

Autism in the Aviary

A married couple with Asperger's Syndrome explores the connections between parrots and people.

by Erika Hammerschmidt, autism author and speaker

Rain Man the blue-fronted Amazon got his name because he was found in the rain. Running down a street in Minnesota, he was picked up by some caring soul, and eventually he ended up with my mother, thanks to her reputation for rehabilitating problem birds. Unfortunately, Rain Man was a little too much even for her. Between a demanding job and several other difficult parrots, plus an even more difficult child, Mom didn't have the time and energy to handle Rain Man's behavior.

He bit. He screamed. He was so violent he couldn't be handled without gloves, and once picked up, he would beg to go back to his cage until he was put there. We had only hints of his past: his vocabulary included the name "Joey" and some mumbled phrases that sounded like "Hello, may I help you?" and "We're all out of those." Mom suspected he'd lived in a store. He had no leg band, so an origin in the wild was likely.

For years he was a very lonely bird. We tried our best, but none of us understood him.

When I mentioned a difficult child, I was talking about myself. I was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome and Tourette's Syndrome when I was eleven. Asperger's Syndrome, an autism spectrum disorder, consists mainly of social challenges, and Tourette's Syndrome includes involuntary movements and impulse control problems. I bit. I screamed. I knew a hundred words in two languages by my first birthday, wrote poems and stories by age four, but couldn't learn social rules well enough to avoid getting kicked out of school. I would sit alone in my room writing and drawing, inventing alien planets I wished I lived on. If I'd had the patience to get to know Rain Man, I would have found we had a lot in common.

When the author and speaker Temple Grandin compared autistic people to animals, she meant no insult. She was describing real similarities, including gifts that autistics and animals share (like heightened senses and an ability to notice things most people don't) as well as challenges (like difficulty generalizing from one experience to others.) In her book [Animals in Translation](#), she points out that

Clever Hans, the horse who was mistakenly believed to do math, really *was* clever-- just not in the way people thought. He figured out how to tell when he'd plodded his hoof the correct number of times, based on an unconscious movement his owner made, so subtle nobody else noticed it. How many humans could make such a deduction? It was a savant skill, like the fictional Rain Man's ability to count cards, or Temple Grandin's ability to find flaws that panicked the animals in feedlots, or my own linguistic gifts.

Parrots have a lot in common with autistics. Intelligent and obsessive, they demand variety in some areas and rigid routine in others. They have body language that humans misinterpret, expecting movements more like those of dogs and cats. Like the rocking and hand-flapping of some autistics, parrot motions may not seem to serve any purpose, but, from the parrot's perspective, they're completely natural. Trying to force an autistic child to stop making repetitive movements can remove a source of comfort, stressing the child. Trying to make a parrot stop behaving like a parrot leads to frustration and aggression.

As Rain Man languished, I grew up. I got through my teens, every year bringing more desire for friendship and love, and more frustration at my loneliness. I didn't want to talk with other students about celebrities or sports. I wanted to talk about what life might be like on other planets. I wanted to talk about philosophy, science, good and evil, animal intelligence, reasons why human behaviors evolved. Few high-school students wanted to talk to me.

My longing for friendship got twisted up with my impulse control problems. At parties, I would start seeking attention in acceptable ways, talking and joking. If it failed, my remarks became more outlandish, and I'd be on a slippery slope where eventually I'd lose control. My conversation degenerated into maniacal laughter and speculations about the sex lives of Star Trek characters, and my behavior turned to dancing on the table and trying to kiss people at random. I was like a parrot denied attention for too long, resorting to loudness and destructiveness, so starved for attention that I didn't care what kind I got.

College was better. Students were more intellectual, and I got along even better with professors. I still spent free time alone in my dorm, but even there I found friendship, sharing my ideas on the internet. I found an environment that gave me acceptance for who I was, and didn't expect me to act like some other creature. I was no longer the parrot whose owner would rather have a dog.

Near the end of college, I collected some of my writing and compiled it into a book, which I sent to a publisher. It was accepted, and together with the editor, I revised it into a more focused piece, which became my memoir Born on the Wrong Planet. By the time I had my own apartment and a job in retail, I was already a published author.

Months later I met John Ricker, another young adult with Asperger's Syndrome, who attended the college I'd graduated from. In childhood he'd had more problems than I had. It had taken him eight years of orthopedic therapy to get his hands to obey his brain, and he still couldn't write a page without hand cramps. There had been a phase in childhood when he'd tried to turn off his emotions, and another phase when he needed serious counseling for anger and depression. Other children tormented him because he wanted to talk about physics when they wanted to talk about movies and games. He once cried for six hours about things his classmates had said and done to him.

Yet as he'd grown up, he became more mentally healthy than anyone I knew. His photographic memory and curiosity turned into the strangest thing: a social savant skill. He watched people so closely, remembering so much about their words and body language, that he could understand their feelings better than they could.

We were engaged within a month and married within a year. He, too, was a bird lover, and when we moved in together, he brought Popcorn, a cockatiel he'd had for thirteen years. When she died, John was so heartbroken that he couldn't finish his classes.

Then he met Rain Man. On his first visit to the bird room in my parents' house, he was not only able to lift the Amazon onto his finger, but Rain Man ate a nut while sitting there. "He's never eaten when sitting on anyone's hand before," Mom said. John and Rain Man made an unprecedented connection. John's patient movements, gentle voice and perfect amount of eye contact-- it was all on a wavelength Rain Man could relate to. Soon Mom's parrot became ours.

The first year was hard for all of us. My mental health had improved since my teens, but I still had problems. Obsessive fears ruled my life sometimes. When I'd first met John, the thought of a relationship scared me to death, just like everything else at that time. I'd been afraid even to let him hug me.

Overcoming that fear still left others. I worried obsessively about health and money, and I was terrified of conflict. I wouldn't ask for help with anything, or even tell my boss I was going on a break, for fear of an argument. Avoiding one conflict would lead to another, and I never felt safe from anger and disapproval.

I picked at my skin obsessively, turning blemishes into scabs and turning scabs into scars. In that respect, Rain Man was healthier than I was: he was never a feather plucker.

He was just as scared as I was, though. John was soon able to handle Rain Man without gloves, but Rain Man shared my early fear of cuddling. He panicked if anyone tried to pet him.

John was eternally patient. Just as he soothed my anxiety attacks with calm logical arguments until they became milder and less frequent, he eased Rain Man out of phobia into acceptance. First, after many tries, he convinced Rain Man to get under a blanket. Once there, with no visual distractions, the bird would finally accept a scratch on the head. The steps that followed were gradual progress: Pet Rain Man with the blanket lifted up a little bit. Pet him in bed but not under the blanket. Pet him while sitting on the couch. And the final triumph: Pet him on his cage.

Rain Man was cage-bound at first. His favorite word was "okay," because Mom trained him to say it when she asked "Do you want to go back to your cage?" If he said it, she would put him back. At first, he would say "okay" nonstop when we held him. Like his fictional namesake, he answered everything affirmatively, whether he understood it or not. But as he became comfortable, he stopped begging for his cage and started enjoying time away from it. "Okay" expanded in meaning: he started using it to beg for treats, and even to be picked up.

After four years together, we're still a close family of three. I continue to work in retail and sell my book. John works for a vacuum coating company. Rain Man shares our meals and joins our conversations. "Okay" and "Joey" are his two clear words. The rest of his vocabulary consists of trills, whistles, growls, and baby-talk with the rhythm of words but no distinctness. He has some mumbles that sound like "shower" and "good bird," but they're not as clear as his "okay." When anyone is talking on the phone, he babbles for minutes on end. He laughs when he hears laughter, but he also laughs at any other high-pitched vocalization, whether it's crying or the voice of a cartoon character. He and John have whistled

conversations, with Rain Man trying new whistles and John mimicking them. I joke that John is more of a parrot than Rain Man.

John understands both Rain Man and me, because he, too, was once angry and fearful. He brought both of us out of fear into joy, and he helped us understand each other, too. I once couldn't relate to Rain Man, but now we're good friends.

People say autistics are impaired in imagining minds unlike their own, but I found that growing up with a mind unlike anyone else's made me hypersensitive to the knowledge that minds are all different. I can even theorize a parrot's mind. When Rain Man does something I don't like, I give close thought to why he's doing it, and I end up with more empathy than most people would have. I can't assume Rain Man thinks like me.

I also can't assume he thinks too differently from me, just as one shouldn't assume a non-verbal autistic child can't understand spoken words. I talk to Rain Man as if he understood, because he might. If a dog associates the word "walk" with going on a walk, then couldn't Rain Man associate the words "I'll be back in an hour" with my return an hour later? And won't it give him comfort to have an idea of when I'll be back?

He's an intelligent bird. Sometimes he begs for a treat, then drops it when it's given to him, and begs for another one. If he gets another, he drops that too, and begs again. Later we'll see him climbing to the bottom of his cage and eating the pile of dropped treats he's stored down there.

He has another trick for getting attention: reaching out from his cage and grabbing a plant on a nearby shelf, pulling it onto the floor. It never fails to make us get up and notice him. He's learned that he can get attention just by *threatening* to pull down the plant: he reaches out toward it, then makes a noise, so we'll look at him and see what he's about to do. I like to think it's because he doesn't want to make us unhappy; he's trying to be gentle, and a threat of destruction is more gentle than destruction itself.

I've gotten more gentle in my own bids for attention. Now that I have John, who loves and accepts me, I no longer feel so much longing for recognition that I risk going past the point where I lose impulse control. At parties I'm interesting and funny, but I don't make people uncomfortable anymore. John and I give speeches for schools and support groups, telling our stories of struggle and growth. People always enjoy hearing us. The story of Rain Man is one of the most popular.

I remember how I used to struggle to fit in, shoehorning my speech to make it sound natural in conversations with normal people. When John and I sit together, talking and holding Rain Man, and he babbles along in his baby-talk approximation of our language, sometimes I wonder if he's doing something similar, trying to sound like us. If so, he's having more success than I did. When we hear him, we smile, say his name, and pet him, letting him know we love him the way he is. For people and parrots alike, what helps most in life's struggle is finding someone who will accept you for who you are.

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