

Somatics and Autistic Embodiment (excerpts)

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One thing I love about the field of somatics is that, whether or not they state it outright, all the best teachers and facilitators of somatic work I've had the pleasure to encounter are clearly motivated by a desire to see their fellow human beings blossom and thrive. This has always seemed to me to be the implicit mission at the heart of good somatic praxis in all its myriad forms. If there's one thing that unites the vast diversity of practices encompassed by the term *somatics*—and the vast diversity of individuals and communities that engage in those practices—it's that we all work with human embodiment, in one way or another, toward the goal of human thriving.

One topic that merits further exploration in the field of somatics is the question of how best to work with autistic embodiment, toward the goal of autistic thriving. This has been a topic of particular interest to me, since I occupy the dual position of being both a longtime practitioner and teacher of aikido and other forms of somatic work, and an autistic person deeply involved in autistic culture.

In the pages that follow, I'll share a bit about my own journey, and some lessons I've learned about autistic embodiment and about the application of somatic practices toward meeting the specific needs of the autistic community.

Autism and Human Neurodiversity

Unfortunately, the society in which we live is rife with ignorance, prejudice, and harmful misinformation concerning autism and autistic people. The prejudice and misinformation pervade not only the mass media and the beliefs of the general public, but also the academic and professional spheres; some of the most pernicious nonsense I've heard on the topic has come from the mouths of highly credentialed professionals. In light of this sad state of affairs, it seems best to begin with some basic facts about autism before discussing the particulars of my own story.

Let's start with the simple fact that just as different people have different genders or sizes or skin colors, different people also have different styles of perception and thought. These differences have their basis not only in differing individual and cultural experiences but also in innate biological variation in neurocognitive functioning. This neurocognitive diversity, or *neurodiversity*, is one of the numerous forms of diversity—along with ethnic diversity, gender diversity, diversity of sexual orientation, diversity of body size and shape, etcetera—that intersect and combine to create the vast and vibrant spectrum of humanity.

One manifestation of human neurodiversity is autism, a name for a particular cluster of neurobiological characteristics and associated cognitive traits that occur in somewhere between

one and two percent of the population. The distinctive characteristics of autistic neurobiology give autistic persons our own distinctive styles of perception and cognition, our own ways of experiencing the world.

The Nature of Autistic Experience

All of us—autistic or otherwise—experience the world through our senses, as an ever-changing field of sensory information. Our brains are continually engaged in filtering and sorting this information: selecting what gets consciously noticed, and organizing the field into a perceived world of discrete and coherent objects and sensations, through a highly complex system of ingrained schemata that are developed beginning in early infancy. Until they develop at least some basic organizing schemata, a newborn infant’s experience of the field of sensory information is, in the words of William James, “one great blooming, buzzing confusion.”

Neurons in the cortex of the autistic brain are more numerous, closer together, and less insulated than the cortical neurons in a non-autistic brain. As a result, cortical neurons in the autistic brain tend to fire more readily and connect with each other more readily, and signals being transmitted along a given neural pathway tend to activate other nearby neural pathways in a sort of “ripple” effect. This creates a condition in which less of the field of sensory information is filtered out of consciousness, and in which any given signal in that field of information is likely to have an effect that’s both stronger and less predictable than the effect it would have in a non-autistic brain.

What this all adds up to is that an autistic person’s subjective sensory experience of the world is quite different from that of any non-autistic person, and far more intense and chaotic. The field of sensory information is much *more* of a great blooming, buzzing confusion for the autistic individual, and thus the process of organizing that field into a coherent world of discrete objects and sensations is more challenging.

Most non-autistic people, fairly early in their development, reach a point where parsing the sensory field into a stable perceptual experience of discrete objects and discrete sensations becomes automatic and effectively instantaneous. For the autistic, however, this process rarely becomes quite as automatic, instantaneous, or complete. Autistic perceptual experience remains to some extent (to exactly what extent varies considerably from person to person) an experience of a buzzing, blooming field of information from which ordered coherence must be continually created and brought into resolution.

In addition to the overall challenge of integrating the sensory field into a coherent and navigable sense of the world, autistic persons often experience other interesting perceptual and cognitive phenomena as a result of our distinctive neurology. Examples include synesthesia (signals in one sensory or cognitive channel manifesting in other channels as well, such as when sounds are experienced as having colors or textures) and strong idiosyncratic sensory responses (finding particular sensations intensely pleasurable or unpleasant, even if most people would find them innocuous).

The intense and chaotic nature of the autistic experience of the sensory field is at the root of the various distinctive traits and patterns of behavior associated with autism. Much of the myth and misunderstanding around autism has its genesis in attempts by non-autistic professionals and laypersons to draw conclusions from the outward, embodied behavior of autistic persons without adequately understanding the subjective internal experiences behind it.

Most notably, autism has been widely misconstrued as being primarily a set of deficits in the capacity for social interaction. Autistics do in fact face substantial challenges when it comes to social interaction, but this is just a side effect of our sensory experience. In infancy and childhood, because so much of our attention is occupied by the complicated process of learning to parse and navigate our sensory world, we don't internalize all the myriad cultural norms and subtleties of social interaction that non-autistic children pick up. Then, because we can't perform non-autistic norms of social interaction well enough to blend in, we tend to be rejected socially by non-autistic people from an early age—which deprives us of opportunities for positive social interaction, which in turn compounds the initial challenges to social development.

The resulting difficulties in social interaction—often lifelong—are incorrectly assumed to be the core defining feature of autism, when in fact they're merely a by-product of having to devote more mental “bandwidth” to processing sensory experience, combined with the effects of a long-term social alienation that stems less from autistic deficits in social potential and more from non-autistic deficits in tolerating difference.

Stimming

From birth—or at least as far back into my early childhood as I can remember—I instinctively responded to the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the world by dancing with it, exploring it with all my senses and allowing myself to move in whatever ways best enabled me to find coherence in it, to modulate its uncomfortable aspects, and to delight in its sensory wonders.

There's one surviving photo of me in my toddler years, taken during an outing to a park: I'm kneeling on the ground beside a flattish, roundish rock about the same size as me, engrossed in exploring its texture with my hands. My happiest fragments of early childhood memory are all of such moments: moments in which I could devote my full presence and attention to some specific sensory pleasure, whether it was feeling certain textures against my skin, being absorbed by the sight and sound of a column of living water in a fountain, or running at top speed across an open field. Whenever I had the chance to fully indulge in such pleasures—especially the ones with a strong kinesthetic or tactile component, like vigorously rocking back and forth or running the palms of my hands along the cool smooth surface of a wall—doing so invariably helped me to integrate the whole of my sensory experience, temporarily lending my perceptual world an increased coherence and navigability.

Many years later, when I became involved in the emergent autistic culture that began to take shape in the early 1990s and continues to develop and grow to this day, I discovered that some of my fellow autistics had coined a term for these various forms of bodily engagement with sensory experience: *stimming*.

To stim is to engage in any physical activity that stimulates one's senses, for the purpose—whether intentional or purely instinctive—of regulating one's experience and consciousness. Stimming can be proprioceptive or kinesthetic (rocking, pacing, waving one's hands, seeking physical pressure or impact), tactile (touching objects and surfaces with appealing textures, stroking one's own skin), vestibular (spinning or swinging), visual (gazing at running water or rising smoke), auditory (loud music), olfactory or gustatory (sniffing or tasting things), verbal (repetition of interesting words or phrases, like “blooming buzzing”), or any combination of these (drumming, for instance, is both kinesthetic and auditory). The list of possible stims is infinite; every autistic person I've encountered has their own favorites. Stimming can serve many functions, including (but not limited to) helping to modulate, process, integrate, and bring greater coherence to sensory experience; facilitating emotional and cognitive processing and regulation; inducing or enhancing states of sensory pleasure; and enabling access to specific cognitive capacities or states of consciousness.

Stimming isn't something that only autistic people do. How many non-autistic people occasionally pace back and forth because it helps them think? Drum their fingers on a desk or table? Pause to deeply inhale a pleasing scent? Let themselves be soothed and entranced by the sound of rain on the roof or the sight of flickering flames in a fireplace? Spend time stroking a pet, or the hair or skin of a lover, because it feels good? Spontaneously move their bodies as they get into the groove of a piece of music? All these activities qualify as stimming. Everybody stims.

But autistics stim a lot more than everybody else, because to stim more or less constantly is essential for processing, regulating, and navigating the chaotic complexity of autistic sensory and cognitive experience. And because autistic sensory preferences are idiosyncratic and diverge from common non-autistic sensory preferences, autistic stimming stands out more to the judgmental eyes of the non-autistic because it tends to violate non-autistic cultural norms.

For instance: once, in kindergarten, I got in a great deal of trouble for stroking the skin of my left forearm with my right index finger. The teacher punished me much more harshly than other kids got punished for hitting their classmates. I suppose that's because while hitting is merely wrong, stroking the skin of one's own arm is (gasp!) *not normal*. And as every autistic kid learns early and repeatedly, there's no worse crime than not being normal.

Sensory Needs vs. Social Norms

I've mentioned that autistics tend to have less attentional bandwidth available to focus on childhood social development or the subtleties of face-to-face social interactions, because navigating autistic sensory experience consumes so much attention. A closely related dynamic occurs in regard to autistic embodiment. (When I speak of embodiment, I refer to all aspects of how we use our bodies, consciously or otherwise—including tension and relaxation, movement, body shape, carriage, breath, gaze, expression, gesture, and vocalization—and the ways in which these various aspects of bodily usage combine to create the overall gestalt of how we perform our presence in the world.) It boils down to this: the more one's use of the body has to be geared toward regulating sensory and cognitive experience, the less it can be geared toward social purposes like following cultural norms of embodiment and nonverbal communication. Everyone

uses their embodiment to regulate their experience, and everyone uses their embodiment to convey social meaning in accordance with learned cultural norms. But relative to non-autistic embodiment, autistic embodiment involves more of the former at the expense of the latter.

For example: like most (but not all) autistic children, I avoided eye contact whenever possible. Why? Because to my relatively unfiltered autistic perceptions, eye contact was so loaded with information that it was too intense to process while I was also trying to process anything else (like other sensory input, or language). Making eye contact in a social situation dysregulated me to the point where it was impossible to deal with any other aspect of the situation, like remembering how to use or comprehend words. And like most autistic children, I'd avoided eye contact so much since infancy that I'd never internalized any of the non-autistic cultural norms around how to use it (and like most autistic adults, I still don't make much eye contact—and when I do make eye contact, my timing and style still don't follow non-autistic cultural norms).

Now, I was a white kid growing up in a mostly Black neighborhood, and going to a school with mostly white teachers. According to the cultural norms of the Black adults in my neighborhood, it was a sign of disrespect if children looked their elders straight in the eye. But according to the cultural norms of my white teachers and most of the other white adults I encountered, *lack* of eye contact was a sign of inattention and dishonesty (an absurd myth that persists in white non-autistic culture despite the accumulation of scientific studies demonstrating that liars tend to make more eye contact than truth-tellers). The result was that I was constantly targeted by white adults for being disrespectful, inattentive, and “obviously hiding something,” while Black adults tended to be much nicer to me than white adults (I once overheard one of them remark to another that I was unusually well mannered for a white kid).

Since I rarely said much, the snap judgments these various adults made about my character were formed, to a large degree, on the basis of how they interpreted my lack of eye contact (on numerous occasions, the white adults even said as much). And their interpretations were based on what their cultural norms said about the meaning of eye contact or lack thereof.

What none of them understood was that my avoidance of eye contact, like my stimming and most other aspects of my embodiment, had no social meaning behind it at all. It wasn't in any way about them or about my attitude toward my interactions with them; it was about regulating sensory input in a way that was necessary if I was going to be able to interact at all.

That's the sort of thing I'm referring to when I say that relative to non-autistic embodiment, autistic embodiment tends to be more shaped by the need to interact in specific ways with the overall sensory field, and consequently less shaped by cultural norms or by any social agenda.

Dyspraxia

There's one other significant factor that contributes to the distinctive nature of autistic embodiment: the same cortical hyperconnectivity that causes incoming signals to ripple across neural pathways, producing the chaotic intensity of autistic sensory experience, also affects the outgoing signals that the brain sends to the rest of the body when one performs any physical

action. This creates interference with the smooth execution of intended actions, a phenomenon known as *dyspraxia*.

Like sensory sensitivity, synesthesia, or any other autistic trait, dyspraxia manifests differently and to differing (and often fluctuating) degrees in each autistic individual. In some, it's noticeable only as a certain physical awkwardness, an odd gait, a slowness at picking up new motor skills. In others, there's extreme impairment of motor skills, sometimes including speech. (One of the more damaging non-autistic social prejudices impacting the autistic community is the unfortunately commonplace tendency to equate oral speech with intelligence. Autistics who are unable to speak due to dyspraxia are frequently dismissed as lacking in basic intelligence and self-awareness, and denied respect and self-determination, despite the fact that a growing number of non-speaking autistics who spent their early lives being similarly dismissed have proven to be eloquent and insightful when given the opportunity to learn to communicate through typing or other assistive technologies.)

Autistic Embodiment

The motor effects of dyspraxia, the heavy use of stimming, and the need to orient the use of the body toward the goal of sensory and cognitive regulation at the expense of orienting toward nonverbal communication, all interact and combine to inform autistic styles of embodiment. Individual embodiment is shaped by many factors, of course—including genetics, culture, and personal experiences—and individual embodiment varies as much among autistic individuals as among non-autistic individuals. And yet, I've met a great many autistic people over the years, hailing from many different backgrounds and cultures and possessing widely disparate personalities, and in each and every one of them I've observed certain distinctive qualities of embodiment—certain shared movement signatures, subtle and nigh-impossible to describe yet readily recognizable to the attuned and experienced eye—that transcend cultural differences and mark them unmistakably as members of my scattered tribe.

A World That Didn't Want Me

When left alone, as a child, I would contentedly follow my natural impulses toward movement, learning, exploration, and creative engagement with the world, in whatever ways and at whatever pace best suited my particular developmental needs and inclinations. But I was never left alone as much as I would have liked. Instead, every day was an extended series of baffling, stressful, and traumatic situations in which nearly everyone I encountered—other kids, my parents, my teachers, and other employees of the school system—rejected and psychologically and physically abused me for being different, for being not-normal, for needing more time to process and understand things than the other kids needed, and for failing to follow non-autistic norms of embodiment, cognition, speech, and interaction.

Conforming to all those norms, while simultaneously trying to navigate the incessant demands of the non-autistic world at the sort of pace that was required of me, would have been impossible for me even if I'd understood what the norms to which I was supposed to conform actually were (which I didn't—because, as most autistic children learn, the first rule of non-autistic social interaction is that no one explains the rules, and the second rule is that anyone who asks for a

clear explanation of the rules gets abused instead of being given helpful answers). So my daily childhood experience, except when I was alone, was one of bewildered floundering under an overwhelming bombardment of confusing noise, incomprehensible demands, implacable hostility, and seemingly random eruptions of verbal or physical abuse that could come from anyone around me at any moment.

What I learned later, reading the stories of countless others in online autistic communities, was that the hostility, abuse, and trauma I experienced as a child were more or less standard fare for an autistic childhood in the modern world. If anything, my childhood seems to have been on the pleasant side compared to that of many of my fellow autistics. To grow up autistic is to grow up in a world that doesn't want you—a world where the mass media, politicians across the political spectrum, giant money-grubbing “autism charities” run by non-autistics, and often our own families speak of our very existence as a “tragedy,” a “burden,” and an “epidemic.” I've found that most non-autistics, including non-autistic professionals who work with autistic clients, have very little understanding of just how much traumatic abuse the vast majority of autistics experience in childhood, adolescence, and beyond.

Losing Myself

A shard of memory: I'm in kindergarten, walking around the playground. Just walking and walking, a favorite activity throughout my life. Feels good, helps me integrate. I'm letting my hands move around as they are wont to do, letting them hover in the air around me, now flapping like butterflies, now floating like seaweed. No language spoken by non-autistic people has words for what this does for me. I'm jolted by the sudden sound of boys laughing. I look and see a group of bigger boys horsing around nearby. I think they're the same boys who taunted me and hit me at recess a couple of days ago, calling me “freak” and “retard.” This time it's not me they're laughing at, but they might turn their attention to me at any moment. I remember that other kids have mocked and sometimes assaulted me for the way I move my hands. It occurs to me that if these boys spot my hands moving it will draw their attention. I quickly jam my hands into my pockets and walk on, pretending to be going somewhere. The boys ignore me. It worked! Next time I walk around the playground, I keep my hands in my pockets. It makes me a little bit safer, and I barely notice that I feel a little bit less alive.

I hardly think that was the very last time in my childhood I moved my hands like that; it's just one moment I happen to remember, one representative glimpse of the story of my childhood. The suppression of my visible stimming habits was a long and gradual process, and even the stifling of any one specific form of stimming, like those particular hand movements, can't be boiled down to any single decisive moment. To repress the embodiment of one's truest and most vital self, to extinguish the unique dance by which that self intuitively seeks to engage with the world, takes countless tiny decisions, most of which end up lost to conscious memory if they were even consciously made in the first place. A slow accumulation of moments in which the spontaneous dance of stimming is put on lockdown for the sake of the partial safety of briefly passing for semi-normal, until the lockdown becomes habit and the dance is buried and forgotten under layers of rigid armor.

It's never a price worth paying. For autistics, especially, stimming is essential to our well-being in every way—essential to ever attaining any measure of ease in navigating our world, essential to self-regulation and stability, essential to accessing our best gifts and highest potentials.

In the long run, suppressing our visible stimming and other aspects of our natural autistic embodiment doesn't even buy us the safety from abuse it appears to offer. We can never truly pass. An autistic person can't thrive and find social acceptance as an imitation of a non-autistic person just by forcing themselves not to move like an autistic person, any more than an eagle can live comfortably as an ostrich by forcing itself not to use its wings.

Locking the beauty of our autistic dance away under layers of chronic tension warps our embodiment into a perpetual state of awkward rigidity, a clumsy stiffness and dissociation, lacking in vitality and physical confidence. In the eyes of non-autistics this sorry condition, combined with our inability to convincingly perform the subtleties of non-autistic social norms, marks us as Other and as targets just as surely as our stimming ever did. And without access to the dance, without the integrative and restorative power of stimming, it's impossible to cultivate the sort of resilience we need in order to thrive in this world.

By the time I turned twelve, the years of accumulated stress and trauma, compounded by the loss of resilience and vitality from repressing my stimming, had taken a severe psychological and physical toll on me. I was depressed, wracked with tension, often dissociated. Pale, anemic, and skeletally thin, I was often unable to eat due to ulcers and other stress-induced digestive problems. My posture was hunched, shoulders up and head down, always curling inward as if to shield myself from the unrelenting rain of abuse. I was plagued with headaches, illnesses, obsessive-compulsive symptoms, and an assortment of nervous tics and twitches. Most of the time, all that kept me alive was sheer stubborn defiance: the world didn't want me, so as long as I stayed alive the world didn't get to win.

[...]

Flamingly Autistic and Thriving

Everything I do these days—aikido, teaching and learning, writing and public speaking, loving and parenting, being in the world and in community—I do as my authentic self, autistically. My embodiment is flamingly autistic. If you know how to recognize it, you can see it in the movements of my hands, the rhythmic rocking of my body as I sit, my walk, the tilt of my head, how and where I direct my gaze, the way certain things in my environment draw my attention, the small and seemingly random stops and starts and moments of silence in the pacing of my conversation, the endless small stims that are a constant part of my engagement with the world.

To those who don't know how to recognize autistic embodiment, I suppose I just come across as weird. Which is accurate, if we consider *weird* as the opposite of *normal*. To thrive as an autistic person, one must allow one's embodiment to be autistic, and this puts one in constant violation of non-autistic conceptions of “normal” embodiment.

Many non-autistic people, even some who've spent time with other adult autistics, don't recognize me as autistic these days. Sometimes this is just because I don't fit whatever popular stereotypes about autism they've encountered (very few real autistic people actually fit the popular stereotypes). But most of the time, I've come to understand, it's because severe trauma is so widespread in the autistic population that most people (including most autistic people, sadly) can't even imagine what we might be like without it.

So when people say I don't seem like other autistics, what they usually mean is that I don't have the pulled-inward quality or the overwhelming anxiety, nor the awkward rigidity that comes from deeply ingrained chronic tensions—tensions established as defenses against constant overstimulation and abuse, and as a means of repressing any stimming or other characteristically autistic movements that might attract further abuse. But none of these things—the pulling inward, the anxiety, the rigidity and tension—are traits innate to autism; what they are is symptoms of trauma. And I don't have those trauma symptoms anymore because I've overcome them through many years of actively working at it via somatic practices like aikido and paratheatre.

Being autistic is neither innately traumatic nor incompatible with thriving; our trauma is the result of living in cultural environments in which our fundamental way of being is regarded as wrong and undesirable, in which our developmental needs are not well met, and in which we are subjected to all manner of traumatic abuses (often in the name of “therapy” or “treatment”). Like most humans, we're born with the capacity to thrive if our needs are properly met—and one of those needs is the need to be accepted as autistic people with autistic styles of embodiment, rather than being pressured to conform to non-autistic norms of embodiment or abused for diverging from those norms. We can only thrive to the extent that we're free to live and move autistically.

Working with Autistic Students and Clients

I've been teaching aikido and facilitating other forms of somatic work for many years now. Although the majority of my aikido students, coaching clients, and workshop participants are non-autistic, I do get plenty of autistics as well (especially these days, as my published work and public speaking on autism have become known to an increasingly large audience). The lessons I've learned from my own journey have proven to be quite applicable, and invaluable, when it comes to working with my autistic students and clients.

Based on my own transformative experiences of somatic practice and my experiences facilitating somatic work for autistic students and clients, here's a quick summary of the key elements that a regimen of somatic work should incorporate in order to have maximum benefit for autistic participants:

Body awareness. Practices to improve the processing of proprioceptive, vestibular, and tactile sensory information. Many autistics instinctively seek to do this through highly physical stims like jumping on trampolines. In autistic children, this sort of vigorous stimming should be encouraged. Every aspect of aikido training fulfills this function in some way or another; the practices of trying to stay grounded while being steadily pushed on, and of frequent falling and

tumbling on a padded floor, were particularly valuable for awakening my body awareness in the early days of my training.

Centering. Practices for remaining centered, grounded, and relaxed. Such techniques—for instance, focusing on the center or *hara* in the lower abdomen, or deep and steady mindful breathing—have many benefits, but for autistics they’re particularly helpful in preventing sensory overwhelm.

Expansiveness. Practices for expanding one’s sphere of attention and sense of presence beyond the boundaries of the skin and into the space around one, while still maintaining body awareness and centeredness.

Dual attention. Practices to build the skill of interacting mindfully with others while still maintaining one’s own body awareness and centeredness. Autistics are often pressured to interact with non-autistics on non-autistic social terms even when they’re not feeling up to doing so, prioritizing the social preferences of non-autistics over the autistic person’s well-being. So especially when it’s autistic children I’m working with, I emphasize that maintaining their own center comes first, and should be prioritized even if it means needing to temporarily withdraw from engagement with others.

De-armoring. Breaking down layers of chronic tension that may have accumulated as defenses against overwhelm or abuse, or as a means of repressing stimming in order to avoid rejection and abuse. Note that because breaking down these tensions can be destabilizing, it should only be attempted *after* a person has developed good centering skills.

Freedom to stim. For adult autistics, cultivating the freedom to stim may entail a process similar to the one I went through: an active effort to recover the capacity to stim, to tune into long-repressed stimming instincts, and to break down any chronic tensions that may have built up as part of the process of repressing stims. For children who are still in touch with the stimming instinct, it’s mostly a matter of keeping them out of the clutches of toxic adults who will try to force them to conform to non-autistic norms of embodiment, and sometimes also a matter of helping them to replace potentially harmful stims with less problematic stimming options (for instance, kids who slam themselves into walls to satisfy their need for impact can be redirected to trampolines or taking flying leaps onto tumbling mats; kids who loudly drum their hands on their desks at school can be given a rubber ball to squeeze or some similarly non-noisy hand-held stim toy).

I hope these guidelines will be of benefit to my fellow autistics, and to my fellow practitioners, teachers, and facilitators of somatic work. And of course, one doesn’t have to be autistic to benefit from incorporating all of the above elements into one’s somatic practices.

Liberation for Every Body

When I first started doing college lectures and public speaking engagements about autism and somatics, I talked about stimming only in terms of how it was a somatic need for autistics. I talked about the harm that results from the suppression of stimming, and about the importance of

recovering the capacity to stim and defending the right to stim, only as issues facing the autistic community.

And then people started reaching out to me after my college classes and public speaking gigs. It didn't surprise me when people sought me out to tell me their own stories of having been forced or shamed into suppressing their own childhood stimming, and to thank me for inspiring me to reclaim their stims. It didn't surprise me when people contacted me months after hearing me speak, to tell me that recovering and following their long-suppressed stimming impulses had helped to restore their joy and vitality, had reduced their anxiety and boosted their creativity, or had given them a sense of engagement with the sensory world that they hadn't felt since childhood. What did surprise me was that a lot of the people who were telling me these things weren't autistic.

So whether you're autistic or not, I hope reading about my journey will inspire you to stim. I hope it will inspire you to experiment with being a little more expansive, a little more engaged with the sensory world, a little more free in how you move your body, and a little more weird.

And I hope it will inspire you to more fully embody the unique beauty of your own authentic self.

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