Inclusion – Will's Community Garden

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On an April morning I meet Will at his community garden. Will is a tall man, with a full red beard, who is often seen around our neighbourhood delivering flyers. In addition to delivering nine flyer routes, he assists special-needs children at a primary school. Will has Asperger's syndrome, but autism doesn't stop him from participating in his community.

Asperger's syndrome is on the "high-functioning" end of the autism spectrum, marked by a difficulty with social interactions, a restricted range of interests, and repetitive behaviours. Not everyone, however, would call Asperger's a neurological disorder. Will himself defines Asperger's as a *culture,* as opposed to a disability—that is, a set of people with their own interests, values and ways of communicating.

The community garden seems an appropriate setting to talk about Asperger's and social norms. It's Spring Clean-Up Day, and people greet one another across a patch-work of plots. Kids skamper up the paths from the adjacent playground. It's a bit like Groundhog Day in that everyone is looking from ground to sky: will sunshine triumph or rain rule the day?

There are two ways to view Asperger's: as a set of individual limitations or the limited way in which we view individuals. Will may have special needs, but he also has special abilities. "I can memorize entire travel itineraries. I am very good a day-date calculations. I could recite most of the screenplays from "The Wizard of Ox" and "Charlotte's Web" when I was a kid. I also have a good ability to understand people with special needs and people who are troubled."

He points proudly to an eight-by-eight rectangle of earth. Having secured his plot for another year, he, like the other gardeners, is keen to get to work. One difficult thing about living with autism has been getting stable, rewarding employment. The interview process is especially stressful for him. Questions involving "what-would-you-do?" scenarios require a kind of abstract thinking that is typically challenging for people with Asperger's.

"I'm not good at explaining myself," he says simply. The garden is one place where he doesn't have to explain himself, though even here there are every-day realities that sometimes leave him feeling that he doesn't share much in common with others. This morning, for example, a few gardeners have brought along thermoses and snacks to share with each other; the effortless banter that passes between them is something in which Will has difficulty participating. Knowing when it is socially permitted to join a conversation, understanding tone and voice modulation, deciphering nuances in meaning and non-literal thinking, these are communication complexities most of us take for granted.

When I ask Will what he likes best about community gardening, he answers, "the vegetables." That, plus helping the environment. "Less trucking food long distances," he says. "And you can eat healthy for a lot less." The beets, carrots and potatoes he grows over the summer will be welcome supplements to his weekly food budget.

Gardening and the environment are two of his interests, but travel is his passion. He admits he *loves* his obsessions. His accomplishments include walking solo across Ireland, writing a children's fantasy novel and numerous essays about living with autism.

One of his goals is to help people understand Asperger's and autism, and the relationship between autism and society. In a reverse play on defining Asperger's, he defines "neurotypicalism," as a life-long disorder that can result in insensitivity to the strengths and needs of non-neurotypicals, as well as to the realities of being human.

"We don't need treatment," he says of people with Asperger's, noting however, that some non-verbal and low-functioning individuals might benefit from speech therapy. "We need more opportunities to work and be accepted."

Will's garden community is flexible enough to allow him deliver a newsletter as part of his member volunteer hours. Flexibility and opportunity go hand-in-hand. As for gardening, it provides meaningful work and enjoyment to people from *all* walks of life. It also provides opportunity to mix with people one wouldn't normally encounter—a plus for Will. Few people here realize he has autism and his presence has nothing to do with limitation.

We talk a bit about the nature of community gardening: what does community mean to Will? "It's a place where a group of people come together," he says. This appears to occur in more ways than

one. The garden is one of the places where he feels safe. Having life-long experience of being bullied and ostracized, he admits, “I don’t always feel accepted.”

This causes me to consider what it means to be included in a community—that inclusion in the garden might extend to connections beyond human ties. To garden is to be part of a living network—with connections to plants and other creatures, as well as to people. Perhaps part of the satisfaction of gardening is finding fellowship and support in the simple tasks we do in common.

The need for society to be more flexible and inclusive isn’t just a question of “mainstreaming” autistic people. “Mainstreaming in schools can be very beneficial, especially if children have teacher’s assistants to help,” says Will. “With others, mainstreaming can be a negative experience. It depends on the individual.”

Individuality is essential to creating community, as each part contributes to the whole. Focusing on abilities and providing opportunity for people to meet their potential is what makes a society great. To be accepted, to make a positive difference as a part of a living community, is an important part of Will’s garden experience. Will puts it more simply: “I like to watch things grow.”

Will Rogers’s answers questions about Asperger’s. His website is Living Asperger’s Culture in a Neurotypical World
http://www.thestonkingsteps.com/