The Two Voices of Autism

OUT OF SILENCE
A Journey into Language
By Russell Martin
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By Deborah Tannen

Born "normal," 18-month-old Ian Drummond was given a routine DPT immunization and had an allergic reaction to the P—the pertussis vaccine—that caused his brain to swell, leaving him with a bizarre oversensitivity to sensory stimuli, the inability to process information or manage emotion, the imprisoning need for routine, and the apparent inability to understand or use language that we know as autism. In this, he was disastrously unlucky, but he was fortunate in having a family who would devote themselves to him and an uncle with an obsession to learn all he could about what happened to Ian and the talent to write a book about it.

"Awakening" reminiscent of those described by Oliver Sacks. At the age of nine, Ian learned "facilitated communication": With the support of a helper to steady his hand and make it possible for him to initiate the motion of striking keys, he could type out messages revealing thoughts and feelings he was utterly unable to speak. Suddenly there emerged from the chaos of autism a boy named Ian and the amazing revelation that language had been in there all along. Because he had possessed language, he also had had an understanding of what was happening to him, even as he was locked in silence. (Although Martin acknowledges that many people believe "facilitated communication" is a hoax, I, like him, was convinced of its efficacy in this case.)

Ian's emergence out of silence into the communicative use of language is miraculous, but also devastating. Along with the precious ability to communicate with their child, to be able to ask him why he did what he did, his parents had to confront the terrible knowledge that their efforts to meet his need for sameness, to provide the interminable "routines" which he demanded—screaming in agonized protest if they were denied—gave him no pleasure, bring him no peace. His family was now faced with two Ians: the physically observable one they had long known, who desperately needed repetition (and who could kick, hit and pull his mother's hair), and another, utterly surprising one trapped inside, who begged for newness and who typed messages saying he hated the routines his parents had devoted their lives to providing (and who apologized for the hair-pulling, explaining that his body simply would not do what he told it).