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Q2 *Why do people with autism talk so loudly and weirdly?*

People often tell me that when I'm talking to myself my voice is really loud, even though I still can't say what I need to, and even though my voice at other times is way too soft. This is one of those things I can't control. It really gets me down. Why can't I fix it?

When I'm talking in a weird voice, I'm not doing it on purpose. Sure, there are some times when I find the sound of my own voice comforting, when I'll use familiar words or easy-to-say phrases. But the voice I can't control is different. This one blurts out, not because I want it to; it's more like a reflex.

A reflex reacting to what? To what I've just seen, in some cases, or to some old memories. When my weird voice gets triggered, it's almost impossible to hold it back—and if I try, it actually hurts, almost as if I'm strangling my own throat.

I'd be okay with my weird voice on my own, but I'm aware that it bothers other people. How often have the

strange sounds coming out of my mouth embarrassed me nearly to death? Honest, I want to be nice and calm and quiet too! But even if we're ordered to keep our mouths shut or to be quiet, we simply don't know how. Our voices are like our breathing, I feel, just coming out of our mouths, unconsciously.

Q3 *Why do you ask the same questions over and over?*

It's true; I always ask the same questions. "What day is it today?" or "Is it a school day tomorrow?" Simple matters like these, I ask again and again. I don't repeat my question because I didn't understand—in fact, even as I'm asking, I know I do understand.

The reason why? Because I very quickly forget what it is I've just heard. Inside my head there really isn't such a big difference between what I was told just now, and what I heard a long, long time ago.

So I do understand things, but my way of remembering them works differently from everyone else's. I imagine a normal person's memory is arranged continuously, like a line. My memory, however, is more like a pool of dots. I'm always "picking up" these dots—by asking my questions—so I can arrive back at the memory that the dots represent.

But there's another reason for our repeated questioning: it lets us play with words. We aren't good at conversation, and however hard we try, we'll never speak as

effortlessly as you do. The big exception, however, is words or phrases we're very familiar with. Repeating these is great fun. It's like a game of catch with a ball. Unlike the words we're ordered to say, repeating questions we already know the answers to can be a pleasure—it's playing with sound and rhythm.



Q7 *Why do you speak in that peculiar way?*

Sometimes, people with autism speak with a strange intonation, or use language in a different way. Non-autistic people can sort out what they want to say in real time, while they're having their conversation. But in our case, the words we want to say and the words we *can* say don't always match that well. Which is why our speech can sound a bit odd, I guess. When there's a gap between what I'm thinking and what I'm saying, it's because the words coming out of my mouth are the only ones I can access at that time. These words are either available because I'm always using them or because they left a lasting impression on me at some point in the past.

Some of you may think we read aloud with a strange intonation, too. This is because we can't read the story and imagine the story at the same time. Just the act of reading costs us a lot of effort—sorting out the words and somehow voicing them is already a very tall order.

More practice will help, however. Please never laugh at us, even when we're doing a less than great job.

Q8 Why do you take ages to answer questions?

You normal people, you talk at an incredible speed. Between thinking something in your head and saying it takes you just a split second. To us, that's like magic!

So is there something wrong with the circuitry in our brains? Life's been tough for people with autism, pretty much forever, yet nobody's really been able to identify the causes of autism. For sure, it takes us ages to respond to what the other person has just said. The reason we need so much time isn't necessarily because we haven't understood, but because by the time it's our turn to speak, the reply we wanted to make has often upped and vanished from our heads.

I don't know if this is making a whole lot of sense to you. Once our reply has disappeared, we can never get it back again. *What did he say again? How was I going to answer her question?* . . . Search me! And all the while, we're being bombarded by yet more questions. I end up thinking, *This is just hopeless*. It's as if I'm drowning in a flood of words.

Q9 Should we listen to every single word you say?

Making sounds with your mouth isn't the same thing as communication, right? Lots of people can't get their heads fully around this, I think. Isn't there a belief out there that if a person is using verbal language, it follows that the person is saying what they want to say? It's thanks to this belief that those of us with autism get even more locked up inside ourselves.

Just because some of us can make sounds or utter words, it doesn't follow automatically that what we've said is really what we wanted to say. Even with straightforward "Yes" or "No" questions, we make mistakes. It happens all the time to me that the other person misunderstands or misinterprets what I've just said.

Because I'm barely able to hold a conversation, fixing what's gone wrong is beyond my powers. Every time this happens, I end up hating myself for being so useless and clamming up. Please don't assume that every single word we say is what we intended. This makes communication

between us difficult, I know—we can't even use gestures—but we really badly want you to understand what's going on inside our hearts and minds. And basically, my feelings are pretty much the same as yours.

Q10 *Why can't you have a proper conversation?*

For a long time I've been wondering why us people with autism can't talk properly. I can never say what I really want to. Instead, verbal junk that hasn't got anything to do with anything comes pouring out of my mouth. This used to get me down badly, and I couldn't help envying all those people who speak without even trying. Our feelings are the same as everyone else's, but we can't find a way to express them.

We don't even have proper control over our own bodies. Both staying still and moving when we're told to are tricky—it's as if we're remote-controlling a faulty robot. On top of this, we're always getting told off, and we can't even explain ourselves. I used to feel abandoned by the whole world.

Please don't judge us from the outside only. I don't know why we can't talk properly. But it's not that we won't talk—it's that we can't talk and we're suffering because of it. All on our own, there's nothing we can do about this

problem, and there were times when I used to wonder why Non-Speaking Me had ever been born. But having started with text communication, now I'm able to express myself via the alphabet grid and a computer, and being able to share what I think allows me to understand that I, too, exist in this world as a human being.

Can you imagine how your life would be if you couldn't talk?

The Mystery of the Missing Words

Us kids with autism, we never use enough words, and it's these missing words that can cause all the trouble. In this example, three friends are talking about their classmate who has autism:

"Hey, she just said, 'All of us'!"

"So . . . that must mean she wants to join in with us, yeah?"

"Dunno. Maybe she wants to know if we're all doing it."

In fact, the autistic girl's 'all of us' came from something the teacher had said earlier on in the day: "Tomorrow, all of us are going to the park." What the girl wanted to find out was *when* they were going. She tried to do this by repeating the only words she could use, "all of us." Here you can see how our missing words tweak your imagina-

tions and send you off on wild-goose chases, here, there and everywhere.

Honestly, what a mysterious language us kids with autism speak!

Q11 *Why don't you make eye contact when you're talking?*

True, we don't look at people's eyes very much. "Look whoever you're talking with properly in the eye," I've been told, again and again and again, but I still can't do it. To me, making eye contact with someone I'm talking to feels a bit creepy, so I tend to avoid it.

Then where exactly am I looking? You might well suppose that we're just looking down, or at the general background. But you'd be wrong. What we're actually looking at is the other person's voice. Voices may not be visible things, but we're trying to listen to the other person with all of our sense organs. When we're fully focused on working out what the heck it is you're saying, our sense of sight sort of zones out. If you can't make out what you're seeing, it's the same as not seeing anything at all.

What's bothered me for a long time is this idea people have that so long as we're keeping eye contact while they're talking to us, that alone means we're taking in every word. Ha! If only that was all it took, my disability would have been cured a long, long time ago . . .

Q12 *You seem to dislike holding hands with people.*

It's not that we don't like holding hands, it's just that, if we happen to spot something interesting, we can't help but dash off and let go of the hand we were holding. I don't even remember letting it go until I hear the other person say, "Huh—it looks like he doesn't want to hold my hand."

That really used to depress me. But because I can't explain to the person why I let go of his or her hand, and since I do in fact find it hard to keep holding the hand for long, there's not much I can do about the misunderstanding.

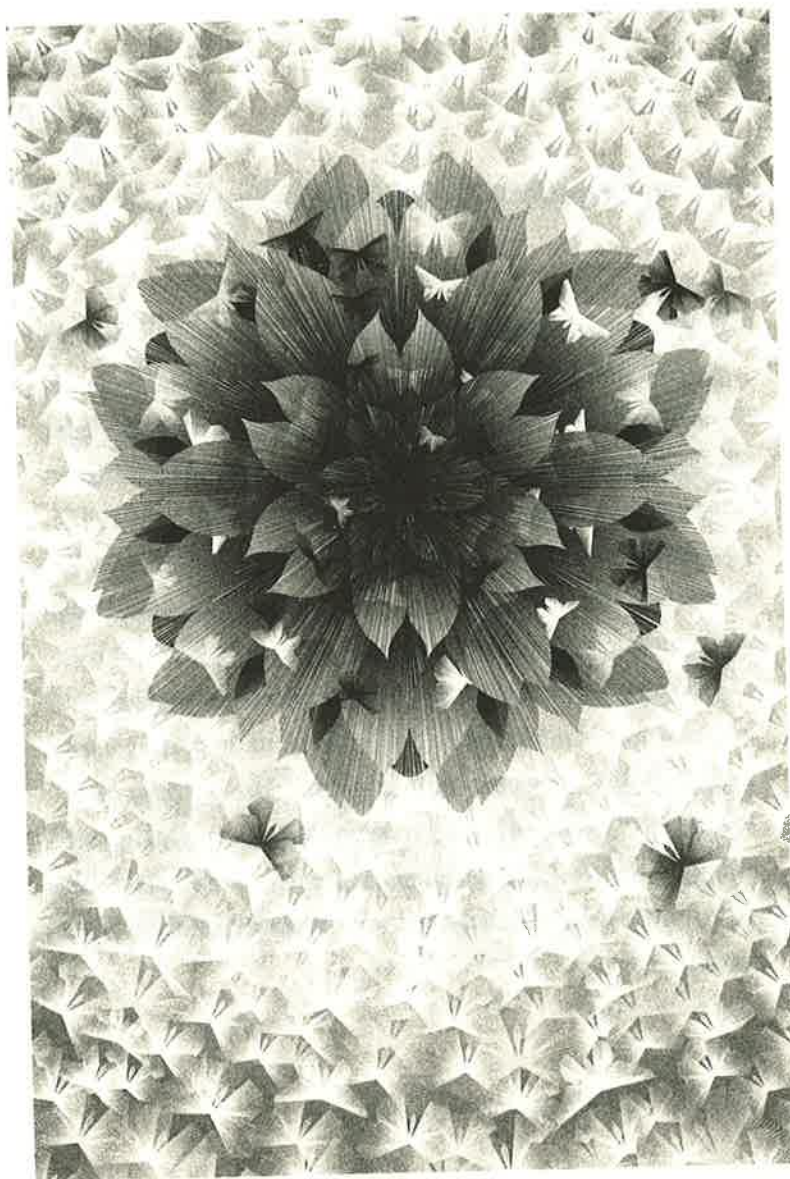
It's really not a matter of whose hand I'm holding, or even of the act of holding hands itself. It's this impulse kids with autism have to dart off to anything that looks remotely interesting: this is what we have to tackle.

Q13 *Do you prefer to be on your own?*

"Ah, don't worry about him—he'd rather be on his own."

How many times have we heard this? I can't believe that anyone born as a human being really wants to be left all on their own, not really. No, for people with autism, what we're anxious about is that we're causing trouble for the rest of you, or even getting on your nerves. *This* is why it's hard for us to stay around other people. This is why we often end up being left on our own.

The truth is, we'd love to be with other people. But because things never, ever go right, we end up getting used to being alone, without even noticing this is happening. Whenever I overhear someone remark how much I prefer being on my own, it makes me feel desperately lonely. It's as if they're deliberately giving me the cold-shoulder treatment.



Q14 *Why do you ignore us when we're talking to you?*

If someone's talking to me from somewhere far off, I don't notice. You're probably thinking, "Same here," yes? A major headache for me, however, is that even when someone's right here in front of me, I still don't notice when they're talking to me.

"Not noticing," however, is not the same as "deliberately ignoring." But often people assume I must be arrogant or "retarded." People around me always make me realize that I'm being spoken to by saying things like, "Say hello back, then, Naoki," or, "What do you say, then?" So whenever that happens I just repeat what I've been told to say, like a mynah bird learning a new word. Even though I feel guilty toward the person who has spoken to me, I can't even apologize, so I end up feeling miserable and ashamed that I can't manage a proper human relationship.

A person who's looking at a mountain far away doesn't notice the prettiness of a dandelion in front of them. A person who's looking at a dandelion in front of them doesn't

see the beauty of a mountain far away. To us, people's voices are a bit like that. It's very difficult for us to know someone's there and that they're talking to us, just by their voice.

So it would help us a great deal if you could just use our names first to get our attention, before you start talking to us.

Q15 *Why are your facial expressions so limited?*

Our expressions only seem limited because you think differently from us. It's troubled me for quite a while that I can't laugh along when everyone else is laughing. For a person with autism, the idea of what's fun or funny doesn't match yours, I guess. More than that, there are times when situations feel downright hopeless to us—our daily lives are so full of tough stuff to tackle. At other times, if we're surprised, or feel tense, or embarrassed, we just freeze up and become unable to show any emotion whatsoever.

Criticizing people, winding them up, making idiots of them or fooling them doesn't make people with autism laugh. What makes us smile from the inside is seeing something beautiful, or a memory that makes us laugh. This generally happens when there's nobody watching us. And at night, on our own, we might burst out laughing underneath the duvet, or roar with laughter in an empty room . . . when we don't need to think about other people or anything else, that's when we wear our natural expressions.

Slip Sliding Away

"I can run faster than any of us!" said the Hare, boinging away.

"But we had a race a long time ago to settle this and I won," said the Tortoise, crossly. "I'm the fastest."

None of the other animals was at all interested. "Ah, who cares?"

But the Hare insisted on having another race, so the Tortoise finally gave in and turned up at the starting line.

The race between the Hare and the Tortoise was about to start.

"Ready, set, go!"

The Hare dashed away at terrific speed.

The Tortoise slipped and flipped over onto his back, at which all the other animals ran up to the Tortoise to see if he was all right: "Poor you, are you okay? You'd better go home and rest."

And so they all carried the Tortoise back to his house.

The Hare reached the finish line.

Nobody was waiting but himself.

Q18 When you're on one of your highs, what's going through your mind?

Sometimes people with autism start laughing like a hyena or appear to be having enormous fun on their own without any obvious reason for it. You must be wondering, *What on Earth's gotten into him?*

At times like these, we're having "imaginings." Or not quite imaginings, but we experience pictures or scenes in our minds that pop up out of nowhere. Maybe it's the memory of something that made us laugh, or maybe it's a page from a book we read.

This might be hard for you to understand. But try to see these "highs" as a stronger version of those times when you remember something funny and can't help but chuckle about it.

Q19 *What are your flashback memories like?*

We do remember what we did, when, where, who we did it with and things like this, but these memories are all scattershot and never connected in the right order. The trouble with scattered memories is that sometimes they replay themselves in my head as if they had only just taken place—and when this happens, the emotions I felt originally all come rushing back to me, like a sudden storm. This is a flashback memory.

I know I have lots of pleasant memories, but my flashback memories are always bad ones, and from out of the blue I get incredibly distressed, burst into tears or just start panicking. Never mind that it's a memory from ages ago—the same helpless feeling I had then overflows and floods out and it just won't stop.

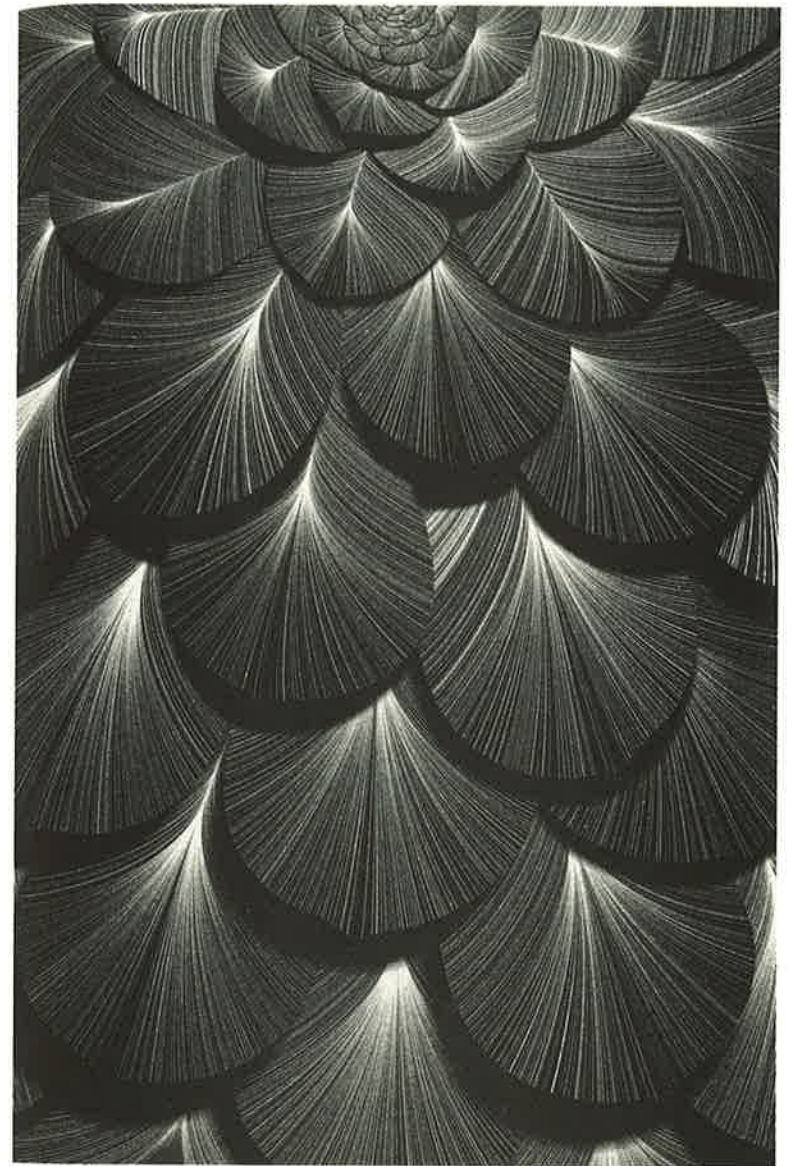
So when this happens, just let us have a good cry, and then we can get back onto our feet. Maybe the racket we make will get on your nerves a bit, but please try to understand what we're going through, and stay with us.

Q20 *Why do you make a huge fuss over tiny mistakes?*

When I see I've made a mistake, my mind shuts down. I cry, I scream, I make a huge fuss, and I just can't think straight about anything anymore. However tiny the mistake, for me it's a massive deal, as if Heaven and Earth have been turned upside down. For example, when I pour water into a glass, I can't stand it if I spill even a drop.

It must be hard for you to understand why this could make me so unhappy. And even to me, I know really that it's not such a big deal. But it's almost impossible for me to keep my emotions contained. Once I've made a mistake, the fact of it starts rushing toward me like a tsunami. And then, like trees or houses being destroyed by the tsunami, I get destroyed by the shock. I get swallowed up in the moment, and can't tell the right response from the wrong response. All I know is that I have to get out of the situation as soon as I can, so I don't drown. To get away, I'll do anything. Crying, screaming and throwing things, hitting out even . . .

Finally, finally, I'll calm down and come back to myself. Then I see no sign of the tsunami attack—only the wreckage I've made. And when I see that, I hate myself. I just hate myself.



Q21 *Why don't you do what you're told right away?*

There are times when I can't do what I want to, or what I have to. It doesn't mean I don't want to do it. I just can't get it all together, somehow. Even performing one straightforward task, I can't get started as smoothly as you can. Here's how I have to go about things:

1. I think about what I'm going to do.
2. I visualize how I'm going to do it.
3. I encourage myself to get going.

How smoothly I can do the job depends on how smoothly this process goes.

There are times when I can't act, even though I really, badly want to. This is when my body is beyond my control. I don't mean I'm ill or anything. It's as if my whole body, except for my soul, feels as if it belongs to somebody else and I have zero control over it. I don't think you could ever imagine what an agonizing sensation this is.

You can't always tell just by looking at people with autism, but we never really feel that our bodies are our own. They're always acting up and going outside our control. Stuck inside them, we're struggling so hard to make them do what we tell them.

Earthling and Autisman

I was traveling with my family to Hokkaido by airplane. It was the first time I'd flown for many years, and I was surprised to find that the sensation of gravity pulling at my body was really pleasant. I hadn't noticed this the time I'd flown before, because I was still a little kid back then. Anyway, I made up this very short story . . .

Once upon a time on a small, green, quiet planet.

Autisman: So—welcome to my home world.

Earthling: Don't you feel weighed down? It feels as if I've got weights strapped to my arms and legs.

Autisman: Ah, but on your planet, I always feel as if I'm swimming around in space, weightlessly.

Earthling: Okay. Now I understand you. I really understand.

If only there was a planet somewhere with a gravitational pull perfect for people with autism, then we'd be able to move around freely.

Q25 What's the reason you jump?

What do you think I'm feeling when I'm jumping up and down clapping my hands? I bet you think I'm not really feeling anything much beyond the manic glee all over my face.

But when I'm jumping, it's as if my feelings are going upward to the sky. Really, my urge to be swallowed up by the sky is enough to make my heart quiver. When I'm jumping, I can feel my body parts really well, too—my bounding legs and my clapping hands—and that makes me feel so, so good.

So that's one reason why I jump, and recently I've noticed another reason. People with autism react physically to feelings of happiness and sadness. So when something happens that affects me emotionally, my body seizes up as if struck by lightning.

"Seizing up" doesn't mean that my muscles literally get stiff and immobile—rather, it means that I'm not free to move the way I want. So by jumping up and down, it's as if

I'm shaking loose the ropes that are tying up my body. When I jump, I feel lighter, and I think the reason my body is drawn skyward is that the motion makes me want to change into a bird and fly off to some faraway place.

But constrained both by ourselves and by the people around us, all we can do is tweet-tweet, flap our wings and hop around in a cage. Ah, if only I could just flap my wings and soar away, into the big blue yonder, over the hills and far away!

Q26 *Why do you write letters in the air?*

People with autism often write letters in the air. *Are you trying to tell us something?* or *Are you thinking about something?* you must be wondering, I guess. In my case, I'm writing to confirm what I want to remember. As I write, I'm recalling what I've seen—not as scenes, but as letters, signs and symbols. Letters, symbols and signs are my closest allies because they never change. They just stay as they are, fixed in my memory. And whenever we're lonely or happy, in the same way that you might half hum a song to yourself, we summon up our letters. When I'm writing them out, I can forget everything else. I'm not alone when I'm with letters. Letters and symbols are much easier for us to grasp than spoken words, and we can be with them whenever we want.



Q27 *Why do people with autism often cup their ears? Is it when there's a lot of noise?*

There are certain noises you don't notice but that really get to us. The problem here is that you don't understand how these noises affect us. It's not quite that the noises grate on our nerves. It's more to do with a fear that if we keep listening, we'll lose all sense of where we are. At times like these, it feels as if the ground is shaking and the landscape around us starts coming to get us, and it's absolutely terrifying. So cupping our ears is a measure we take to protect ourselves and get back our grip on where we are.

The noises that get to people with autism vary from person to person. I don't know how we'd cope if we couldn't cup our ears. Me too, I cup my ears sometimes, though I've gradually gotten used to the noises by pressing my hands over my ears less and less heavily. Some people can overcome the problem by slowly becoming accustomed to the noises, I guess. What matters most is that we learn to feel safe and secure even when the noises strike us.

Q36 *Why do you like spinning?*

Us people with autism often enjoy spinning ourselves around and around. We like spinning whatever object comes to hand, for that matter. Can you understand what's so much fun about spinning?

Everyday scenery doesn't rotate, so things that do spin simply fascinate us. Just watching spinning things fills us with a sort of everlasting bliss—for the time we sit watching them, they rotate with perfect regularity. Whatever object we spin, this is always true. Unchanging things are comforting, and there's something beautiful about that.

Q37 *Why do you flap your fingers and hands in front of your face?*

Flapping our fingers and hands in front of our faces allows the light to enter our eyes in a pleasant, filtered fashion. Light that reaches us like this feels soft and gentle, like moonlight. But "unfiltered" direct light sort of "needles" its way into the eyeballs of people with autism in sharp straight lines, so we see too many points of light. This actually makes our eyes hurt.

This said, we couldn't get by without light. Light wipes away our tears, and when we're bathed in light, we're happy. Perhaps we just love how its particles pour down on us. Light particles somehow console us. I admit this is something I can't quite explain using logic.

Q38 *Why do you line up your toy cars and blocks?*

Lining things up is the best fun. Watching running water is great fun, too. Other kids seem to enjoy games about pretending and make-believe, but as a person with autism I never really see the point of them.

What I care about—in fact I'm pretty obsessive about this—is the order things come in, and different ways of lining them up. It's actually the lines and the surfaces of things like jigsaw puzzles that we love, and things like that. When we're playing in this way, our brains feel refreshed and clear.

Q39 *Why do you like being in the water?*

We just want to go back. To the distant, distant past. To a primeval era, in fact, before human beings even existed. All people with autism feel the same about this one, I reckon. Aquatic life-forms came into being and evolved, but why did they then have to emerge onto dry land, and turn into human beings who chose to lead lives ruled by time? These are real mysteries to me.

In the water it's so quiet and I'm so free and happy there. Nobody hassles us in the water, and it's as if we've got all the time in the world. Whether we stay in one place or whether we're swimming about, when we're in the water we can really be at one with the pulse of time. Outside of the water there's always too much stimulation for our eyes and our ears, and it's impossible for us to guess how long one second is or how long an hour takes.

People with autism have no freedom. The reason is that we are a different kind of human, born with primeval senses. We are outside the normal flow of time, we can't

Q46 *Do you enjoy your free time?*

So what do *you* do in your free time? Because for people with autism, free time is in fact un-free time. "You can do whatever you feel like doing now," someone might tell us. But actually, it's pretty hard for us to find something we do feel like doing, not just like that. If we happen to see some toys or books we're always playing with or reading, then sure, we'll pick them up. Thing is, however, that's not so much what we *want* to do as something we *can* do. Playing with familiar items is comforting because we already know what to do with them, so then, of course, people watching us assume, *Aha, so that's what he likes to do in his free time . . .* What I really want to do, however, is to get stuck in some difficult book or to debate some issue or other.

We are misunderstood, and we'd give anything if only we could be understood properly. People with autism would be suffering breakdowns over this—all the time—if we weren't holding ourselves in so tightly. Please, understand what we really are, and what we're going through.

