

“A Life of Strange Obsessions”

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THE WEEK STAFF
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Throughout his childhood, Tim Page’s bizarre inner life confounded him, his teachers, and his parents. Decades later, his condition finally was granted a name.

My second-grade teacher never liked me much, and one assignment I turned in annoyed her so extravagantly that the red pencil with which she scrawled “See me!” broke through the lined paper. Our class had been asked to write about a recent field trip, and, as was so often the case in those days, I had noticed the wrong things:

“Well, we went to Boston, Mass., through the town of Warrentville, Conn., on Route 44A. It was very pretty and there was a church that reminded me of pictures of Russia from our book that is published by Time-Life. We arrived in Boston at 9:17. At 11 we went on a big tour of Boston on Gray Line 43, made by the Superior Bus Company like School Bus Six, which goes down Hunting Lodge Road where Maria lives and then on to Separatist Road and then to South Eagleville before it comes to our school. We saw lots of good things like the Boston Massacre site. The tour ended at 1:05. Before I knew it we were going home. We went through Warrentville again but it was too dark to see much.”

It is an unconventional but hardly unobservant report. In truth, I didn’t care one bit about Boston on that spring day in 1963. Instead, I wanted to learn about Warrentville, a village a few miles northeast of the town of Mansfield, Conn., where we were then living. I had memorized the map of Mansfield, and knew all the school-bus routes by heart—a litany I would sing out to anybody I could corner. But Warrentville was in the town of Ashford, for which I had no guide, and I remember the blissful sense of resolution I felt when I certified that Route 44A crossed Route 89 in the town center, for I had long hypothesized that they might meet there. Of such joys and pains was my childhood composed.

I received a grade of “Unsatisfactory” in Social Development from the Mansfield Public Schools that year. I did not work to the best of my ability, did not show neatness and care in assignments, did not cooperate with the group, and did not exercise self-control. About the only positive assessment was that I worked well independently. Of course: Then as now, it was all that I could do.

In the years since the phrase became a cliché, I have received any number of compliments for my supposed ability to “think outside the box.” Actually, it has been a struggle for me to perceive just what these “boxes” were—why they were there, why other people regarded them as important, where their borderlines might be, how to live safely within and without them. My efforts have been only partly successful: After 52 years, I am left with the melancholy sensation that my life has been spent in a perpetual state of parallel play, alongside, but distinctly apart from, the rest of humanity.

From early childhood, my memory was so acute and my wit so bleak that I was described as a genius—by my parents, by our neighbors, and even, on occasion, by the same teachers who gave me failing marks. I wrapped myself in this mantle, of course. But the explanation made no sense. A genius at what? Were other “geniuses” so oblivious that they couldn’t easily tell right from left and idly wet their pants into adolescence? What accounted for my rages and frustrations, for the imperious contempt I showed to people who were in a position to do me harm? Although I delighted in younger children, whom I could instruct and gently dominate, and I was thrilled when I ran across an adult willing to discuss my pet subjects, I could establish no connection with most of my classmates. My pervasive childhood memory is an excruciating awareness of my own strangeness.

Despite their roseate talk, my parents and my school put a good deal of effort into finding out precisely what was wrong with me. And so, between the ages of 7 and 15, I was given glucose-tolerance tests, anti-seizure medications, electroencephalograms, and an occasional Mogadon to shut me down at night. I suffered through a summer of Bible camp; exercise

regimens were begun and abandoned; and the school even brought in a psychiatrist to grill me once a week. Somehow, every June, I was promoted to the next grade, having accomplished little to deserve it. Meanwhile, the more kindly homeroom teachers, knowing that I would be tormented on the playground, permitted me to spend recess periods indoors, where I memorized vast portions of the 1961 edition of the World Book Encyclopedia. In my darker moods, I think that the rest of my life can be encapsulated in a single sentence: I grew up and grew into other preoccupations, some of which have served me well. I became a music critic and culture writer, first for New York's SoHo News and then for The New York Times, Newsday, and The Washington Post. In the middle of all this, I became enamored of the American author Dawn Powell, whose life and works I absorbed in much the same manner I had the World Book, and I spent five years editing her novels, short stories, plays, diaries, and letters, and writing her first biography. This was simple, even fun; day-to-day existence was another matter.

In the fall of 2000, in the course of what had become a protracted effort to identify—and, if possible, alleviate—my lifelong unease, I was told that I had Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism. I had never heard of the condition, which had been recognized by the American Psychiatric Association only six years earlier. Nevertheless, the diagnosis was one of those rare clinical confirmations which are met mostly with relief. Here, finally, was an objective explanation for some of my strengths and weaknesses, the simultaneous capacity for unbroken work and all-encompassing recall, linked inextricably to a driven, uncomfortable personality.

The syndrome was identified, in 1944, by Hans Asperger, a Viennese pediatrician, who wrote, "For success in science or art, a dash of autism is essential." In his 1998 book, *Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals*, Tony Attwood observed, "The person with Asperger's syndrome . . . is primarily viewed by other people as different because of their unusual quality of social behavior and conversation skills. For example, a woman with Asperger's syndrome described how as a child she saw people moving into the house up the street, ran up to one of the new kids, and, instead of the conventional greeting and request of 'Hi, you want to play?,' proclaimed, 'Nine times nine is equal to 81.'"

The Asperger's spectrum ranges from people barely more abstracted than a stereotypical "absent-minded professor" to the full-blown, albeit highly functioning, autistic. We are informally referred to as "Aspies," and if we are not very, very good at something we tend to do it very poorly. Little in life comes naturally—except for our random, inexplicable, and often uncontrollable gifts—and, even more than most children, we assemble our personalities unevenly, piece by piece, almost robotically, from models we admire.

So preoccupied are we with our inner imperatives that the outer world may overwhelm and confuse. What anguished pity I used to feel for piñatas at birthday parties, those papier-mâché donkeys with their amiable smiles about to be shattered by little brutes with bats. On at least one occasion, I begged for a stay of execution and eventually had to be taken home, weeping, convinced that I had just witnessed the braining of a new and sympathetic acquaintance.

Caring for inanimate objects came easily. Learning to make genuine connections with people—much as I desperately wanted them—was a bewildering process. "I despise the Beatles and their ilk," this remarkably Blimpish young man proclaimed in a school paper shortly after the first Ed Sullivan show, when other boys my age were growing their hair long and learning to play the guitar. My favorite pop musician then was the Scottish comedian Harry Lauder, a star in vaudeville and music halls at the beginning of the last century, who told obscure jokes in brogue and sang through exaggerated hiccups in a state of pretend intoxication. The depth of my admiration for Lauder now baffles me as much as the steady diet of horehound drops I adopted as snack food, or my insistence, much of one autumn, that I wear a rabbit's foot in each buttonhole of my shirt, which I kept tightly fastened up to the neck. But nobody could have persuaded me to abandon these quirks, and any attempt to do so would have been taken as a physical threat and reduced me to hysteria.

Oddly, the inanimate object that helped pull me into the human race was Emily Post's book *Etiquette*, which I picked up in a moment of early-teen hippie scorn, fully intending to mock what I was sure would be an "uncool" justification of bourgeois rules and regulations. Instead,

Post's book offered clearly stated reasons for courtesy, gentility, and scrupulousness—reasons that I could respect, understand, and implement. It suggested ways to inaugurate conversations without launching into a lecture, reminded me of the importance of listening as well as speaking, and convinced me that manners, properly understood, existed to make other people feel comfortable, rather than (as I had suspected) to demonstrate the practitioner's social superiority.

There is no cure for Asperger's syndrome, however—though there is some question today whether it should be considered an affliction or merely a “difference.” A group called Aspies for Freedom runs a Web site that celebrates what it calls “neurodiversity,” arguing that there are advantages as well as disadvantages in an autistic condition.

I cannot pretend that Asperger's has not made much of my existence miserable. I've transcended Lauder and horehounds, though, and my passions range now widely, if spottily, through any number of fields. Laughter, meditation, therapy, Valium, antidepressants, loyal and patient friends, a congenial work situation that allows me to spend much of my time alone—all these have helped me to carry on.

Besides, I am fairly used to myself now, and my symptoms bloom publicly only on rare occasions. Waiting for the check after a Washington lunch in 2005, I realized that it was both the 140th anniversary of Lincoln's assassination and exactly 40 years since the murderers of the Clutter family (In Cold Blood) were put to death in Kansas. I doubt that my companion was equally thrilled by this coincidence, especially when elaborated upon in such sudden, bursting detail in the middle of a lovely spring day, but at least I controlled the temptation to launch into a lengthy exculpation of John Wilkes Booth's associate Mary Surratt. I count that as progress.

*From a story originally published in The New Yorker. Adapted with permission of the author.

“Us and Them”

From *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* by David Sedaris

WHEN MY FAMILY FIRST MOVED to North Carolina, we lived in a rented house three blocks from the school where I would begin the third grade. My mother made friends with one of the neighbors, but one seemed enough for her. Within a year we would move again and, as she explained, there wasn't much point in getting too close to people we would have to say good-bye to. Our next house was less than a mile away, and the short journey would hardly merit tears or even good-byes, for that matter. It was more of a "see you later" situation, but still I adopted my mother's attitude, as it allowed me to pretend that not making friends was a conscious choice. I could if I wanted to. It just wasn't the right time.

Back in New York State, we had lived in the country, with no sidewalks or streetlights; you could leave the house and still be alone. But here, when you looked out the window, you saw other houses, and people inside those houses. I hoped that in walking around after dark I might witness a murder, but for the most part our neighbors just sat in their living rooms, watching TV. The only place that seemed truly different was owned by a man named Mr. Tomkey, who did not believe in television. This was told to us by our mother's friend, who dropped by one afternoon with a basketful of okra. The woman did not editorialize—rather, she just presented her information, leaving her listener to make of it what she might. Had my mother said, "That's the craziest thing I've ever heard in my life," I assume that the friend would have agreed, and had she said, "Three cheers for Mr. Tomkey," the friend likely would have agreed as well. It was a kind of test, as was the okra.

To say that you did not believe in television was different from saying that you did not care for it. Belief implied that television had a master plan and that you were against it. It also suggested that you thought too much. When my mother reported that Mr. Tomkey did not believe in television, my father said, "Well, good for him. I don't know that I believe in it, either."

"That's exactly how I feel," my mother said, and then my parents watched the news, and whatever came on after the news.

Word spread that Mr. Tomkey did not own a television, and you began hearing that while this was all very well and good, it was unfair of him to inflict his beliefs upon others, specifically his innocent wife and children. It was speculated that just as the blind man develops a keener sense of hearing, the family must somehow compensate for their loss. "Maybe they read," my mother's friend said. "Maybe they listen to the radio, but you can bet your boots they're doing something."

I wanted to know what this something was, and so I began peering through the Tomkeys' windows. During the day I'd stand across the street from their house, acting as though I were waiting for someone, and at night, when the view was better and I had less chance of being discovered, I would creep into their yard and hide in the bushes beside their fence.

Because they had no TV, the Tomkeys were forced to talk during dinner. They had no idea how puny their lives were, and so they were not ashamed that a camera would have found them uninteresting. They did not know what attractive was or what dinner was supposed to look like or even what time people were supposed to eat. Sometimes they wouldn't sit down until eight o'clock, long after everyone else had finished doing the dishes. During the meal, Mr. Tomkey would occasionally pound the table and point at his children with a fork, but the moment he finished, everyone would start laughing. I got the idea that he was imitating someone else, and wondered if he spied on us while we were eating.

When fall arrived and school began, I saw the Tomkey children marching up the hill with paper sacks in their hands. The son was one grade lower than me, and the daughter was one grade higher. We never spoke, but I'd pass them in the halls from time to time and attempt to view the world through their eyes. What must it be like to be so ignorant and alone? Could a normal person even imagine it? Staring at an Elmer Fudd lunch box, I tried to divorce myself from everything I already knew: Elmer's inability to pronounce the letter r, his constant pursuit of an intelligent and considerably more famous rabbit. I tried to think of him as just a drawing, but it was impossible to separate him from his celebrity.

One day in class a boy named William began to write the wrong answer on the blackboard, and our teacher flailed her arms, saying, "Warning, Will. Danger, danger." Her voice was synthetic and void of emotion, and we laughed, knowing that she was imitating the robot in a weekly show about a family who lived in outer space. The Tomkeys, though, would have thought she was having a heart attack. It occurred to me that they needed a guide, someone who could accompany them through the course of an average day and point out all the things they were unable to understand. I could have done it on weekends, but friendship would have taken away their mystery and interfered with the good feeling I got from pitying them. So I kept my distance.

In early October the Tomkeys bought a boat, and everyone seemed greatly relieved, especially my mother's friend, who noted that the motor was definitely secondhand. It was reported that Mr. Tomkey's father-in-law owned a house on the lake and

had invited the family to use it whenever they liked. This explained why they were gone all weekend, but it did not make their absences any easier to bear. I felt as if my favorite show had been canceled.

Halloween fell on a Saturday that year, and by the time my mother took us to the store, all the good costumes were gone. My sisters dressed as witches and I went as a hobo. I'd looked forward to going in disguise to the Tomkeys' door, but they were off at the lake, and their house was dark. Before leaving, they had left a coffee can full of gumdrops on the front porch, alongside a sign reading DON'T BE GREEDY. In terms of Halloween candy, individual gumdrops were just about as low as you could get. This was evidenced by the large number of them floating in an adjacent dog bowl. It was disgusting to think that this was what a gumdrop might look like in your stomach, and it was insulting to be told not to take too much of something you didn't really want in the first place. "Who do these Tomkeys think they are?" my sister Lisa said.

The night after Halloween, we were sitting around watching TV when the doorbell rang. Visitors were infrequent at our house, so while my father stayed behind, my mother, sisters, and I ran downstairs in a group, opening the door to discover the entire Tomkey family on our front stoop. The parents looked as they always had, but the son and daughter were dressed in costumes—she as a ballerina and he as some kind of a rodent with terry-cloth ears and a tail made from what looked to be an extension cord. It seemed they had spent the previous evening isolated at the lake and had missed the opportunity to observe Halloween. "So, well, I guess we're trick-or-treating now, if that's okay," Mr. Tomkey said.

I attributed their behavior to the fact that they didn't have a TV, but television didn't teach you everything. Asking for candy on Halloween was called trick-or-treating, but asking for candy on November first was called begging, and it made people uncomfortable. This was one of the things you were supposed to learn simply by being alive, and it angered me that the Tomkeys did not understand it.

"Why of course it's not too late," my mother said. "Kids, why don't you . . . run and get . . . the candy."

"But the candy is gone," my sister Gretchen said. "You gave it away last night."

"Not that candy," my mother said. "The other candy. Why don't you run and go get it?"

"You mean our candy?" Lisa said. "The candy that we earned?"

This was exactly what our mother was talking about, but she didn't want to say this in front of the Tomkeys. In order to spare their feelings, she wanted them to believe that we always kept a bucket of candy lying around the house, just waiting for someone to knock on the door and ask for it. "Go on, now," she said. "Hurry up."

My room was situated right off the foyer, and if the Tomkeys had looked in that direction, they could have seen my bed and the brown paper bag marked MY CANDY. KEEP OUT. I didn't want them to know how much I had, and so I went into my room and shut the door behind me. Then I closed the curtains and emptied my bag onto the bed, searching for whatever was the crummiest. All my life chocolate has made me ill. I don't know if I'm allergic or what, but even the smallest amount leaves me with a blinding headache. Eventually, I learned to stay away from it, but as a child I refused to be left out. The brownies were eaten, and when the pounding began I would blame the grape juice or my mother's cigarette smoke or the tightness of my glasses—anything but the chocolate. My candy bars were poison but they were brand-name, and so I put them in pile no. 1, which definitely would not go to the Tomkeys.

Out in the hallway I could hear my mother straining for something to talk about. "A boat!" she said. "That sounds marvelous. Can you just drive it right into the water?"

"Actually, we have a trailer," Mr. Tomkey said. "So what we do is back it into the lake."

"Oh, a trailer. What kind is it?"

"Well, it's a boat trailer," Mr. Tomkey said.

"Right, but is it wooden or, you know . . . I guess what I'm asking is what style trailer do you have?"

Behind my mother's words were two messages. The first and most obvious was "Yes, I am talking about boat trailers, but also I am dying." The second, meant only for my sisters and me, was "If you do not immediately step forward with that candy, you will never again experience freedom, happiness, or the possibility of my warm embrace."

I knew that it was just a matter of time before she came into my room and started collecting the candy herself, grabbing indiscriminately, with no regard to my rating system. Had I been thinking straight, I would have hidden the most valuable items in

my dresser drawer, but instead, panicked by the thought of her hand on my doorknob, I tore off the wrappers and began cramming the candy bars into my mouth, desperately, like someone in a contest. Most were miniature, which made them easier to accommodate, but still there was only so much room, and it was hard to chew and fit more in at the same time. The headache began immediately, and I chalked it up to tension.

My mother told the Tomkeys she needed to check on something, and then she opened the door and stuck her head inside my room. "What the hell are you doing?" she whispered, but my mouth was too full to answer. "I'll just be a moment," she called, and as she closed the door behind her and moved toward my bed, I began breaking the wax lips and candy necklaces pulled from pile no. 2. These were the second-best things I had received, and while it hurt to destroy them, it would have hurt even more to give them away. I had just started to mutilate a miniature box of Red Hots when my mother pried them from my hands, accidentally finishing the job for me. BB-size pellets clattered onto the floor, and as I followed them with my eyes, she snatched up a roll of Necco wafers.

"Not those," I pleaded, but rather than words, my mouth expelled chocolate, chewed chocolate, which fell onto the sleeve of her sweater. "Not those. Not those."

She shook her arm, and the mound of chocolate dropped like a horrible turd upon my bedspread. "You should look at yourself," she said. "I mean, really look at yourself."

Along with the Necco wafers she took several Tootsie Pops and half a dozen caramels wrapped in cellophane. I heard her apologize to the Tomkeys for her absence, and then I heard my candy hitting the bottom of their bags.

"What do you say?" Mrs. Tomkey asked.

And the children answered, "Thank you."

While I was in trouble for not bringing my candy sooner, my sisters were in more trouble for not bringing theirs at all. We spent the early part of the evening in our rooms, then one by one we eased our way back upstairs, and joined our parents in front of the TV. I was the last to arrive, and took a seat on the floor beside the sofa. The show was a Western, and even if my head had not been throbbing, I doubt I would have had the wherewithal to follow it. A posse of outlaws crested a rocky hilltop, squinting at a flurry of dust advancing from the horizon, and I thought again of the Tomkeys and of how alone and out of place they had looked in their dopey costumes. "What was up

with that kid's tail?" I asked.

"Shhhh," my family said.

For months I had protected and watched over these people, but now, with one stupid act, they had turned my pity into something hard and ugly. The shift wasn't gradual, but immediate, and it provoked an uncomfortable feeling of loss. We hadn't been friends, the Tomkeys and I, but still I had given them the gift of my curiosity. Wondering about the Tomkey family had made me feel generous, but now I would have to shift gears and find pleasure in hating them. The only alternative was to do as my mother had instructed and take a good look at myself. This was an old trick, designed to turn one's hatred inward, and while I was determined not to fall for it, it was hard to shake the mental picture snapped by her suggestion: here is a boy sitting on a bed, his mouth smeared with chocolate. He's a human being, but also he's a pig, surrounded by trash and gorging himself so that others may be denied. Were this the only image in the world, you'd be forced to give it your full attention, but fortunately there were others. This stagecoach, for instance, coming round the bend with a cargo of gold. This shiny new Mustang convertible. This teenage girl, her hair a beautiful mane, sipping Pepsi through a straw, one picture after another, on and on until the news, and whatever came on after the news.

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Your summer writing assignment is to:

- Respond to the text-based questions about the two excerpts from personal narratives
- Create a list of ideas- a “brainstorm” - of personal experiences that you could write about for your college essay and other personal narratives. You need a list of 20!- The first 3 will be easier, the next 10 will seem impossible and the last 7 will come tumbling out! What experiences can you remember in detail? Think about sensory details: What did you see? Hear? Smell? Taste? Feel? AND... (not sensory) What did you THINK?
- Create a “planning page” for an essay addressing one of the CommonApp prompts. Choose the planning style that works best for you. Some suggestions are: Outlines, mind maps, idea webs...etc. You can use what has worked for you in the past or bravely try something new!
- Write a 400-600 word essay addressing one of the CommonApp prompts. (Please identify the prompt you are writing about at the top of your essay.) Read through and edit your work, correcting any spelling or grammar errors and checking to make sure it “reads” the way you intended. Be sure to give your piece a title!
- Now, share it with two other people. It can be anyone who can read! Ask them to complete the brief “Loved/What if...” page and DO NOT make any changes to the original work. Keep the suggestions for when we return to school!

Directions: Please read these two excerpts and answer the following questions in complete sentences with details and quotes from the text. Use in-text citations when necessary.

1. How do the authors draw you into their lives and their stories?
2. How are their endings similar? How are they different?
3. Do you think these authors had the same goal and purpose for their stories? Why or why not?
4. How have they used punctuation with purpose in their writing? Give two examples and explain the purpose of each.
5. Which one feels more formal? Which one feels more intimate? Justify your response with examples from the text.

Reader's Thoughts on the Personal Narrative:

(Title of the personal narrative) _____

Name of writer: _____

Name of reader: _____

Date: _____

CommonApp Prompt: _____

Readers comments:

"I loved..." 1. _____

2. _____

(Suggestions:)

"What if..." 1. _____

2. _____

Reader's Thoughts on the Personal Narrative:

(Title of the personal narrative) _____

Name of writer: _____

Name of reader: _____

Date: _____

CommonApp Prompt: _____

Readers comments:

"I loved..." 1. _____

2. _____

(Suggestions:)

"What if..." 1. _____

2. _____

*Be sure to attach your list of 20 experiences you could write about for your Common App essay.

*Be sure to attach your planning page for the essay you are writing.