

Married on the Spectrum

“To me, our love is like a painting.”

Brilliant, creative, and a high-ranking communications professional before the age of 30, my beautiful bride-to-be stood across from me under her white veil and a tiara, prepared to make a lifelong commitment to love someone who still didn't truly love and know himself.

“For the first few layers, we made a lot of mistakes,” I said, “but with new layers of paint, hard work, and attention to detail, we continue to create a more beautiful painting.”

We said, “I do,” and celebrated with our friends and family, partying all night.

Around the same time, Netflix released a docu-series titled, “Love on the Spectrum.” We were drawn in by the honest, caring, and often hilarious folks trying to find love while navigating the difficult waters of Autism Spectrum Disorder. Interestingly, my wife and I often saw their behaviors differently.

“I don't get why he's being laughed at. He's just being honest.”

“I completely agree with her stance on that. Small talk is awful.”

“She's right. Animation is awesome.”

My wife would respond, kindly.

“You can't be that honest if it's going to be rude.”

“Small talk is just a part of life.”

“Animation is cool, but she's a little too obsessed with it.”

Then my wife joked, “maybe *you* are on the spectrum too!”

A bucket of paint was thrown onto our canvas.

Sitting in the office at Annville Psychology, we braced ourselves for potentially life-changing news.

“Well, you're very, very smart.”

I turned to my wife and raised my hand for a high five. “All right!” I yelled. She rolled her eyes, but my wife is a saint. She gave me five.

“These results are indicative of ADHD and Autism Spectrum Disorder.”

I was 34 years old.

I was elated. Everything had become clear. Did I have special interests? Yes. Was I painfully honest? Yes. Did I fidget and stim? My mom would call it my “isms.” Strong sense of justice? Difficulty understanding sarcasm? Missing social cues? Emotional dysregulation? Check. Check. Check. Check.

The reason the doctor said that I was smart? To explain why I was able to hide my autism so well for so long. “You’re able to mask well most of the time. But that can be exhausting, leading to burnout and a quick fuse.”

My wife was concerned. She had hoped, fairly, that with proper therapy I could better control my anger. With rest, she hoped I’d feel less exhausted. An autism diagnosis changed that hope. Now we understood; it wasn’t just work and family and stress that burned me out— it was the lights, the smells, and the noises.

My wife and her family are New York Puerto Ricans. Their culture differs significantly from my working class, white, coal region background. She is one of seven siblings and her family has blessed us with eleven nieces and nephews. Growing up, I didn’t have much family. We didn’t have big parties. There wasn’t much hugging or touching. We never blasted music or talked over each other. My wife’s family did. All the time. It wasn’t rude. It was just how they did things.

Week after week, party after party, I would return home a mess. I wanted to sleep. I wanted to be alone. My wife, an extrovert, wanted to discuss the day’s events, and I couldn’t bear it. I was experiencing autistic burnout, and, on bad days, autistic meltdowns or shutdowns. Before we knew my diagnosis, these seemed like immature and petty fights that I was often provoking.

After the diagnosis, we started on a fresh layer of paint. At first, the brush strokes were small; learning the terms: burnout, shutdown, meltdown, overload. We made many mistakes. We painted with broad brushes, often with the wrong colors, and created a warped image of ourselves. But we kept working. We tried different colors, different strokes, and sought new sets of eyes.

We attend therapy every month together, and frequently on our own as well. We have tough talks that can still lead to shutdown. My autism became a more obvious part of myself as I realized how many times I struggled to communicate why I was hurting so badly. The result of these hard times, tough talks, and therapy? A greater understanding between two people in love whose minds work in very different ways.

“Sorry, I just realized I said that very rudely. Let me try again.”

“What do you need right now?”

“Can I just put my headphones on for a little while?”

My wife goes above and beyond to accommodate my sensitivities. She bought me fidgets and Loop ear plugs. She's patient and giving. And I do my best to offer her the same patience, and when I'm unable, I can at least offer honesty. “I'm just really overstimulated right now.”

And now, when we attend family events, or loud social gatherings, we do our best to communicate, I go outside when I'm overwhelmed, and our family offers kindness and support for my needs. In turn, I offer the same consideration to everyone else, regardless of whether or not they are on the spectrum.

Offer patience, extend kindness, and strive to understand other people.

My wife and I will continue painting, one new lesson, and one new brush stroke, at a time. And whenever I take a moment and look back at what we've created, even with all of the mistakes, I know it's something beautiful.