Larry Bissonnette, Jonathan Lerman: Two Autistic Artists Teach Us What It Means To Be Human

By Estée Klar-Wolfov

ability

1 a: the quality or state of being able; esp: physical, mental, or legal power to perform
b: competence in doing: SKILL
2: natural aptitude or acquired proficiency

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It is this notion of ability versus disability that has come to mind after meeting with Larry Bissonnette and Jonathan Lerman in Burlington, Vermont and then Vestal, New York. I visited Larry and Jonathan in order to curate their artwork for the exhibition and upcoming event in October: The Joy of Autism: Redefining Ability and Quality of Life.

I climb the narrow stairs of a barn-like structure housing other workshops. It is hot and sticky; the air is thick with dust. Larry watches me approach and I smile excitedly. He leans in to me with his forearm, and returns the smile—his version of a handshake.

I am so happy to meet him in person, finally—an admirer of his awesome insight and poetic way of describing things. Larry has been featured in a documentary by Douglas Biklen and in How to Look At Outsider Art, by Lyle Rexer. After reading about a person for so long, they become a kind of celebrity—I feel so familiar in his presence, yet am a complete stranger to him. It is an invasion of sorts, being here, meeting him, looking through the hundreds of paintings so neatly organized in his studio. This is Larry's inner and outer worlds.

I am tentative and try to be delicate within his space as I am the outsider today. Larry has been categorized by the artworld, like many other self-taught artists, as an “Outsider Artist.” The term is unsettling. It does not achieve respect for the work without his autism label, but rather, continues to segregate. There is a cameraman with me. Larry, I'm told, likes to be on camera, but we are all quiet, introducing ourselves slowly, meeting his assistants, letting the minutes determine what is to be said, and how much.

Larry is standing near the door, drawing arcane lines with his finger through the air, like the conductor of an
orchestra. "Baby blue door," he interjects, as I wander around the room, pointing to the door next to him. "Baby blue door."

"Does that have a meaning?" I ask Pascal Cheng, Larry's Facilitated Communication assistant since 1992.

"They are repetitious phrases, a breakdown in communication. They don't have any specific meaning," he tells me. I think about the times when my own son Adam, now four, is scripting—when he places a phrase into a space or a moment, how it can make sense even though it is repetitive, like he is enraptured with the sound and the melody of the words.

I ask Larry, "What is happening for you when you loop your language—when you say Baby Blue Door, for instance. Does it have meaning for you?"

Larry looks at me, and I can tell he acknowledges every word, leaning in and listening closely. "Ah!" he says, and promptly begins to type on a portable laptop that Pascal pulls out for him. "Pale imitation of real feelings," he writes.

At the studio, and after the introductions, I begin to feel comfortable enough to look through Larry's work. He is watching me, arms folded, smiling. I ask him if it's okay to look, even though this is what I came here to do. Craig, the videographer turns the camera on, the dialogues at this first meeting among the artifacts of Larry, of autism, and this attempt to promote awareness about autism ability.

After two hours, I pick the work for the show, we grab lunch and return to the Howard Centre, a few miles away from Larry's studio, where the interview continues. We are next to the University and Burlington, Vermont, still bustles with summer students. Larry is listening to us talk while we eat, and I ask him what his favorite food is.

"Macdonald's cheese burgers," he says, and I chuckle. He shines a big smile and Ryley, my assistant, grabs two coupons for Macdonald's burgers from her purse and hands them over. Larry reaches for them hastily.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" Larry cowards and blushes. I joke around. "Ah!" I say. "I made you blush!" He grins.

The laptop computer comes out again, the camera is ready. Larry is using a computer program called Write Out Loud, which says the words and sentences he writes. Pascal's index finger and thumb squeezes Larry's shoulder gently to remind him to keep his fingers moving along the keyboard. I have not yet asked him a question and he begins to type.

"Least little force of my typing isn't making sense. Estee ask me your awesome questions." He is a gracious man.

I have seen many symbols in his work—houses, cars, and crosses. So I ask, "What do cars mean for you?"

"Problem knowledge of goings on with interpreting images as symbols is Larry doesn't paint ever vesting deliberate symbols. It's all intuition." I understand intuition.

Popular science has purported so many myths about autism to the point that the public doesn't believe that empathy, emotion, imagination and intuition are a major part of an autistic person's life. All of this is present in an autistic person, although it takes on a different form. Larry is one of the many autistic adults I've met and spoken with over the past two years of travelling who refute many of these ideas—"the shell of a person that is autistic." We have learned that autism is very much a part of the person. We have learned, through the research of Dr. Laurent Mottron and Michelle Dawson from University of Montreal and Dr. Morton Ann Gernsbacher from University of Wisconsin-Madison, for instance, that there are cognitive abilities in autism that are profound—that autistic people learn in a way that could be called metaphorically, "upside-down."

"How can you begin to know how to teach an autistic child unless you understand how we learn?" Michelle asks rhetorically in a lengthy telephone conversation. Her research with Dr. Mottron is becoming world-renown in helping us understand this. "It is untrue that autistics need to learn how to learn," she laughs. "We learn!" I can see that of my son, how he acquires reading skills, among many things, on his own. It may not take the shape I'm used to, but I know he is learning, and though I need to teach Adam to the best of my ability, I have to also learn about his type of intelligence. Dr. Mottron, as the title of his book suggests, says autism is "another kind of intelligence."

"Whose to say that our senses are disintegrated?" Michelle continues. There is some defiance in her voice. This is the premise for sensory integration theories, but Michelle and Laurent both make the point that there is not a disintegration, but a difference. The difference in semantics is apparent here, and by paying close attention to it, we can
recognize and respect autistic ability. I feel that Adam’s sensory system is so precise, attune and very intact if not overly astute to the point of intuitive. This may be called by some as “hyper-sensitive.” Michelle helps me think about how boxed in we are with popular theories that have turned into common semantics and “absolute truths” about autism. She doesn’t say this to me, but what she does say is more congruous to my experiences with Adam.

She mentions that there is a belief that once we know the cause, or etiology, of autism, we’ll understand everything. Instead of jumping from causation to behaviour as a means to supposedly understanding autism, she and Laurent believe it is more important to look at cognitive abilities -- how autistic people can be tested in a way that befits them, how they process information and how they learn. Once we understand and respect how autistic people learn as whole people instead of impaired ones, we will accomplish so much more in education. Ellen Yack, an Occupational Therapist for nearly thirty years says, “once we know how the child who can teach themself how to read learns, we can perhaps use this knowledge to teach the child who has difficulty reading.”

Larry is what you call classic autistic. He was sent to an institution for most of his life -- Brandon Hall -- where he escaped in the middle of the night to break the padlock of the art studio in order to work. When his sister saw how he was being treated there, she took Larry to live with her. Today, Larry has a daily assistant who takes him around town, to the pub, to his studio, and since 1992, Larry has communicated using Facilitated Communication -- a method where the assistant pinches the shoulder of the autistic person as a prompt to keep typing. Since then, he has been able to travel abroad and participate in many autism conferences. With all the challenges he has faced throughout his life, I ask him outright, “Do you want to be cured of your autism?”

“It’s something profoundly relational (analogical) in the way that non-speaking people with autism communicate. Perhaps being forced to map the world visually encouraged an over-reliance on metonymy (or the principle of relational contiguity); whatever the case, their way of communicating and the ethics it implies (not individualism but community, connection) seems a lovely rejoinder to much that is sadly neuro-typical. In a footnote about Larry, I suggest that he seems to produce spontaneously the wonderful analogical dislocations of the great modernist poets.”

Larry loves McDonalds like people once they stop dieting and only when work that I spend my time on is seen as personally motivated and not derived from autism will I be satisfied.”

I tell him that people will be interested in his art for itself, and because of his autism. His art and the titles he ascribes to them, are inseparable. Larry is like a poet, revealing profound truth about his experiences in institutions and his views about life in a mere phrase.

“Yes,” he continues, knowing how people will view him, most likely, better than I. Larry leans into me each time I ask a question. He is able to say a few phrases before typing the rest.
Magazine yet maybe publishing a book would put it on People's reporter's plain but cool list."

I am told Larry likes to hang out in the pub and drink Budweiser. His humility and sense of humour must be a hit in Burlington.

Larry is tired. I've been with him for four hours, looking through work, talking on film which is being made into a video for The Autism Acceptance Project. He shakes his tired hand from typing - a long and deliberate task as he types slowly with his index finger -- and we have a plane to catch. Larry and his assistant, Frank, stand on the sidewalk as we pull out of the parking lot, waving -- Larry's body a little stiff like a child's, but he has left me with a subtle wisdom that will stay with me for the rest of my life: that there is always more to a person than meets the eye.

We fly to Vestal, New York. It is raining again like the last time I was here. This time, Jonathan is with Alan, his father. I haven't seen them since last December. They greet us and Jonathan looks as excited as he did when I picked him up for the opening of his exhibition at Lonsdale Gallery last year — he is almost breathless. I bring him a book from the library - illustrations by an artist - a book-long comic strip. Jonathan seems to enjoy it as he reads it in the car on the way to his studio - a building attached to a church which is owned by Joe, his art-teacher. The studio is an old musty building and we are lead to the basement where a series of studios, including a clay one, are housed. Jonathan has his own studio way around the corner and at the end of the long narrow hall.

"I want to start a sculpture," he declares. Joe was hoping he would draw or finish the one in front of him. Osama Bin Laden stares at us in the doorway. Jonathan's room and the clay studio are filled with other political figures too. Today, he wants to do George Bush. Again, the camera sets up and he begins sculpting. "There's no such word as can't," he says, molding Bush's nose.

I enter the adjacent room flipping through hundreds of Jonathan's powerful drawings, each one commanding my attention. I pick drawings from Jonathan's various stages of interest - people he knows, rock musicians, busy collages of faces — while talking with Joe and Alan, intermittently.

"How often does Jonathan come here?" I ask Joe.

"He's here almost every day."

"No wonder the prolific work," I comment.

Joe works with other students in his after-school arts program. He has been helping Jonathan for over ten years, making suggestions, exposing Jonathan to different mediums, but Jonathan's ability is clearly self-taught. Since he began drawing suddenly at the age of ten his lines are lucid. The depth of emotion he portrays in his portraits, through line, is hauntingly perceptive for any child, not to mention an autistic one. Jonathan continues to sculpt in the next room and I pop in to take a break between his drawings. I am impressed how Jonathan's sculpture is becoming more sophisticated, and the speed at which he works.

"One day I finally got Jon to do a self-portrait in clay," Joe says while flipping through artwork again. "He has done so many heads, and there hasn't been a problem with any of them when they've been fired. But the day he does his own head, it blows up in the kiln." I pause. We stare at each other at the apparent irony. "Isn't that bizarre? Not one other head blows apart except for Jonathan's."

Later, I see that head proudly sitting on the window ledge of Jon's drawing studio. It is not blown apart as much as it is fractured. The outer skull on the left side has fallen off but sits deliberately next to the remaining head. The inner clay is still round and clean, like looking through the skull to the brain-intact. It appears not so much an incomplete or fractured brain as much as an invasion of one - it reminds me of our curiosity to know what is perhaps unknowable.

It is getting late - nearly eight o'clock in the evening and we've been going non-stop since nine in the morning. We've been with Jon for about three hours. He is getting hungry and tired, the bright camera light becoming too much for him to bear. He is showing signs of agitation and begins to cry.

"I'm tired. I want to go home." Alan goes in to soothe him. Jonathan hugs his father. We all watch in the crowded stu-
doo, feeling invasive, and this is not the first time I've witnessed the tenderness between them — Alan is completely devoted to his son. He is sad to see his son upset, his tall frame enveloping Jon, comforting him. I want to tie this up. I want Jonathan to be with his father and go eat.

While wrapping up, Joe goes to calm Jonathan while Alan takes photos of the works I've picked for exhibition. I show Joe the picture I've used in The Joy of Autism ads and ask him where the piece is. Nobody knows. There are works, like Larry's, that still need to be catalogued and shown. Jonathan's work is his artifact and must never be lost. To distract Jonathan for a few more minutes, Joe asks if he can replicate that drawing.

Back in the car, Alan's Magellan is talking us back to the airport in the otherwise quiet SUV. "What do you want to eat?" Alan interjects, trying to let Jon know that dinner is coming soon.

"Italian." We are all salivating in the back at the talk of food. It's been a long day and we too are hungry. "I want Fettuccine Alfredo," says Jon. I have noticed a remarkable increase in Jonathan's language compared to a few months ago, which re-affirms that autistic development does not match typical timelines. It is a well-known fact that autistic people keep learning throughout their lives. Alan holds Jonathan's hand to keep him calm; Jonathan is rocking his body a little, like he's holding on to himself.

"Jonathan has been talking of going to college," Alan says, taking a deep breath, turning his head to talk to me a little more. I am thinking it's entirely possible, if not probable. Jonathan is surrounded by the love of his parents, and after meeting Larry, will likely manage his anxiety at some point. Jonathan has a girlfriend, and just went to his high-school prom in a limo.

We run out and say a quick goodbye; Jonathan shakes everyone's hands and runs back to the car.

"Go feed him!" I laugh, and Alan runs after him. I am delighted to see Jonathan, hoping that food and home will ease his stress. I think of what Larry might have been like at Jonathan's age, when his sister took him out of the institution he talks sourly about today. I think of Barbara Moran, the autistic woman, age fifty-five from Topeka, Kansas, who wrote to me of how her sensitivity to noise has made it virtually impossible for her to be around people, and how she says that being on medications and institutionalized made "her autism worse." I think about ability, about sadness and struggle, but how every autistic person I've met and spoken with enjoys being as they are despite their challenges, which even to me some days, is difficult to comprehend. I think about the responsibility of talking about the title The Joy of Autism amidst all of these challenges - how some parents might call their children a joy, but "not the autism." Yet, every parent of an autistic child knows that our beautiful children demand from us a commitment to joy. Joy is struggle's antithesis. We cannot experience one without the other. Adam and autism have indeed given me the gift of humility and appreciation for life itself. Every parent of a challenged child understands the enormous joy that our children's achievements do bring, for they do not come without hurdles.

I hope that the positive messages from autistic people who face these many challenges, will reign. Both Jonathan and Larry show that they are indeed attuned to the world around them, through their art and words, and are perhaps more humane because of their autism. They help us rethink our notions of ability and disability and remind us that we must search for uniqueness, potential and dignity in everyone.

Estée Klar-Wolfond is a mother of a four year old autistic son and is a curator of art, writer and founder of The Autism Acceptance Project.