

Mental Modifications to the Constructs of Change

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Six-year-old Heidi and her mother are on their way to explore Jessy Park's art exhibit. Since Jessy is obsessed with Route 7, the exhibit is scheduled to take place outdoors, on the road, near her home in Massachusetts. Both Heidi and Jessy have neurological illnesses that have drastically altered their thought processes, communication skills, and social interactions. Garrulous and extroverted Heidi loves to make new friends and socialize: unfortunately, her spatial cognition and understanding of quantity and time suffer greatly due to William's Syndrome. Her smile, bright eyes, and poised personality make up for the mental functions she lacks. Since Heidi is an affable character, she is more excited to meet Jessy than to look at the paintings in the exhibit. *What is she like? What does she paint pictures of? How old is she? What's her favorite color? Where does she live? Is she tall? What's her favorite painting? Will she like me? I can't wait to meet my new friend.*

Upon arriving at the exhibit and meeting Jessy, Heidi did not waste time on introductions or attacking the artist with questions. "Hi, I'm Heidi. I'm six. I know your name is Jessy Park. It's nice to meet you. Your paintings are beautiful. How are you?" Jessy did not seem to appreciate the friendly questioning. In exasperation, Jessy quickly covered her ears with her hands and violently shook her head. *What did I do? What is wrong with Ms. Park? Oh, Mommy told me that she has a disease like me. She has Autism. I don't really know what that is. We've been standing here for hours. When are we going to go home?* Heidi impatiently whined to her mother, "When can we go home?" Heidi's mother then encouraged her daughter to ask Jessy questions about the artwork. Heidi inquired, "What inspires you? How did you make that building look so real? What's your favorite color? I want to know everything!" Heidi smiled and her eyes glistened. However, before she could open her mouth and ask another question, Jessy threw a tantrum and screamed obscene sounds. *Oh, no! I didn't mean to upset her. I must have scared her or something. I should apologize. There are no strangers in this world, just friends.*

Heidi immediately approached Jessy, "I'm sorry I upset you, Ms. Park. Will you forgive me?" Jessy was speechless, as if looking right through Heidi. The wide-eyed child waited for an answer and continued to stare at Jessy. *Now, she should apologize to me. I'm being quite friendly and polite. My ears hurt from all her yelling. I can't believe she screamed so loudly. Mommy told me to ask her about her paintings. Why won't she apologize? Wow, what a big airplane.* Meanwhile, Jessy had turned to her mother Clara, and expressed her apologies indirectly. She was ashamed for her behavior, and seemed to have an understanding of why it was impolite and wrong to react the way that she did to Heidi's curiosity. Clara apologized to Heidi for Jessy. *Ms. Park is an adult. Why can't she tell me she's sorry? Maybe Autism made Ms. Park behave like that. Maybe it makes her shy. Maybe she can't hear me. Maybe she doesn't understand me. I just want to talk about her art and get to know her.* Clara decided to help Jessy answer all of Heidi's questions since Jessy seemed to express concern about her response towards Heidi. *Ms. Park really likes to paint*

buildings and stars. She talked about constellations a lot. She talks like a big baby. Her speech is quite choppy. Wow, these paintings are so colorful. Why is there so much black in sky? I don't like dark colors because they make me sad. There must be four hundred paintings here.

"Don't be shy, Ms. Park," Heidi comforted the artist. *Autism makes Ms. Park rude. I can't get to know her better if she doesn't respond to my questions by herself. I'm a nice person. Doesn't she want to get to know me?* Heidi tried to understand how her experience with William's Syndrome was different from Jessy's Autism. She wondered what made them different. *I like to talk, and Ms. Park obviously does not. But Ms. Park likes to paint. I don't know how to paint. I'm not very good at drawing pictures, either. Unlike Ms. Park, I hate counting. I even had to buy a special calculator because it's too hard.* Eventually, Heidi's mother said it was time to go home. Despite Jessy's withdrawn attitude, Heidi was willing to try one last time to talk to her. Extending her arms for a hug, Heidi bids farewell to Jessy, "It was a pleasure meeting you today, Ms. Park. Maybe one day you can come over to my house. I can bake you some muffins. I hope to see you again soon." Even though Jessy did not accept Heidi's embrace, Heidi felt content with her closure. However, she was not entirely pleased with a particular detail. *I like Ms. Park, but I absolutely hate Autism. I just wanted Ms. Park to be my friend.*

Author's Reflections: Both William's Syndrome and Autism alter the human experience directly in terms of neurobiology, and indirectly in terms of one's perception of change in the universe. Obviously, Heidi and Jessy are affected daily by their illnesses. They must try to conform in a world they were not meant to fit into. While both illnesses seem to affect the patients' sensitivity to change, the two fall on totally opposite ends of the spectrum. Heidi thrives on strangers and experiences, and finds both excitement and delight in meeting new people. Her impatience and lack of focus further support her passion for exploring the unknown. She wants to be aware of everything occurring in the present and cannot wait to see what the future holds. In an effort to understand everything and make conversation, Heidi will ask the "what" and "how" questions that disturb Jessy. Autistic people, like Jessy, reject social interaction. Instead, they have obsessions and fixations—private ordering, organizing, and numbering—skills that Heidi lacks entirely. Geometric constructs represent Jessy's fear of chaos in the world. As a child, Jessy created a system to determine fortune based on the sun's color and number of rays. Reserved in her thoughts and language, Jessy cannot accept change. She appreciates routine and regimen, whereas Heidi delights in surprises. Despite their differences, both Heidi and Jessy use their illnesses to inspire others. Jessy provides insight into the Autistic mind with her precise, geometric style of painting; while Heidi encourages others to smile and let their personalities shine. Although these diseases are not desirable, they are vital to understanding the human experience and the complexity of the human brain. Indeed, the brain's physical plasticity also mimics its ability to allow abnormal human beings to adapt to a strange world.

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