

Hardwiring a Friendship

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Every year, Port Washington, Wisconsin holds a festival called Fish Day. This gathering is the world's largest fish fry and people across the world flock to Port Washington for fish, beer, games, and music. The festival is perched atop Lake Michigan on a bluff overlooking the marina and lighthouse. It is here, at Fish Day, where Heidi meets Warden. Heidi suffers from William's syndrome while Warden suffers from autism. Unusually high socializing, distinctive facial features, mood swings, and very acute feelings characterize William's syndrome. On the other hand, Autism's telltale symptom is social aversion. In extreme cases, patients are impenetrable to any form of communication. Temper tantrums, fear of loud sounds, and obsessions with seemingly unusual objects distinguish Autism.

I walk towards the security gate and wonder why they even need a security gate. Why can't everyone in the world just get along and be friends? As soon as I pass through the gates I see masses of people. I really want to make a friend so I can explore the fair with them. Everyone already seems to be in big groups and it seems like I might have to explore the fair alone.

Finally I spot someone I can make a friend with. Look at him over there- tinkering away with some object all by himself. No one should be without a friend at a great festival like this; I think I'll help him out. As I approach him I can make out what he's fidgeting with – it appears to be a circuit board. That seems odd, but everyone is entitled to their own pleasures. I stand over him for a brief minute before sitting down across from him. He doesn't acknowledge my presence since he's so intensely absorbed in his electronics.

"Hi. My name's Heidi."

Warden, that's a nice name. He's still hunkered over his electronic pieces twisting wires and attaching pieces via a screwdriver. He seems very intent on ignoring me but I will prevail in talking to him. Maybe I can get him talking about music. After all, music is a highlight of Fish Day. Sadly, I didn't know the band playing since I just arrived at the festivities. But I decided to roll the dice and ask him anyways.

"Are you enjoying the band playing?"

He didn't miss a heartbeat in replying to my question. The band was a hometown raised group of kids that performed indie rock. Even while giving me the details of their songs and playlist, Warden continued to work on his electronic object. I still don't know what the object is, only that it's electronic.

There is an awkward moment of silence where no one talks. The sounds of the band, people laughing, and his screwdriver squeaking as he turns it fills the air. I blurt out the question that's been on my mind since I first spotted him.

"What's that? Is it dangerous? Can I try it? Where did you get it?"

The questions pour out of me and keep coming nonstop as if Warden won the jackpot at the slot machines. Instantly I regret asking so many questions since I can see he is uncomfortable. Quickly I apologize and try to explain that I get overly excited and social at times.

I pause and prepare myself for a snotty remark but amazingly Warden actually starts explaining his electronics

to me. It rapidly becomes the most in-depth discussion on electronics I've ever had. He stops and pulls a second electronic board out of his pocket and pushes it to me and asks me to try it.

I glance at his board and back at mine as I put the pattern together. Then I notice Warden's face as I work. He seems puzzled by what I'm doing. I contemplate if I should tell him that I have William's Syndrome and it causes me to be awful at recognizing patterns.

Before I could start explaining myself, he says it's okay that I didn't get it. Electronics are a really difficult topic apparently. I'd agree based on my short exposure to them. He dives back into his explanation of electronics. It becomes very in depth and my mind starts wandering. I gaze out at the lighthouse on the water and get lost in thought.

Suddenly, Warden is tapping my arm and asking me about the lighthouse. He wants to know how far off the shore I think the lighthouse is.

"Maybe thirty or forty feet."

He lets out a chuckle and tells me it's at least 200 feet off shore. I figure that I should just tell him about my condition but he asks me another question. He wants to know why I'm so friendly and why I came up to him in the first place.

I open up to him and tell him about the high socialness and problems with numbers I have. He comments on my upturned nose and larger mouth asking if they are characteristic of my disease. Most William's patients have upturned noses, larger mouths, and noticeable eyes. Suddenly, in the middle of my explanation, Warden tells me that he too has a disease. Autism, I've heard of that disease but have never really known anything about it. He tells me that unlike William's Syndrome, people with Autism don't socialize the best. He goes on until he hits the point that autistic people generally get obsessed with random objects. It all makes sense suddenly! That's the reason for his electronic pieces.

"Is your obsession electronic?"

I couldn't hold it inside me any longer. I just blurted out the question and instantly felt bad about the question, as I didn't mean to offend him. He reassures me that it's okay and that yes; in fact he is obsessed with electronics and their wiring.

Warden tells me that he has to leave soon but that he's grateful for meeting me. He says that meeting someone else suffering from a disease but being so cheerful and positive really gave him hope. Hope from what? I don't know since he packed up his supplies and left, but I can only imagine it meant hope that life will be normal.

I too, was ecstatic for meeting Warden. He showed me that even in the face of adversity, diseased people like us, have a future. There's no denying that Warden is remarkably gifted at electronics and circuits. I know that he'll be working somewhere in the electronic field in the future. He is a prime example that if you stick your mind to it you can achieve something in this world. Meeting Warden made me realize that I should embrace my disease, not let it hinder me.

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