a business like mine is not for everyone; especially Aspies, many of whom (like myself) may have comorbid conditions that get in the way of day-to-day life; nevermind starting a business. I should mention my presentations are about growing up without a diagnosis (received that when I was 33 - just after the DSM-IV came out), behaviours and other things that are different for those of us with AS, and tips and tools to help people live easier on both sides of the equation. I figure I have the best job in the world; I get to talk about myself, and I get paid for it. Actually, I don't talk at all about myself. I speak about Asperger Syndrome, and I am the example. I can often hear teachers say things like: "doesn't that remind you of so and so?"

It's very easy for me to get caught up in the moment when I'm speaking. I'm so passionate about the subject I forget about things like money. Some of my presentations (especially Teacher's Conventions) pay reasonably good money. Some of my presentations I don't charge for. It's more important to me to get the message across and make a difference. I've included a list of organizations I've presented to, so you can see the diverse audiences I've shared my message with. If I make a difference to even one person, I've accomplished my goal. I aim for more than one, however.

Organizations I've Presented to:

Government of Alberta

- Alberta Works
- Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped
- Employment First 2014 Symposium (panel that was part of a webcast)
- Persons with Developmental Disabilities Program Branch

Teachers' Conventions (all at least twice)

- Central Alberta Teacher's Convention Association
- Central East Alberta Teacher's Convention Association
- Greater Edmonton Teacher's Convention Association

- Mighty Peace Teacher's Convention Association
- Northeast Teacher's Convention Association
- North Central Teacher's Convention Association
- Palliser District Teacher's Convention Association
- Southeastern Alberta Teacher's Convention Association
- Southwestern Alberta Teacher's Convention Association *United Nations International Day of Persons with Disabilities*
- Community Futures Lakeland
- St. Paul Abilities Network
- City of Fort Saskatchewan
- City of Red Deer

Educational Institutions

- Archbishop Jordan Catholic High School, Edmonton
- Austin O'Brien High School, Edmonton
- F G Miller Junior/Senior High School, Elk Point
- Living Waters Catholic Regional Division, No 42, Whitecourt
- Mother Mary Margaret School, Edmonton
- St. Alberta Protestant School District Educational Assistants, St. Albert (2x)
- Red Deer College Educational Assistant's Program
- Grant McEwan Community College Occupational Assistant's Program, Edmonton

Disability Organizations

- Autism Society of Edmonton Area, Edmonton
- Canadian Mental Health, Camrose
- CASA House, Sherwood Park
- Centra Cam Vocational Training Association, Camrose
- Children's Autism Services Edmonton (3x)
- EmployAbilities, Edmonton
- Robin Hood Association, Sherwood Park (4x)

Community Organizations

- Various Lions Conventions and Clubs in Canada and the USA
- Lit Fest - October 21, 2011. Western Canada's only literary festival. I sat on a panel with 2 authors with very differing views of Asperger's.
- The Hub on Ross Street, Red Deer
- Action Group, Learning Circle Program, Red Deer
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I look at the list (I think I may have forgotten 1 or 2) and I'm amazed at what I have done. Imagine the ripple effect after one presentation, let alone all the speaking I have done. Wow. Having my own company can be a lot of work but, in my mind, it is well worth it. COVID has really put a damper on live presentations which I enjoy the most. For me it is much harder to engage with my audience on a personal level while on the computer. I plan to continue with my company for a number of years yet. I want to foster an environment of understanding and acceptance to as wide an audience as possible.