



MOVING OUT OF CULTURAL AUTISM: Freeing Oneself from Non-Functional Behavior

Four-year-old Scottie sits cross-legged on the floor of the treatment room. Kate, a licensed occupational therapist, sits beside him, but he doesn't seem to notice her. In fact, he looks off in the other direction. "Take your shoes off, Scottie," she says. "Take your shoes off, so we can play on the mat." He ignores her and hums softly to himself. "Shoes off," Kate repeats with exaggerated enthusiasm. He looks away, continues humming and begins to flap his fingers near his eyes. "Scottie, let's take our shoes off." Kate places her hand on his arm, hoping to get his attention. He pulls away, turns his back to her, hums louder, flaps faster, and begins to rock back and forth. "Watch me, okay?" Kate removes her shoes in a performance worthy of an Academy Award. Scottie remains unimpressed. Kate gives up on the shoes and offers him a brightly colored toy that lights up and makes silly sounds, a toddler's delight. Scottie begins to scream and bang his head on the floor.

Recently, a music minister came to me and expressed some frustrations at his new parish. He was previously in an all-English-speaking, European-American middle-class community and had a good routine worked out. Now he is in a new world that includes Spanish speaking, a large Tongan community, and an English-speaking choir that is dominated by Filipinos. The music director, let's call him Robert, is professionally qualified with a degree in music and a certificate in liturgy, but nothing, nothing is working right at the new parish. Robert is ready to bang his head against a wall.

I listened with great empathy to Robert because I, too, have had experiences of confusion, disorientation and exasperation when working with choir members from other cultures and preparing liturgies with people from ethnic backgrounds not my own. Let's return to our little boy in the treatment room for a second. Scottie is autistic. Usually diagnosed in early childhood, autism limits a person's ability to interact effectively with people and things in the environment. Kate, who has

worked with children like Scottie for over ten years, has explained to me that persons with autism perceive the world differently. They may crave or avoid particular types of sensory input, and they may be easily overwhelmed by sights and sounds that are not disturbing to others. To survive these confusing sensations, autistic children often retreat into a private world, performing self-stimulating, but otherwise non-functional, behaviors.

Over the years, I have shared my journey into multicultural ministry with my good friend Kate. Once, when I was processing my frustrations with her, she told me about a parent who had this crisis on Easter Sunday morning: A seven-year-old threw a tantrum because the Easter Bunny had put orange shoelaces in his Easter basket. It was only after two hours of screaming, a dozen Easter eggs were smashed into the carpet, church was missed, and his mother had dissolved into a wilted heap of exhaustion that, at last, the boy tearfully explained, "But I don't know how to tie the orange ones." For autistic children, once a skill is learned a certain way, it is nearly impossible to alter. A puzzle that Scottie learned to work sitting on the floor could not be completed standing up any more than orange shoelaces could be expected to behave the same as white ones.

It was then that a realization struck me: this Franciscan is culturally autistic. I was born in the United States and educated as an American. I was taught to think like an American, reason and process problems like an American, communicate in styles that Americans comprehend, and I have found professional success and personal satisfaction in all of the above. There is nothing wrong with being an American, or thinking and acting like an American, but I can be like Scottie, caught in my own world.

My American self-awareness only came about when I had to minister with people from other cultures and ethnicities. Why all these tensions and misunderstandings? Kate revealed to me that I possess functional behaviors for an American world and live in an American bubble. I naturally presume

that everyone else operates, processes and communicates the way I do, which is the right way, of course. The curve ball is that I communicate in English with Filipinos, Mexicans and African-Americans, and I presume that we all understand what was decided at the Christmas Eve liturgy preparation meeting or are in agreement on how the procession is going to flow at the parish unity Thanksgiving Day liturgy. But the people at those meetings are of different cultures and we all process thought, emotion and reason differently. To move out of cultural autism I have to repeatedly remind myself that I am an American and that I think, reason, prepare liturgies and run choir rehearsals like an American.

Another pervasive feature of autism is a rigid desire for sameness and a fierce resistance to change. When Scottie was beginning in occupational therapy sessions, Kate taught him how to make a tower out of building blocks. Later on, Kate wanted to teach him how to arrange the toy blocks to make a train. She would line up the blocks and place one on top as the engine, make the whistle sound, and slowly push the train across the floor. "Choo-choo! Choo-choo!" But when Scottie was asked to make a train, he could only form the blocks into a tower. He could not imagine the blocks being used in any other way.

Desire for sameness and a fierce resistance to change is also another component of cultural autism. I have particular behaviors and skills that work well when I am with middle-class, white Americans, but often they do not serve me when I am ministering with immigrant laborers, ethnic refugees or people who speak English as a second language. I have found a liturgical style and music repertoire that satisfies my Western-trained ear and tend to stick to it. In a way, I am a little bit like Scottie, who, at the age of eight, cannot walk down the hall at school without stopping at every door to touch and say the room number. (This would present a serious danger to himself and others in the event of a fire, when speedy evacuation is essential!) But for Scottie, transitioning from one space to another is so stressful that it requires the comfort of a familiar

routine, which is adhered to compulsively, regardless of its consequences. He will fight anyone who tries to prevent him from fulfilling this compulsion.

When ministering with other cultures, we are called to be hospitable and to welcome into the faith community people who have different spiritualities, musical aesthetics and devotional expressions. If I am imprisoned in my own world, I will be hampered by patterns of belief and relationship behaviors that have me doing senseless things like demanding other cultures do it the right way, that is, demanding that they do it my way. In many instances, what I think is the right way is merely the American way. Only after relationships are developed between the ethnic groups, dialogue is formed and trust is gained can the various groups have honest mutual reciprocity when forming intercultural liturgy. One of the first steps, and one of the most difficult, is for the person in the dominant power position (usually the English-speaking American) to recognize and own that he or she is American. Your reaction might be, "But that is claiming the obvious!" The realization that people of other ethnic backgrounds think and assume things differently than Americans is obvious, but what is shocking to me is that most of the frustrations, struggles and complaints of American liturgists and musicians in regard to multicultural ministry ultimately has little to do with liturgy or music. The root hindrance is that the person in power unknowingly is locked within an American world and is frustrated because others don't cooperate or understand.

Let's go back to Robert, who is new in a multicultural parish. While he will never cease being American, after conversing with him, he understands better that he was imposing his American behaviors and expectations on the other cultural groups. Intercultural ministry is a balance of give and take; one needs to recognize what he or she is bringing to the table before being able to truly engage in mutual reciprocity.

Scott is now sixteen and has a far greater repertoire of activities than his parents ever imagined. He can feed and dress himself, play purposefully with a

variety of toys, and read and spell many words. While autism cannot be cured, it is possible to overcome many of its hindrances. Given the right support and intervention, a person with autism can expand his or her world beyond the boundaries imposed by the condition.

Toy blocks have more potential than just making towers. They can be circled to form wagon trains and pushed in a line to make a train. If our behaviors restrict us to only building towers, we miss all the other games, the wealth and richness of diversity. Moving out of cultural autism allows liturgical preparation, music selection, and ensemble performance to be understood in multiple modalities and from various viewpoints. Sometimes a pastoral situation will give us orange shoelaces instead of white shoelaces. How will we respond? Will we bang our head on the floor or will we celebrate Easter?

Endnote

Roughly one in 163 American children born today is somewhere on the autistic spectrum. To learn more about autism, go to the US centers for disease control and prevention autism information center site (www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism) or the Autism Society of America site (autism-society.org).

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Recommended Reading

Thinking in Picture. Grandin Temple. New York: Vintage Books, 2006.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime. New York: Vintage Books, 2004.

Kate Beals, BS, OTR/L, is an occupational therapist in pediatric practice at the South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind. She has received specialized training in autism from the South Carolina Department of Disabilities and Special Needs Autism Division through continuing education courses and direct consultation. In addition to providing occupational therapy services for children with autism and other disabilities, Kate is the parent of an autistic son.

Franciscan Brother Rufino Zaragoza is an Oakland, California, liturgist and musician who explores the world of intercultural worship. He recently went through intense cultural autism therapy while working in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City for four months, coordinating for OCP their latest Vietnamese-English bilingual collection, Chơn Ngài (OCP 2024ITL). Rufino also regularly leads pilgrimages to Vietnam; visit vnpilgrimage.com for more information.