

My Experiences with Autism

Debbie Caulfield, aged 56

The Characteristics and Traits

From the age of two I was thought to have been deaf as didn't learn to speak until I was three and a half years old. I was late in learning to walk, clung when taken up steps, used to just scream and scream, and I didn't take note of anything around me.

One characteristic I had at that time was a great love for the water. I didn't learn to drink out of a mug until after attending Nursery school, before that I was still drinking out of a bottle. I remember that when I first attempted to try and paint on paper, I didn't know what it was that I was painting, and I just painted up, up and up, going from small to large.

After starting school at the age of five I made up my own words and made queer noises, as well as being behind the class. Hitting and pinching other children was the way I showed affection towards them, and I also showed affection by feeling people's faces, but if my space was invaded I used to pushed people away.

Playing alone a lot was a great enjoyment for me because the fantasy of my own imaginary people gave me a sense of contentment. The love of smelling things for comfort and pleasure was another habit of mine, and it was mainly new things of most fabric materials, as well as other things like paper, metals and plastics.

When colouring in shapes at school, I was more interested in the colours themselves than conforming to keeping within the lines, but when I had to repeat grade one I coloured within the lines because I felt I had explored the colours themselves.

In later childhood I was always behind the class, and continued to hit and pinch other children to show affection, as well as feeling people's faces. Also I still pushed people away if my space was invaded, continued to smelling things for comfort and pleasure.

I had trouble throwing a ball, hitting with a bat, and stepping and keeping behind the line, as well as being clumsy. I didn't, and still don't, like the feel of certain clothes on my body, and tight clothes or materials rubbing against me. On certain parts of my body, such as around my waist, under my armpits and around my neck, materials were uncomfortable and still are if they rub against my body. Being shut in anywhere, or hemmed in, was also another thing I didn't like.

The love of making up my own imaginary places, worlds, countries and people was my main **hobby** then because it made me feel good about myself and it gave me contentment. My imaginary places and people revolved around the things I liked, such as planets and anything to do with things from outer space. I even enjoyed seeing myself as a person from another planet. I played alone a lot to preserve my imaginary places and people that I enjoyed so much.

When conforming to the real world, I found it easier and more enjoyable sticking to routines. My imaginary places and people were an obsession I had at the time because I felt safe and contented in my world, as opposed to the real world that I could not make sense of. I was even happier if wearing loose clothing, only because they were the only type of clothing that made me feel physically comfortable.

What I feel has helped me as I moved into adulthood was writing a story on Atlantis, which I did by writing and scribbling in a notebook as I thought of things. It was the fantasy in my story that kept me going, because I couldn't always do the things I would like to do due to not making sense

of the world around me. The fantasy gave me a sense of identity of my own and I saw myself as an Atlantean.

At this time in my life, I found that living independently was the main thing that really helped me a lot because it had taught me to do and sort things out for myself. Living on my own also taught me a lot about the real world besides enabling me to take on responsibility. Going by my own experience, independent living is something that I recommend to be of great help to others on the autistic spectrum, only if it is possible obviously due to circumstances, because I gained a lot of confidence after lacking it. I also developed an inquiring mind and learnt a lot from other people through observation.

What I feel the positive qualities are that I now have as an adult are being strong-willed and having determination. These qualities have allowed me to be hard working, tidy, clean and honest, and pay a lot of attention to detail. With these strengths I have been able to learn many skills that have led me to becoming a team leader in my job.

In everyday life, having the natural ability to be good with money has allowed me to achieve owning my own flat, rather than just renting one. Fortunately I finished repaying my mortgage just before the credit crunch. Understanding the value of money has given me the ability to pay attention to quality when buying things and learn to spend money wisely.

For thirteen years I used to follow a spiritual teaching that helped me to learn how to interact with others, and it taught me how to be silent within and to obtain peace of mind. This led on to awareness of how to approach people, and it taught me good techniques on how to channel conversation effectively. Now I find it a lot easier to hold a conversation with other people and make friends.

My creative hobbies play a very big part in my life in making me contented. Painting pictures, writing fiction and non-fiction stories, occasionally composing my own bits of music and songs, besides doing a lot of photography, have all shaped my identity. I have decorated my home with landscape murals and have made hanging mobiles of angels and people to go in front of the murals, as it gives me the feeling of living in a world of my own creation.

Having also learnt a lot on the computer, has allowed me to have my own website that displays my creativity to anyone who is interested. To me, my creative hobbies are like having a faith, culture, country, continent and even planet of my own in a positive way. Over the years, with a positive outlook on life, I have persevered and I continue to do so. I am proud to be autistic, and I am quite happy with that because I like my hobbies and I can just be myself.

My website: <http://planetdeb.wordpress.com>