



Next Stop: Autism Nation

When your child is diagnosed on the autism spectrum, you emigrate to a new country called Autism Nation. You don't need a visa, you don't need a passport. You don't even have time to say goodbye, or prepare or pack. And, although you'd like to choose a different destination, you find you're already en route. You stare blankly out the window as the train rambles through the unfamiliar landscape. "Autism Nation" you think to yourself. "I don't want to go there."

And then you experience an unexpected delay. You get held up at "Denial Station." "This is a pretty nice place," you muse. "I could stay here for a while." In fact, life feels almost perfect. You discover all your fears and concerns were really just a bad dream. You're beginning

to enjoy yourself. Just as the calm begins to settle in, the conductor yanks your arm and forcefully pushes you back on the train. "Time to move on," he declares. "Wait a minute!" you protest. "I'm not ready to leave. I like it here!" Your words trail off along with the puffs of smoke as the train picks up speed again.

Sleep; blessed sleep might help, but just as you doze off the train jolts to a stop. You step onto the platform, overwhelmed with anger. "How dare they transport me here without my consent? This is not where I want to be!" Overtaken with fury you silently blame the messenger who sent you here, this place that is so dark, gloomy and uninviting. "Where am I?" you cry out in frustration. "This is Angerland," says a passerby as he folds his newspaper and

steps onto the train. You stare at him in horror as a voice on an intercom booms, "ALL ABOARD!"

At the next stop you remain seated, your mind racing, torn in millions of directions. You do your best to ignore the thoughts that plague you, but try as you do to clear your mind, you can't help revisiting the situation over and over again. "Why Autism Nation? Why me? Why did this happen? Is this my fault that I'm here? How do I adjust? How do I cope? What does the future hold? Where do I start?" As the train starts moving again you notice the platform sign: "Thank you for visiting Mull Over Point. Next stop 100 miles."

Emotionally drained, you slump in your seat and stare out the window. Overtaken by a deep sense of grief, you read the



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signs as the train passes each of these destinations: “Joy”, “Freedom”, “Carefree”, “Happiness.” One by one they slip into the distance.

The train slows down and a station appears. A voice announces, “Final stop. Autism Nation.” “Must I get off this train?” you inquire. “Can’t I just go back home now?” “There’s no return,” is the answer. You step off the train and are hurriedly shuffled through passport control. You appeal to the authorities. “There’s been some terrible mistake,” you plead. “I’m not supposed to be here.” But you are told there is no mistake. There is no going back, no return to your homeland. “This can’t be true,” you remark in disbelief. You ask other parents for verification. “Surely this is a short stop?” But they shake their heads in unison. “I’m sorry,” they say,

“but once you arrive in Autism Nation you’re probably here to stay.”

A few people whisper stories about people who managed to escape. You listen eagerly, anxious for any tidbit that might change your plight. You become fascinated that changing diet, using vitamins and extensive language training may be your ticket out of this nation. In the meanwhile, you reluctantly settle in. You begin learning the language of Autism Nation. It’s called Acronym. In the beginning it’s confusing but you soon pick it up and words like ABA, DTT, PDD-NOS, OT, SLP, PT, IDEA, EI, and PTC become part of your everyday vocabulary.

At first this seems to be a very friendly nation and why not? Abandoned here without choice the people share a common bond. But soon you find it’s very political and even quite combative. The “Autism is OK – Let’s Accept It” political party butts heads with the “Autism is Bad – Let’s Cure It” party. Subdivisions like the “Biomedical Party” and the “ABA Party” are equally vocal, equally at odds with each other. You ponder the philosophies of each group and try a few of them out. It takes some time but you eventually pledge your allegiance to the party of your choice.

There are days you long to be in the company of your old friends when everything was simple. You call them up on the phone but it’s hard to communicate. Autism Nation has a different culture and you have developed some new speech and customs. You try and explain some of these customs but they don’t seem to get it at all. While many things are perfectly acceptable in your country, your friends seem confused and even horrified about some of the behaviors you try and explain. With a sympathetic pep talk they bid you farewell and hang up the phone, severing the connection.

Truthfully, you’re often just as confused about the behaviors and customs, but you’ve already come to accept it. Autism Nation is not an easy country to live in but the daily struggles have made you stronger, wiser and broadened your perspective.

So you keep your chin up and move forward. You form strong alliances and friendships in your new country, bonded together through a natural empathy and understanding. The people of Autism Nation have learned to appreciate the small things that bring joy to their lives. In fact, there’s a celebration for almost everything! Trying new foods can result in a happy dance. An uneventful haircut is a joyous occasion, and a spontaneous conversation results in gatherings of merriment and delight.

The people of Autism Nation are proud. Faced with judgment at every turn they stand strong. “You’re right,” they call out to their neighboring countries. “Our people are not the same as yours. But that doesn’t make us wrong or less. It makes us different.” Autism Nation is a country filled with different people and different hopes. Whatever today brings, they know how to make the best of it. People unite, fighting for causes they believe in while relentlessly working to improve conditions for all citizens. They are involved; they care.

One day you find yourself thinking, “Autism Nation has become home.” And, it’s not the horrible place you once thought. It’s given you a sense of purpose and passion. You no longer sweat the little annoyances of life and you appreciate everything. Once upon a time you thought life was supposed to follow a predetermined course.

Now you understand that many walk a different path.

Now you understand what it means to embrace differences.

Now you understand that being unique can also be great.

Most of all, you understand that you can never change what happens, but you can change your attitude. Choosing to view your world in a positive light is not only your power - it’s your ticket to freedom. ■

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