**Appalachian Through-Hiker and Autism**

*Joe Kitchens*

It took him more than six months to hike the long trail from Amicalola Falls in Georgia to Mt. Katahdin in Maine. In physical and emotional terms, this might have been a defining accomplishment, a journey that many have only dreamed of completing. The boy was never short on determination.

From the moment he entered school, the boy had struggled. He was fine with the raucous play of other small boys, but in school he could never catch on to the routine of playful teasing or the games of who- likes- who. Each year brought new frustrations. The most routine math assignment required exhausting homework sessions with his devoted parents.

School banter made no sense to him. Spared the slightest concern about what brands he wore, he never belonged to a clique. By the third grade the invitations to birthday parties had stopped and the teasing had begun. There were some compensations. When his parents gave him a book on medieval armor, he was mesmerized by the details, all seven hundred pages of them, and the illustrations became fixed in his mind. He could remember everything he had ever read. He noticed the most trivial details. Things out of order bothered him, except for his appearance. As to what he wore, he could not have cared less. Catching a ball was impossible for him.

Then there were the video games: something at which he was good. He vanished for hours into his room. His interactions with his sisters became strained and were always devoid of social conversation. The usual sibling rivalry and teasing never developed and his sisters fell into the habit of explaining to their friends that their brother was "different." His parents were often in consultation with teachers and school counselors. Frustration mounted.

Middle school was a continuing meltdown of forgotten assignments, math rage and social isolation. The bullying came later. Adolescents have an errorless penchant for recognizing weakness and vulnerability. His parents would have been wiser to keep him out of high school altogether. He ended up with no specific educational diagnosis and his parents enrolled him in a charter school. Behavior problems were the norm and math was most kids' nemesis. The outcasts found some comfort and encouragement from an accepting and unconventional faculty. But they too were without real knowledge or weapons in the war on what would eventually be recognized as autism- spectrum disorders. Not until he was seventeen was the correct assessment made, too late to for him to benefit from more innovative teaching strategies.

To his loving parents, anything was better than letting him vegetate at home. Despite the occasional part- time job, no career or even long-term work seemed available. The endless variety of nonintegrated experience offered by the computer absorbed him without providing improvement in his social skills or pointing to a career possibility. In desperation, his parents sent him to the Rehabilitation Center at Warms Springs. Their hearts ached.

More than two years of dormitory life there were spent in company with many young people whose challenges were more obvious than his own. Despite the devoted efforts of staff, the enormous variety of difficulties displayed by their clients seemed to overwhelm their limited staff and professional knowledge.

The Warm Springs that had offered hope to a young Franklin Roosevelt had become a center to rehabilitate victims of polio. When a vaccine to prevent the infection was discovered and widely administered in the 1950s, the institute evolved into a more general rehabilitation facility and was used to train people for employment. The boy’s "practicum," served with a burglar alarm company, was spent mostly crawling under houses to string wires. Though vaguely related to his interest in computers, the experience opened no employment doors after his return home.

At long last and only after employing an attorney was the boy able to get help from Vocational Rehabilitation and Social Security. A legal redefinition of his condition provided an opportunity to attend college.

Along the road to entering the freshman class at a state university in his home state of Georgia, he underwent psycho-educational evaluation. Like most autistic people, he fell entirely on one end of the spectrum: some were math whizzes and/or music prodigies, others were lost in math, while their verbal skills were sometimes remarkable. It was on the later end of the spectrum that he was defined. So, contrary to what one might expect, he was placed in remedial math. His parents pointed out that this made little sense. This was a daunting prospect, alarming the boy as well as his parents. They pleaded against this.

The boy’s academic advisor became irritated when the father offered an analogy: “Imagine that you are paraplegic and that the school requires badminton classes to graduate, so in your case you must enroll in remedial badminton lessons. Does this make any sense?” The adviser was likely as frustrated as the parents.

True, remedial math was required by the university. Most colleges require college algebra, presumably a litmus test for college- level intelligence. And yet, the registrar had admitted the boy, fully aware of the challenges he -and the faculty-faced. How often does this happen? When was the last time, as an adult, you used your high school algebra? The consequences were painful and predictable. Relying on his fear of failure to motivate him, the boy became angry and confused. He was assigned a student math tutor by his adviser. His parents hired a math coach-a bright young math student at the university

The boy did well in his other subjects, but flunked math. Picked on by other students because of his lack of social skills-there are always a few bullies around who tease and torment- the boy simply gave up. He packed his clothes and called his parents to bring him home. He had experienced the worst failure of his life. And, because he suffered from a disability, he was unable to take advantage of a fully paid college education that was being provided because he suffered from a “disability!” His parents wondered how many other families had experienced this kind of heartache. It was hard to come to terms with.

Presumably all college students will somehow be better off for having passed math. The boy and his parents continue to tough this out, but their hopes are growing thin and they are confounded and saddened by the knowledge that their son-who is extraordinarily intelligent, has a remarkable memory and a great vocabulary- has few prospects for a successful career. They pray that something miraculous will happen and the boy will someday find a way to succeed in a system bent on defining him as a failure.

*If you would like to share a response or ask a question about this article about this, drop me an email at* [*gajoe42@gmail.com*](mailto:gajoe42@gmail.com)*.*