FLOURISHING AS A NEURODIVERGENT ADULT

THE AUTISTIC'S GUIDE TO SELF-DISCOVERY

SOL SMITH

"Finally, an expert who truly gets the experience of navigating life as a neurodivergent adult in a neurotypical world!"
— SHAWN C. HORN, PsyD, author of *The Adult ADHD Guide to Social Success*

Chapter One

When the Person Who Stole Your Identity Is You

In my early twenties, I was reasonably sure I had it all together. I thought I had learned what I needed and was on my way to some kind of American Dream–like success. I had a couple of degrees, I started a job as a professor, and, against all odds, I had a wife. This was the moment I had been waiting for. It was time for the curtain to drop, "They lived happily ever after!" to appear, and success to sweep me up like a current into the future, with me eventually winking out as a stellar example.

That curtain never came. The end credits should have run, but the days kept on happening, my alarm kept going off, and new challenges kept popping up. Furthermore, I had a sense that this "I finally did all the things, give me my American Dream award" moment wasn't the final, dramatic crescendo of an orchestrated symphony. I knew this because I was a fake.

Yes, I faked the whole damn thing. Oh, the wife was real,* but everything else in the equation was a form of fraud I had managed to pass off to the world. Two degrees, a job teaching writing, and yet I knew I shouldn't have even passed high school.

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* A fact that never ceases to amaze. No matter how many times I pinch her, she doesn't wake up.

I had navigated the system, but I did so without becoming integrated into it in any logical or organic way. I did my work, passed my classes, and caught some praise and some criticism here and there, but none of it felt like it was about me. It never felt like anyone *knew* me. I was to learn, however, that no one *did* know me. I was *actually* different, or atypical, at least, and all anyone saw was my playacting. Was I supposed to playact through my entire life?

An articulation of my situation came to me once. A dean at a job interview, who seemed to severely dislike me, once said — to my face, mind you — "You seem egotistical. Do you think you're better than everyone else?" This was a drastic misreading of my confidence, but I saw what she was saying. I had been arguing that my idea about the education grading system was better than the collective thoughts and actions of human history regarding the subject. It wasn't a rant I had intended on delivering, but it happened. Her conclusion, though, seemed like a lazy one to reach regarding my attitude. She had direly missed the point, and I couldn't stand the thought that she would walk away thinking I felt "better" than anyone — I just didn't feel like I compared to anyone in any relevant way when it came to my interactions with the world. It wasn't about "better" or "worse"; it was more like I was serving a different, though oddly parallel, purpose.

"No, you missed it there," I said. "I don't think I'm better than anyone. I'm singular, apart. Let's say that there *is* some kind of 'better' that people are trying to be. Different people would be aiming for different versions of this, kind of like cars. This car is the fastest, that one is the most luxurious, and yet another has largest towing capacity. All these cars could be fighting over which quality is the one that makes them better, and you could use those inputs to decide which car you want. But me? I'm not doing that at all. I'm *not* a car. I'm a *boat*."

The woman's resulting eye roll was impressive, but it didn't hurt me because my own articulation had put into words the

feelings I'd had about myself for some time. I didn't dislike myself at all, but I also knew I wasn't getting this job from the start. I was happy with who I was, thrilled with the ways I thought and acted, but for whatever reason it always set me apart. Every day I had to smother parts of myself to fake my way through the world. I was used to people wanting cars — fast ones, fancy ones, big ones — but I was a boat, and a damn good boat.

Here's what I knew: I was articulate, intelligent, and crafty. But I also never studied, never followed directions, and never prepared for any essay or presentation. I earned a Master of Fine Arts by turning in a book I had written in a couple of weeks, years before grad school had even started, and I knew absolutely nothing about teaching in an organized, professional context. In fact, it all occurred to me in one flash of realization on my first day as a college professor. I remember that someone had told me to write out a "lesson plan," which I didn't do. I had no idea what one would look like or what function it would perform. I was standing in front of a class, leaning against the blackboard, and going on about how writing is, fundamentally, both good and easy, and you shouldn't have to go to school to learn it. I felt like there was a chance I was being inspiring, but the blank stares I received from these students — every one of them about my own age — clued me in that my ramble was going in weird directions.

I had my hands behind my back, and I was fidgeting with the little chalk shelf that sits below the blackboard. While talking, I was wondering, "Does this metallic structure that's so ubiquitous and familiar to entire generations even have a name beyond 'chalk shelf' "? One finger brushed up against an actual piece of chalk, and it sent a blood-chilling shiver through my entire body. I couldn't touch chalk. Like, I was averse to the idea physically and mentally. I couldn't touch cotton balls either — the kind found at the tops of aspirin bottles — but touching cotton balls isn't a daily part of a professor's job! How was I going to

teach if I couldn't use the chalkboard? But wait, if I *could* use the chalkboard, how would I even teach? What would I write up there that would make the students nod and scribble in their notebooks? How the hell was I supposed to know? I had faked my way through college twice!

Another interesting thing I've always known about myself is that I don't get embarrassed. I understand what people mean when they talk about being embarrassed, and I can academically reason the conditions that would normally constitute embarrassment. But the final piece of the puzzle, the feeling itself, would never fall into place. That dream where you go to school naked? I would absolutely recognize it was awkward and dramatically out of line, but I can't say that I would be *embarrassed* in any relatable sense of the word. I became keenly aware of my little superpower during that first class because I sensed in vivid detail the growing conditions for embarrassment. I could hear what I was saying, something about distinguishing a wise person from a fool, which I had clearly recycled from the first day of a World Religions course in my freshman year of college. It had been a great, inspiring lecture, but it was only applicable in the World Religions class and made absolutely no sense in a developmental writing course.

As I continued with someone else's slightly altered words (remembered nearly verbatim from years earlier), I could see the conditions of embarrassment rising like an archway around me. However, I had an awareness that the key element of the emotional reaction would never materialize, and the instant this course ended, it would all dissipate. I kept talking, going on and on about the purpose of education (substituted here for religion) as students were likely looking for some kind of concrete expectation I might have been explaining, or something that sounded like it would be on a test. Never making eye contact, often scanning over their eyebrows, I talked until the minute hand of the clock on the wall had moved enough to justify an early dismissal.

And when the students left, I felt the walls of embarrassment disassemble. Relief washed over me, and my amygdala released its grip.

I left that class, got back to my campus housing where my fiancée was playing *Animal Crossing*, and said to her, "I can't do that again. I cannot teach another class. I have no idea what I'm doing, and they all know it."

Twenty years later, I feel like I've faked an entire career. In fact, I've faked two new degrees — a terminal degree in education and a master's in psychology. I was certain that if I really paid attention, did my work, and minded my business, these degrees would teach me how to "adult," putting an end to my lifelong habit of deception. However, when push came to shove, I was able to complete all the work without paying attention, get the papers finished without completing the readings, and squeeze by my statistics courses and dissertation committees by just *acting* like these were things I could do. It was more of the same — being rewarded for what felt like the wrong things. Hiding in plain sight, I pressed on. I didn't have a choice because our family grew, our debt grew, and our responsibilities grew.

Still an Impostor

I thought this severe impostor syndrome, which started in grade school, would let go of me at some point. It just didn't. Now in my forties, often I look around a room of adults and wonder how many others are faking it. If so, who are we playacting for? Who would be offended if we didn't wear the right clothes? Which person sees themselves as an actual grown-up, would judge our handshake, comment sincerely on a wine, and expect a sense of achievement and pride to blossom within them for proving their adulthood? Who is motivated by power, believes that money is real, and insists the social structure is a meritocracy that

sprouted from the ground when George Washington chopped down a cherry tree to ratify the New Deal at Gettysburg, accompanied by his Rough Riders? Which people are we trying to fit in *for*? In any given room, it could be everyone but me, or it could be no one.

I'm saying this with more awe than cynicism. A game began so long ago that we forgot it was a game at all. We can only see the game and its rules. We can't see the room where we are playing, nor can we stop playing. Everyone is born into it. We spend the first few years learning the rules, and we know that to win the game, we must become an amorphous, perfect person. If we just follow the right steps, read the right things, and behave in the right ways, we're certain to become this person. We've built pipelines and institutions to encourage this, complete with premade goals, graded feedback, moral guidance, an armory of cosmetic solutions, and anything else you can imagine. We are all in, dead set on this belief that we can and will become the perfect person. Even though no one has done this before. Ever. It has never happened.

Well, I sucked at this game. Everyone else seemed to have the rules hardwired, while I faked every step.

At forty-two, I discovered more about who I am, thanks to the global pandemic. Many in my generation learned new things about themselves, as we stepped away from the panopticon of society and stayed home for weeks or months. Not everyone got to shelter in place, and not everyone survived long enough to gain much insight about themselves — but for me and tens of thousands of others like me, a huge shock came when people started *literally* protesting because they wanted to "go back to normal."

Normal? I thought we all hated that! Why in the world wouldn't we take this opportunity to change everything about how we were living? Why wouldn't we build an entirely new system that wasn't normal at all? We didn't need offices and middle

managers and five-day workweeks and team building and all of that anymore. These were relics of an era when you could afford a home on one income and take vacations. I was getting emails from coworkers that said — unironically — "I can't wait to get back in the meeting room together and see everyone's smiling faces!" I made a sincere attempt to imagine what would prompt me to think such a phrase and commit to it long enough to tap it out on a keyboard. No joke. I really tried to put myself in a lonely, dark house without a family and consider what it would be like to want to see everyone's faces. I couldn't get there.

This striking difference was another in that long line of distinctions between me and the world, and I wanted to keep exploring it. It was during the pandemic that I started a podcast (because it was that or sourdough). My podcast was possibly the nerdiest one, as it was entirely about thinking and learning. I'd always been fascinated with my thought process and how it differed from those around me. I noticed as a kid that when we took multiple-choice tests, other students wrestled with the answers, while I wrestled with the questions. I have read very few test questions in my life that have enough information in them to be answered securely.

One that comes to mind is this: "If a baker can bake forty cakes in sixty minutes, how long does it take the baker to bake eighty cakes?" My answer would be sixty minutes, but my classmates would come up with something different — 120 minutes — and they would *all* agree. So I would have to argue. The question doesn't say how big the oven is. I'm assuming he's a large-scale baker, our friend, and he has an oven with something like a two-hundred-cake capacity. And really, *that* doesn't even matter. The question asks how long it takes him to "bake" them, which to me means the cooking part. This could imply that he has an Easy-Bake Oven and bakes them one at a time, each one taking sixty minutes. So he can bake eighty cakes or a million cakes in sixty minutes…each. It's not specific. And what counts

as a cake? Is a cupcake a cake? Does a cake need a certain number of layers before it's a cake? Does he have economic or environmental limitations? My teacher and classmates would argue that forty cakes were clearly the maximum he could do in sixty minutes, and I had absolutely no clue where they got that idea. Who put this ridiculous limitation on the situation? This scenario is already off the chain — some rogue baker going absolutely haywire on the cake population — so why would they think he had reached his limit? The question doesn't say he did. And if he *were* maxed out, would he really be up for making the same amount again the following hour? Does the kind of cakefoolery change his efficiency over time, or does it make him stronger? And *why the hell* is the baker a *boy* anyway? The question doesn't assume the gender, and here we've been using male pronouns this entire time.

My podcast was about my system of thinking, which was not to assume the rules of the game are solid but to deconstruct the game so you can find yourself within it. I wanted to lead people, step-by-step, from the thinking I saw all around me to the type of thinking I did. Despite the fact that the world didn't cater to its style, I saw advantages in my thinking. I felt that if more people adopted the ways I thought, we could deconstruct the systems that make us feel so terrible about ourselves and instead focus on what was important. Thinking this way had freed me from a lot of constraints, helped me to learn ferociously without concern for institutional reward, and just plain made me happy. Everything I had done in school was a sort of smoke screen. I performed a few tricks to satisfy my teachers and keep the system from correcting me, but in the meantime, I invested fully in myself. I felt like I discovered so much more than what was set out in the curriculum. Rather than spreading myself thin, like the courses seemed to demand, I dove deep into the small parts I found interesting.

I put everything I had into the final episode of the podcast's first season and made a stunning realization: I was teaching

people how to think like an autistic. My therapist said, "Well, I thought about asking if you thought you were autistic, but I didn't want to offend you." My doctor said, "I don't know, you make pretty good eye contact." I laughed at her because I have a long list of eye contact work-arounds. After much insistence, I finally got my diagnosis.

I found out that I'm dyslexic, autistic, and ADHD. Yes, these are words, mere tokens of meaning, and those meanings are both broader yet more specific than most suspect. I realized I've spent my life hiding who I am to fit in better. Defying the stereotype, I developed a gregarious social persona so that people would feel comfortable around me. At work, I adopted a calm, composed front by maintaining a straight face, appearing to look colleagues in the eyes, and feigning interest when others discuss either profoundly boring stuff or interesting stuff that they are all wrong about. I've learned to only express my opinion when I absolutely have to, and even then, it comes out so direct, frustrated, and self-righteous that I'll have to apologize for it within a week or so.

At the time, I was studying psychology and fairly obsessed with autism. I doubled down on this special interest and found there was so much more to it than was being discussed. The range of what people understand and misunderstand about autism is shocking. Myths about autism are strikingly persistent, which is troubling to me because the actual research is published and available. You can just read it to know more. But a doctor will still look at you and say, "Well, you make good eye contact, so you can't be autistic," thereby striking down the possibility of a diagnosis and robbing someone of the chance of self-discovery, which is downright troubling. Maybe the most surprising thing is that the proficiency of so many autism experts *ends* at diagnosis. Once that diagnosis is made, especially for adults, the expert's job is over, and they have no idea how to guide you in handling that information.

Mission Statement

I decided this was where my job would start. I have always been aware and in tune with my experiences and differences, and now I had a new vocabulary for them. Many people — disproportionately white males — are identified as autistic when they are in grade school, usually because they're in need of some extra help to get through the day. Those of us who aren't identified early are often missed because *we saw how other kids responded to those who were identified*, and we worked to camouflage ourselves so that we wouldn't be so terribly mistreated. We did our best to fit in, be typical, or control the narrative, and kept this ruse up for years and then decades, usually developing some really unhealthy coping skills to deal with the resulting anxiety. Expectations were always high, and we worked harder and harder to meet them, exhausting ourselves and deteriorating our quality of life.

Now that we're adults, and partially thanks to the pandemic, we can't hide any longer. We need to make some big changes if we're going to reclaim our identities and live the rest of our lives more happily. I've been digging through the research and working with autistic adults all around the world from many walks of life. I want to set the record straight about what autism is, what it isn't, and how you can have a better, more fulfilling life.

Making changes, taking some control, and releasing the metastasized shame and anxiety isn't easy. And it's not even expected of you. The normal pipeline for an adult autistic is being overwhelmed, tired, then reaching burnout, depression, and guilt. But change is possible. These are systemic problems that we encounter, and the solutions we bring are going to be individual. Autistic people are wildly diverse, and what strengths you have won't look like someone else's.

If promises of happiness and fulfillment sound like sunshine

and rainbows, don't think about what you might gain; instead, consider what you have to lose: shame, anxiety, self-hate, alienation, loneliness, that ever-present feeling of being an impostor in your own skin. Getting rid of all that will open a few doors, don't you think?