

"Artistic" Tendency

by Shari Kersch



I have never been much for art. As a teenager, my artistic talent was limited to painting the wall of our garage with the popular 1970's "Smiley Face." It didn't take much expertise to paint a huge yellow circle with black oval eyes and a grin. My classes in high school were more a lesson in futility than a lesson in art. I resented being forced to do something for which I had no talent. I would have preferred to give a lecture to thousands of people rather than create a horrible concoction labeled, "ash tray."

Thankfully, college brought an end to art classes. Earning a degree in nursing was about as far as I could get from the art realm. I studied the intricacy of the human body and could trace the flow of blood leaving and returning to the heart, but I didn't have to trace art history. I could label every bone of the body but I didn't have to draw a picture. I memorized hundreds of diseases and their effects but I didn't have to remember what artist painted *Madonna with the Long Neck*. I could dissect a human body, but I didn't have to analyze the sculpture of *Saint Teresa of Avila in Ecstasy*. Studying the brain of a cadaver was far more interesting to me than interpreting a painting or sculpture. I was in my element, and for a while I forgot about the world of art.

In my late thirties, I was catapulted into the world of art once again. Jason came along and stole my heart. Art modalities were his passion. He loved working with colors and shapes to form a creative piece that even I could appreciate. With a pen and paper, he fascinated himself, and me, for hours. Jason was ambidextrous—he could craft drawings equally well with either hand. His right and left brain competed for the glory. I was captivated by his unusual abilities.

When it comes to the stories of famous artists and their eccentric behaviors, Jason was no exception. He walked precariously on high, narrow passages, never fearing the danger. He ran with wild abandon as a free spirit whenever he had the chance. Most of the time, he was silent, yet I sensed that a genius was locked in his body. I knew that he was always thinking, that his mind was perpetually in motion. I also knew, from my medical training, that Jason suffered from a disorder called autism. I was often embarrassed in public when he made odd gestures with his hands, often accompanied by grunting noises and other eccentric social behaviors. I was embarrassed, yet captivated at the same time. He possessed attributes that I didn't have. With him I felt like a complete person.

Jason has a fraternal twin, Jordan. Jordan is also bright but, without autism, he fits better into the social mainstream than his brother. As twins, developing simultaneously in the womb, closeness was inherent, even if their personalities were opposite.

Jason and Jordan were six pounds each at birth. Their development in the beginning months was textbook perfect. Jason began saying, "bye bye" and waving before his brother. By age eighteen months, however, his acquired skills faded and then disappeared. While Jordan was developing social and vocabulary skills, Jason was locked in a world of his own. He repeatedly flapped his hands, as he sat for hours and matched blocks by size and color, or drew geometric shapes on paper. His brother, Jordan, was protective and often spoke for

him in public. On one occasion when they were seven years old, a clerk asked a question of both boys as their faces peered over the counter. The ever mindful verbal twin piped up quickly by retorting, "My brother is *artistic* so I will answer for both of us."

Jason was diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorder with autistic tendencies. This is an umbrella term used for the autism spectrum. No one knows what causes autism, although it is now estimated that a staggering one in five hundred children will develop this disorder. Autism has risen dramatically within the past few decades to epidemic proportions. People with autism typically have impaired social interactions, impaired communication, and restrictive and repetitive behaviors. To this day, there is no effective treatment or cure.



Despite his unique abilities, you may wonder why I have taken this burden upon myself—why I have put up with Jason's silence and his social inadequacies. I put up with him because I love him dearly. And, I put up with him because he is my ten-year-old son.