

Leska Emerald Adams' 'New Found Aspirgations'

A photo story of Asperger's Syndrome by Leah Nash

BY LESKA EMERALD ADAMS
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The first time I read about another being having anything near the same experiences and consciousness as me was the vampire revelation, as a teenager reading Anne Rice's first vampire book, "Interview with the Vampire." It was a delicious lightning bolt recognition that let me know that somebody out there could relate, albeit a mythical character in fiction.

My abiding similarity to Rice's vampire is an inner voracious extreme pleasure in life, an amazed appreciation and drinking in of detail, endless close up fascination with beauty and the Spirit within God's pristine creation. The drumbeat of progress, of insatiable learning, curiosity, drive for improvement pulses a subterranean rhythm under the current of my existence, leading and driving me, unseen but overwhelming, sustaining, giving rise to intense joy and core enrichment. But, also, when uncontrolled, overtakes all else and leads to executive dysfunction, but a very happy interior.

Still have never actually met anybody on Earth in person that I can recognize as being similar in the most fundamental prevailing aspects.

Sometimes I briefly wonder if I am autistic because of previous inner inclinations, or it's a karmic result of lifetimes spent relishing the interior life, or if it's God's protection in this life, underlying whatever organic chemical biological environmental or other causes for this neurological abnormality which is becoming epidemic. Autism has its blessings as well as challenges. The intrinsic ability to focus, concentrate, obsess is an invaluable boon to the spiritual life and yields the most fantastic adventurous inner results wrapped in an ever-new peace.

I was able to get a doctor's prescription for a service dog. My spatial disconnect and clumsiness was deplorable, could not walk in a straight line, needed help with balance maneuvering navigating, needed to be given water TP and barf bucket constantly, needed a loyal, loving, cheerful servicefully entity to help me back on my feet, among many other necessary tasks. Also, transitions are torture for me; the autistic proclivity toward repetition and staying in the groove held me prisoner to my intense one-track joys and absorptions. I need transition cues so compellingly enthusiastically tuned to joy that the switch is bearable. And then the next activity becomes infused with that welcome beautiful happiness, in the zone, zinging with accomplishment and functional pleasure, then help onto the next thing.

Sensory issues with autism, especially hearing, for me. Sensory input is processed differently. Gaps in neuron connections in some areas with over burgeoning connections in others. Autism = neurological wiring is different, broad spectrum, no two people alike, affects each uniquely. Some signs that autism



may be an evolutionary advantage in the direction humans are progressing in the info age. Nerds and geeks reign and rise, hold the keys to advancement, to thinking creating producing outside the box.

I love to kayak, more motivated by kayaking and going way out into nature unblemished by idiotic man's destruction than anything else, be surrounded by glorious God unobstructed. Kayaking can be hazardous so it is recommended to always go with another kayaker. But being autistic, the social connection is not there, so need a water rescue buddy. Decades ago I watched in astonishment at George Rogers Park, a sight too splendid for earth; teams of people and huge furry amazing dogs practicing water rescues, working together with such precision and intelligence, such intuitive teamwork, vowed then: Someday I am going to be part of this.

The Newfoundland. Strongest dog on the planet, webbed paws, largest lung capacity, constructed by centuries of waterwork evolution to be the most powerful efficient swimming dog, gentle giants, noble gorgeous bears, hilarious sweet personalities, intelligent, loving, loyal, serviceful, versatile, endurance pullers: the perfect service dog for my needs. Searched the globe for a Newf with good health and water lineage.

Since getting Orka in February 2010, my life has dramatically changed and improved. Orka is helping me immeasurably. My goal was to

breathe and stay alive; now it is to get completely better and return to full functioning. Because my condition is changing rapidly his service tasks are changing. Training will be lifelong, ongoing. The autism lends to desire to be still, to live only the inner life, so I have to challenge myself physically to function and overcome outer inertia.

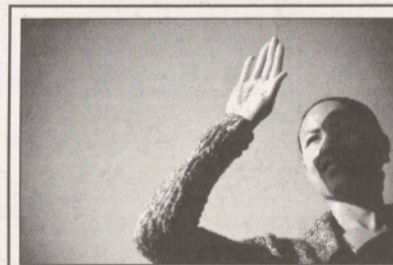
Walking, Nordic power walking, hiking, backpacking, snowshoeing, skiing, kayaking, swimming, all with Orka pulling me, known as dog powered driving joring, doing/starting / learning it all and loving it! Also, I will be biking and Rollerblading with him beside me, and scootering with him pulling. And tracking. I am teaching Orka water rescue so we swim and kayak together. He is learning to pull a cart and wagon, drafting, which is very helpful when one cannot yet drive a car. We go everywhere via bus and Max. We are having a blast together and I am getting better every day.

Learning (again) I had autism later in life — I am 51 — has been a consciousness earthquake. So many revelations and explanations. It has changed my thinking, my mental orientations with respect to the world. A huge relief relax valve: no longer even trying to fit in or connect. Tension of puzzlement gone. I know I'm incredibly fortunate to be alive, to have Lynn providing for me and God and guru giving me the opportunity to get better.

See photos on pages 8 and 9



Leska Emerald Adams, 51, lives with friend, boss and domestic partner Lynn Szender and Leska's Newfoundland service dog, Orka, in Oregon City. Diagnosed with autism in fourth grade, Leska says, "I knew I was different but I didn't know why and I had no idea how different I was. I realized that everything I wanted socially, to talk to other little kids and play with them, never happened. It did not happen." Leska's autism symptoms were not at the forefront until an unexpected divorce led to an autism regression and subsequent Asperger's diagnosis almost 40 years later.



Part IV: Pretending to be normal

Elesia Ashkenazy is many things — a mother, wife, ballet dancer, writer. And yes, she is on the spectrum of autism. Her story and Parts I, II and III in the series can be seen at www.streetroots.wordpress.com.

"I don't need to be fixed, and I don't need to be cured. And I wouldn't want to be fixed or cured. I want to be accommodated and I want to be respected. And I want to be understood." — Elesia Ashkenazy



Regional Arts & Culture Council

This is the fifth in a special series on five individuals with Asperger's Syndrome as told through the lens of photographer Leah Nash. The project was made possible in partnership with the Regional Arts & Culture Council in an effort to chronicle the diversity of this complex diagnosis of autism, illustrating the challenges and beauty of an unconventional life.

About this project:

Autism is the fastest growing disability in the U.S. with an economic impact of more than \$90 billion. The Center for Disease Control reports that now one in 110 children are being classified with autism spectrum disorders, compared to one in 10,000 in the 1970s, and according to the Autism Society of Oregon, our state has one of the highest rates of autistic diagnoses in the country.

The objective of this series is to explore the diversity and complexity that exists across this spectrum, for it is often said that people with autism are like snowflakes — no two alike. This work is especially relevant given controversial revisions proposing to do away with the Asperger's diagnosis altogether in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the diagnostic encyclopedia of American psychiatry.

Leah Nash is a documentary photographer based in Portland. More of her work can be found at www.LeahNash.com.