

# *Working with the Cards You are Dealt*

By Jesse Saperstein

I had the privilege of delivering a keynote oration at the ASPEN Conference on Sunday, October 25, 2015 in Iselin, New Jersey. It is always so difficult to pay attention to the sage-like wisdom of the other speakers because my attention is usually focused on rehearsing my own dialogue. No matter how many successful experiences are under my belt, the fear will never completely subside. There were definitely a few pearls of wisdom that burrowed into my consciousness, however.

Ami Klin, Ph.D. and Celine Saulnier, Ph.D. essentially said that they refrain from referring to the autism spectrum as a brain or genetic disorder. In their respective presentations, they collectively emphasized the benefit of real-life experiences to chip away at some of the more debilitating characteristics of the autism spectrum. My thoughts turned to the book cover of my memoir and the graphics indicating postage insignia. It is hard to believe that at one point I had an obsession with the postal system that monopolized the start of my winter vacations from college. I *had to* get my Holiday cards out on time and write long messages inside each one. When the clock ran out it was distressing, and I entertained the ridiculous fantasy of sending them out in January. (Robert Frost supposedly sent out belated Holiday cards in July.) Sending out cards to random people was once much more critical than procuring employment or trying to build a social life.

Lots of other negative characteristics have died a natural death over time. For example, I no longer walk through New York City to avoid the crowding and relentless rattling of the NYC subway system. Living in the neurotypical (non-autistic) world means occasionally braving such stimuli. One thing that has still not changed is the ability to “let go” or “move on.” These days, however, this behavior has allowed me to function in the neurotypical world and occasionally leads to success when the pushing finally pushes down whatever barriers are in the way. Persistence with certain individuals may be spaced out in increments of six months to a year at a time. These little compromises have and will continue to make a huge difference. New experiences have been the greatest beacon of progress and not therapy, pills, or clichés such as, “That’s just life” or “Everything happens for a reason.”

The following tips are some hard-won lessons that have been learned over the years that will hopefully help my peers who are struggling in the throes of Asperger’s syndrome.

- The past few years have taught me to embrace the concept of WIN (Work Is Necessary). This acronym and attitude will keep many of the demons at bay. One would think it would be an endless slice of heaven to not have to work at a position that is considered to be mediocre or unfulfilling. We have all thought of it at some point or another. Wouldn’t it be incredible to troll Facebook sixteen hours a day or take strolls to the local movie theatre? Be careful what you wish for because you might just get it all and the bonus of a nightmare. This theory was validated when an Orientation Trainer at my company, *Living Resources* asked the group, “Has anyone here ever been unproductive for three months? What did it feel like?” The answers from this group and past ones

have been in the range of, “I was contemplating suicide” or “felt worthless.” There are a lot of haunting memories and residual grudges that could ruin any given morning. On the other hand, such negativity usually dissipates when a stream of business emails takes its place.

- When I was struggling with obtaining employment, someone suggested that I could be eligible for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). This individual meant well, although it seemed more like a personal insult. SSDI is for individuals who are truly disabled. They want to work, but cannot because of an insurmountable barrier that is often beyond their control. Individuals on the autism spectrum are often famous for their persistence, meticulousness, punctuality, integrity, and honesty. If this does not make someone with autism a viable employee then we must be living within the Twilight Zone!

Unfortunately, technical glitches are sometimes beyond our control and they plagued me during the speech at the ASPEN conference. There was not enough time to elaborate on all of my hopes, dreams, and the momentum that is prevalent in our autism community.

Major companies are beginning to catch up on what we already know. Individuals on the autism spectrum will have enough life experiences to allow them to use their talents without behavioral challenges terminating such opportunities. Jose Velasco from the SAP Corporation is a prime example of a pioneer for employment. He runs the *Autism at Work* program that is harnessing the talents of our abilities to hyper-focus on small details that are necessary for computer programming. I saw Mr. Velasco and Thorkil Sonne speak at the United Nations in April 2015 among several other CEOs. They all said that my peers were not hired out of pity and charity. They were hired due to their innate ability to enhance the bottom line. The ability to charm with social skills is important, but it is more important to have integrity and a great work ethic. More companies should drag out the interview process for a solid month like SAP and give my peers several chances to make a good first impression.

I have spent much of my adult life trying to run past the memories of bullying and unfair criticisms that have formed permanent scars. My hope for my peers is that they are also in a good place or will be in the near future. I am serving as the Habilitation Liaison for the College Experience Program (CEP) that was founded ten years ago by Living Resources, Inc. and the College of Saint Rose in Albany, NY ([http://www.livingresources.org/college\\_experience/](http://www.livingresources.org/college_experience/)). A lifetime of bullying and consistent rejection has prepared me to make a difference in the lives of young adults contending with challenges related to Down Syndrome, Asperger's, DiGeorge Syndrome, Epilepsy, as well as other barriers both physical and intellectual. For those on the autism spectrum, it is not about the cards you are dealt, but how you choose to play the hand...