

# The Battles of the Autistic Thinker

By Marc Segar

## About Marc Segar

Marc Segar (1974-1997), BSc Hons in Biochemistry, University of Manchester. We are very grateful to Marc's parents for their help and support in getting his work the wider audience it deserves. Marc Segar's tragic death in 1997 at the age of twenty three filled those who knew him and his work with grief and dismay. We felt his death cheated us of the inspiration we had come to expect. Despite the brevity of his career Marc's thinking was already beginning to play an important part in the development of our understanding. We miss him.



## Chapter 1

As far back as I can remember, I have had thoughts and ideas which at the time, seemed to make me unique. In actual fact, many of my earliest memories are theories I had about the world around me. Perhaps my earliest thoughts were about phonetics. Without actually knowing what "phonetics" meant and probably not even knowing the alphabet, I was able to think to myself that "P" was a harder version of "b" as was "T" to "d", "K" to "g" and "S" to "z". This all worked reasonably well inside my own head but at the time I was only 4, an age at which apparently I wasn't even speaking yet except to express basic needs. However, I didn't know I wasn't speaking. I simply assumed I could.

At the same age, I used to wonder about matter, thinking that different colours must have represented different kinds of matter. If you like, I believed in the plasticine principle.

Also, I used to wonder what would happen if I were to travel along the earth or on a road in a straight line for a very great distance. Would I eventually end up against a card-board wall which constituted a small part of the great card-board box which enclosed the universe? And if so, what was beyond it? Perhaps there were more card-board boxes, all stacked up inside an even greater card-board box. When you make a theory that depends on another theory which in turn depends on another, this is the sort of conclusion you may form. It is one of the major pitfalls of linear thinking which can wreak havoc with your interpretation of social situations.

When I started school I had a teacher who took a sympathetic and open minded approach. My classmates would accept me for who I was even though I spent so much time daydreaming and wondering over to the wrong side of the classroom while the teacher was reading a story. Even at that early age the other children could probably tell there was something wrong, despite the fact that I never suspected anything of the sort; and this was to be the case for a long time to come.

Throughout my life people have treated me differently to the way they treat each other and when I ask why, or what is wrong with me, they have never seemed to be able to tell me. They say, it's just a bit of everything.

What really seems to throw people is that they can't seem to understand that a six year old boy who knows all the planets in the solar system and who can already subtract five from three may not yet have worked out that it is inappropriate to climb in the dust-bins during play time or that it is naughty to chew up ones pencil and stare out of the window during a lesson.

In all honesty, many of my skills and snippets of scientific knowledge didn't come from the classroom at all. They were the answers my parents would give me in response to my rather obscure questions. They did actually serve quite a useful purpose in that people could see that I may have been very odd but I wasn't stupid. Also, it has given me a rather scientific outlook on life, without which I probably wouldn't have been able to succeed in the way I have. I have analysed social interaction from a scientific point of view enabling me to participate as an individual within a group.

My mother used to walk me to school and back every day. This was my favourite time for singing Beethoven's violin concerto which my father used to listen to. Emma, my sister, would be in the pram earning motherly attention while I carried on singing Beethoven, completely unaware of the symbolic and emotional value of having a new person in the family. When my sister was approaching the age of two, this was probably when we first began to play together. Our games would usually involve a small number of characters or personas represented by dolls, teddies, other toys or even just objects. We would organise them into lines and bash them about a bit.

After seeing how indifferently I related to action man, my parents introduced me to Lego. Lego was the perfect toy for me. I used to spend whole days just making shapes and structures.

Back at school I had a best friend, Ben, whose work was suffering as a result of his attempts to look after me. On the whole, people in the same class as me would casually defend me and look after me at playtime. However, when I chose to go running off in whatever direction pleased me, I was a sitting duck. I don't really know how the staff interpreted my funny rituals and habits but they would probably have classified me under the heading "attention seeker". It's actually quite strange the way in which I used to think of the staff. Myself, the other children and my parents were all people. However, teachers weren't people they were teachers and dinner ladies weren't people, they were dinner ladies. It is almost as if I thought of them as a separate species in the animal kingdom, beset with the role of looking after people.

When it came to puppet shows I was even more confused. Puppets aren't really alive. However, we're supposed to think they are, well maybe not. We are at least supposed to react towards them AS IF they are real, even though at the back of our minds we know the truth of the situation. Father Christmas had me even more confused than this. I was easily confused by any situation which involved any separation between truth and supposition. For a long period of my life I have been very easily deceived.

To the school tear-aways I was a real object of interest. If they told me to do

something, quite often I would do it, thinking I was being good and doing as I was told, not really knowing that it was against the school rules and it would get me into trouble. When they said "Umm, I'm telling", I would immediately realise that I was breaking the school rules but that I didn't know about it at the time and that it was extremely unfair. I would respond to this injustice by saying "No, no, don't", making me look like a real attention seeker.

When I wasn't a target I was a reject. I remember how desperately I used to wish to be part of other children's games where the grass was always greener. I used to wish I could take a bag of marbles to school, join in with the game and come home with more, instead of always losing them all to little pirates and con-artists.

I may have been unaware that there was anything wrong with me but the feelings of rejection I felt then were to crop up time and time again for years to come.

Dr Elizabeth Newson came to visit us on one occasion when I was in my third year of schooling to try and determine what was wrong. She talked to me for an hour about my favourite thing, the solar system. Impressed with my knowledge of the subject, she suggested autism to my parents but with uncertainty. My parents replied with "now try talking to him about something else". On this note, my diagnosis was almost certain and my parents were worried at the prospect that I had an incurable social disorder but were at the same time relieved that finally, someone had shed some light on the problem.

My obsessions and interests showed plenty of depth but very little breadth and my behaviour patterns were ritualistic and repetitive. At school I wasn't coping either with the lessons or with the other children, I was disruptive and day-dreamy and I would usually behave as if no-one was watching me.

At the age of eight I was taken out of mainstream school and placed into Whitefields special school in East London, in a new department known as DNCC, which stood for disabled non-communicating children. This was soon replaced by BCD "behaviour and communication difficulties" which seemed like a much more appropriate description. Here, I was first acquainted with Jenny who was to be my teacher for a long time to come. I was part of a group of five children, all with the same problems as myself, one of whom was another boy called Marc. It was really quite a contrast from the previous classes I had been in where I had been one of 30.

This other Marc had a rather amusing directory of "sillies" in his head. Sillies are little catch phrases which you spurt out and laugh at hysterically, regardless of whether or not it might be appropriate to the situation. They included things like "have a banana" and "sense sense to Marc Segar" as well as including silly sounding words or jingles off the TV. The whole of the class would find it hysterical. Also, making the rest of the class laugh was something I was irritatingly good at. It was always the teacher's job to put the breaks on.

Together as a class we were all being taught to say hello, goodbye, please and thank you. The emphasis always seemed to be on courtesy and independence and in many ways, I didn't really feel as if I was at school. I gradually developed this un-informed image in my mind of what it was like in supposedly "normal" schools. In secondary schools the work must have been really advanced. Everyone had to learn French, trigonometry and algebra. I was under the impression that whatever I was doing, people in normal schools of the same age were doing much more difficult work.

## Chapter 2

I believe that despite the effect going to special school had on my self image at the time, I was in fact happier there. It was a very protected and sheltered environment in which the work would cause me some but not too much anxiety and the other children were not too cunning for me.

In the same class as me there was an older girl called Sammy. Her speech was quick and monosyllabic but she had rituals and noises which were like soothing background music which went on all day. I fell hopelessly in love with her one afternoon when she put her finger on my nose. In later years we used to rub cheeks or squash our noses together under the relentless disapproval of various members of staff.

For much of the time, we would be going on outings which involved shopping, cooking, washing up and various other activities concerned with personal independence. In many ways, I would say I was lucky. I was in a controlled environment where stresses and demands were given to me in just the right amounts and I had plenty of advantage over my classmates.

On the other hand, I would look around me and see all these children who would bite their own hands, bang their heads and make bizarre vocal noises. This always led me to the same question "what the hell am I doing here ?". Some of the staff, but by no means all of them, would treat me as if I was a much younger child. A small number of them might even have thought I was merely pretending to be disabled so that I could take advantage of the system. It's funny how normal I could appear on the outside, only to say something completely inconsistent and out of context two minutes later.

I used to hang around with my sister's school friends in the street after school and during the holidays. We would spend most of our time on bykes, riding over ramps at high speed, climbing ontop of walls and talking about how old we were and which schools we went to. I was happy to say the name of the school I went to but to talk about it any further than that was to risk disclosing a deep dark secret. Every time I got onto the minibus in the morning or jumped off in the evening I would worry about my friends finding out that I was slightly handicapped. What a horrific label that would be to have to endure. This is something which they later found out about through the grape vine, but it seemed to make vary little difference.

Looking back on it all, I find myself wondering how on earth I managed to belong to this small group of friends. Perhaps it was because there were usually about five of us, the perfect number. Perhaps I was merely lucky that they were a welcoming group. Then again, it may have been because my mother didn't object to everyone playing in our back garden. Experience tells me that a group of people either accept or reject you but once they have made up their minds, they seem to stick to it. Their attitude towards me, whether positive or negative, seems to have little to do with the general level of intelligence or moral understanding in the group and at certain points in my life, I have been at the fifty-fifty stage in that half of the groups would respond negatively towards me and the other half positively.

My sister was at least as eccentric as myself in that she was very easily annoyed. It was almost as if she had a bright green explode button which everyone could see and which many people were always tempted to press. We were both as targettable as eachother. One of our street friends, Bradley, used to come round every day during the holidays and play us off against eachother. He was cunning, devious and proud.

When I wasn't involved with friends, I would be doing lots of little projects on my own at home. For about two years I used to draw mazes. I also spent a lot of time making mixtures in coffee jars which included tea-leaves, grass and mud. I would leave them behind my bed and forget about them. When me and my sister were left in the absence of anyone else to play with, we used to string up dolls and teddies to the banisters, stick pencils in them, drown them and spin them round on a peice of string.

I soon became very interested in my new ZX spectrum and began to write programs in basic. It was not long before I was writing my own computer games.

Around the same time, I taught myself to play the keyboard. It was perhaps because of skills like these that my sisters school friends continued to be interested in me. One friend in particular, Douglass, was very interested in what I was doing and seemed to be very tolerant of the fact that I didn't really know how to show an interest in him. Unfortunately, we lost touch when I moved out of the area.

## Chapter 3

Emma and I had moved on from torturing dolls and teddies and had begun building lego colonies all over the house. We called our latest game "punishing Hitler". A lego man with a mostache would represent Hitler and the rather grand and elaborate Lego city around him, with about 20 individual characters in it, would be constantly punishing him whilst having to defend their city against extra-terrestrial attack. They even had a colony in the garden which they would travel to in a small cabin which slid down a taught piece of string which led from the bathroom window to the trunk of the apple tree. The lego game eventually drew to an end when I decided I was too old and grown up for it and this made Emma quite upset.

There were in fact quite a lot of things which I used to opt out of because of feeling too grown up. These involved many kinds of group activities such as singing, drama sessions or joining in with games. Group activities were something which took place quite a lot at a family support group we had joined called Kith and Kids.

It was not long after I had been diagnosed as autistic that we started going to Kith and Kids events. It includes not only the families with at least one disabled member but also the volunteers, work-shop people, program planners and organisers. We always used to have an excellent time as a family at Kith and Kids, always keeping busy, never bored.

Perhaps one of my favorite activities at Kith and Kids as a child was building castles out of boxes for the other children to climb inside and explore. Kith and Kids was one niche of many that I was encouraged to participate in.

During my time at special school I would be integrated part time into other, more mainstream like schools. These included the local primary school and Durants special school in North Enfield. This was a school for children and teenagers with general learning difficulties and behaviour problems, most of whom were able to speak quite well and could read.

There was quite a lot of gang formation at Durants and one gang in particular used to harass and threaten me. However, I was usually able to diffuse the situation because at this school, at least they weren't too quick witted for me. However, it was at times like this when I began to ask myself a very useful question. Why do people choose to be nasty to each other? Why do these bullies harass me when I've done absolutely nothing wrong to them? Given the choice between complementing and insulting someone, why do people so frequently opt for insults? It was as if my mind was now so tuned into logic that I had forgotten my instincts completely.

I now explain negative human behaviour in terms of survival of the fittest. People seek to eliminate others when their natural instincts perceive the threat of competition. It's actually quite funny how every time I've left one place to start with a clean slate in another, I've assumed that this problem would just go away, never to be seen again. Only in recent years have I actually realised that this isn't the case at all.

## Chapter 4

During my last two years at Whitefields my teachers were men. This was probably much more valuable than I realised at the time since they have given me quite a good reference point from which I am now able to understand myself as a man.

They were sensitive, enthusiastic and wise. To begin with, I would show off to them with silliness and arrogance, seeing them almost as rivals, but in the long term, silliness rarely matches up to wisdom.

Having been prepared in this way for two years I was seen to have out-grown Whitefields and reluctantly, I was transferred to West Lea which was a school which operated like a main-stream school in most ways but with smaller classes. Many of the children at West Lea suffered from physically oppressive disorders such as asthma, some suffered from dyslexia but at West Lea, we were altogether quite a well acquainted little community.

Gradually, but not straight away, I was accepted by my classmates. Perhaps one of my closest friends was Nigel, a boy with similar problems to me. We both enjoyed talking nonsense and singing silly jingles together. However, other classmates would keep on reminding me that this silliness needed to be discouraged not made worse. This is something I found oppressive and fun-killing. I just thought it was so good to see him enjoying himself. Everyone always seems to have this irrational impulse to stamp out and destroy all nonsense and autistic humour and replace it with hard competitive wit games.

Together, Nigel and I learnt the lyrics to about twenty jingles from adverts on TV, put the first 35 elements of the periodic table into a song and recited PI to 17 decimal places.

During all this, a rather attractive girl who was new to the school took to me, perhaps because of my rather unoppressive persona. She seemed to have problems handling her emotions and her affections. Every day she'd dump me so that she could get back with me afterwards. The larger, more dominant boys in the school used to come up to me and give me arrogant pats on the back, asking me for manly advice. I would respond with mostly indifference, probably because of not really knowing what to say.

With regard to work, I suddenly became extremely swattish, sometimes working 5 hours a day during holidays and weekends. During my spare time at school I would program myself with foreign languages, memorise the jargon from mini-dictionaries on science and write out long lists of dates and events throughout history. I was suddenly obsessed with being hyper-intelligent, elitist and snobbish. Snobbishness was the stereotype which came free with the persuite and I was constantly amazed at just how un-impressed people could be.

Some people befriended me, some people harassed and bullied me, some people nagged me and some people simply tried to reason with me. It was just extremely fortunate that I happened to be with probably the most diplomatic and agreeable students in the whole of the school's history.

Every day, on the way to school, I used to have to walk past the local ex-grammar school called Latymer which produced the most outstanding exam results in the borough of Enfield second to Southgate. West Lea was at the other end of the scale. Every morning I was surrounded by all these Latymer pupils, quite often talking about their work and asking each other questions which I would sometimes be desperate to answer for them, just to show them that there were brain-boxes at West Lea too.

Before long, we were all preparing to take our GCSEs in Maths, English, Science, Home Economics and French (basic level only). This was the entire content of GCSEs the school was able to provide with its limited size. To begin with I was even excluded from the GCSE English course. I felt very resentful at just how limited my options looked at the time. Also, there were various teachers who would constantly try to justify the situation, often by suggesting that I wasn't intelligent enough or efficient enough. It was almost like some kind of a test. The question was, just how strongly did I believe I was capable of taking a larger range of GCSEs.

There was one teacher in particular, the French teacher, who firmly supported my claims and helped me to fight for what I believed in. He and I used to spend many hours of the week conversing in French and he was certain that I could go in for GCSE French to a higher level than the one provided by the school.

Relentlessly, I carried on the battle, refusing to accept that I was useless until finally, I was permitted to take one year evening courses at my local college. At this same time, the school granted me some free study periods.

I had already revised most of the course before starting at college. I was able to get along quite well with most of the students at evening class, perhaps because my knowledge of the subject compensated for my extreme naiveness and shelteredness. At the end of the year, I came out with five GCSE's of high standard and English. I had to re-sit my English the next year during A-levels.

During my time at West Lea I was a very unusual pupil. Obsessed with cleverness and brain power but at the same time almost completely unaware of social undercurrents or the consequences of things I'd do or say. When people in the dinner queue asked me if they could go in front of me I'd simply let them. Sometimes I'd fall twelve places behind.

Whenever confronted with any kind of aggression I would be thinking the following:

"Wouldn't it be nice if people gave each other compliments instead of insulting each other all the time".

Such a simple outlook on life is often too simple for most people to understand.

## Chapter 5

I went into a sixth form as a completely new student with a clean slate thinking "this is great, and now I have enough experience, no more having to deal with difficult people".

This was not an arrogant thought, it is what I naturally believed at the time due to my limited experience of people. During the first week I took great care in what I said. The trouble all began the minute I decided I wanted to look as cool and confident as everyone else. Also, the sixth form common room was a jungle for showing off, roudiness and flirting. The game many people were playing was "look what I can get away with".

On the one hand, I could say I was surrounded by bad examples but on the other hand, there is a certain kind of person who always stands out amongst the rest, not as a target but almost as a representative of everyone else.

In the end, I made such a complete mess of my clean slate that I have to admit, sixth form was nothing more than a social training ground. During these two years I suffered the same kind of rejection and targetting I had previously suffered all those years ago at primary school. What didn't help much was my refusal to admit to myself that I did in fact have a disability and that I could perhaps benefit from learning about it.

There were so many things I simply didn't understand. Perhaps one of the key rules to conversation amongst young people is that they like to talk about the forbidden. This includes sex, drugs, driving, provocative films, smoking, drinking and raves. Not very easy topics of conversation for someone like me who didn't even know what a rave was, never mind a spliff or a band like prodigy.

I went out to a few of the sixth form parties and raves which everyone knew about, only to suffer immense feelings of rejection during and afterwards. I began to associate nearly all of the most popular music and especially hardcore with these feelings of worthlessness and futility. It was as if the base-line of all the songs was

saying "Marc this is not your world you cannot win".

Perhaps one of the most embarrassing things I did in sixth form was to dance solo in the common room under the request of other people. I did it to look cool and confident but maybe also to avoid having to be stubborn. Besides, at the time I couldn't see anything wrong with it. Also, with all the compliments they seemed to be giving me about my dancing, I was completely unaware that they were actually being negative towards me.

Everything about me seemed to place me into the category of "sad", the very thing I least wanted to be. Whenever I asked people to try and help me to understand why I was being treated like this, they would probably either think I was being stupid, awkward or that I knew full well what I'd done wrong and was pretending not to.

In many ways, I felt as if I was being treated like a leppar and this made me paranoid about approaching people, never really knowing how they would respond. Of course, there were people who felt pity for me and people who even tried to help me when it was feasible but ultimately, it was more important for them to look after their own reputations and that normally involved pushing me aside. I got into the habit of escaping from the common room during break-times and going down stairs to play the piano where sometimes, I would unsuspectingly acquire an audience of younger pupils. Sometimes this would annoy the music teacher.

I became involved in the drama group and starred in two school productions. When it came to learning my lines, I was usually quite swift. I also volunteered to participate in the school mock election as the Green Party candidate where my earnest approach won me the votes of many of the more seriously minded pupils but didn't appeal to the saucy, gang-forming, football minded majority.

Public speaking made me a familiar face in the school and for the next few years people would recognise me as I walked past in the street responding with anything from friendly recognition to verbal abuse. However, despite all the anxieties I suffered at sixth form, I gave un-rivalled commitment to my A-levels and it is perhaps this which kept me sane and gave me the hope I needed to survive these two rather merciless years

## Chapter 6

There is a rather less oppressive corner of the world where I have always had a niche. This is a family support group known as Kith and Kids which is almost like family to me. Early in my childhood I came to this group as one of their disabled members and over the past six years, I have been a regular volunteer, always keeping active and creative.

At the age of seventeen I was already running music and drama workshops and I gradually learnt a repertoire of activities and techniques for keeping people amused. For a long time, I have needed lots of support from the organisers and program planners but gradually, I became more independent and at the same time, more creative.

Recently, I did a project in which I had the group decorate 60 sheets of card board, cut out doors and windows and piece them together into a maze. I had already thought up the blue print and the procedure for constructing the maze and I took on board the task of group motivation very seriously, knowing that enthusiasm was the most important thing. The maze went up in no more than two days.

Within this highly interactive group the other volunteers have always accepted me for what I am. It is a protected environment a world apart from the cunning and brutal outside world in which it survives. Within this group, there is one family with



whom I have become particularly well known. They have an autistic daughter with whom I seem to be able to identify without effort. Cartoons seem to be very much her favorite thing.

## Chapter 7

When I began at university, yet again I assumed that now, at last, I had enough experience to get by without too many problems. However, the top ten percent of the population for being educated and moralistically aware sure as hell know how to be nasty when they want to be.

As far as my course was concerned things were pretty much ok, even if I was convinced that I had to put in at least five hours of work a day OR ELSE I fail. But by no means did I want my flatmates to think that I was a swat.

I took the social life as seriously as I took my course but unfortunately, I found that the social chemistry was quite a lot harder than the study of biomolecular forces when applied to enzyme kinetics.

It seemed as if everything I did was wrong, or at least someone would have the knack of making it look wrong. There was one lad in particular who decided to make me his hate object for the year, just tutting at everything I did and never talking to me except to say why don't I move out. On hindsight, I would have seen this as a brilliant suggestion and have moved out as soon as I possibly could but at the time, I saw it as nothing more than yet another confrontation.

One weekend I left the flat to go home without thinking to tell anyone. When I got back they made it seem as if I hadn't done anything wrong but I later found out that they had been really worried in my absence, thinking that I may have locked myself in my room and departed in one of life's little escape pods. Having seen the way they were treating me I was quite surprised to find out they had actually been worried about me.

During my first year at University I joined various societies including HARM, the heavy metal and rock society. I bought myself an expensive leather jacket to fit in with the stereotype I was trying to portray but it was not long before it went missing at someone's flat-warming party, never to be seen again.

I took up smoking, yet again to fit in with the stereotype. Every day I used to burn about 20 incense sticks in my bedroom, causing certain people to get annoyed with me. In actual fact, I couldn't make up my mind whether I was a hippy or a heavy. It also took me a very long time to find out where any of the night-clubs were.

It was during this year that many things seemed to start falling into place. For example, the way in which people organise themselves into a hierarchy. The fact that the rules concerning social interaction and courtship are in fact different for men and women. The fact that lads always exaggerate about how much beer they consume on a night out, making it sound as if it is normal to make a complete drunken fool of yourself in public.

Eventually, I decided I wasn't going to be cool any longer. Instead I decided to follow the advice people had been giving me for a very long time. I decided to BE MYSELF.

Suddenly, I would walk into the living room every other hour wearing a simple pullover and jeans, showing honesty and sincerity whenever I spoke. I'm not completely sure what kind of an impact this had on other people but during my second year, they would sometimes tell me I was too genuine and that I needed to put on a bit of a mask. I simply couldn't win either way.

It was during the end of the first year that I disclosed to the rest of the flat the truth behind my odd behaviourisms. I had to get one of the lads to confirm with me that

behind my odd behaviours. I had to get one of the lads to confirm with me that they had in fact chosen a house to live in during the second year but had conspired not to let me in on it. This then prompted me to go and seek out my own accommodation.

Surprisingly, the flat-mate who had showed the most hatred towards me was the one who put me in touch with the people I ended up living with in my second year. Perhaps he was attempting to pay off his conscience in some way. However, it is surprising just how many of these strange little ironies life can throw at you.

## Chapter 8

During my second year at university I lived with a completely different group of people. Amongst them was Nick, someone with a very casual outlook on life, a real rock and roll rebel and someone who seemed to be extremely good at bringing women home from night clubs. He had been cut off from his first year flat-mates for different reasons such as incompatibility of attitudes. His rather brutal jokes against the socially inadequate used to make me feel quite paranoid at times but I was to learn later on that he wasn't making them out of spite, it was just an effective way of letting off tension and another of life's strange ironies.

We soon learnt to live with each other as best mates, the two of us pretty much isolated from the rest of the world sitting in front of the TV every evening and being silly. We may have been well acquainted but really, we were like chalk and cheese.

The other three students in our flat were part of larger circles of people. They left Nick and myself pretty much alone. However, there was one thing they really seemed to know a lot about and this was acid. In fact, this was probably just about the only topic of conversation we were all able to talk about. I'd ask the questions and they'd attempt to educate me, inadvertently saying things to try and put me off the idea.

When Nick had enough money, we would go to the local Rock Club and spend the night drinking, smoking, dancing and hoping to cross paths with similar characters of the opposite sex. Nick was better at this than I was and it took me the next two years to learn to accept myself as a thinker and an analyst rather than as a charmer.

On the rather down-beat streets of Manchester, drugs are very common-place and it was during this year that I became acquainted with cannabis. This is something we all enjoyed to while away the hours in front of the telly.

My reaction to cannabis seemed to be stronger than other peoples. I would have experiences of time expansion, distortion of consciousness, heightened perception of sounds, shapes and illusions. Sometimes, it would be spiked with a harder drug, making it hallucinogenic. Quite often I would find these experiences so fascinating that I would go round telling friends on my course. When back in the flat I would leak out signs of indiscretion and people would bring this to my attention, urging me to be quieter.

Cannabis has had a profound effect on the way I perceive life. It has brought to my attention many rather profound philosophical ideas which seem to challenge our very existence and individuals in a physical universe. Whether or not these new perspectives have improved my performance in life I am unable to say but they are not something I regret having acquired.

During my second year, I wasn't completely lazy. I did in fact attend a counselling course with Nightline twice a week. This gave me some immense improvements in my listening skills and when it came to the role plays, people seemed to show that they were impressed. However, what I didn't seem to be prepared for was failing the entrance examination.

Perhaps I'm just not the right personality type. Perhaps I was simply unable to

council someone whilst under the pressure of guidelines and policy telling me what I can or cannot say. I later decided to retake the same course in the third year but yet again, I couldn't get through. This time, I was able to accept that perhaps, the thing they wanted from me which I seemed unable to provide was intuition.

The third year was generally quite good. My flatmates accepted me most of the time. However, they didn't make any exceptions for me as this would automatically have been treating me differently to the way they treated each other.

Together, all seven of us spent the whole year gently fighting each other with subtle and sometimes brutal witticisms. They were perhaps the most diplomatic and mature lads I had lived with and they seemed instinctively able to find a balance between politeness and vindiction. This is why it was so beneficial for me to be living with them.

Analysing people has finally allowed me to realise just why it is that people prefer to insult each other rather than exchange compliments. It is a very good means of giving and receiving constructive criticisms in a way which is comical, time efficient and can diffuse any tensions and barriers caused by the trap of over-politeness.

## Chapter 9

Not having been abroad very much before, and never having been on an aeroplane, I decided it would be a brilliant idea to jump right in at the deep end and travel somewhere in the world where it was about as different from home as it could possibly be. For some reason, I had set my heart on Africa.

I went to the travel agents and hastily booked myself on a Safari expedition. I turned my attention to all the official details like passports, injections, travellers cheques and the like, having little time to think about whether or not a Safari in Africa was the right holiday for me. I was actually looking forward to meeting the local people and seeing their way of life much more than thinking about the animals or the sites.

The flight to Kenya and the first two days were absolutely fascinating. I was astonished by the way the people were so friendly and forthcoming, the way the minicabs all seemed to have broken wind screens and holes in the doors. I was also quite taken aback by the way all the trees and bird songs were different. I then became acquainted with the people on the tour.

Gradually, tension built up from certain people in the group who seemed to take an instant dislike to me. This was to get worse as the tour continued. I was never really able to work out just why certain people were reacting to my presence the way they were. Perhaps it was simply some kind of gut feeling. The real problem was being part of a group who were forced to live in close proximity 24 hours a day for seven weeks.

There were many chores to be done and pulling my weight was a problem. I don't think it was because I was lazy, despite popular belief. I was happy to do any chore that was assigned to me. The problem seemed to be that at a very early stage people had already decided to label me as "incompetent" and had since made it extremely difficult for me to join in with the work.

I didn't protest to them or allow myself to feel enraged because at the time, I was going through a Zen phase, reading parables every day and seeking to cleanse my heart and spirit of all hate and resentment.

When they wanted to refuse my offers to help and call me lazy at the same time, I would feel the open-minded and un-spoilt spirit of the local people calling me and I would stroll off and introduce myself to them. My best friend on the tour was probably the driver who was African himself. The rest of the people on the tour

were westerners who probably felt that by sneaking off and talking to the locals I was putting us all at risk.

I don't think the feelings of hate towards me were unanimous. They never have been. My enemies have usually been a small minority of people who always just happen to have the gift of dominance. They watch the rest of the group like hawks, just to make sure they don't become too understanding.

Perhaps what most intrigued me about Africa was learning how so many people, at such a young age, could walk such great distances with neither food nor water, balancing something so heavy on their heads in the dry and oppressive heat of the day without even wearing shoes on their hardened feet. And they do it for such small sums of money. As a group, we took upon ourselves a long walk to the top of a small mountain in the hot baking sun with about fifty local people as our porters. My experience was shared not with the other Westerners but with the porters.

When people tell me how fantastic it must have been to have seen the Gorillas in Zaire and rafted the great waters of Victoria falls, when the truth of the matter is that I was much more interested in the local people, who I often conversed with in France, sometimes trying to use Swahili as well, I sometimes feel as if I enjoy all the wrong things.

I quit the tour ten days early in Zimbabwe where I stayed two days with an Indian family who lived in the capital city before finally disembarking for home. It seemed like I had been away for such a long time.

## Chapter 10

One year later, I went to France to work with a group of autistic children and adults in the country side around Bleneau. It was quite different from what I'd been expecting. The children were mostly suffering either severe autism, infantile psychosis, post traumatic tension or a combination of these factors. Some of them were completely resistant to any form of discipline or authority and aggression was a serious problem.

During times of very low staff to children ratios, the staff could become aggressive too, simply due to the strain of the demands which were being placed upon us.

This hostel may have been placed in the middle of a very refreshing and beautiful portion of countryside but inside the building its self, conditions were poor. This wasn't really surprising if you bare in mind that one of the older children had broken almost everything in the building which was breakable. During the day there wasn't really anywhere soft enough for the children to lie down comfortably and this is something which angered me somewhat.

Some of the more challenging and aggression seeking children were often on my trail for hours, making me very annoyed. But whenever there was a child with simple, straight forward autism I seemed to be able to identify with them without any problems at all.

I related well to the other staff who were quite intrigued to be working along side an autistic englishman. But gradually, I became more concerned with the children and communicated less with the staff. I had decided that I would spend the best part of the day playing my guitar and singing to the children, telling them what to do in song and rhyme rather than telling them off. For this, I became popular with the residents in the other block who were adults with less severe learning difficulties. I would often be there entertaining them in the evenings. Some of them would laugh so hard they'd cry. I had the perfect audience and I was a master of autistic comedy.

Slowly, my songs became more and more ridiculous. Some of the staff labelled me as mad whilst others who were more open minded would invite round for dinner so that they could try and learn all about my extraordinary approach

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When I had reached the stage of asking myself if I had seriously regressed, another volunteer came along. He was interested in juggling and clowning and we became best friends. He made me realise that it wasn't me who was mad but it was other people who didn't understand.

I am now in the business of children's entertainment. This is in many ways quite different to entertaining people with severe learning difficulties because I am now having to deal with audiences who can be quite vindictive if you are too nice. However, I would be inclined to say that of all the jobs I could be doing, I think that doing magic shows makes me happiest. It is using almost every skill I have and forever giving me more insight into human nature, even if it is taking place on a children's level.

My social life now entails going to juggling workshops although I also attend an evening class in psychology and regularly attend groups who work with autistic children. To supplement my salary, I have a consultancy service for people who want to find out more about autism in depth.

I may now have social interaction down to a science. However, there is one thing I must make an effort never to forget and that is what it's like to suffer from Asperger syndrome.

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