Ass Burgers

By C. Randall Nicholson

“If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing [sic] would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern.” – William Blake

Now that I’m the most respectable Mormon boy you could ever hope to meet, you might find it difficult to imagine the moody, stubborn, smart-mouthed child that caused my parents untold grief. I didn’t think of myself as “different” at first, but an awareness of that fact began to surface as my parents tried to do something about it. I cycled through various antidepressants as they attempted to find something that worked well and didn’t upset my stomach. Even when they met those criteria, I hated taking pills as a matter of principle. They made me feel broken and dependent. I also cycled through various therapists and the like as they tried to pinpoint what else was wrong with me. I wondered too. I knew the symptoms, but I needed the name.

I don’t think there was, or is, just one confounding factor behind all of it, but there were patterns that I can recognize all these years later. I got annoyed at certain figures of speech, like “Can I see that?” to mean “Can I hold that?” My reaction would be something like, “Of course you can see it. It’s right here. Don’t you have eyes?” I was similarly annoyed at a couple of phrases that I heard on at least a weekly basis. Cut what out of where? Knock what off of what? Other times, I was sincerely oblivious. Once I thought that my mother’s cooking smelled awful, and let her know. My father told me not to say that because it was rude. I didn’t think it was rude because it was just the truth, but I figured out what I thought was a good solution; I would simply hold my nose, so that I wouldn’t have to smell it and I wouldn’t be saying anything rude either. I was perplexed and more than a little angry when I got hauled upstairs for a spanking.

This cluelessness extended outside the home as well. In kindergarten I was blessed with only one bully to deal with on the school bus, but by the next year virtually everyone on said bus hated me and acted accordingly. Now I realize it was because I was obnoxious, but that thought never entered my mind at the time. Maybe I subconsciously figured it out because I adapted by becoming an introvert, and eventually it tapered off, though this also had to do with the older people moving on to high school year after year. By the time I moved on to high school myself and saw most of them again, I was thoroughly introverted and there were no more problems in that regard. Spoiler alert: I’m Facebook friends with most of them now, so it’s all good.

I dealt with some flak in the classroom as well, but a lot of this was owing to an obsession with Star Wars. Apparently it’s now cool to like Star Wars, but in that time and place everyone else was obsessed with The Lord of the Rings instead, and they weren’t willing to agree to disagree. One day at lunch as someone was mocking Star Wars, he said, “Ooh, a sword made of light, that’s going to do a lot of damage.” I gestured up at one of the ceiling and said, “I could kill you with that light fixture.” Everyone started freaking out, claiming that I had “threatened” him. I thought they were being ridiculous. I hadn’t said that I was *going* to kill him with it. I hadn’t even said that I *wanted* to. But I explained the incident to my parents and they said “Yeah, that’s a threat.” The more you know...

So by now I was quite aware that I was unusual and that people therefore didn’t like me, but how could I explain it? How could I describe it? Was I just fated to be “weird”? I have no idea when it was that my pediatrician, Dr. Iqbal – one of the five or six non-white people I ever saw in upstate New York, whose job description didn’t even include trying to figure out what was wrong with me mentally – put all my therapists to shame. I have no idea why he brought it up or what it had to do with anything, but I remember him offhandedly remarking, “He seems to have ass burgers.” Of course I immediately thought in response, *I beg your pardon? Uncalled for.*

I didn’t ask for a clarification out loud at that time, because I hardly ever spoke, but I remembered that moment when I saw the word in print some time later and realized it was “Asperger’s.” Something clicked. I went to Google, the source of all knowledge, and set to work diagnosing myself. There is, of course, a danger in diagnosing yourself on the internet. You can set out to diagnose a pimple and leave convinced that you have cancer. But this was nothing like that. I read through a list of the symptoms and found that virtually all of them described me perfectly, I felt an immense sense of enlightenment. *Problems with social skills… eccentric or repetitive behaviors… unusual preoccupations or rituals… communication difficulties… limited range of interests…* This was me, plain and simple. I had a pervasive development disorder similar to autism. And it seemed so obvious now that I have no idea why it apparently didn’t occur to any of my therapists. Maybe it did and they just never bothered to tell me, or maybe this disorder still wasn’t known enough in the early 2000s. It was investigated and diagnosed by Hans Asperger in 1944, but nobody paid much attention during his lifetime and it wasn’t added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders until fifty years later.

With this enlightenment came a great sense of comfort and relief. It wasn’t even so much knowing that there were others like me – I’d never been particularly concerned about that, and maybe this makes me a bad person, but I don’t even particularly enjoy the company of others like me – but it was great to have a label out there to attach to the greater portion of what was wrong with me. I wasn’t merely “weird” with no rhyme or reason. I didn’t like what the label actually was, or to be specific, how it was pronounced, but it was better than nothing. I took to thinking of myself as an “Aspie” and wearing that term as a secret badge of pride. People say not to self-identify by your flaws, but I reasoned that this one is essentially the basis of my personality.

High school presented a mild improvement because I was armed with this new self-awareness and had realized that as long as I minded my own business people would tolerate me and occasionally be nice. For several years, I had nervous tics whenever I got too involved in my daydreams, e.g. moving my hands along with the motion of an imagined space cruiser, and these daydreams usually occurred in school because school was boring. So it was that I received the nickname “Twitch,” after the guy from the movie “Holes” (and the book too, but the movie was what most of my classmates would have been familiar with) who twitched whenever he saw a nice car that he wanted to steal. I grew out of this behavior by fifth grade or so, but in seventh grade Ashia would say “Twitch!” and I would say “What?” and she would say “Twitch!” and I would go into a little series of spasms for her amusement. I didn’t mind it. At least she was being nice, sort of.

I sort of gravitated toward a certain group of friends over the years, not because I fit in with them or had anything in common with them but because I shared most classes with them and sat at their lunch table. They consisted of some guys who talked about little more than sex, sports, and video games (not necessarily in that order) and a couple of girls who mostly just listened and occasionally smiled as if to say “You guys are idiots.” Males bond by picking on each other, and I gave them plenty of fodder to do so. Occasionally it got to be a bit much but for the most part I didn’t mind it because this time there was no malice in their words, and they came through for me when I really needed it. The same thing took place at church, but since that was a closer-knit group – like a bunch of siblings really – we flat out insulted each other, the girls also participated and I dished it out as easily as I took it. (There was one kid at church even weirder than me whom people actually didn’t like, and they were legitimately unkind to him. I wasn’t unkind to him and I felt bad for him but I never stood up for him because I didn’t want to jeopardize my own social standing, which always felt precarious. I regret that a lot now.)

It therefore took some trial and error to figure out what was acceptable and what crossed the line. For a while at school, people found it humorous to encourage me to use pickup lines on girls, since it was out of character for me and they were all out of my league. One day during study hall I said to Danielle, “Did it hurt?” She asked, “What?” I said, “When you fell from heaven.” She took that in stride, rubbed her forehead and said “Yeah, actually I got a bruise right here.” I, seeing a golden opportunity, was unable to resist adding, “You messed up your face, too.” The classroom erupted in laughter, the story spread and made me the most popular person at school for a few days, and she was really hurt. She was actually quite attractive, so I had assumed she would know I was joking and not be bothered by it. I felt really bad but I also really enjoyed the popularity. I wrestled with my conscience, wondering whether I would have said it again if I had the opportunity to go back in time.

The only time things really got out of hand at the lunch table was when they started a running joke that I had a foot fetish. Derek had thought it would be amusing to offer me five dollars to lick the bottom of Kayla’s foot, and I had feigned enthusiasm just to be silly or whatever, and everyone raised their eyebrows and wouldn’t let me hear the end of it. I thought that if I just stayed quiet they would lose interest and forget about it, but week after week that didn’t work. So I tried playing along with it instead. Big mistake. That only renewed their enthusiasm and increased their ammunition. I don’t even remember how it ended, but I guess they found something else to hold their attention. I should have told them about my real fetish.

They didn’t know about my Asperger’s. I almost never mentioned it to anybody during my high school career, because even though the term privately brought comfort, it seemed like an embarrassing thing to have on public display. My friends instead assumed that I was weird because I was Mormon. I was the only active, strictly obedient (I had cleaned up my act by this point, but that’s another story) Mormon they knew, and I was weird, so their logical conclusion was that the one led to the other. They thought I was sexually repressed (I don’t even like sex, but that’s another story) and not allowed to do anything fun. I wanted to explain that being Mormon was actually helping me and that I actually enjoyed it, but I was afraid of being teased for that too, so I didn’t say anything. So I guess my weirdness has dissuaded them from ever wanting to convert.

One of these friends, Danny, said the “ass burgers” thing one day as a joke. I could have chewed him out for his insensitivity, if not for the fact that I found it funny. But the opportunity seemed right to finally mention that I had Asperger’s myself. “Oh,” he said, and felt really bad for giving me a hard time. I realized I should have brought this up a long time ago so that people would understand I had a legitimate, medically corroborated excuse for being weird. I’m not sure if he forgot about that, since he continued giving me a hard time, but it didn’t matter since he was a true friend. As we prepared for graduation he assured me that as soon as I moved out to Utah I would fit in wonderfully and find a nice Mormon girl. He was so happy for me that I didn’t have the heart to tell him most Mormon girls are just normal people. I really appreciated the sentiment, though.

In 2013, after being there for less than two decades, Asperger’s syndrome was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. I’m not sure what that entails, since it still has a WebMD entry and a Wikipedia article, but it seems that the people who really matter no longer consider it a thing. I don’t remember exactly when or where I found out, but I was very annoyed to have this piece of my identity torn away by a bunch of scientists or doctors or whoever was responsible for making those decisions. They didn’t know me, they weren’t invested in me, they didn’t care that their playing God with words was a disruption to my peace of mind. The worst part was that they had replaced this diagnosis with generic “autism spectrum disorder.” Even though I wasn’t crazy about the word “Asperger’s” it was much better than being “autistic,” a term that had way too much stigma attached for my liking. I insisted to myself that I was not and never would be autistic no matter what anyone said.

I held this opinion for a couple years until one day when I was rolling my eyes at people on the internet who wanted Pluto to be reinstated as a planet for emotional rather than scientific reasons, and I suddenly realized that I was a hypocrite. Rather than grant the legitimacy of their position I abandoned my own, deciding that the people who had made this decision presumably had good reasons for doing so and I would just have to live with it. Since then I’ve actually come to find that being autistic isn’t so bad. It gives me a better vantage point from which to hate anti-vaxxers, for example, and despite the stigma it does sound more professional and standardized than some Austrian guy’s name with an unfortunate pronunciation. I’ve embraced it with all the zeal I had for the old term and proactively tell people about it so they know why I’m weird. I still use “Aspie” when I need a noun, though, since “autist” has never really caught on.

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