

NOAH:

Autism and the World We Could Build.

The world we live in is constructed for neurotypical people, and even though we've made great strides in understanding Autism, we haven't yet envisioned what we might change to be more inclusive. For example, even though autistic advocates like Temple Grandin have helped with public awareness, the problems that Autistics face remain unaddressed, especially in common institutional systems such as schools and businesses. Here to explain further, Noah Ward, on Autism, and the world we could build.

I want you to picture yourself somewhere. Not just any place, but the most unbearable place you've ever been. A time when you were completely overwhelmed—totally shut down in the blur of panic. Maybe it was the sounds, or the light, or the people near you—but all you can think about is needing to be *out*. Think of how you felt. Scared? Overloaded and submerged in the cacophony? Stuck? Terrible, isn't it? Unfortunately, that's close to what Autistic people face every day in places and situations that feel normal to

you, like talking to a stranger. Thinking through what should be a basic homework question. Watching a movie. Sound unbelievable? It is.

The vast majority of the people in the world are neurotypical, meaning they function well and as expected within our normal periphery. Only about 3.2% of American children are diagnosed as Autistic today. That's about 1 in 33, so it's no wonder that the flaws in our every-day systems get overlooked. While many "reformers" see themselves as making institutional systems more equitable, they're actually relying on Autistic people to adapt to their comfort levels, not creating a balanced world. When Autistics inevitably struggle to adapt to these hostile systems, we readily label their differences as "limitations", "challenges", and try to change the person—not the system. In the 21st century, we have more knowledge than ever of how Autism works compared to what little we knew when we designed our society. Using this knowledge, we can easily better our systems. Using this knowledge, we can lessen the prejudice that has become entrenched through how Autism experts have set norms, how all of us enforce these norms, and how our systems encode these damaging social norms into society.

The first system that negatively affects Autistics and therefore must be changed is within the realm of the clinical world: the scientists, researchers, and experts that diagnose, treat, and define Autism. There are two primary reasons for this: the outdated diagnostic tools still being used in the field today; and permeating prejudices from the non-clinical world, affecting clinicians' views of Autism and Autistics. The various tests and definitions or criteria we use for diagnosing and researching Autism are based on an outdated understanding of what Autism is. When the first observations of Autism and the first tests were being constructed in the 1940s, the stereotype of young, wealthy, caucasian boys who are obsessed with trains and lack any social skills was considered science on which to base understanding. Now, 80-some years later, we still use the same tests to diagnose Autism, despite our knowledge that Autism is far more than impaired social skills and model train obsession.

Autistic author and psychologist Devon Price puts this phenomenon of diagnostic exclusion into a disturbing perspective with the term "double marginalization". Double marginalization occurs when a marginalized group (AKA Autistics) are further marginalized and isolated by their skin colour, sex, gender

orientation, or other factors. Prejudices from the non-clinical world such as racism, sexism, and anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment permeate the minds of clinicians and experts who are administering judgement on Autism and Autistics in the scientific world, which is also biased to the original research and theories of wealthy, sexist, white-European men. These biases against certain groups of people, combined with outdated diagnostic tools and criteria complicates diagnosis. These antiquated standards cause great injustice to those who need support. For example, according to a study by Washington State University's School of Medicine, African-American and Latino children rarely receive a diagnosis for Autism until 3 years after their caucasian peers; and usually only after hard fighting, according to one mother who reportedly had to 'keep pushing' for nearly 16 months to get her clearly neurodivergent son a diagnosis after being turned away, time and time again. Furthermore the clinical world's belief in so-called 'female Autism' jeopardizes female Autistics all across the world. 'Female Autism' isn't really a thing. There is no hard evidence that Autism presents differently in girls in any major way—they are merely excluded from our view of Autism and

diagnoses that dictate it. These are only a few examples of the double marginalization that occurs daily within the clinical world, and that daily prejudices those in need.

The second and broadest structure that pervades the difficult lives of Autistic people is that of institutions. An institutional system, compared to any other mechanism of our society, is a system that is organized, drilled, and relies on the expectation of cooperation. Starting with schools, their primary design failure is a failure to adequately address education and the specialized learning support needs of Autistics caught within their system—as if schools weren't already stressful enough for even neurotypicals. Instead of expecting compliance within these structures, we should be altering expectations and adapting our methods. But right now, many Autistic children and teenagers struggle relentlessly without support, due to an uneducated group of adult leaders and overwhelming environs. Secondly, public infrastructure such as airports, parks, or public transportation systems can be incredibly stressful and taxing on their own, but even more so because of the way we Autistics process things. To generalize: having Autism means you think and interpret stimuli differently than neurotypicals—basic instructions become complex, and intricate processes

become easy. The way that the neural passages and constructions in your brain are wired is simply different—you literally just don't think the same. For example, certain specific sensations, such as the feeling of paper, in my case, causes a reflexive cringe response. Hypersensitivity and hyposensitivity are both the clearest examples of this, but there are others. Most Autistics think in an internal monologue—not just talking to themselves, but extended sometimes multi-sided conversations, lectures, and lessons as visual thinking.

All of these institutions are made even worse by draining Autistic people of all their energy and attention. They, and most neurotypicals without realising it, require and force Autistics into masking behaviour. What's masking? It's a term you've probably heard before, and while I don't have nearly enough time to say everything that deserves to be said about this subject, I can explain in brief. Masking is the intentional abandonment and concealment of one's neurodivergent traits for efficiency or “necessity”, not for social acceptance (though Autistics do engage in social masking at much higher rates than you probably imagine possible). For example, masking or camouflaging behaviour can include suppressing the need to

stim, forcing yourself into masks of different emotions, or even just withholding yourself from basic actions such as speaking or asking a question. Masking has incredibly bad mental health implications, is reflexive, constant, and very, VERY draining. I'm masking right now, and I will be for the entirety of my day because I have to, to be able to do this, like I am right now. Masking is forced, not a choice, and makes Autism harder to spot (more on this later). Not all Autistics mask, and many simply cannot, but the vast majority of Autistics mask for unbelievable amounts of time and not even always by choice.

The best way for public institutions to address these limitations is through modifying the design of these pieces of infrastructure by literally making them more streamlined; better educating those who work in them; and specifically, introducing 'soft spaces' or low-sensory areas for decompression, orientation, and comfort; like those in airports, amusement parks, and some schools right now. These decompression zones can work to tackle unhealthy masking and Autistic shutdown in high-danger areas. In private businesses, introducing sensory-friendly environments through similar means is key to making them less stressful and high-masking focused environments. But they do introduce a new necessity: peer education.

By better educating the general populace, like I'm doing right now, to the sensitivities, needs, and details of Autistics, so that they can understand, support, and validate the experiences of their friends, family, coworkers, classmates, and even strangers, is important. It creates authentic empathy for Autism and its struggles, and is the first step in creating healthy and supportive environments. Lastly, public officials, like law enforcement officers, need to be better educated in handling Autistic subjects and trained in supporting them and their families. It's just a necessity. For example, the risk of Autistics being shot and killed by law enforcement officers all over the world is unbelievably high and poses a real threat to Autistic adults. Almost 50% of people killed by police all over the world are Autistics. The differences in processing and special needs of Autistics can put them at dangerous odds with those who don't understand, or know why they should care. As I said before, the way to create lasting change in our world is by first changing ourselves.

Both the clinical world's misdemeanors and our inflexible institutions incompatible construction influence our everyday opinions and thoughts about Autism. For example, while many no longer share this

belief and have realised its fallacy, there are still just as many out there, and many more a long time ago, who believe that Autism is caused by vaccination, or that there is some correlation between the two. This is blatantly false, and a good example of one way the clinical world has damaged people's view of Autism. In fact, the single study that proposed this idea was refuted by every expert in the field at the time, taken out of publication, and the man who wrote it, Andrew Wakefield, owned up to his mistake and resigned his position out of shame for a poorly conducted and false study, admitting it was incorrect, himself. But not only does the clinical world influence the general populace's opinion of Autism—institutions and social structures do as well.

Autism is often subtle, and very difficult to spot. Especially in high-masking individuals who spend copious amounts of time masking and don't get to unmask that often. They usually appear pretty neurotypical and composed, compared to what we imagine unmasked Autistics to be like. Unfortunately, the way many institutions and structures are designed is constructed around the belief that Autism is very visible and extreme. This is simply false. Autism is a spectrum, and many high-masking individuals, or low

representing Autistics are overlooked. Based on the way I'm acting and presenting myself right now, in this instant, you may not guess that I'm Autistic (unless you already know me or realised why I chose my speech topic). In fact, for those who haven't yet connected the dots, I am an Autistic, and I have had personal experience with all of the struggles enumerated within this speech. There needs to be change.

Finally, the last reason most people struggle with actually understanding Autism is because of their own misconceptions. Fear and confusion of and about Autism causes the general public to create their own ideas and opinions about what Autism is and what it should be. Their life experiences, media choices, and political views can also influence this thinking, and usually paints a deceptive picture of what Autism looks like. It is this deceived picture of Autism that is most dangerous, because nothing can be more isolating and somber than being targeted by people's misplaced and misguided judgement and opinions.

Throughout the course of this speech, I've proposed numerous solutions to various struggles faced by Autistics around the world, but done so without context. Let me now give you a clearer understanding of my position. The best way to truly support our Autistic comrades is to educate ourselves and others about

Autism and what can be done to help. But what can be done? There are several solutions you can take part in. You can support and donate to local and national support organizations, like ABC of NC, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping Autistic children and adults find themselves and lead healthy, confident lives. You can speak out in your school and business communities, advocating for true equity and the address of the struggles of Autistics in the world, like I'm doing now. As a nation, we can support the literal design of public infrastructure and education of public servants through legislature and changing cultural norms. But truly? The most important thing you can do is to empathize. Just understand the difficulties that Autistics face, whether they realize it or not, and to validate and support the Autistics you know (because you certainly know some). Giving someone the confidence and support they need to make it through a day can change many people's lives. One small act of open-mindedness can open up an entire community to acceptance, and that power is within each and every one of you. The question is: will you use it? Will we build a community of inclusiveness, or keep our world of injustice? Thank you.