How to Find a Four-Leaf Clover

How to Find a Four-Leaf Clover

What Autism Can Teach Us
About Difference, Connection
and Belonging

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Introduction

My grandfather taught me how to find four-leaf clovers. At the bottom of a winding rock staircase close to his home was a park filled with white-flowered clover in the early spring. I love the smell of clover. I love that it attracts the bees and that it's as soft and comforting to lie in as a quilt on a cold winter's night. I love it most because of the lessons it has taught me.

One day, as my grandfather and I walked through the clover park, he quietly said, "In amongst all of those thousands and thousands of three-leaf clovers, there are clovers that are unique. Those are the ones that you want to seek out."

When my grandfather whispered, I knew to listen and listen hard, because there was a secret coming.

"Just because you see only threes in a clover patch, don't think that everything must be the same. If you think there are only threes, you'll miss seeing the fours and the fives and even the sixes—if you're lucky. That's where the magic is."

I got on my hands and knees and studied the clover. All I could see were threes, thousands of individual threes.

"Don't look so hard, love," my grandfather said. "If you train your eyes to see the beauty in difference, it's everywhere. It's right under your nose. If you look at the world with a closed mind, all you'll see are limitations."

It's strange how some childhood lessons stick with us. A line or two of sage advice can become a recurring theme and help shape our lives in uncanny ways. For me, looking for four-leaf clovers helps me keep an open mind and reminds me that life is full of possibilities.

I never imagined that one of those possibilities would include writing a book. Up until a few years ago, that thought had never crossed my mind. This might be because the idea of spending so much time alone goes completely against my grain. My greatest happiness comes from being with other people. Finding connections with others has always brought me joy.

When I was sixteen, I was fortunate to gain work experience at a school where one of my friends' mothers taught. It was a school for children with disabilities, and I loved every second of being there, perhaps because it was the first place where I spent so much time with people who were different from me. The kids moved in a different way, communicated in a different way, and learned in a different way. My brief stint in that classroom opened my eyes to how unique we all are, and I wanted to keep learning. I wanted to know what made people tick.

My time in that school set me on a path that I have followed since. I wanted to surround myself with people who helped me view things from a new perspective. When I graduated from high school, I studied to be a teacher who works with children with disabilities, and I started working in the community and in people's homes as a disability support worker. By the time I was eighteen, I was spending many of my waking hours hanging out with people of different ages and backgrounds and who all had disabilities of one kind or another.

That was more than thirty years ago. Since then, my life has

weaved through many different jobs and careers, but there's been one constant: I have always worked with autistic people.

A few years ago, I set up my own practice to provide relationship and sexuality counseling for people with disabilities. During my many years in disability support services, I had become aware that many autistic and neurodiverse people didn't have access to this type of therapy. I'm a person who thinks that relationships are the most important thing in life, so this did not sit well with me.

I had been (and still am) very happy working as a counselor, and I certainly wasn't expecting someone to call and ask me to join *Love on the Spectrum*—a TV series centered on autistic people and dating—to provide the participants with support. I definitely didn't expect the show to be so well received internationally. When I said yes to this opportunity, I didn't know that it would open so many doors, set up so many new possibilities, and create so many wonderful new friendships with the autistic people on the show.

I am not autistic. This fact created a lot of angst and trepidation for me when I began writing this book. I had to ask myself if a neurotypical person should write about autism. I struggled with this question; it consumed my thoughts. I discussed this dilemma with many of the autistic people in my life. One person, a mathematical genius, broke it down for me in an equation.

"How old were you when you first met an autistic person?" he asked. I told him. "And how old are you now?" He wrote down my answers, asked me what I had been doing each of the years between then and now, and estimated how many autistic people I had met and spent time with. The page filled with numbers and sums. "Well, by my calculations, it looks like

you've met over a thousand. That's a lot of autistic people's stories you have in your head."

And when he said this, I realized that, although I wasn't a natural writer, I was a storyteller, and my life had been filled with story upon story upon story of autism: the story of the autistic person who changed my perspective on time; the person who made me rethink my relationship with objects; the person who showed me that I speak in riddles. So many tales of how autistic people changed my view of the world.

To respect people's privacy and confidentiality, I have removed the identifiers from everyone in this book. There are no real names, and none of the people in these pages are exactly like their true selves. All the individuals I'm still in contact with have read their own stories, righted my wrongs, added their perspectives, and, on a few occasions, even chosen their own pseudonyms.

One of the autistic people featured gave me the encouragement I needed to keep writing. On reading the chapter that was based on her, she sent me this text:

I thought this was a book about autism, but it's not. It's a book about all of us.

And she was right. Although the way that autistic people communicate and perceive the world might be different from the way neurotypical people do, these stories try to bridge the gap between "them and us." They attempt to help *all* of us have a deeper understanding of autism by offering a closer look at ourselves and the people we spend our lives with. This isn't a book about the lived experience of autism; that's not my story to tell. It's a book about what autistic people have taught me.

We all have teachers. We all have people who educate us and guide us through life. Some of these teachers are in our families or friendship groups. Some are found in schools, yoga

classes, or the gym. Teachers are in churches, mosques, temples, and ashrams. They're on sports fields, in theaters, in boardrooms, and in concert halls. For myself, I have been guided to a far greater understanding of nonjudgment, compassion, empathy, humility, honesty, trust, and integrity by autistic people. I have learned about difference, connection, and belonging from my autistic teachers, and I hope that, by telling you these stories, I'll help you learn something too.

Often when I'm training or delivering workshops on disability, sexuality, and relationships, I will start by setting the audience's expectations. I will say, "You'll not find everything I say life-changing, and you will probably already know most, if not all, of what I'm going to tell you. But I hope that you can find one thing that you didn't know before and one thing that you can act upon later."

So this is the hope I have for you. I hope that within these pages, you can discover just one new thing that shifts your way of perceiving people and that, with this new knowledge, you can create better connections with those around you, whether they are neurodivergent or not.

When I started working on this book, my brother quoted Hemingway to me: "Write it as straight as you can." In keeping with this, I've tried to steer clear of jargon and academic language. But I've been very conscious of the language I use surrounding identity. Over the past three decades, I have watched the diagnostic criteria for autism be rewritten three times and revised once, and I have witnessed the language and culture of autism and disability change. When I first started working, in the 1980s, everyone used the words *autistic person* and *disabled person*. Then person-first language came into use, and for many years we used the terms *person with autism* and *person with autism spectrum disorder*, which led to the term *person on the spectrum*. In

recent years this has shifted again; a large majority of the community have embraced their autistic identity and now identify as *autistic people*.

In this book I use the term *autistic person* to follow this preferred language. While I use identity-first language for autistic people, I use the term *person with a disability* for all other disabled people. This was a conscious choice, because, though I know that both identity-first and person-first language are used, there are a vast number of disabilities, and I wanted to be broad in my terminology. In saying all of this, I recognize that a person's identity is completely their own. If you call yourself an autistic person, so do I. If you call yourself a person with autism, so do I. And if you call yourself a disabled person or a person with a disability, I'll follow suit.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 is about how we all perceive the world and our own unique experience of thinking, sensing, and feeling. Part 2 is about how we communicate this viewpoint to others, understand one another, and express ourselves. And part 3 explores the aspects of life that connect us and give us a sense of belonging in this big, mixed-up, extraordinarily beautiful human race.

You will read about facial expressions and gestures and emotions. You'll read about trust and patience and anxiety. You'll learn about acceptance and inclusion, and you'll learn a little more about compassion. I hope this book will help you look at neurological differences from a new point of view.

My grandfather was right. When we shut our minds and see the world only from a closed perspective, when we seek only sameness and judge differences, we are not allowing ourselves the joy of all that we can learn from one another.

This book won't tell you how to find four-leaf clovers. That's between my grandfather and me. What I can tell you is

that the greatest lessons and insights come from opening our minds and hearts to diversity. That was the wisdom of my grandfather.

So relax your eyes and don't look too hard. The beauty and magic found in difference is everywhere.

Luna's Pool

Luna was a pixie-like girl, fine-boned and fragile with a head that appeared too big for her seven-year-old body. She had eyes the color of mottled gray clouds on an overcast day and a shock of wispy blond hair that often stood on end, as if an electric current ran through her. Every Saturday morning, I would pick up Luna from Stanley Hall, a housing complex for people with developmental disabilities. It was a cluster of red-brick buildings surrounded by a wire fence adjacent to a major road.

On the day I met Luna, all I knew was that she didn't speak, that she loved the water, and that she had something called autism. I was only eighteen and had no knowledge of autism beyond the occasional movie reference, but I *did* know that I wanted to work with people with disabilities. As a step toward this goal, I had recently started a job as a disability support worker while studying for an undergraduate degree in education.

My job was to take Luna out on Saturday afternoons. We could do whatever we wanted from one till four, and since both of us loved water, I thought going for a swim would be the perfect plan. A local special-education school had a hydrotherapy pool that wasn't used on the weekends, and the principal had given me permission to use it. All I had to do was pick up the keys from the nuns who lived in a convent at the rear of the school.

On that first day, Luna screamed for the entire twenty-minute

drive from Stanley Hall to the pool. It was a scream of deep pain and torment, and it didn't stop. Twenty minutes of screaming and thrashing and kicking and sweating, and I had nothing to offer. I didn't know how to soothe or calm her. I tried talking to her from the driver's seat while she screamed and raged in the back. I tried singing, but the screaming only got worse. I felt helpless and hopeless and in way over my head. I had no idea what Luna was doing or why she was doing it, no idea what was hurting her or causing this fear.

I ran as fast as I could to collect the keys from the convent. An elderly nun answered the door. She seemed oblivious to the anguished sounds coming from the back seat of my car. I told her that I needed the keys to the pool, and I needed them *now*.

"How lovely that you're taking a little kiddie for a dip," she said calmly, moving like molasses. She clearly was in no rush. It took everything in my power not to force my way into the convent and snatch the keys from her wrinkled hands.

When I finally had them, I raced back to the car and drove the short distance to the building that housed the pool. Luna kept screaming. I parked just outside of the pool's locked door. Luna kept screaming. I opened the car door and unbuckled her seat belt. Luna kept screaming. I lifted her out of the car seat. Luna kept screaming. I tried to lead her to the pool door, but when I touched her, she screamed even more. Getting that key in that lock was pure torture. I fumbled and swore and pleaded.

But when I finally wrenched that door open, everything changed.

Before us was a pool—twelve by thirty feet of liquid heaven. There was a single ramp that led into the water at one end with a steel handrail trailing into the depths. A pool cover was mounted at the edge of the other end like giant blue Bubble Wrap, twisted around a roller. It was just like any pool you

would see in a yard, back when most pools were simple rectangles and not the curved oases that make gardens feel like the beaches of Bali or Hawaii that you see today.

It didn't matter that the room was humid and hot and there was an overpowering smell of chlorine that burned your nostrils. It didn't matter that the only fresh air entering this steamy space came from slatted windows so high up they almost touched the ceiling, as if they'd been installed as an afterthought. All that mattered was the pool. To Luna, this small rectangle of blue surrounded by rough brick walls was bliss.

I took in the pool with my eyes, but Luna examined this haven with her tongue. She ran in and licked every surface. She licked the red bricks of the walls, the metal of the handrail, the plastic of the pool cover, and the water itself, lapping at it.

At first, I was horrified. *She can't lick the pool*, I thought. *Surely this is not okay.*

But she laughed.

So I laughed.

We were not sharing this laugh; we were laughing separately, Luna in joy and me out of pure relief that the screaming had stopped.

I watched her build a relationship with this space, licking every surface. She giggled and immersed herself in the warmth of the water, then pulled herself along the edge of the pool, hand over hand, licking and making friends with each tile. She spent time with the filter and cover and skipped around the edges of the pool, making contact with all of those red bricks with her tongue.

That first day, we kept our distance from each other. I was scared of Luna's screaming, and Luna was scared of me. But the next week we went to the pool again. And the week after that. And the week after that.

Every Saturday—same time, same place, same convent run to pick up the key from the nuns. And the same licking, but with every Saturday, there was less and less screaming in the transition from one place to the other.

Every Saturday, I learned. In the oasis of the pool, I tried to get Luna to look at me, to acknowledge me, to interact with me. Initially, I did this on my terms, using a style of language and interaction that I was used to. I would call Luna's name, ask her multiple questions, and fill the air with the sound of my own voice. I tried playing games with her, floating pool toys in her direction, and throwing an inflatable ball toward her in the hope that she would pick it up and throw it back. But whenever I said her name, talked to her, or tried to get close to her, the heart-wrenching screams would begin again.

So Luna made me try a new way. A different way. Her way.

I learned that her way was all about keeping it simple and that this simplicity meant ease and calm. I learned that I didn't need to talk to her or say her name. In fact, I didn't need to speak at all. After several weeks, out of curiosity, I decided just to copy Luna. Whatever she did, I did too. I tried to clamber inside her brain and see the world as she saw it. What was she doing? What was she feeling? Why was she licking every surface?

By copying everything that Luna did, I learned that rough bricks on the tongue felt like a cat's lick on my skin. I learned that the metal of the handrail is sure and stable and provides security. I learned that each of those bubbles on the plastic pool cover was uniquely different and held its own texture and pocket of air. And I learned that water *should* be lapped, always lapped. I learned all of this with my tongue.

One Saturday, I arrived at Stanley Hall and walked to building 3 just as I'd always done. Through the glass window of

that locked door, I could see Luna pacing impatiently, holding her towel and already wearing her swimsuit.

When the door buzzed, Luna came out, walked to the car, and climbed into the booster seat. She hummed to herself the whole twenty minutes of the drive.

Later, in the pool, just the two of us, lapping but not talking, Luna came up beside me and licked my arm.

We had found our connection.

PART I

Having a Unique Perspective

Thinking, Sensing, and Feeling

I travel a lot, both for work and for pleasure. One year I slept in thirty-two different beds over the course of forty-five nights. I hated all thirty-two. Each morning, I'd run workshops or go to meetings with bags under my eyes and my overcaffeinated heart pounding.

The first night of sleeping somewhere new is always terrible. On that first night, I'm sensitive to new noises, the creaking of the building, and the humming of the fridge. I'm aware of the lighting and the way the streetlamp casts shadows across the unfamiliar wall. I toss and turn, adjusting the pillows and occasionally punching them. I'm restless and fitful.

For the past six years, for one week a month, I've provided sexuality and relationship counseling for people with disabilities in a regional community. Every time I'm there, I stay in the same hotel. I've slept in every bed and in every room that the hotel has to offer, and they're all different. They're different shapes and sizes. The mattresses range from hard and firm to saggy and soft. Some rooms are closer to the road and some are closer to the railroad tracks, where cargo trains pass all night. Some have carpeted floors; others have polished wood or tiles. Some have big sliding doors looking out over the ocean and others have small windows with a view of the liquor store and the service station. Each room sounds different, smells different, and feels different. I used to arrive at check-in filled with uncertainty, because every new room was so disorienting.

"I just want to know how to get to the toilet in the dark" was how I explained my desperation to the front-desk clerk. "I want to be able to navigate the room without hitting a wall or the doorjamb or a cupboard. Please! If I'm always in the same

room, I can wake up in the morning and know which side of the bed I'm on."

So room 4 has become my room. I know its nooks and crannies, where the electrical outlets are, and that I have to turn the showerhead toward the wall to avoid flooding the bathroom floor. I know to pull the battery out of the clock because its tick is too loud. I know where the blankets are when it gets cold, and I barely notice the passing trains and the shaking fridge. When I first arrive, I know to adjust the blinds and tuck in the edges of the curtains to block the streetlight, and I know to open the windows to let out the smell of cleaning products. I know not to overfill the kettle (because it splatters boiling water onto the counter) and to turn on the table lamps (because the overhead fluorescents glare too brightly), and I know the roles of all five remotes. It took me some time to get to know room 4, but now that I do, I sleep like a log—and in the middle of the night, I can get up and walk to the toilet in the pitch-black.

So there's the truth about me. I like to think of myself as spontaneous, as footloose and fancy-free. I'm a person who believes that getting lost is part of the adventure and who's willing to hang-glide off a cliff on short notice. But I actually love consistency. I love routine and rituals. I won't turn around on a walk without touching a rock or a tree. When I go into the ocean at the end of my street, I don't count it as a real swim unless I put my head under the water three times. Any less than that is just a dip. I've used the exact same shampoo and conditioner for years, I always buy the same brand of Jarlsberg cheese, and I like to drink the same wine. And when one of these brands isn't available, I'm not a happy camper.

My love of sameness is just how my brain is wired. But instead of chastising myself, I've learned that these habits are

just a beautiful component of what makes me *me*. We all have our quirks, and these characteristics are created by how we think, sense, and feel.

The ways that we interpret information, process sensory input, and experience emotion are as diverse as we are. When I was a child, I was told, "Every person is unique." I thought of this as meaning "I have freckles and you don't" or "I have hazel eyes and you have blue." But over the course of my life, I've come to understand that this uniqueness relates to how our brains work. Autistic and neurodivergent people are wired differently from neurotypical people, and in these differences lie many lessons about how our perceptions and views of the world are constructed.

Who you are is shaped by your thoughts. I'm an overthinker and will try to look at situations and experiences from every angle. I turn them around and around in my head, and these thoughts can keep me up at night. I'm easily distracted, and because of this I constantly lose things and leave my belongings on buses, in taxis, and at café tables.

I'm also highly emotional. I cry all the time, and tears come easily. I cry when I'm sad, happy, frustrated, or angry. I cry when I watch movies and read books. I cry when people tell me stories of their hurt, but also when they share their successes. My tears flow when I see another person's tears, even if I don't know why they're crying. I cry so much that once, as a child, I was removed from a movie theater because I couldn't stop sobbing when Bambi's mother died. (Sorry for the spoiler.)

I'm super-conscious of my senses. I love the way they all work together to take in the world. I like to listen with my eyes closed and break down what I hear: leaves rustling, a bird's song, the footsteps on the floor above me. I love the sounds of snorkeling—the tinkle, crack, and click. I have a fondness for

soft light. My favorite time of day is the gloaming, that light just before sunset when shadows are long and everything is golden. And I can't live without the feel of water on my skin—baths, oceans, lakes, or just splashing it on my face.

In the ways you and I perceive the world, we might be as different as day and night. But we also have the chance to appreciate these incredible differences in how others think and sense and feel. It's in these differences that we're given the most wonderful opportunity to view life through a whole new lens. If we think about the vastness of this—that every single human being is having their own experience and that our own perspective is just ours—it makes learning about one another an endless journey of discovery.

1

Emily's Diapers

The Martins lived in a suburban cul-de-sac surrounded by cookie-cutter houses. The interior of their house was a jolting combination of mission-brown walls and orange laminate countertops, and the only heater was in the living room, which consequently became the hub of activity. And there was always a lot of activity. Leslie had three beautiful children under seven; the youngest had been born a few weeks before, and her two older kids were autistic. Leslie's partner worked as a long-haul trucker during the week and came home only on weekends, which meant Leslie was the sole parent five days a week.

This was quite different from the house I was living in with a bunch of students at the time. It was a typical student house; there were always dishes in the sink, trash that didn't quite make it to the curb, and constant arguments over who had eaten whose food. While living there, I was studying education at university and had a part-time job as a community support worker for people with disabilities. It was a perfect job for me, as it allowed me to get the kind of hands-on experience you couldn't get at school. As a young woman without children, I didn't understand the reality of families with young kids, much