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Building oneself with a unique double background:

autism and a foster child journey

By JANE GONÇALVES

In the early hours of a gloomy Saturday morning in the fall of 2022, at the age of 39, I stand in front of my bathroom mirror, washing my face, when suddenly, a revelation hits me: "But I'm autistic too." "Too" because three days earlier, I had just realized that my 11-year-old son was autistic. For a fraction of a second, I detach from my body. Standing there, staring into space, I observe myself from the outside, motionless. My breath stops. So that was what explained my persistent feeling of being different, far beyond my past as a foster child,

which I had been working on in therapy. Eureka, everything finally made sense.

A Different Childhood

From the age of 6 months, I was placed in the care of child protection services in France. Coming from a "family known to the authorities," my mother, a single parent, faced insurmountable challenges in her role. Just before my Eureka moment, I told my therapist: "My mother was strange, but I still can't pinpoint her

condition." In hindsight, I'm convinced she was also autistic.

I grew up in the same foster family for fourteen years. Far from being a model child, I had few friends and a fiery temperament. I nurtured "strange" interests, like memorizing all 100 French departments (administrative regions), even though it wasn't part of the school curriculum. I would transcribe dialogues from my favorite TV shows to decode how social interactions functioned. At school, although generally bright, I struggled to interpret authors' intentions in French literature lessons – a complete mystery to me.

Then, at 14, I was removed overnight from my foster home following a judicial report filed against the family. It was a relief, as it allowed me to escape the abuse and alcoholism of my foster father. What followed were nearly 4 years of navigating psychiatric hospitals, group homes, and rehabilitation centers (for physical health issues). It may not sound like it, but I did have some good moments! Yet psychological instability loomed relentlessly: untreated depression (my first, at 13), suicide attempts, self-harm, crises (hysteria: as noted in one of my medical records I secretly read), and post-traumatic stress disorder. Despite early psychiatric care, no one identified the root of my struggles. At no point was autism considered. Probably, among other things, because I was a girl. It's well known: "girls aren't autistic." The fact that I carried the weight of multiple traumas further complicated the picture. A part of me thought, from the age of 13, that I wouldn't make it to adulthood, so much did life seem to reject me.

Perseverance as a Lifeline

Despite all these instabilities, apart from the crisis moments, there was an unshakeable academic perseverance. School was my sanctuary; I loved learning. I had been told when I was younger: "If you want to succeed in life, you need to go to school." I took it literally and rigidly: no school = life on the street. The fear of not surviving on the streets pushed me to complete a Ph.D. in social psychology. It's funny when you think about it. Another "rigidity" in my thinking was considering that "I had no choice." I didn't take any pride in my academic perseverance because I wasn't doing it for myself: I had no other choice. I would later understand in therapy that I had made the choice to have no choice. Phrased that way, it reclaims some power over your story.

My perseverance was put to the test – between financial struggles, a lack of social support, housing challenges, and health issues – it wasn't easy. I could clearly see that I was struggling more than others. Unfortunately, school didn't always help. Studying *L'Assommoir* by Émile Zola for the French Baccalaureate particularly shook me. I, who had invested everything in school, was now being taught social determinism – the idea that our destiny is determined by our social background. According to the lessons, I was destined to become an alcoholic and possibly homeless. If the school said so, it must be true! I felt rejected by my lifeline, my only secure attachment. This stayed with me for years, looping endlessly in my mind. I don't blame the learning itself, but the lack of hopeful messages that accompanied the statements.

A New Life in Quebec

With my Ph.D. in hand, I moved to Quebec with my partner and baby. My status as an immigrant brought me temporary peace. My eccentricities seemed to be excused as cultural quirks. What Quebecers didn't know was that these same traits – like my frankness or naivety – had been criticized in France. Driven by the desire to finally thrive, I began therapy, not just for myself but for my young son, who displayed very challenging behaviors: meltdowns, anger, school exclusions, relationship struggles. The list was long. One question haunted me: how could my past still be so present today, even affecting my son? Something wasn't working!

From his earliest years, I raised concerns during pediatric visits. "He's different." The doctor asked if he played with toy cars. "He doesn't play with cars," I replied. "Does he respond to his name?" "Generally." I sensed she suspected autism, but she quickly dismissed the idea. The years went by, and my son remained isolated at school, yet no one was really concerned, neither at the CLSC nor at school, especially since he wasn't violent anymore. The diagnosis came recently, after a chain of events: autism level 2 for him, level 1 for me, confirmed separately on the same day at different clinics, shortly after my Eureka! It was a way of telling him: "We're both autistic. We are in this together." Sharing this news with those around me hasn't always been easy. Autism is still poorly understood and known. That's why I recently launched an awareness page: abcduspectre.ca.



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Strengths and Challenges

Autism is not just a series of deficits. It also brings unique strengths: a way of thinking "outside the box," the ability to categorize quickly, a sharp eye for detail, and specific interests that can sometimes be exhausting but also bring unexpected miracles. For three years, I managed to work full-time at the university while also running a communications company I had founded. On top of that, for 8 months, I was writing a manuscript about my journey and the lessons life had taught me (to be published in 2025 by Performance Édition). All of this while raising an autistic preteen.

I also see strengths in having been placed in foster care. A sharp sense of resourcefulness, an unusually high tolerance for hardship, great independence, and special empathy for those facing life's difficulties are among the takeaways from this journey. Also, a greater appreciation for life and its small joys. So, every night or almost every night, I take a moment to thank life and my lucky star.

It's sometimes difficult to distinguish between the challenges related to autism and those stemming from being a foster child, especially when the placement occurred under difficult circumstances. The consequences of both sometimes intertwine. For example, I have a great ease in detaching myself from people. This can be explained both by the attachment issues inherent in my development and by the strong dichotomous thinking in autism: I'm usually invested at 100% or 0%, rarely in between.

These two particularities of my journey will likely affect my life expectancy, according to data in the literature. I believe it. When I was 20, I felt like I had lived as

much as someone aged 50. I often feel exhausted by social situations despite my hyperactivity. That's why I try to take care of myself. I have exciting professional activities, a valuable social network, a good lifestyle, and a stable romantic relationship. I also continue my therapeutic work to resolve past traumas and learn to better understand the world around me and better equip myself – for example, by exploring the famous gray areas or learning to lie to avoid hurting others. I feel incredibly lucky to be able to afford this private therapy work, as I am fully aware that it's not within everyone's reach.

A Liberating Acceptance

Today, our respective autism diagnoses allow me to support my son with more serenity and empathy. I no longer desperately chase normality. I've finally understood that this wasn't the right battle. I'm learning to judge my needs less (like listening to a song on repeat for hours) and to avoid unnecessarily exposure to draining situations (like overly noisy environments). I'm also trying to abandon social camouflage... though reluctantly. Indeed, since uncovering the unconscious strategies I'd developed to meet social expectations, I struggle to apply them as effectively as before. So, I sometimes seem more autistic than I did before! My son has also made enormous progress, I am very impressed.

I can't change my past or my condition, but I can choose to accept them with kindness. I can also choose to do something useful with them – this is exactly what motivated the writing of my book. My goal: to light the path for others dealing with difficult life journeys and to give them hope that one day, a better life is possible. 🌸