

A day in the life of

Pamela Hirsch

Address for correspondence

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Editorial comment

Pamela recently contributed brilliantly to an away day on planning services for people with Asperger syndrome. As a potential user of services herself, Pamela's valuable contribution was compiled into a short article for a local autistic society newsletter. Very quickly requests came from other organisations for permission to reprint her article in other 'society' newsletters. Likewise, as editors, we were keen to get a contribution from Pamela, in an extended and more in-depth form. Pamela was given an open brief and has decided to write on a day in her life.

Introduction

When I give talks about my experiences of living with Asperger syndrome, I normally illustrate them with anecdotes in the following categories:

- * My school days and how staff could have helped me
- * The jobs I have had, the aspects of work that have gone well and the misunderstandings there have been between myself and my employers.
- * The benefits that knowing I have autism has given me, together with the dark side of living most of my life without diagnosis and support (I am now 52 years old, with the diagnosis only about 5 years ago).
- * The way that special interests can come to dominate one's life and how I am trying to control this. For this I draw on events from the past.

But for this very different format, I propose instead to recount the events, or at least some of the events, of one day in the present.

At six o' clock, when my alarm goes off, I always get up immediately because as soon as I wake up, my mind will be rehearsing some negative, aggressive phrase, usually targeted towards someone or something in my past. Today, the object of my venom is god. So I need to go down and get a coffee and a piece of toast and a book to put something pleasant into my mind. The radio will not help. I hate the noise and can only endure it when the programme is something I specifically wish to hear, such as the news. The book I am reading is 'The Mind Matters' by David Hodgson. I have a very long-term interest in the problem of individual consciousness. Hodgson's argument seems to be that consciousness is not so much a function of the brain at the level of the firing of individual neurons, but rather at the deeper level of quantum events, which being uncertain, have the advantage of the possibility of explaining free will. Well a physicist would say that, wouldn't he?! Anyway, it's nice to think about these things. I feel quite refreshed and relaxed.

There is a section in the book on QUANTUM MECHANICS which I am completely unable to understand. I am very tempted to begin reading it aloud into my dictaphone. I love reading aloud, especially material which contains difficult or obscure words, for the sheer joy of pronouncing those many syllabled words, and there are plenty of them in the section on Quantum Mechanics. Never mind that I don't understand it. At the stage of reading, meaning for me is irrelevant. But I will have to leave that for another time because at the moment, I am studying AS Level Buddhism. So I will continue my task of reading an entire text book on A-Level Buddhism into my dictaphone and listen to it while walking etc.

This is how I study. I am unable to make notes. I can't decide what to put into notes and what to leave out. Or I can't understand enough of it to shrink it down into a more concise form, as other people do, so I just record all of it. By recording and listening, recording and listening, in some cases understanding will follow. Where it doesn't, at least there will be a memory of facts with the possibility of giving the correct answer to exam questions without the need to understand. If I am not disturbed, I will continue taping until 8.00am when I will listen to the news, after which my husband will come down for breakfast. I prefer to listen to the news alone. I feel the need to hear every word so I feel tense if someone else is there. I am afraid he will suddenly begin to talk (eg make some comment and obliterate some of the words) so I can only really relax while listening to the news when I am alone.

Today, as I am not going anywhere where I have to take my coat off or mix socially (I don't count the shops) I won't be washing myself. I don't particularly enjoy getting wet and cold. I find water coming at me from a shower quite nerve-wracking, so when I have to go out to mix socially, I have a bath. I find it difficult to face so I always have my portable cassette player, playing something I have taped, to get me through it. I never lie back in the bath to submerge my back. That's much too scary.

I just go through the following steps:

scrub top; front and back
stand up and wash bottom
sit down again and wash feet
stand up and scrub legs

Then I sit down and repeat the 4 steps again and then get out of the bath. But today I don't have to do that. I just put on the day clothes I had on yesterday and the day before.

Today, I'm going out to search for some jars of coffee to complete the set. I already have Nescafe Gold Blend and Black and Gold at cut price from my local supermarket. According to the offers leaflet they put out, the full range of luxury coffees Blend 37, Alta Rica, and Gold Blend Decaffeinated should be available there, but each time I go to enquire they haven't got them in, so I'm taking a bus to an area which has more supermarkets. I feel compelled to acquire the full range of the coffees, before the offer is over.