Resilience, Resistance, & Making a Difference:

Guidance for Living & Loving in Community During Difficult Times

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1

Outline

I. The Existential Crisis

II. Sociocultural and Political Influences

III. Evolution of Disability Rights

IV. Strengthening Connection and Resilience

V. Protecting and Cultivating Autistic Joy.

2

We Are In an Existential Crisis!

- ▶What's happening is not normal!
- ▶What has happened to our society? Our community?
- ▶It's overwhelming!
- ▶What is the future for our children & grandchildren?
- ▶How can we find hope?

3

THESE ARE DIFFICULT TIMES WHETHER YOU ARE:

- Democrat
- Independent
- Republican
- Libertarian
- Green Party
- Social Democrat
- Any faith tradition
- Any sexual identity
- Any race or ethnic group

People are stressed, scared, angry, and divided. Let's make a difference in healthcare and human rights.

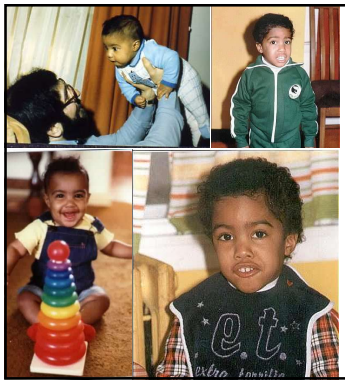
In crisis there is opportunity to work together for a better world!

4

Why am I talking about this?

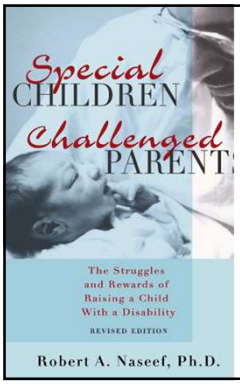
My Story:
making eye contact on Day 1

5



- Seemingly normal at first
- Stopped speaking at 18 months
- Problems transitioning
- Flapping incessantly
- Pacing back and forth
- **Diagnosed Autistic at 5 years old.**
- **Needed residential Care by Age 9.**

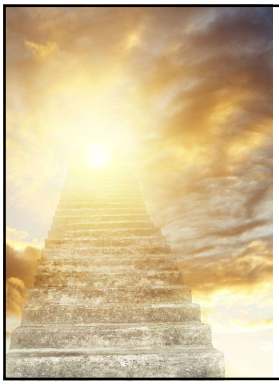
6



The simplest lesson

As I wrote to Tariq, "I have tried so hard to change you, and in the end it was you who changed me. Instead of becoming the son I wanted you to be you made me become the man I needed to be."

7



Acceptance as a Developmental Process

Gradual Growth

Acceptance involves a gradual learning process where individuals come to terms with their realities over time.

Personal Transformation

The journey towards acceptance fosters personal growth and emotional resilience.

Supportive Environment

A nurturing environment facilitates the development of acceptance through understanding and encouragement.

8

Acceptance is a Developmental Process

No one has died, so the stages of grief don't apply. Families and Autistic Individuals are actually mourning:

- Neurotypical characteristics;
- Inclusive lifestyle we want and expected;
- Loss of Medicaid/ Services/Education;
- Loss of our democratic society, which affects our free press, education, health care, & important things our families depend on;
- Our loses are ambiguous. Things may get better or they may not.

9

Usually happy;
Always Autistic

10

II. **Political & Sociocultural Influences**

1. Politically there is "policy whiplash" :

- Medicaid and Funding Cuts
- Grant "Chaos"
- Regulatory Shifts
- Agency Restructuring
- Mass deportations
- Unnecessary wars

11

2. Sociocultural Influences

"Perseverative cognition"—a loop of chronic worry triggered by news cycles.

- **Societal Division as a Stressor:** 62% of adults cite societal division as major stress linked to loneliness; political disagreements cause "relationship cut-offs."
- **"Doomerism" Effect:** Younger generations report hopelessness regarding the future. Over 60% of adults have considered moving to another state or country.
- **Polarization & Physical Health:** Political stress is manifesting physically, with roughly 40 million Americans reporting sleep loss and elevated cortisol levels.
- **Marginalized Communities:** LGBTQ+ individuals and immigrant communities report heightened "anticipatory anxiety" due to proposed policy changes regarding civil rights and healthcare access, leading to a demand for "trauma-informed" care in these groups.

12

Breaking the cycle of **perseverative cognition**

Gemini Image 12/23/2025

13

Breaking the cycle of **perseverative cognition**

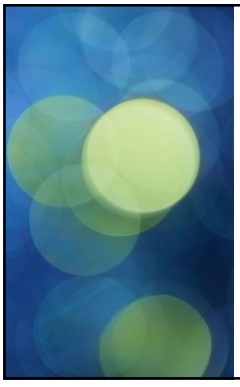
1. **Cognitive Defusion** (ACT). Label it as "I'm having a thought." Thank your mind for trying to protect you, but remind yourself the danger is not immediate.

2. **Schedule "Worry Time"** by setting aside 15 minute intervals. If worry comes up sooner, tell yourself that you will handle it at "worry time."

3. **Physiological Grounding**, paced breathing: Focus on an exhale longer than the inhale (e.g., inhale for 4, exhale for 6). This stimulates the vagus nerve, which sends a physical signal to the brain that the danger is gone.

4. **Values-Based Action**. Perseverative cognition is often a result of feeling powerless. Replacing "worry" (passive) with "action" (active) changes the chemistry of the response. Decide on a specific act of resistance.

14



Digital Hygiene

- **Turn off Push Notifications:** Only check news when *you* choose to, not when an algorithm pushes it to your lock screen.
- **The "One Source" Rule:** Pick one reliable, long-form news source to read once a day, rather than grazing on headlines all day.
- **Curate Your Feed:** Mute keywords on social media that consistently trigger a physical stress response (increased heart rate or jaw clenching).
- **Take digital breaks:** Turn off your phone at meal times and other times you do not actually need it.

15

Systemic Bias: Impact on Access, Safety, and Self-advocacy

1. Access: Systemic bias manifests by tightening of the gates to healthcare. Financial Stratification causes those with lower socioeconomic status, disproportionately people of color and those in rural areas to be priced out of private care. Marginalized groups (autistic, immigrants, or the LGBTQ+ community), often avoid formal medical systems entirely for fear of surveillance or discrimination,

2. **Safety: The Cost of Hypervigilance.** Political conflict shifts policing and public rhetoric that directly impact the physical and psychological safety of marginalized individuals.

3. Self-advocacy: The "Double Burden" of Stress. While the general public deals with political anxiety, marginalized groups face minority stress and racialized trauma. Additional energy is required to navigate a world that may be actively hostile. There is a profound sense of institutional betrayal.

16

Neurodiversity as Identity & a Civil Rights Movement

Autism is not something people *have*, but something they *are*. This "identity-first" perspective aligns autism with other protected identities such as race or sexual orientation. When autism intersects with other identities (e.g., being a Queer person of color), the "layering" of systemic bias becomes intense. An autistic person of color may be seen perceived as "defiant" rather than "overstimulated" by police, leading to higher rates of dangerous escalations.

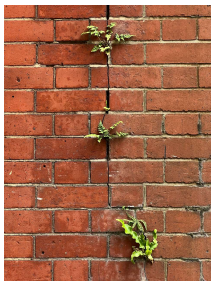
"Masking," the exhausting process of camouflaging autistic traits to fit into a neurotypical world, is viewed as a civil rights issue. The right to *not* mask is seen as the right to exist authentically without social or professional penalty.

17

Intersections of Autism, Identity, and Disability Rights

18

Resilience

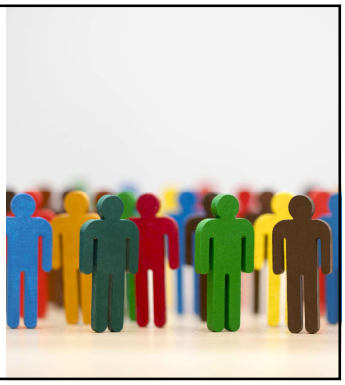


- Resilience is the ability to "bounce back" from difficult experiences.
- Rather than being tough, it is about being flexible and finding a way forward.
- Resilient people have the ability to adapt to stressors and maintain psychological well-being in the face of adversity

Photo by Jumpy Wizard on Unsplash

19

III. The Evolution and Intersectionality of Civil & Disability Rights



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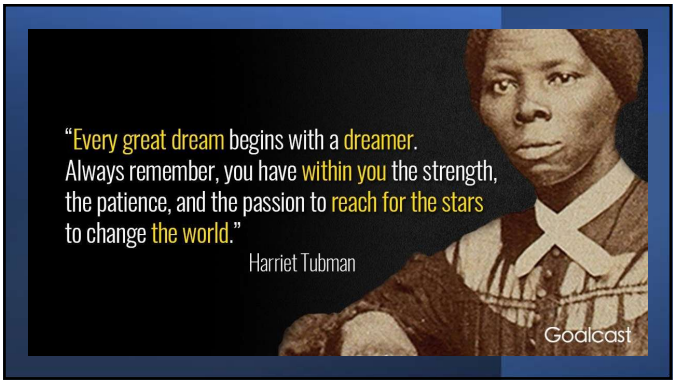


21

Our community has been trained in & Grown into resilience

22

WE ARE STRONGER THAN WE THINK

- Families who care for children or adults with disabilities and their service providers are resilient.
- It's been baked into our very beings by the challenges we have faced over and over, such as the pandemic and our current existential crisis. It's been a process in which we've learned lots of coping skills that help us to face adversity, keep struggling, and bounce back.
- This struggle has connected us in community to each other.

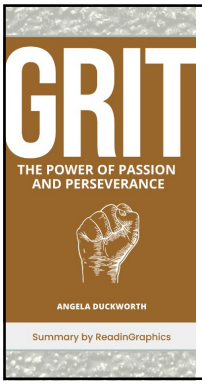
23

Our Community Has Persistence

- We have also faced setbacks, and we have practice at persisting and moving forward despite our disappointments.
- Some experience more adversity due to race and social class.

- We know how to face loneliness and alienation.
- We have to be very careful because our children /clients often don't understand danger.
- We have learned to adjust expectations.
- We have learned to face our fears and regulate our emotions.
- We have learned that we do not have control.

24



- Grit is the combination of passion and perseverance. Through years of research, Angela Duckworth found grit to be a stronger predictor of high-achievement than intelligence, talent and other personality traits.
- Passion is the deep, enduring knowledge of what you want.
- Perseverance is hard work and resilience. It's about moving in a direction toward your values with consistency and endurance, while having a clear inner compass that guides all your decisions and actions.

25

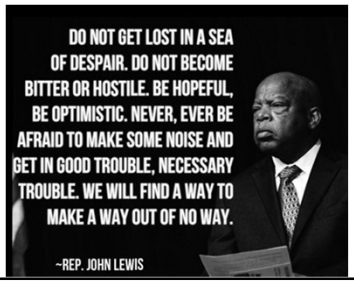
26

1950: The Arc Was Founded

- Parent groups throughout the country met in Minneapolis, MN in 1950 to organize The Arc.
- There were virtually no programs and activities to assist in the development and care of people with IDD. Doctors told parents that the best place for their child was in an institution. But these families wanted more. They wanted their loved ones to lead fulfilling lives in the community. The Arc was born out of the desire to raise their children at home and their refusal to accept institutionalization was the only option.
- Disability rights, women's rights, and civil rights have similar histories based on nonviolent actions.

27

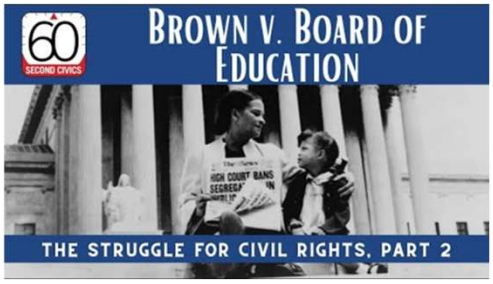
A Messenger of Hope to Our Times



Thousands of protests
45 arrests
33 years in congress

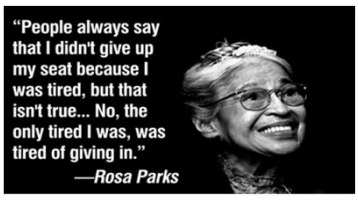
28

1954: Landmark Moments in Civil Rights



29

1955: Montgomery Bus Boycott



30

1957: Little Rock 9 with National Guard Escort

31

1960: Greensboro Sit-ins

32

1961: Freedom Rides- *Black & White Together*

33

1963: March on Washington

34

35

WILLOWBROOK STATE SCHOOL 1972

- *The abuse and neglect revealed by Geraldo Rivera's report led to national outcry, successful legal action, and the establishment of a federally mandated network of legal advocacy agencies protecting the rights of persons with disabilities.*
- *The nation was shocked into changing its laws* ***by the power of a free press***

36

PUBLIC LAW 94-142 & SPECIAL EDUCATION 1975

- PL 94-142 completely changed the game for people with disabilities who wanted to receive an education that was equitable to the education provided for people w/o disabilities.
- Zero rejections due to disability
- Least restrictive Environment
- Individualized Educational Program
- Became IDEA in 1990

37

1977 Section 504 sit-in, San Francisco

- Historic 28-day occupation of a federal building.
- Disability activists took legal strategies, moral language, and protest strategies from the Black freedom struggle.
- Black Panther Party member, Brad Lomax (RIP) was a key organizer. The Black Panthers provided hot meals and supplies.
- This illustrates that disability rights was born from the Civil Rights Movement. Role of disabled Black activists has been largely ignored.
- Disability rights became a civil rights issue.

Chat GPT Image

38

Capitol Crawl, March 9, 1990

Iconic protest where disability rights activists left their wheelchairs and crawled up the U.S. Capitol steps to demand Congress pass the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), demonstrating the physical barriers they faced and pushing the landmark civil rights legislation to a swift passage in July 1990.

39

Disability Pride Parade, NYC 2015

40

People in wheelchairs zip-tied and arrested June 26, 2025

41

More than 30 arrested at U.S. Capitol protesting cuts to Medicaid, June 26, 2025

42

IV. Strengthening Connection and Resilience

- ***We stand on the shoulders of those who have come before us.***
- ***It is now our turn to pass forward the movement for civil and disability rights.***
- ***We must be the shoulders for our children and grandchildren.***

43

44

A Culture of Resistance Is Growing

On October 18, 2025, the No Kings Alliance conducted the largest peaceful protest in American history. Over 7 million people in 2700 locations in 50 states. from 200 organizations.

In Portland, OR, National Guard was called out to protect the ICE officers sent to arrest & deport immigrants. Protestors in inflatable costumes began to creat a culture of nonviolent defiance.

45

Community Means Standing Up for and with One Another

46

Our Existential Crisis is a Moral Crisis

According to Martin Luther King, Jr., "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." In 1955, he made these comments on the 54 mile march from Selma to Montgomery for voting rights.

Right now it feels like the moral arc of the universe is bending the wrong way. It's precisely at times like this when we need to dive deeper into the work of nonviolence and work to dismantle systems that destroy life.

47

SUPPORT & ENGAGE WITH ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS

- The Arc of the United States
- The Autism Society of America
- National Disability Rights Association
- American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)
- Black Lives Matter
- National Immigration Project
- Women's March
- NAACP
- Human Rights Campaign
- Planned Parenthood
- Children's Defense Fund
- Indivisible
- Move On
- 50501
- United We Dream
- League of Conservation Voters
- Common Defense
- Home of the Brave
- Your Union, House of Worship
- Your Community Organization
- United We Dream
- League of Conservation Voters
- Home of the Brave

48

Mutual Aid

Nonviolent resistance includes providing Mutual Aid and care to our neighbors hurt by the government cutbacks and threatened with deportation. It is important not just for the care it gives, but it's an important form of protest. Mutual aid provides services to people directly through community organizing and resource sharing. Food banks & clothing relief networks for people in danger of deportation is protest.

49

Mutual Aid in Disability Communities

- We build power by helping our neighbors and by showing what can be possible when people work together.
- Mental health professionals must not just sit by and watch others suffer. We step in and do what we can to provide mutual aid.
- This is not charity: it is solidarity.
- Using our privilege to make a difference.

50

Forms of Resistance

Poetry	Prayer circles
Art	Walkouts
Music	Consumer boycotts
Slogans	Sickouts
Petitions	Strikes
Motorcades	Civil disobedience
Mock Funerals	Sanctuary
Banners	Sit-ins
Speeches	Guerilla theater
Group lobbying	Refusing unjust orders
Wearing symbols	Work slowdowns
Leaflets	Taunting officials
Writing on sidewalks/walls	Organizational statements
New signs & names	Turning one's back
Silence	Hunger strikes
Caricatures	Read banned books

51

Limitations & Risks of Resilience

1. **The "Resilience Trap" (Responsibility Shifting)**

The biggest systemic risk is that "resilience" becomes a buzzword. If a community is told to be "resilient," it implies they should handle their own crises. This allows the government to divest from social safety nets, shifting the burden of care from the state to unpaid, overstretched volunteers.

2. The Risk of "Insular Bubbles"

Strengthening community connections involves bonding with people who share our views or identities. This can have unintended consequences, such as “echo chambers.” While connecting with like-minded people provides safety, it can increase societal fragmentation, making it harder to engage across differences and deepening political silos.

52

3. Exclusion of the "Most Vulnerable"

Ironically, the people who need community connection most are often the ones least able to access it. Autistic individuals are often isolated with social anxiety often lack the "social bandwidth" to participate in community-building activities.

There are Safety Risks for Marginalized Groups. ”Strengthening community" for one group might look like "increased surveillance" for another.

4. Resource Limitations: Community resilience is often limited by the economic health of that specific community. A wealthy community can be "resilient" by pooling private funds for mental health clinics. A low-income community, facing the same systemic stressors, may have no capital to pool, leading to an "inequality of resilience." **Crisis Overload:** Community bonds can snap during large-scale disasters when everyone in a network is traumatized.

53

Hope Through Action

“Fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you free.” -Stephen King

“Hope is the belief that your future will be better than today AND you have the power to make it so.” - Chan Hellman, Director, Hope Research Center

“Those who have a why to live can bear with almost any how.”- Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*.

54

Cultivating Narratives of Belonging, Validation, & Hope

1. Remember family members, teachers, or ancestors, who saw your worth and would be least surprised to see you standing up for your rights today.

2. Cultivating Hope by Identifying "Unique Outcomes."Hope in 2026 is about finding evidence of your own agency in the "cracks" of a dominant, negative story. Look for small victories, such as a moment recently when the “Systemic Exhaustion” tried to stop you, but you took one small step anyway. How did you manage that?"

3. Narrative Work for Marginalized Communities. For those at the intersection of autism, disability, or minority status, narrative work is a form of resistance. **These** stories center joy, complexity, and competence. Sharing your story with a friend or a community group validates your narrative and transforms it into a a sense of collective belonging.

55

What are some of your narratives?

What are you seeing, hearing, or experiencing that gives you hope:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

56

V. Celebrate Autistic Joy

We must celebrate and protect our autistic or disabled family members and clients in a society that regards them as different and even less than! We protect the broader community by protecting them.

Photo © Jennifer White-Johnson with permission

57

Shifting the Focus

- Advocating for autistic joy and wellbeing shifts the focus from managing deficits to celebrating the intense happiness and strengths.
- Organizations like Proof Positive, https://proofpositive.org/, provide evidence-informed tools and research to help autistic individuals and their families flourish through positive psychology.
- Neurodiverse-affirming approaches foster self-acceptance and community.
- Personal narratives emphasize that expressing joy, through stimming or deep interests, is a powerful act of self-advocacy and resistance against stigmas.

58

Skills of Happiness from Positive Psychology

- Notice what's going right.
- Practice gratitude every day.
- Notice sparks of joy.
- See the positive side of people.
- Spend time celebrating together.
- Write a gratitude letter.
- Give yourself permission to play.
- Spend time in nature.
- Engage in regular physical activity.
- Measure what matters most. (https://proofpositive.org/skills/perma-snapshot/)

59

Autistic Joy as Resistance

- Jennifer White-Johnson describes **Autistic Joy** as an intense, unbridled gladness that provides a sense of purpose and "light."
- This joy is expressed through spinning, soulfulness, and authentic interaction.
- Black and Brown families face pressures to keep their children "in line" and "steady" to avoid systemic racism and stigmas.
- **#AutisticBlackJoy** is frequently missing or overshadowed by predominantly white narratives in the media.

https://jenwhitejohnson.com/, https://www.instagram.com/jtknoxroxs

60

61

Acceptance and Protecting Autistic Joy

From our monthly fathers support group:

- The father of a cheerful 14-year-old who is minimally verbally shared how his boy doesn't understand the holidays but enjoys opening gifts of socks and underwear.
- A 12-year-old boy singing Christmas carols in public used to embarrass his father who now sees it as his son's joy. "Walking next to me and holding my hand, he taught me to love him for who he is." Now his son sings in the church choir.
- A teenager holds my hand like a preschooler in the market while stimming with the other hand and vocalizing: I can protect him and his joy by not shushing him.
- In public, people were more compassionate than several men expected. One shared that he learned to let his boy sing, scream, run down the hall and back.

62

Neurodiversity-Affirming Interventions (NAI)

Reframing Goals: Instead of aiming for "normalization," focus on supporting an individual's existing strengths and creating supportive environments

Interdependence: the ability to collaborate and engage in reciprocal support within a community—rather than strictly independent functioning

Self-Determination: Regardless of verbal or cognitive abilities, autistic people should be given the opportunity to make informed choices about their goals and methods to achieve them.

Environmental Focus: Challenges are often viewed as a product of a social environment (abelism) that devalues neurodivergent identities; so target social, academic, and professional contexts to make them more inclusive.

from Lerner, Gurba, Gassner (2015).

63

Where do we go from here?

64

European Existentialism:

- "I think, therefore I am." – Descartes (Sartre, Camus)
- Individual is inherently free and creates meaning.
- Freedom is an inherent fact of the human condition.
- More individualistic with concepts of anxiety, despair, and personal meaning.

Black Existentialism:

- "I am because we are." (Ubunto)
- Oppression, racialization, marginalization, freedom is a goal.
- Freedom and agency are systemically denied by racism and white supremacy.
- Sociological and political, focusing on collective struggle for liberation and justice.

WHICH COLUMN APPLIES BEST TO ABLEISM?

65

FROM FRANTZ FANON:
ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS FOR OUR COMMUNITY

- *Who am I?*
- *Am I who I say I am?*
- *Am I all that I ought to be?*

66