Rhetorics and Technologies

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The Rhetorics of Online Autism Advocacy

A Case for Rhetorical Listening

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Whatever else it might be, autism is a profoundly rhetorical phenomenon. Regardless of its cause or causes, regardless of whether we consider it a lamentable medical condition or an amazing demonstration of the value of human sociocognitive diversity, regardless of the disciplinary lenses and professional orientations we might bring to bear on the issues involved, whatever sense we can make of autism—and whatever actions we might take based on that understanding—result primarily from rhetorical activity. Let us begin by recalling Aristotle's ancient distinction between the necessary and the contingent. The proper domain of rhetoric, Aristotle said, is not the realm of the necessarily true, certain, or stable, but rather the realm of the contingent, possible, and probable (1357a, par. 4). Autism is rhetorical, in part, because we do not yet know what causes it, and we may not know for quite some time. In addition, there is considerable argument about what autism could possibly be, how we should think about it, and how we should respond to it. Is it a disease? A disorder? A disability? A diversity issue? All these things, and more? How meaningful—and to whom—are the unstable and contingent distinctions between autism, "high-functioning autism," Asperger's syndrome, and the increasingly popular diagnosis of pervasive developmental disorder—not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS)? Since our discourses about autism are fundamentally, pervasively uncertain, autism and rhetoric are thus deeply wed.

Another way that autism is rhetorical is that—whatever it is—it is being constructed and reconstructed in the public sphere via strategic and purposeful language use. As Dilip Gaonkar has said, "Rhetoric is the discursive medium of deliberating and choosing, especially in the public sphere" (8). Because all we are presented with in the public sphere is competing narratives and arguments about autism, all of which are clamoring for our assent and none of which are remotely disinterested, autism and rhetoric again are deeply wed. We offer here an introduction to a set of such rhetorics of autism vying for our attention and allegiance: online rhetorics of advocacy from two opposing groups of invested participants.

As the fathers of sons on the autism spectrum, our interest in the rhetorics of autism is personal as well as professional. We can say from both personal and professional experience that examining the rhetoric of those on the spectrum is a considerable challenge. Consider the following: Although our definitions of rhetoric are legion, what most have in common is their focus on language use in the social realm. Most definitions of rhetoric focus on the role of communication in social interaction. Kenneth Burke, for instance, writes that the "basic function of rhetoric [is] the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents" (41). Similarly Marc Fumaroli says, "Rhetoric appears as the connective tissue peculiar to civil society and to its proper finalities" (253–54). And Gerard A. Hauser maintains simply that "rhetoric is communication that attempts to coordinate social action" (2).

Similarly, even though our definitions of autism are also legion, what they, too, have in common is a focus on language use in the social realm, a focus on communication in social interaction. Indeed, two of the three primary descriptors of autism spectrum behavior, two of the three fundamental ways that autism presents itself in the world, have to do with communication in the social realm. The National Institutes of Health defines autism as "a spectrum that encompasses a wide range of behavior" but whose "common features include impaired social interactions, impaired verbal and nonverbal communication, and restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior" (par. 3). Likewise, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says "Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are a group of developmental disabilities defined by significant impairments in social interaction and communication and the presence of unusual behaviors and interests" (par. 1).

Unless one has direct and frequent contact with a person on the autism spectrum, the abstractions above are not particularly meaningful. Let us try to be more specific, then, by offering excerpts from the "tip sheet" Paul provides to his son's teachers at the beginning of each school year, those tips which focus on the *rhetorical* aspects of autism.

> Eli has Asperger syndrome, a condition on the autism spectrum. Like most people with Asperger syndrome, Eli
>
> —has difficulty with the unwritten rules of social behavior and is sometimes unaware of even simple social conventions;

> —shows marked deficiencies in social skills, having difficulty sustaining conversations and sometimes making socially inappropriate responses to others;
> —has difficulty developing relationships with peers his own age, preferring the company of adults;
> —desires interaction with others but has trouble knowing how to make it work;
> —has a strong desire to please others and an acute sense of embarrassment when he has erred socially;
> —has difficulty reading and using nonverbal cues, like eye-to-eye gaze, facial expressions, gestures, and body language;
> —has difficulty determining socially appropriate body spacing;
> —finds it hard to gauge the emotional state of others and equally difficult to express his own emotional state;
> —gets preoccupied with (and may monologue about) particular and idiosyncratic subjects of interest;
> —has an advanced vocabulary, but is very literal, has difficulty processing figurative language, and is overly involved in repetitive language use, reciting stock phrases or lines drawn from previously heard material;
> —tends not to "get" jokes, despite a strong interest in humor and jokes, especially puns.

Similarly, in a blogpost entitled "Note to Daycare Teacher upon Her Asking the Following Question," Jason's wife, Rachel, provides some tips.

> John David has autism. So what does that mean?
>
> Sometimes it means a lot, and other times it means very little. First of all, it means that he has been slow to develop adequate expressive language. I think he has a lot to say, but he just doesn't know how to say it. So, instead, he screams and squeals. He also kicks sometimes, or tries to hit. Or, he says the only things he knows how to say—things he's heard on TV or movies, or that we've said to him. He can talk—he just doesn't always know what or how to say what he wants to. And that's frustrating to him, I think, and obviously to those around him. But please be patient with him and don't write him off. He will say what he needs to in some way or other. And if you're "listening" well, you'll know what that is. (King pars. 1–2)

In sum, working within these kinds of dynamics, that is, studying the communication and social interactions of a group defined specifically because of its difficulties in communication and social interaction, is a fascinating—though sometimes vexing—problem.

Rhetorical Conflict between Autism Communities and Autistic Communities

The central dynamic that drives online discourse about autism is the conflict between *autism* communities and *autistic* communities and their contestation over who has the ethical right to speak for people on the autism spectrum. Since the mid-1990s, those who care for people on the autism spectrum have been using the Internet as a way to form support groups, share advice, celebrate victories, and commiserate about difficulties, among other things. Generally speaking, these *autism* communities consist of neurotypical parents and professionals who are working with children on the spectrum. The members tend to see autism as a disease for which they seek causes and cures (or at least preventive measures). Some of the more visible and powerful of these communities include Cure Autism Now! (which recently merged with Autism Speaks) and the Autism Society of America, which calls itself "the Voice of Autism." On the other hand, we have more recently seen the creation of online *autistic* communities, which, generally speaking, consist of adults and adolescents on the spectrum who reject the disease-and-cure model, advocating instead that autism is an inherent and inextricable part of a person's selfhood and that what is needed is not a cure so much as greater sociocultural acceptance and tolerance of this natural difference. In addition to Aspies for Freedom, for instance, we can look to other autistic communities such as Autistics.org, which calls itself "the REAL Voice of Autism."

Autism and autistic advocacy communities often exhibit very different goals and employ vastly different rhetorics. While "cure-oriented" *autism* advocacies deploy rhetoric in search of sympathy and awareness that will yield financial support for medical research and therapeutic interventions, *autistic* advocacy is "acceptance-oriented," seeking instead empathy and open-mindedness about autism as a different, yet acceptable, way of being. To this end, *autistic* communities work to dissolve what they see as negative stereotypes and stigma that mainstream culture associates with autism. In stark contrast, metaphors of tragedy and violence are common currencies for *autism* communities. Consider the following three examples, which have recently been the object of much discussion in online autism and autistic advocacy communities.

First, we can point to the recent fund-raising film *Autism Everyday*, which was produced by Autism Speaks for a fund-raising event but is now available (and highly popular) on YouTube. Director Lauren Thierry characterizes the film as an effort to "show the world what the vast reality [of autism] truly is" and to reveal the "dark and uncomfortable truths about living with autism." Thierry argues that a realistic picture of autism is needed to counter the "erroneous perceptions" that people might glean from stereotypes about "autistic savants" or from recent stories about a phenomenal basketball performance by a young man on the spectrum (Liss pars. 8–9).[1] Thus the film is developed through interviews that weave together the struggles and frustrations of five mothers of children on the spectrum. Thierry's orchestration is evident from the opening moments of *Autism Everyday*, as somber music and the shrieks, moans, and screams of children lead up to the opening credits. The remainder of the film follows suit as each of the five mothers laments the overwhelming demands and difficulties of raising a child on the spectrum. The most controversial moment occurs midway through the film as Alison Tepper Singer—one of the mothers being interviewed as well as an executive vice president for Autism Speaks—elevates the tragedy-rhetoric even higher: "I remember that was a scary moment for me when I realized I had sat in the car for about 15 minutes and actually contemplated putting Jody in the car and driving off the George Washington Bridge. That would be preferable to having to put her in one of these schools. It's only because of Lauren, the fact that I have another child, that I did not do it" ("Autism Everyday [Original 13 Minute Version]").

Although some, such as Thierry, see Singer's admission as "gutsy and courageous," many "acceptance oriented" advocates have not only harshly criticized her for her thoughts of violence but have also accused her of unequally valuing her daughters. Moreover, many have suggested that her statements point sharply to an insidious trend of sanctioning violence against people on the spectrum though "propaganda" that "demonizes" or "dehumanizes." As Ari Ne'eman, founder of the Autism Self-Advocacy Network, puts it, "A causal relationship exists between the rhetoric that reinforces a diminished value for autistic life and personhood and the implementation of that idea in the form of murder of people on the autism spectrum" (par. 34).

Although *Autism Everyday* has received much support and much criticism online, its representation of autism or autism parenthood is not uncommon. In fact, images of tragedy, violence, and evil are frequently associated with autism to build identification among parents of children on the spectrum. One particularly notable example is Susan F. Rzucidlo's "Welcome to Beirut" statement, published on the BBB Autism Online Support Network with the subtitle "Beginner's Guide to Autism." In fact, "Welcome to Beirut" is a doubly poignant statement: it not only compares autism parenthood to a violent and terrifying journey but also is based on a revision of Emily Perl Kingsley's famous 1987 essay, "Welcome to Holland," written about having a child with Down's syndrome. In Kingsley's essay, parenting a child with a disability is compared to a trip to Italy that is suddenly diverted to Holland. Despite initial disappointment, however, the Holland traveler soon learns to appreciate the windmills, the tulips, and "the Rembrandts" (par. 8). Rzucidlo's "Welcome to Beirut" appropriates the traveler metaphor for autism parenthood, but with a much different message: "One day someone comes up from behind you and throws a black bag over your head. They start kicking you in the stomach and trying to tear your heart out. You are terrified, kicking and screaming you struggle to get away but there are too many of them, they overpower you and stuff you into the trunk of a car.

Bruised and dazed, you don't know where you are. What's going to happen to you? Will you live through this? This is the day you get the diagnosis. 'YOUR CHILD HAS AUTISM.' There you are in Beirut, dropped in the middle of a war" (pars. 2–3). Although Rzucidlo writes that hope might be found in new medications, research, hard fighting, and new relationships, she cautions: "Don't get me wrong. This is war and it's awful. There are no discharges and when you are gone someone else will have to fight in your place" (par. 8).

Finally, as we have seen most recently, the vilification of autism even pervades medical communities. On December 1, 2007, the New York University Child Study Center, led by Dr. Harold Koplewicz, launched what it labeled a "Provocative New PSA Campaign" called Ransom Notes, which was a series of ads meant to alert Americans "to the silent public health epidemic of children's mental illnesses" ("Millions" par. 1). Each ad resembled a typed or handwritten ransom note that was signed by a neurological condition such as "Autism" or "Asperger's Syndrome." The autism ransom note contained the following ominous warning: "We have your son. We will make sure he will no longer be able to care for himself or interact socially as long as he lives. This is only the beginning . . . Autism" (par. 5). And the Asperger's syndrome note read, "We have your son. We are destroying his ability for social interaction and driving him into a life of complete isolation. It's up to you now . . . Asperger's Syndrome" (par. 7). John Osborne, president of the public relations firm BBDO, called the ad series "a wake-up call." He explains, "Left untreated, these illnesses can hold children hostage. That's why we've chosen to deliver our message in the form of a ransom note" ("Millions" par. 3).

In response the leaders of several autism advocacy communities launched an online petition that contained an open letter to the creators and supporters of the Ransom Notes campaign. Among other things, they argued that the campaign perpetuates stigma and "some of the worst stereotypes" by portraying people with disabilities as "kidnapped and possessed" ("An Open Letter" par. 1). Similar objections, many of them scathing, were leveled by other advocates. For example, one blogger on the "Whose Planet Is It Anyway?" blog wrote:

> One thing is clear: The repulsive attitudes expressed by Autism Speaks, BBDO, and Dr. Koplewicz do not represent the majority view. They do not speak for us. Rather, they speak for a tiny number of bitter, twisted New York elitists who feel angry and cheated about having children with disabilities in their otherwise glamorous families, and who are throwing a colossal temper tantrum and spewing their vicious prejudice all over the media. . . . They are a hate group, pure and simple. They share a hideous eugenic agenda. . . . They are enemies not only of the autistic minority population but of decent people everywhere. And it's past time for decent people to stand up in outrage and put a stop to their hate-mongering. ("Ransom Notes" par. 6–7)

Although many thought that the ads were "gripping and thought provoking" and productively defied "political correctness," the campaign was soon ended as a result of the public outcry of advocacy organizations and parents of affected children (Fritz 8).

As these examples illustrate, autism and autistic communities harbor very different foundational assumptions about what constitutes appropriate, productive, and ethical advocacy, which creates what Ne'eman calls a "zero-sum game" where "any positive attention about autism or autistics takes away from the hoped-for public pressure for a cure. By portraying people on the spectrum as tragic and all aspects of autism as horrible, more fundraising dollars can be raised. . . . That this ignores the reality of most autistic people—who are neither 'Rain Men' nor tragedies—is irrelevant to the ends sought by Autism Speaks and its fundraisers" (par. 49). As Ne'eman sees it, autism communities employ polemical discourse to make the strongest possible fund-raising arguments. Other autism communities, such as the BBB Online Autism Support Network, employ polemical rhetorics to foster identification among parents as they face the challenge of raising a child on the spectrum. And in the name of awareness, medical organizations like The NYU Child Study Center accost people in the hope of mobilizing them through the "visceral reaction" of fear for their children (Fritz 8). In each instance, however, autistic communities object to what they see as harmful caricatures that work to counter respect for and acceptance of people on the autism spectrum.

Public Rhetorics of Autism

The binary here is obviously arch and deeply entrenched. But let us back up a moment to sketch the larger backdrop against which this current conflict is being played out. While the idea of autism as a rhetorical phenomenon may be new, the rhetorical effects of autism are not. Since many of the earliest diagnosed cases of autism involved individuals who did not speak, people who were therefore unable to actively represent themselves in traditional ways, people on the spectrum have historically been spoken for—and spoken about—by the neurologically typical, much as we are doing now. Their silence was a blank screen onto which we projected numerous fears, values, and misconceptions. We need think only of Leo Kanner's infamous "refrigerator mother" theory, first published in 1949, to appreciate the power and the longevity of the rhetorical constructions of autism and people on the spectrum in the public imagination. Such discussions of parental frigidity as a cause of autism moved fairly quickly from the limited audiences of professional journals to those of popular journalism: in 1960, for instance, in *Time* magazine, Kanner described the parents of autistic children as "just happening to defrost enough to produce a child" (qtd. in "The Child Is Father" par. 4). This theory that parenting influence is to blame for autism no longer enjoys the currency and support it once had, but it still has its contemporary manifestations and adherents. For example, consider the recent explanation of autism offered by Michael Savage on his nationally syndicated radio show: “I’ll tell you what autism is. In 99 percent of the cases, it’s a brat who hasn’t been told to cut the act out. That’s what autism is. What do you mean they scream and they’re silent? They don’t have a father around to tell them, ‘Don’t act like a moron. You’ll get nowhere in life. Stop acting like a putz. Straighten up. Act like a man. Don’t sit there crying and screaming, idiot’” (Aronow par. 1).

Similarly, in 1967, Bruno Bettelheim explicitly compared autism with being in a concentration camp, one such extended treatment ending with the following peroration, complete with an appeal to pity: “Here I wish to stress again the essential difference between the plight of these prisoners and the conditions that lead to autism and schizophrenia in children: namely that the child never had a chance to develop much of a personality” (68). The now ubiquitous idea that inside every person on the autism spectrum is a normal person trying to get out, that people on the spectrum are imprisoned within a shell of autism and struggling to break through it, would seem to be closely connected with Bettelheim’s original argument. Its staying power is phenomenal.

Because what most people know of autism and people on the spectrum comes from arguments like these presented via mass media, some additional critique of those arguments seems in order. If, as Fumaroli suggests, rhetoric is the connective tissue linking people on the autism spectrum to the larger society, some examination of that rhetoric and its effects is clearly needed. On 21 March 2007, for instance, *Larry King Live* on CNN offered “The Mystery of Autism,” a one-hour presentation we find iconic of the *autism* community’s public rhetoric on autism and people on the spectrum. Epideictic rhetoric was on strong display, as celebrities such as Bill Cosby, Toni Braxton, and Gary Coles offered panegyrics for Suzanne Wright and her organization, Autism Speaks. Wright began her remarks with powerful ethical and pathetic appeals (complete with photographs) by noting that she began advocating for autism research when her grandson was diagnosed with the condition. Her grandson “went into the darkness of autism right before our eyes,” she said. Wright invoked an urgent, agonistic rhetoric by voicing her strong support for the federal Combating Autism Act of 2006, and her belligerent stance was clearly marked not just toward autism, but also toward those who might not share her orientation on the issues involved. She then grew hortatory—while at the same time demonstrating a remarkable bit of audience analysis—in her call to action, contending that “we need to get the grandparents of this country galvanized” to help with autism advocacy because parents are too busy with the day-to-day difficulties, the frustrations, anger, and sadness of dealing with a child on the spectrum. Furthermore, the argument that autism is a childhood disease of epidemic proportions was foregrounded, with Dr. Ricki Robinson (also playing heavily on pathos) asserting that "more children will be diagnosed with autism this year than with AIDS, cancer, and diabetes combined."

In addition to looking at the means and the goals of individual utterances, we should also step back to look at the larger, perhaps less obvious, features of this discourse if we want to get a more fully useful sense of the public rhetoric on autism and people on the spectrum. Again, this episode of *Larry King Live* is iconic. On the one hand, we have Suzanne Wright, wife of Bob Wright, former chairman and CEO of NBC Universal, who is thus able to secure the help of three celebrities, an enormously popular journalist, and an entire cable news network to voice her particular message about combating this childhood epidemic. On the other hand, not a single person on the autism spectrum spoke during the entire broadcast, and autism in adults was never mentioned. The differential in rhetorical access, agency, and power here is quite remarkable. Whereas Autism Speaks got an hour of high-profile national media coverage (not to mention the inevitable reruns), people on the spectrum did not get to speak (and do not get to speak in mainstream media).

Online Rhetorics of Autism

The place where people on the spectrum do get to speak about autism is the Internet, which is in many ways an ideal medium for them. First, the asynchronous nature of Internet textuality is a tremendous boon for people on the spectrum because they typically have difficulties monitoring and processing the enormous range and number of rhetorical and contextual cues that so powerfully determine meaning in face-to-face conversations. Whereas neurotypical people rapidly, effectively, and usually unconsciously monitor and process how an utterance's meaning shifts according to rhetorical factors such as the exigence, occasion, setting, and purpose of the utterance, each of which can be further complicated by the evolving motivations and roles of the various actors in the scene as it plays out in real time, people on the spectrum often struggle in their efforts to do so. In addition to trying to deal with this unfolding and dialectic complex of unspoken and nonverbal information, people on the spectrum also have difficulties accounting for the effects of a speaker's physical performance, that is, difficulties in processing how the meaning of an utterance changes according to a speaker's facial expression, tone of voice and inflection, body language, physical spacing from the audience, and gestures. For instance, a speaker's use of sarcasm, irony, and even mock-anger and mock-sadness may be obvious to the neurotypical members of his or her audience, but these ploys may be baffling or completely misinterpreted by people on the spectrum. Combine all of these processing difficulties with the social imperative to respond quickly in a conversation (or be thought to be rude or incompetent, or both), and the desire to withdraw from synchronous, face-to-face forms of communication becomes quite understandable. Many forms of Internet communication relieve people on the spectrum of the imperatives to track and respond quickly to the overwhelming, unwritten nuances of conversations that we find in face-to-face situations. People on the spectrum can use the Internet to read, interpret, reread, and reinterpret the statements of others over long periods of time, and then to craft and revise their responses and statements slowly and carefully, both of which are especially useful when engaging in charged encounters and argument.

Second, the Internet allows people on the spectrum to find one another, to collapse the time and space that would otherwise fragment them and perhaps make any larger forms of community impossible. Internet-based communities and movements such as Aspies for Freedom, Neurodiversity.com, and Aspergian Pride—as well as the ever-increasing, collective mass of the blog rolls listed by individual bloggers on the autism spectrum—constitute sympathetic audiences of like-minded peers, which work to reduce a writer's anxiety and thus increase the likelihood of his or her contributing to the conversation. Simply put, the Internet encourages rhetorical participation by people on the spectrum who are often functionally shut out of real-world, real-time conversations; it allows them to present their perspectives effectively when they may not have the communication skills to do so offline.

Online discourse has thus empowered people on the autism spectrum to become organized politically. Let us take the group Aspies for Freedom (AFF) and their online rhetoric as a case in point. The AFF was founded in 2004 by Amy Roberts and Gareth Nelson, and it is remarkable in its aggressive and agonistic efforts to claim authority over the discourses about autism. The name of the organization itself constructs its members as "freedom fighters," and its warlike rhetoric has been on display ever since its founding. For example, the front page of the AFF Web site offers the following manifesto: "We know that autism is not a disease, and we oppose any attempts to 'cure' someone of an autism spectrum condition, or any attempts to make them 'normal' against their will. We are part of building the autism culture. We aim to strengthen autism rights, oppose all forms of discrimination against aspies and auties, and work to bring the community together both online and offline" (par. 3). Early on, the AFF coined a new term to announce its agenda, "the autism rights movement," and in the time since, other groups have followed suit and coined their own covalent terms, such as "the autistic self-advocacy movement" and "the autistic liberation movement."

Similarly, the AFF quickly developed its own visual language to represent its perspective and counter the visual rhetoric of other groups. Autism communities were the first to seek visual symbols to represent their common understandings and collective efforts, and like many contemporary advocacy movements, they coalesced around the image of a ribbon, whether a physical one a person could pin to his or her lapel or a digital one for posting on their Web pages. Whereas a ribbon promoting breast cancer awareness is bright pink, for example, the autism community ribbon is imprinted with a jigsaw-puzzle design, and the interlocking pieces are tinted dark blue, light blue, red, and yellow. The puzzle motif foregrounds the mysterious nature of the condition; the varied colors for the pieces, those colors' dispersion across the visual field, and each piece's unique shape suggest the wide range of ways autism presents itself; and the interlocking design works to express the community members' desire for unity and support. The AFF, however, objected to the symbol's negative connotations—that people on the spectrum were enigmas, that they needed to fit in, that they had pieces missing, and so on. These connotations are even more pronounced in Autism Speaks' visual symbol: a single such blue jigsaw puzzle piece standing upright against a white background, an arrangement that clearly anthropomorphizes the piece's main body and five lobes into a representation of a human head, torso, arms, and legs. The AFF and other autistic communities have instead gravitated toward the use of a rainbow-hued infinity symbol (the horizontally oriented, elongated figure eight). This design extends the visual range from four distinct colors to the seven colors of the visual spectrum (and all the various shadings between the seven primary hues) to better represent the diversity of people on the spectrum, and it uses the graceful, perpetual curves of the closed infinity symbol to counter the negative connotations of the puzzle motif, stressing instead ideas of balance, fluidity, unity, and beauty.

The AFF's efforts to control the discourse about autism go far beyond reconstruing its visual rhetoric, however. For instance, within a year of its founding, the AFF had established June 18 as the international Autistic Pride Day, with numerous public events scheduled each year to promote its educational and political agendas. One such effort is the AFF's global attempt to have people on the spectrum recognized as an official minority group by the United Nations. On 18 November 2004, Amy Nelson used the Internet to publish an open letter to the UN, which began as follows: "We make this declaration to assert our existence, to be able to have a 'voice' on autism, rather than only that of experts and professionals in the field, to show how discrimination affects our lives, and that we want to direct a change from this type of bias against our natural differences, and the poor treatment that can ensue thereof" (par. 5). People on the autism spectrum, Nelson says, recognize themselves as a minority group on the basis of their linguistic, genetic, sociocultural, and behavioral similarities, a group that faces widespread discrimination—including well-documented cases of hate crimes and "mercy killings"—because of its members' innate differences and therefore needs increased legal protection. But the most courageous and remarkable claim made in this letter is that the autistic community is facing possible genocide, the eradication of its future generations. People on the spectrum, Nelson writes, “are facing an imminent threat of possible cure, in whatever fashion that may transpire. Prenatal testing for autism could mean a form of eugenics, the total prevention of autism through genetic counseling before conception” (par. 12). Thus, much as Bettelheim did forty years earlier, Nelson suggests that the Holocaust itself is a proper analog for autism in society and the difficulties faced by those on the spectrum.

Given the overwhelming power differential that autistic communities face when dealing with autism communities, for instance, the vastly superior rhetorical skills and access that Autism Speaks continues to bring to bear, it is no wonder that the AFF and similar groups have adopted such a martial rhetoric of their own. Such warlike self-representation has surely served them well to galvanize and energize their constituencies. But what are the longer-term effects of their employing such a martial rhetoric and warlike stance? At what point does this self-empowering representation of people on the spectrum as warriors become unhelpful, even harmful, to those who invoke it?

We worry that this deeply agonistic rhetoric may do nothing more, ultimately, than make both sides dig in even deeper, make both sides ever more vicious in their attacks, ever less able to hear anything from the other side. For example, a particularly nasty flame war has erupted of late between members of the AFF and a blogger known as John Best. Members of the AFF have circulated a petition for Google to close down Best’s E-Blogger site, entitled “Hating Autism,” claiming that it “is in clear violations of the terms of service, as well as spreading bigotry and hatred against specific groups.” One of Best’s blog entries begins as follows:

> Tuesday, July 03, 2007
>
> Aspies for Freedom, Supernitwits
>
> Aspies for Freedom is one of the spawns of Neuroinsanity. This is a group made up mostly of young people and a few older idiots like Phil Gluyas. The deranged philosophy that is seen here is the product of what Neurodiversity has done to corrupt youth into acting against their own best interests. These are potentially violent and dangerous people with mentally diminished capacities for reasonable thought. . . . I have to wonder if the next serial killer we hear about will come from this group. (pars. 1–4)

We find ourselves torn here between being disgusted by Best’s hate speech and vitriol, on the one hand, and, on the other, being deeply saddened by the AFF’s efforts to *silence* him. There is something that seems especially wrong to us about *people on the spectrum*, about Aspies for *Freedom*, advocating that someone be silenced by force.

A Case for Rhetorical Listening

What is needed are alternative tactics for fostering both understanding and productive rhetorics for autism advocacy. As Ne'eman asserts, despite their differences, parents and self-advocates share many goals and are all capable of making positive contributions. However, Ne'eman argues, those involved need to think strategically about negotiating the rift between the two communities, about how to "translate the autistic community's ideas" for "the wider world," and about how they might avoid rhetorical stances that lead only to "stalemate" (par. 51). As a first step, Ne'eman suggests that advocates refocus on articulating what autism is, rather than what it is not, as well as what autism advocacy aims to do, rather than whom it opposes (par. 52).

As one such effort to create an alternative discourse that fosters understanding rather than opposition, Eric Chen offers a rhetoric of reconciliation that might help move this increasingly static binary forward. On his I-Autistic Web site, he has begun what he calls an "Aspies for Forgiveness" campaign:

> I believe that the autistic community desperately needs an Aspies For Forgiveness campaign. . . . Autistics are upset that they have been rejected, bullied and trodden upon by non-autistics. Years of pain and endurance has manifested in many angry words like "don't you pity us" and "don't you dare make us normal." People with these angry words come together to make big angry organizations telling people how they despise ill treatment from nonautistics. But anger only makes more anger, unhappiness only creates more unhappiness. These emotions only bring people further from one another. No one has made peace through anger. It is not through reasoning or anger, but love and forgiveness, that calls upon peace. (pars. 1–4)

We can hope, then, that more useful and humane rhetorics of online advocacy may emerge organically from within the autism and autistic communities, but we submit that as rhetoricians, scholars of technology and disability studies, and writing teachers, we have an ethical and pedagogical obligation to help hasten such transformations, to intervene and educate those in both the autism and autistic communities so that their heartfelt but perhaps misguided and counterproductive discourses of advocacy issues may become more fully effective in achieving their ethical and political aims. Specifically we contend that an adaptation and deployment of Krista Ratcliffe's theory of rhetorical listening could do much to help alleviate the strife between these two polarized communities and help them begin to move beyond the current vexed stasis in their discourse. Rhetorical listening, we believe, offers concerned citizens, people on and off the autism spectrum, scholars, and educators the means by which we can all collectively begin moving toward the kind of forgiveness Chen is calling for, by which we can all respond to Ne'eman's call for a more strategic approach to bridging and healing the rift between the autism and the autistic communities.

Ratcliffe begins her book *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* by stating that her purpose is to answer Jacqueline Jones Royster's call for scholars "to construct 'codes of cross-cultural conduct,' that is, rhetorical tactics for fostering cross-cultural communication" (3). Ratcliffe calls her code of conduct, her tactic for fostering cross-cultural communication, rhetorical listening, which she defines generally as "a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture" (xiii). It is important to note that Ratcliffe's work focuses on issues of race and gender, but it is equally important to note that she foregrounds her project by suggesting how broadly one might conceive of the usefulness of her ideas: any person, text, or culture might be profitably approached using this stance.

Defined more specifically as "a code of cross-cultural contact," Ratcliffe says, "*rhetorical listening* signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in cross-cultural exchanges" (1). Finding ourselves in such exchanges, she notes, we are faced with a confounding question: "How may we listen for that which we do not intellectually, viscerally, or experientially know?" (29). Ratcliffe maintains, however, that when we engage in *rhetorical* listening, "*understanding* means listening to discourses not *for* intent but *with* intent—with the intent to understand not just the claims but the rhetorical negotiations of understanding as well." Thus rhetorical listeners can and should "invert the term *understanding* and define it as *standing under*, that is, consciously standing under the discourses that surround us and others while consciously acknowledging all our particular—and very fluid—standpoints" (28).

Such a radical invocation of openness is tremendously attractive, offering the possibility of liberation and growth on a variety of levels. Still, significant issues arise immediately. We must, for instance, understand and take into account that the "listening" we are proposing is metaphorical, because these encounters and exchanges between members of the autism and autistic communities would be happening via digitally mediated textuality. Just as there are powerful analogs between speaking and writing—as well as fundamental differences, which we lose sight of only at our peril—so, too, are there powerful analogs between listening and reading and fundamental differences as well. As we discuss rhetorical listening in this context, then, we are really talking about a particular form of rhetorical reading. Furthermore, as a code of conduct, rhetorical listening assumes at least three crucial things about potential participants. First, rhetorical listening is a trope for invention. If successfully invoked, it will produce perspectives and knowledge that are truly new, perspectives and knowledge that are, by definition, challenging if not alien to the participant's current, habitual, even entrenched ways of being in the world. As Ratcliffe puts it, rhetorical listening can help us "resist the coercive forces within dialectic/dialogue while remaining open to impossible answers" (8). Participants must thus be willing to embrace the possibility of the impossible. Second, rhetorical listening is a stance of openness. To be effectively deployed, it requires the participant to be truly open to these challenging and alien perspectives and knowledges, these impossible answers. This presupposes a great deal about the goodwill, motives, and intentions of the participants and assumes a significant desire to turn away from the current state of affairs, which are both highly charged and the source of whatever power the parties in the autism/autistic schism currently possess. Third, although we might more easily adopt such a stance of openness toward an individual person or text, the question of openness toward an entire culture is a very different matter of scale. Moreover, the debate about the existence of an autistic culture—that is, arguments for and against the existence of such a culture—lies at the very heart of the current conflict between autism and autistic communities. One cannot have a cross-cultural exchange if one does not believe the other culture even exists. In short, even in proposing rhetorical listening as a strategy to alleviate the strife between autism and autistic communities, we recognize that an array of substantive difficulties exist that will limit its usefulness. Some people may simply be incapable of adopting such a stance. Even so, we think these limitations can be turned around and employed as useful tests to identify potential first adopters, potential initial candidates for training and mentoring.

As Ratcliffe explains, rhetorical listening involves a fundamentally different way for participants to relate to—and relate *through*—discourse. It means transforming our "desire for mastery into a self-conscious desire for receptivity" (29). She cites Heidegger's claim about "the divided *logos* . . . we have inherited in the West, the *logos* that speaks but does not listen" (23). What we need to recover, she says, is a forgotten practice of "laying others' ideas in front of us in order to let these ideas lie before us. This laying-to-let-lie-before-us functions as a preservation of others' ideas . . . and, hence, as a site for listening" (23–24). This practice runs directly counter to our deeply habituated practice of listening in order to engage in dialogue or dialectic, that is, listening precisely in order to discover what we agree with or contest. Listening within a stance of openness, she says, "maps out an entirely different space in which to relate to discourse. . . . For when listening within an undivided *logos*, we do not read simply for what we can agree with or challenge. . . . Instead, we choose to listen also for the exiled excess and contemplate its relation to our culture and our selves" (24–25). It is through this fundamentally different relation to discourse, this entirely different space, this process of "letting discourses wash over, through, and around us and letting them lie there to inform our politics and ethics," as Ratcliffe suggests (28), that rhetorical listening can bring about change. As she writes, "Within this more inclusive *logos* lies potential for personal and social justice" (25).

Coming to inhabit this more inclusive logos is hardly an easy matter, of course, especially when the stakes are high and the parties have strong personal and emotional investment in the issues involved. A slow and careful approach toward the other is wise, and that alone is a difficult enough challenge. The distributed and asynchronous nature of online discourse should, however, be of considerable help in easing the difficulties of these initial cross-cultural encounters between members of the autism and autistic communities. Participants can approach the other as slowly as they like, backing off and returning to the encounter as often as they need to without feeling the pressure of the social imperatives of "politeness" and the like, which can bind people to uncomfortable face-to-face conversations in real time. In addition, utterances on stable Web sites can remain archivally available for extended periods of time and thus be approached again and again, as many times as is necessary to allow a participant to begin inhabiting a more inclusive logos.

Once potential first adopters (appropriately disposed first participants) have been identified, we would do well to teach them the value of two practices: what Peter Elbow calls "rendering" and what Ratcliffe calls "eavesdropping." Elbow's concept of rendering, of discourse that seeks to render experience rather than seeking to analyze or explain it, provides a useful way for us to begin recovering the forgotten practice of laying others' ideas before us to let them lie before us, which Ratcliffe notes is crucial in the creation of a more inclusive logos. Rendering runs directly counter to our deeply habituated practice of listening or reading precisely in order to analyze, explain, or argue, and thus most of us are ill prepared to do it. According to Elbow, although "discourse that renders is . . . one of the preeminent gifts of human kind," students are almost never asked to produce it. He notes that "virtually all of the disciplines ask students to use language to explain, not to render," and thus when "students leave the university unable to find words to render their experience, they are radically impoverished" (137). "To render experience," he says, "is to convey what I see when I look out the window, what it feels like to walk down the street or fall down," it is language that "conveys to others a sense of [the writer's] experience" (136). But rendering is not merely an autobiographical effusion, "not just an 'affective' matter—what something 'feels' like," according to Elbow. Rather, it is a prerequisite to an important kind of reflection and learning. As Elbow puts it, rendering "mirrors back to [writers] a sense of their own experience from a little distance, once it's out there on paper." To the extent that we "write about something only in the language of the textbook or the discipline," he says, we "distance or insulate [ourselves] from experiencing or internalizing the concepts [we] are allegedly learning." Thus, Elbow notes, "Discourse that renders often yields important new 'cognitive' insights such as helping us see an exception or a contradiction to some principle we thought we believed" (137). Even though Elbow's concept of rendering focuses squarely on the writer's experience of some phenomenon, we think it offers us a useful lever by which to help participants learn to render—rather than analyze or explain or argue about—the phenomenon itself. And it is this rendering of the phenomenon itself, this rendering of an opposing discourse, that seems essential in learning the skills of laying others' ideas before us to let them lie before us, skills crucial to the creation of a more inclusive logos.

In concert with teaching participants the value and the practices of rendering others' discourse, we would do well to help participants learn the value and practices of what Ratcliffe calls "eavesdropping" (104). Eavesdropping, she says, is "a rhetorical tactic of purposely positioning oneself on the edge of one's knowing so as to overhear and learn from others and, I would add, from oneself" (105). It is a courageous act, we think, and should be presented as such. Eavesdropping, Ratcliffe writes, involves "choosing to stand outside . . . in an uncomfortable spot . . . on the border of knowing and not knowing . . . granting others the inside position . . . listening to learn" (104–5, ellipses in original). It involves more than just a willingness to be open; it involves a willingness to be vulnerable, if not exposed. Moreover, as Ratcliffe notes, "eavesdropping requires an accompanying ethic of care" (105), that is, "being *careful* (full of care) not to overstep another's boundaries or interrupt the agency of another's discourse" (106).

Those people in the autism and autistic communities seeking to move forward out of the currently vexed and static discourse of their cross-community discourses could begin, then, by lurking, by simply visiting the others' online sites. But they would need to approach these sites with a fundamentally different attitude, stance, and purpose. With our guidance and mentoring, which could be provided asynchronously online through our own Web site devoted to this project, participants could be educated in the concepts and coached in the practices of eavesdropping and rendering. They could then attend to the others' discourse and attempt to render it in their own writing, honing laying-others'-ideas-before-us-to-let-them-lie-before-us practices, and they could send these renderings to us electronically so that we, as interested third parties, could both validate their renderings and offer suggestions for improving them. Participants' deeply entrenched predispositions to analyze, explain, and argue with another's discourse will surely take some time and assistance to grow beyond. But as rhetors and teachers, this kind of patient, repeated attending and responding and suggesting is precisely our skill set and our calling.

After a considerable amount of time has been spent rendering and eavesdropping on the others' Web sites and blogs, once participants have become comfortable with their laying-the-ideas-of-others-before-them-to-let-them-lie-before-them abilities, attuned to listening for the exiled excess, and articulate in rendering their digital discourse rather than seeking to engage with it argumentatively, then they might be taught to make the next critical move in rhetorical listening, which is to move beyond simply what is said to include why it is said, to move, in Ratcliffe's terms, from the claim to the underlying cultural logic. Rhetorical listening, she says, "invites listeners to acknowledge both claims and cultural logics. . . . By focusing on claims and cultural logics, listeners may still disagree with each other's claims, but they may better appreciate that the other person is not simply wrong but rather functioning from within a different logic" (33).

Once a participant has effectively rendered a significant corpus of the others' electronic discourse, he or she could be asked to revisit those renderings with a different purpose and lens. Seeking the underlying cultural logic of the others' discourse will mean using their renderings as a mirror, as Elbow puts it, a reflection that allows them to see how and where they have distanced or insulated themselves from experiencing how others experience the same phenomena of autism. Seeking the underlying cultural logic of the others' discourse in their renderings will mean actively and openly and purposefully seeking and embracing an exception or a contradiction to some principle participants thought they believed (Elbow 137) as they listen for the exiled excess and contemplate its relation to their culture and their selves (Ratcliffe 25). In helping participants move from rendering and eavesdropping to seeking the cultural logic of the others' digital discourse, the ostensible "move" is simple, though hardly easy: it means asking participants to move from what the other has said to why he or she has said it. Participants could revisit their previous renderings and offer speculative, essayistic, exploratory discussions about how and why another person might experience autism in these ways, about how and why another person might have come to think and feel about autism in these ways. Again, participants could send us these texts through the auspices of our Web site, and we could respond as interested third parties. But in responding to explorations of the others' cultural logics, our roles as rhetors and teachers will necessarily and explicitly begin moving into the roles of interpreters, intermediaries, emissaries, and mediators for both communities. Participants will trust us only to the extent that we maintain a firm adherence to a singular orientation and purpose, which is to help both the autism and autistic communities equally, to improve the overall quality and usefulness of all discourse about autism, and thus to help improve the lives of people on the spectrum, their caregivers, and the polis as a whole as a result.

Conclusion

In conclusion we harbor no delusions about the difficulties we would face in taking up such a challenge for our pedagogical or rhetorical skills. To train members of the autism and autistic communities in the precepts and values of rhetorical listening would be to ask them to forego their current ways of being in the world, ways which have provided them with whatever agency, power, and success they currently possess, to ask them to be not only open to the impossible but vulnerable in the process, to ask them to begin a process that will never end. As Ratcliffe points out, "Rhetorical listening with the intent to understand, not master, discourses is not a quick fix nor a happy-ever-after solution; rather, it is an ongoing process" (33). But given that the polarized rancorous discourses between members of the autism and autistic communities are now affecting public discourse on autism as a whole, both online and offline, and given that autism will only occupy a greater place in public affairs, we think the time to begin this necessary process is now. Both the exigency and the means of addressing it are before us; we need only the will to begin.

We end here with a distinct sense of how the project we have traced is both a direct outgrowth of traditional rhetorical study and perhaps a fundamental shift away from it at the same time. On the one hand, we see our proposed project of training members of autism and autistic communities in the values and practices of rhetorical listening as a direct attempt to act upon the understanding of rhetoric we have learned from such scholars as Lloyd Bitzer. In "The Rhetorical Situation," for instance, Bitzer contends that "rhetoric is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action. The rhetor alters reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes a mediator of change" (4). By helping members of these sometimes viciously combative communities learn to eavesdrop and render and rhetorically listen to one another's discourse, we can help bring about the creation of a more ethical, humane, and effective discourse, which may change reality by mediating the thought and action of people both within and beyond these communities, altering how they perceive of, conceive of, and respond to autism and autistics. We can help bring into existence a discourse that may engage a wide range of persons to become more ethical, humane mediators of change themselves. But a project like the one we propose here also challenges us to grapple with questions about the appropriate sphere of rhetorical scholarship, both personally and collectively. What is the place of and for "socially responsible" scholarship in rhetorical studies? What is the place of and for *activist* scholarship in rhetorical studies? To what extent can and should scholars of rhetoric become mediators of public disputes between contending parties? What is at stake if we do? And perhaps more important, what is at stake if we do not?

Note

1. High school student Jason McElwain, who is on the autism spectrum, received a flurry of media attention when he scored twenty points in four minutes during a high school basketball game on February 27, 2006. He was also honored by President George W. Bush. http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/03/14/national/main1401115.shtml.

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