

## Aspergers, Inside Looking Out

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### Opinion

Standing in line for the bathroom, I recited the ABCs. My mother was shocked because she'd never heard anything come from my three-year-old mouth other than the curse words I had learned from my father. I was as surprised as she was. The letters flowed off my tongue like water from a spigot. With three older siblings, I must have heard them recite the alphabet. I never thought of letters before because my mind was always focused on playing outdoors. I would walk up our old dirt road to the Armory about an eighth of a mile away and ask Skippy for a nickel to buy a Coke. In shock he asked, "Where's your mother, boy?" My mom wasn't a watchful person and I was an out of control child who couldn't sit still for more than five seconds. Mom said only God could watch over me and I believed her.

I liked to climb high places. At five I fell from the pigeon loft and broke my arm. That damaged my mind to a greater degree. I was strapped to a hospital bed for a long time. They saved my arm but the thinking child's mind flew off to faraway places. Later in school I was a daydreamer they said and I believed them.

There were eight children in my family and all the others earned high scores in school. That's one of the things that confused my teachers. Why wasn't I as smart as my siblings? Somehow the things my teachers tried to teach me went in my head, rattled around in there for days, months, sometimes even years and then spewed out at an unwanted time. I was always surprised, but the teachers thought I was toying with them. They moved my desk to the principal's office and he wasn't friendly toward me.

In the second grade they labeled me stupid. No one believed that more than me. Due to emotional stress I lost motor dexterity and couldn't sign my name correctly. By the 9th year in public school they moved me to the 7th grade at another school to be rid of the strange kid who could sometimes speak like a Philadelphia lawyer, yet couldn't spell "beans" if his life depended upon it. One thing was certain, I didn't belong in school. I would do anything to escape the abuse. I went to work in construction with my illiterate father who was abusive but treated me better than the school officials had.

I let strangers perceive me the way they saw me. I didn't look like a fool and I played the role they wanted to see. I kept my mouth shut most of the time because I didn't want them to think otherwise. . . stupid things could fly from my mouth like bats from a cave. I had learned that the closer I got to someone the tougher life could be. I had a knack for making people angry by saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. I didn't operate like them. I was the slap in the face when it came to their education. They did things one way and I did them another. That undermined the way they were taught. I angered everyone if I was cornered with a problem that had an educational solution. I figured, so be it, I made it work even if it was the hard way.

Eventually, I changed my negative attitude. One day a thought came to me from the Bible. "In my Father's house are many mansions." I realized that's the way my mind was. I had a lot of buildings in my brain where information stayed and when a door opened knowledge scrambled out to freedom. That made sense to me. How to become a doorkeeper was the problem.

Margie was the smartest of all my siblings. While in the 4th grade she beat the entire student body and most of the faculty in a spelling bee. I learned much later she taught herself to read and speak French. She started an insurance company for the Virginia Municipal League and made the stock holders \$90 million the first year. That was so beyond anything I could do it made my head spin. I was always so proud of Margie. There was nothing wrong with her mind and it made up for what was lacking in mine. Sadly, Margie died at 51 from melanoma. She was so brave, had no fear of death. To make me feel better about myself she once told me there was more than one kind of smarts. I miss her ways of making life good for everyone. She was a peace maker.

At 21 I worked for a construction contractor. He was a smart fellow and had flown 32 bombing missions over Germany during WW II. He had been shot down twice and avoided being captured. He had about a hundred employees working at his different businesses throughout the city of Richmond, VA. He ordered each employee to be interviewed by a doctor who had been a Nazi officer in WW II. I don't recall the doctor's name but I do remember his voice, his accent and the message he presented to my boss after the IQ test. He said I had by far the highest IQ of all his employees. I thought it was a setup and waited for the gavel to fall. This was so different from what was said about me in school. I figured some of the doors in my brain must have opened or he was the biggest fibber who ever lived. But I could read faces and his face held true while the "good doctor" spoke nice things about me to my boss.

The contractor promoted me to manager of a full service cleanup shop with 10 employees. Still, I was careful not to open my mouth too much or a disaster might fly off my tongue and kill my chances of success as manager.

For a half century I tried to write using a tape recorder, but the doors to the mansions wouldn't open to any meaningful subject. Then in 1989 I was given an old Apple computer with a big floppy disk that had to be formatted to match the computer. Over the years I learned to read visually. The phonics in my head were distorted, but I spelled well enough when I punched the letters into a hand held Franklin Language Master that had 2200 words and definitions. The Franklin gave me choices of words to pick from. I knew at that moment I could put my thoughts together on the computer screen. I started rambling. Later, I made complete sentences. My voice grew in a matter of weeks. I got a printer, the one with holes on both sides of the paper. I typed with one

finger on my right hand and used one finger from my left hand for the caps lock.

I joined a writer's critique group and met wonderful writers like Sharon Baldacci, Margaret Sibley, Nancy Fuchs and Larry Holcombe. Rule #1 was, write what you know. The second rule was to use a little book, *The Elements of Style* by Strunk & White. I didn't learn all the rules in that book but enough to help me self-edit so editors wouldn't be overwhelmed with my prose.

A lot of weight was lifted off my shoulders. I could finally express my mind through writing. I thanked God for the technology of our time, the computer and the Franklin Language Master. I began writing short stories for newspapers and magazines. One day I heard my father's voice bust open a locked door. He said, "Anyone who could write a book is smart." My father believed that with all his heart; so I decided to try to write a book. That's how *Mercy Me* came into the world. I loved the characters in *Mercy Me*. I wrote about people I had met years before. The characters lead the way on the plot.

I took my chances and self-published *Mercy Me*. The word got around and two of my schoolteachers in their 90s were happy one of their students they taught had written a book. One didn't know who I was until she saw my eyes and the other could hardly contain her thrill of telling me she had found an error in *Mercy Me*. I welcomed the correction and thanked God they were still alive. I took my 5th grade teacher to lunch and she reminded me that I had stomped a second grade reader to pieces on the floor of her classroom. She had sent me to sit in a second grade class room to humiliate me into learning how to read. It worked, but not without a life time of extreme mental anguish. I'm happy both schoolteachers parted this world loving me and proud

they had stored their teachings in some of the locked mansions in my mind.

Seven years later I wrote a book entitled, *Timekeeper*. The story rang so true I got tired of telling folks it was part truth and part fiction. The fiction part was my fantasy of the way I wanted life to have been on the road when I made my real journey across America. I ran away from home at 14 in 1959, crossed many states and met many people. I learned something of value from each person I met. In *Timekeeper* my motivation was to take the reader into my world to escape their life. I wanted to give them a picture of my young life from a character who was illiterate. I was familiar with the main character, Johnnyboy. The toughest part was in the follow up book, *Timekeeper II* making him learn indigenous ways. I let Johnnyboy learn "The Way" along his journey. To be accurate I read many books written by Native Americans to get it right. *Timekeeper* was such a powerful read the Library of Virginia invited me to speak in 2007. The room was filled with schoolteachers. That felt like my graduation day. Chris Meadows, a childhood friend, videotaped me and put it on Youtube. I thought it was a good omen that the first podium I stood behind was at the Library of Virginia.

Information from my schoolteachers had been locked away in the many mansions. That realization struck me across the forehead like lightning in the dark. . . similar to my ABCs I had recited so many years before. The doors flew open and my frustrated schoolteachers' voices began booming like thunder. Some yelled, some pleaded and some cried in failure that they had lost me to a world of illiteracy. God bless the schoolteachers. I am forever grateful to them because their work didn't fail. I went on to write three more books.