

Being UU in an Age of Autism

By

Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

September 18, 2011

Despite its title, *Being UU in an Age of Autism*, today's message is not about the socially crippling condition by the same name. I'm referring, rather, to autism in the classic sense of the word. At the dawn of psychology, a hundred and something years ago, there was no agreed upon term for what we now most generally call the *unconscious*. William James, who preceded Sigmund Freud, often referred to it as the *subliminal* mind, and Freud tended to use the word "*subconscious*," as if referring to something beneath and less than the conscious mind. Carl Jung was among the first to place it beside consciousness by more often calling it the *unconscious*. But all of these words referred to things about ourselves that we don't know. The *subliminal* or *subconscious* mind referred to information flying below the radar screen of consciousness, a place to warehouse, or repress, all the nasty stuff we didn't want to know about. In Jungian psychology, the *unconscious* mind was expanded to something beyond and much larger than the individual, to something shared by all humans containing ancient archetypes from our primitive pasts in what he called the *collective unconscious*.

In either sense, the unconscious is seen as something the conscious mind must become more aware of, the mysteries of which are like puzzles we must work to unlock in order to better understand ourselves and the human condition in general. But imagine if it were the other way around, imagine being locked inside the unconscious mind with little to no awareness of what's outside, with little to no awareness of others or the environment around us. This is precisely the condition *autism* is associated with today, describing a spectrum of disorders, from mild to severe, that impair one's ability to relate normally to the outside world. But those who suffer from this unfortunate condition cannot help themselves. It is something they are born with, and a challenge they and their loved ones must face the rest of their lives.

But in the classic sense *autism* was spoken of more as a defense mechanism against the real world and recognizing the reality of others. "Thus the sole functions of autistic thought," according to Jean Piaget, "is to give immediate and unlimited satisfaction to desires and interests by deforming reality so as to adapt it to the ego. For reality is infinitely plastic for the ego, since autism is ignorant of that reality shared by all, which destroys illusion and enforces verification."¹ In short, we can make reality whatever we want so long as we don't pay any attention to the facts. And what I'm proposing here is that this is precisely the kind of thinking that is becoming usual in our society today. Ours is a society in which it is increasingly

¹ Gruber, Howard E. & Voeche, J. Jacques, eds., *The Essential Piaget*, Jason Aronson Inc., Northvale, NJ, 1977, 1995, *ibid.*, p. 111.

acceptable to ignore the facts, and, worse, the needs of others, in order to satisfy individual self-interests.

Have you ever heard one of your Senators or Representatives get on TV and say, for example, they are only following the will of “the American People?” Yet they are not expressing your opinion, which many Americans you know also hold, and, perhaps, that you have expressed in a phone call or a letter to their very office. We can only conclude one of two things. Either they don’t consider those who hold different opinions than their own to be Americans, or they are unaware that people with different opinions exist. I know of at least one Representative, who shall go unnamed, that refuses to listen to those constituents with whom she disagrees entirely. This is an autistic mentality in the sense that it ignores the diversity in our nation because it’s more personally advantageous to paint all Americans with one broad stroke. Again, as Piaget put it, “autism is ignorant of that reality shared by all.”

It might also help to understand that *autism* comes from the Greek word for “self,” *autos*, and refers to complete self-absorption, which is why I’m referring to ours as an, *Age of Autism*. Let’s take the global economic meltdown as another example. In 2008, Richard Fuld, the CEO of the now failed Lehman Brothers investment bank, testified before a congressional oversight committee. He was asked three times if it was fair for him to have earned nearly half a billion dollars in just 8 years, not including company stock, while those who put their trust in him walked away empty handed. He never directly addressed the question about fairness, that is, about his obligation to others. At one point he did say, “When the company did well. We did well. When the company did not do well sir, we did not do well,” to which committee chair Henry Waxman quickly replied, “Well Mr. Fuld, there seems to be a breakdown. Because you did very well when the company was doing well, and you did very well when the company wasn’t doing well, and now your shareholders that owned your company have nothing. They’ve been wiped out.” Fuld’s inability to answer questions about the suffering of others seems pretty typical of those like him who were questioned during similar hearings.

I would propose to you this is not the case because any of these people are sinister at heart, but because they have allowed themselves to become so far removed from the lives of ordinary people that they simply have no idea of what others are actually going through. If you want to socialize with Mr. Fuld, for example, you could rent the now vacant 8th floor Park Avenue apartment beneath his, if, that is, you can spare 29 million dollars. But even if you could afford it, your prestigious neighbor is likely to be away visiting his 14 million dollar oceanfront home in Florida, or, perhaps his summer vacation home in Sun Valley, Idaho. But if for some reason he is home, and his private elevator isn’t working, and your lucky enough to bump into Mr. Fuld in the lobby of your building, ask if he’d invite you up to see his multimillion dollar private art collection. The point I’m making, if somewhat sardonically, is that Mr. Fuld is but one example of a rich and powerful figure in our society who has managed to isolate himself from ordinary people, and, more importantly, from seeing how his lifestyle effects them.

Although this problem is rampant today, which is why I consider ours an Age of Autism, it's not new. Those who exploit others have always found a way to flee the scene of the crime. Two thousand years ago Jesus told a parable about a wealthy "landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press, and built a watchtower." Then, as soon as he was through, he moved away to a distant land. After a while he sent his slaves to collect the produce from his tenant farmers. "But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another." Instead of learning his lesson, however, the out-of-touch landowner sends another group of slaves that are treated even worse than the first group. Finally, he decides to send his son, saying, "They will respect my son." But when they saw the son the tenants said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized him, through him out of the vineyard and killed him.²

The moral of this story, as far as I'm concerned, is that this wealthy "landowner," (a term that would have been offensive to the ancient Jews, for they believed the land belongs to God alone) so thoroughly separates himself from those he exploits, that he's completely out of touch with just how angry and desperate they've become. Judaism defines sin as separation, yet this man places a fence around the vineyard, builds a watchtower to elevate himself above others, and finally, moves off to a foreign land, completely separating himself from them. He's so far removed, in fact, that he ends up putting the lives of others, including his own son, in mortal danger because he just doesn't get it! He doesn't understand the situation he's caused.

In light of the millions of home foreclosures happening today, this parable is as poignant now as ever, especially given that those who've caused this crisis are so insulated from its impact. Indeed, the words of those frustrated Jewish prophets of old are as meaningful today as they were thousands of years ago. Isaiah protested, for instance, "**It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the plunder of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the face of the poor?**"³ Micah, similarly, grumbled, "**they covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away, they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance,**"⁴ and Amos complained, "**I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy at the gate.**"⁵ The prophets began protesting unjust land appropriation after egalitarian tribal life fell sway to the sort of centralized government that made such exploitation possible. According to Biblical scholar Anthony Ceresko, it was under these circumstances that the ruling elite "presumed that land was the property of the king (along with members of the ruling class), who distributed parcels of it to his subjects and who

² Matthew 21:33-39

³ Isaiah 3:14-15.

⁴ Micah 2:2.

⁵ Amos 5:12.

could, and did, demand payment of rent and who could, and did, expropriate the land and evict its tenants at will.”⁶ So things haven’t changed much during the past few thousand years.

In his book, *How We Decide*, author Jonah Lehrer explains that when scientists at UCLA imaged the brains of autistic people they found no activity in the mirror-neuron area, which enables us to look at another person and imagine what they must be feeling. “As a result,” he says, “the autistic subjects had difficulty interpreting the feelings on display. They saw the angry face as nothing but a set of flexed facial muscles. A happy face was simply a different set of muscles. But neither expression was correlated with a specific emotional state. In other words, they never developed a theory about what was happening inside other people’s minds.”⁷ Leher goes on to explain that Yale scientist have further discovered that those with autism have an inactive fusiform face area, the part of the brain that recognizes faces and distinguishes them from mere objects, like furniture. “They looked at human faces with the part of the brain that normally recognizes objects,” he explains, “A person was just another thing. A face generated no more emotion than a chair.”⁸

This is truthfully one of the things I loath about communicating anything but the most mundane information through email, because we lack the ability to see the expression on another’s face, or the emotion in another’s eyes. Email is, in this sense, an autistic form of communication. Our brains, on the other hand, have evolved to communicate face to face. The problem, as we have seen, is that there are many in our society who have distanced themselves from those whose lives they effect. This is actually facilitated more easily in the Middle East, as well as other countries, where what is called the “honor/shame code” forbids one who is considered socially inferior from looking into the face or eyes of a superior. But what it really accomplishes is to enable the, so-called, “superior” from having to see the humanity in the eyes of those considered beneath them. It’s like some bad Batman movie in which all the villains have hidden faces and are dehumanized as jokers, scarecrows, and penguins. For we can’t demonize and dismiss others unless we first dehumanize them, and we can’t dehumanize them if we look upon their faces and into their eyes, the windows to their souls.

“At its core,” writes Lehrer, “moral-decision making is about sympathy.”⁹ The reason questions of fairness fell on deaf ears regarding the CEO’s and Presidents of our nation’s exploitative financial institutions, is because they had removed themselves from the humanity of those they took advantage of. For, as Lehrer also

⁶ Ceresko, Anthony, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1992, p. 160.

⁷ Lehrer, Jonah, *How We Decide*, Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York, NY, 2009, p. 185.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

says, “The ability to sympathize with others leads to fairness.”¹⁰

In another experiment mentioned in his book, an experimenter hands one of two people a ten-dollar bill and instructs the subject to split it however she or he wants to. The other person can accept or reject the offer, but if it’s rejected, both subjects walk away with nothing. Experimenters initially expected the first subject to keep nine dollars, give the other person one dollar, and both walk away happy. “After all,” Lehrer says, “a rejection leaves both players worse off, and one dollar is better than nothing, so this arrangement would clearly demonstrate our innate selfishness and rationality.”¹¹ But what they weren’t expecting is that when the two subjects were face to face, the proposer could anticipate the responder’s potential anger if offered just a meager amount, and so usually divided it equally. What’s more, Lehrer says, “People play this game the same way all over the world, and studies have observed similar patterns of irrationality in Japan, Russia, Germany, France, and Indonesia. No matter where the game is played, people almost always make fair offers.”¹² The only exception to the rule is when the game is played on a computer, that is, when the subjects can’t see each other face to face. So I wonder if we would be in the financial mess we’re in today if folks like Mr. Fuld had simply been more in touch with their neighbors?

This is why it is as important to promote and live out our Unitarian Universalist values today as ever. For our first principle, promoting the worth and dignity of every person, makes it impossible for us to dehumanize anyone, even those who live their lives far away and far differently than our own. There is nowhere this principle allows us to go where we can escape the reality, nor the plight, of others. This first principle is what leads to our second, “Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.” For, again, it is not possible to treat others in any other way when we see truly them as our equals. Our other principles further suggest that every person, being of such worth and dignity, ought to be free to think for herself, and have a voice in how she is governed, as a citizen of a peaceful, free, and just global community in which all people and all beings are respected as part of the interdependent web of all existence. Unitarian Universalism really is a transformative faith because it uplifts the downtrodden and brings the lofty down to a level playing field. It is what we need in this age of autism. It is what we need to show our world the face of humanity.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 181.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 181f.