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Hiding in Plain Sight

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Se cacher à la vue de tous

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Abstract

Receiving an autism diagnosis later in life led the author to contextualize a lifetime of struggles and accomplishments, sparking profound reflection on the meaning of success, happiness, and interpersonal relationships. These two stories share the author's lived experience with intimate detail. In the first story, the author shares his mental model that likens living with autism to 'hiding in plain sight', uncovering the intensive emotional toll it takes. In the second story, titled 'All the Best With Your Future Endeavours,' the author delves into the realm of work in our world, and the relentless pursuit of societal definitions of success. As the author grapples with his late diagnosis, the need to understand his past from a new lens becomes a journey towards self-discovery. What emerges from this is a moving account of a life molded by a desire to conform to societal roles, a norm shown through such mastery that it hides the true self. This narrative explores the challenges of understanding and embracing one's identity, particularly within a world that often fails to recognize and accept differences. Together, these narratives illuminate the struggle of navigating life with autism and the simultaneous joy that can come from discovering one's unique personal power.

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Resumé

La réception du diagnostic d'autisme à un âge avancé a amené l'auteur à contextualiser une vie de luttes et d'accomplissements qui ont allumé une profonde réflexion sur la signification du succès, du bonheur et des relations interpersonnelles. Ces deux histoires partagent l'expérience vécue par l'auteur avec des détails intimes. Dans la première histoire, l'auteur partage son modèle mental qui compare la vie avec l'autisme à « se cacher à la vue de tous », dévoilant le lourd tribut émotionnel que ça suppose. Dans la deuxième histoire, appelée « Tous mes vœux de réussite pour vos projets futurs », l'auteur se penche sur la question du travail dans notre monde et de la poursuite incessante des définitions sociales du succès. Alors que l'auteur se débat avec son diagnostic tardif, le besoin de comprendre son passé sous un nouvel angle devient un voyage vers la découverte de soi. Ce qui en émerge est un récit poignant d'une vie moulée par un désir de se conformer aux rôles sociaux, une norme montrée avec une telle maîtrise que ça cache le vrai soi. Ce narratif explore les défis de comprendre et d'embrasser son identité, particulièrement dans un monde qui manque souvent de reconnaître et d'accepter les différences. Ensemble, ces narratifs éclairent la lutte de naviguer dans la vie avec l'autisme, ainsi que la joie simultanée qui peut découler de la découverte de son pouvoir personnel unique.

Keywords

Autism, lived experience, late diagnosis

Mots-clés

Autisme, expérience vécue, diagnostic tardif

I was talking to my therapist today about my values. I recalled a scene from the movie *Ocean's 11*, where Matt Damon's character was playing a Liquor and Gaming agent. In the scene, he was told, by Brad Pitt's character, to be liked, but also forgotten as soon as he left. That is a role I have been playing my entire life. When I worked at the bank people told me I looked like a banker; average looking, a little overweight, quiet, and, as I looked the part, I even landed the gig of being Santa for the kid's photos.

I worked long hours, and everyone thought I was a nice guy. I was well-liked, existed safely in my space, was comfortable in my knowledge of how to act, and knew how to control things around me. I was always friendly but never revealed too much. My customers liked me; I was good at small talk and getting to know others, while only having to reveal what I wanted known about me. I could exist in this world without ever having to escape my safety net. I was playing a part.

On rare occasions, I would actually connect with a client or a co-worker, but all my energy would be spent playing my part, leaving me by the end of the day with nothing left emotionally. I was tired, both mentally and physically, but I thought I was doing what a good father, husband, friend, and employee was supposed to be doing. I was a people pleaser who believed that if I kept people happy, there would be no conflict, no stress, and I could make it through my days. This left nothing for those who were expecting me to be more connected.

I don't recall ever fighting with any of my friends or co-workers, yet at home, the fighting and the stress never stopped. I didn't understand it, I was doing what I was supposed to be doing. I was providing financially, kept a safe home, put food on the table, and never missed a soccer practice, dance recital, birthday, or Christmas. Ever. We looked happy, but there was no real happiness.

I have learned how to act in most situations in my life by being quiet, observing, agreeing, and blending in. I got so good at it that I no longer even know who I am and what my values,

dreams or desires really are. I spent so much time trying to fit into a role that I never really discovered who I was as a person. This explained a lot of decisions that I had made in my life, and I felt I knew myself better and understood why I had made those decisions.

The only role I never really learned was how to be in an intimate relationship because I never saw how that was done. I want that, I want to feel, I want to have that. Most days I get through by knowing what to say and what not to say, the only time I don't is when I get overwhelmed with emotion or get into a situation that I haven't incurred before. My mind feels cloudy, and I figure out a way to escape as soon as I can. I used my body to hide, carrying a little extra weight, wearing clothes that weren't too "loud", and so on. Some of my friends refer to me as "beige," and tell me I need to add some colour. I am working towards becoming me, whoever that may be.

My diagnosis helped me understand a lot of things and take action in my own life. Looking back now makes sense to me why any real relationships I had were unsuccessful. I had no clue what I was doing. I still don't, but I want to. I want to have that meaning and that feeling in my life. I am tired of hiding and blending in. I want to be me, but I am not sure who that is. Mental illness hasn't always been socially accepted and is still not understood. To this day, I tell people I am on the autism spectrum, but they have no idea really what that means. I get told I look "normal"; and "I never would have guessed", I think to myself that's because I have spent my entire life learning how to hide in plain sight. I want to come out of the shadows and into the light which scares me because it's not something I have ever done.

I am still trying to figure out what "autistic" is or isn't, but it is who I am, not a role I am playing. This is my life and I want it to be mine, not some other version of what others or society thinks it should be.

I don't want to be labeled and stuck in a box anymore, but I also don't want to bust out of it completely. I want to learn to be me, it is something I struggle with every day, and the toughest part is trying to do it in a world that doesn't understand and always accepts something or someone that is different, that's why I will continue to hide until I figure it out. I hope I can stop hiding soon.

The best example of what I go through daily and what it cost me is the experience I had when I got a new job in Calgary and my family, and I decided to move. The whole experience ending up costing me my family and my career.

All The Best With Your Future Endeavours

We were living in Regina - more like existing. My wife and I had talked about moving back to Calgary, we thought it would be better, and more exciting to be there. I took this and ran with it because I really wanted to get back there. I worked for one of Canada's big banks. At work, you could put your name on a list for job opportunities and job locations, I set mine for Calgary as a Senior Financial Advisor. That's the job I had always wanted and had been working toward all my life. The very day I hit send on my application, I got a call from a Senior Manager in Calgary. She said she wanted me in Calgary as soon as possible. Without hesitation, I accepted it because this is what we wanted as a family. At least we thought it was what we wanted as a family. It was easy. I was going to stay with my friend in Calgary while we waited for our house to sell – it shouldn't take more than a couple of months, right? I went home to tell my wife and didn't think anything of what us living apart from one another was going to do to us. She went along with it and said supportive things. "How long would it be?" she asked, I told her "only a couple of short months." Boy, was I ever wrong. It took sixteen months for our house to sell and for us to be reunited. I didn't really notice anything as time went on. My visits home were less frequent as work was busy. I was doing well, making good money, and taking care of what I was supposed to. I was providing for my family.

I didn't know what this was really costing me. I was going to hockey games, going out, and doing things, I thought I was parenting. I thought I was being a good husband. But in reality, I was absent from the life I had created. But, in hindsight, was it really the life I wanted or was happy in?

As the months went by, the stress increased and took an emotional toll on my wife and daughter. They were saying all the right things but they felt I wasn't there for them which I didn't understand. I was working. What did they want me to do? Sit in Calgary and not do anything? When I was home at Christmas I bought A LOT of presents for my daughter. I got her everything on her Christmas list. I thought that was what Christmas was about. I wasn't there to put up the tree. I was so exhausted from work and writing my qualification exams that I slept the first three days of my two-week Christmas vacation.

This is how life went for sixteen months. Me working hard but growing further apart from my family. I was unaware as I was caught up in doing what I believed I was supposed to do, what I mirrored back when I looked at others. Work hard. Become successful. Make enough money so I could take care of my family. After sixteen long months, the house in Regina had finally sold. We found a house in Airdrie and were reunited. But things weren't the same for any of us. The move had created a chasm between us. We were very different. They had learned to live without me and I had learned to live without them - I had redefined success by success at work.

Four months after my family arrived, and four days before my birthday, I was brought into a meeting with corporate security. I have replayed and retold this foundational event in my life many times. Steve, from corporate security, questioned me about reimbursing service fees to my clients. He mentioned sums of money and different client situations. I answered easily and honestly. I had nothing to hide. I was working within the parameters of my job and my boss had signed off on all the reports and transactions that I had submitted so I didn't think anything was wrong.

The last question he asked me was, in my opinion, what was more important, the bank's needs or my customer's needs? I naturally answered my customers' needs because without my customers we don't have a business. It was the truthful answer. It was easy to answer. Without question or hesitation, it was the right answer.

Those were the last words I said as an employee of the bank. Less than an hour later my manager, Sherry, the same manager who had recruited me to the branch; the same manager for whom I had been a top performer, handed me a letter stating that we were parting ways. She thanked me for my service and said "all the best with your future endeavours."

"All the best with your future endeavours."

"All the best with your future endeavours?????" Just like that? Without emotion? Without any connection?

The assistant branch manager, Pat, was in tears because I think she knew this was wrong and she saw the look on my face and saw my heart breaking. I wasn't upset for me but all I thought of was my daughter. How would this impact her? I decided to move back to Calgary for this job and now it was gone.

As I was escorted out of the building after collecting my things, my phone started to buzz and ring non-stop. I had twenty-one text messages asking what was going on. I sat in my car in disbelief; crying; in a daze; wondering how this happened. I hadn't done anything wrong. I was a top-ranked Senior Financial Advisor in Alberta, I did what was right for my clients and the bank, I worked long hours, I put together charity events, and I had the top sales and customer reviews. It took me over an hour to leave as I couldn't compose myself. I had to go home and had to tell my family what had happened without really understanding why. They cried and were upset but they saw what this meant to me and hugged me and said we would make it through. I could see on

their face how they hurt, but they also had words and actions that I could never feel or express.

I went for a walk that night around my neighbourhood and looked at all the houses and stopped in front of mine. All the houses looked the same. My house and my life looked like it should. Nice house. Family. Two cars in the garage. But I didn't feel happy. Is this what I was working for? All this stuff? My family wasn't happy. We were struggling. But no one could ever tell because I put on a happy face every day. I told everyone how great things were and that we were working hard to pull through. Everyone showed concern and empathy over how we had been separated and the stress of being apart and trying to sell a home.

Behind closed doors, my wife would often ask me if I was being a jerk or if there was something wrong with me. She and my daughter wanted "work" [redacted], not the [redacted] I was when I got home. I didn't get her point, I was working hard and providing the things that were expected of a husband and a father, I never missed dance recitals, soccer games, parent-teacher interviews, etc. I did my work around the house. When we broke up, my wife told me that they knew I loved them but I wasn't emotionally present. There would be times when she or my daughter would be upset and crying and I would be sitting there anxiously waiting for her to finish what she was saying so I could solve the problem. I didn't cry or get upset. I didn't realize that anything was wrong. When my wife suggested there was in fact something wrong I didn't believe her. Everyone else thought I was a nice guy and was doing everything I could.

I was diagnosed in October 2017. It was right before we split up. I was 45-years-old. My autism diagnosis made a lot of my behaviours and emotional disconnection make sense. When I started therapy it took me 6 months to stop saying I needed to be fixed. Through my sessions, I realized that what was happening was normal for someone with ASD. When I'm highly anxious or stressed I act as though everything is OK. I pretend everything is OK. I'd laugh at jokes I didn't understand. This behaviour is known as masking. I masked to get through my day, always saying yes to things and never wanting to cause any conflict. But that behaviour led to longer days and autistic burnout. By the time I got home to my family, I had nothing left, I was emotionally and mentally drained so I just went through the motions when I got home, I was physically present but had no emotional energy or support.

I thought I was providing enough but I wasn't. When I was working in Calgary and my wife and daughter were living in Regina, it was easy for me. I could hyper-focus on work all day, have a short call with them, and then have time to decompress alone. When they finally moved out here, I found myself needing more time alone and eventually, the space between us was too much. We were just going through the motions. When we split I didn't cry and wasn't angry. It felt inevitable and with my diagnosis, it made sense to me. Looking back, I so badly wish I'd been diagnosed earlier in life. I was so hyper-focused on what I thought I should be doing, I missed out on what was truly meaningful - knowing myself and my family. After all that time and effort I put into my career, mirroring what I thought I was supposed to do, it was gone in a flash. The ramifications of my autistic actions still follow me to this day.

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