

# Conquering autism wins a crucial victory for the human spirit

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## **Nobody Nowhere: The Extraordinary Autobiography of an Autistic**

by Donna Williams

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This book has affected us both deeply. The very fact of its existence is extraordinary. For an autistic person to be able to write this kind of autobiography, is itself something most experts would consider impossible before seeing it. *Nobody Nowhere* is the journey of Donna Williams from the realm of "my world" to the realm of "the world." As she says in the Author's Note:

"This is a story of two battles, a battle to keep out 'the world' and a battle to join it. . . . I have, throughout my private war, been a she, a you, a Donna, a me, and finally an I. . . . If you sense distance, you're not mistaken; it's real. Welcome to my world."

Autism is defined in one mental health encyclopedia, as a preoccupation with one's own thoughts and feelings. Autistic disorder or infantile autism, which Williams refers to simply as autism, is described as a serious developmental disorder characterized by lack of social interest, mutism or speech problems, and self-destructiveness. Like other mental disorders, autism spans a range of symptoms and degrees of severity. For example, while avoidance of emotional exchange—even eye contact—is characteristic, some children will scream or throw tantrums in response to physical contact, and others may allow it under certain conditions. The autistic child, in particular, finds much of the world outside himself incomprehensible and, therefore, either frightening or entirely unimportant. Thus, the separation, as Williams says, of an inner "my world" from "the world."

Because autism tends to preclude good verbal communication, the task of trying to get to the root of seemingly incomprehensible behavior patterns from observation alone can appear insurmountable, even to the professional thera-

pist. Dr. Lawrence Bartak, a specialist in psychology and special education, makes the point in his Introduction: "Professionals are not superhuman, and are just as prone to making incorrect, if not downright silly, interpretations of what they observe as anybody else. Many of the things we notice in people with autism remain puzzling, even after some 40 to 50 years of research in this field."

*Nobody Nowhere* provides a unique view, from the inside out, of the world of autism. Donna Williams thus serves as our guide, as it were, among a group whose language we cannot interpret. As such, it will surely be invaluable to those dealing with autistic individuals and, in some cases like Donna Williams's, to autistic individuals themselves.

However, this book goes beyond providing insights; it may be revolutionary. In the hands of insightful professionals, it may hold keys to new approaches to treatment. For, what Donna Williams makes crystal clear throughout her story, is that each action, every behavior of the autistic, though it may make no apparent sense to the observer, *has a reason*. She explains her reasons for numerous activities, from going into hallucinatory states to repeated, compulsive actions (such as her attempting to walk through the large mirror in her room for a year, unable to comprehend the mirror image and seeking to enter the world seen reflected in it). Even the characteristic self-abuse, such as head-banging, she describes as a way to "fight tension and to provide a thudding rhythm in my head when my mind was screaming too loud for me . . . to calm down."

## **Rejecting Freud, Jung, and Skinner**

In revealing the reasoning behind her actions, Williams's book provides in its own way dramatic confirmation of one important psychological thesis. In the early 1970s, Lyndon LaRouche presented a series of lectures in New York City, entitled "Beyond Psychoanalysis." Critiquing both classical psychoanalytical and modern models of the mind, and sharply refuting behaviorism as glorified animal-training and worse, LaRouche insisted that the motivation for human action derives from its perceived potential to enhance the sense of social identity, however that identity may be located in the individual, i.e., even though the sense of identity may be

neurotically or otherwise distorted. Even in today's average individual, said LaRouche, the sense of self associated with creative reason, that self through which we can "look over our own shoulders" at ourselves, is weak, and often sits impotently watching as an irrationally guided self dominates the individual's active response to the world.

While providing substantial evidence of the correctness of LaRouche's work, Williams's book pokes its own large holes in the theories that attribute autistic behavior patterns to primarily involuntary physical or neurological disorders, and which then propose to treat them with one brand or another of behaviorist method. (While there certainly appear to be physical or chemical factors in autism, including even food-allergy complications, as in Williams's case, she shows how misunderstood the emotional outlook of the autistic person is.) In one delightful anecdote, Williams also gives an example of the failure of Freudian and Jungian psychology to comprehend the mind. She relates the following, about a drawing by a young autistic girl that appeared in a book written by a psychoanalyst. The drawing was a white square within a larger black square, "surrounded everywhere by the blinding whiteness of the paper."

"The adult analysis of the picture was that it expressed this girl's longing for the breast. When, after becoming close to her counselor, she drew two white squares in the darkness, this was interpreted as two breasts. When she reversed the picture, with a black square now in the middle of the white paper, this was taken to be her version of the 'bad breast' as opposed to the 'good breast.'

"I laughed myself stupid when I read this. I had drawn the same picture over and over, writing beside it, 'Get me the hell out of here.' This was the symbolic representation of my trap. . . . The blackness I had to get through was the jump between 'my world' and 'the world.' I had learned to fear the complete loss of all attachment to my emotional self, which happened when I made the jump, and this was the only way that communication was possible. Giving up the secret of this was simply too deadly."

*Nobody Nowhere* describes Donna Williams's journey through an abusive childhood with a sadistic, alcoholic mother and a mostly absent father, to an odyssey of self-discovery in early adulthood—the result of which is this book. Given an autistic's propensity to withdraw from the world, even in what most of us would consider a friendly environment, it is a testimony to the human spirit that Donna Williams survived that childhood to strive as an adult to understand the world and seek her role in it. The existence of Donna Williams and her book are proof-positive of the extraordinary potentials of the human mind.

Although she writes that she does not entirely accept the "normal" world as normal, her matter-of-fact discussion of her self-discovery (her own study of psychology was undertaken in order to emulate a particularly helpful therapist) sheds new light on our ability to understand autism. After

years of therapy, she was introduced to other handicapped persons, including other autistic persons, an experience which allowed her a new vantage point from which to see herself and the world. Of this she writes:

"I have been with the mentally ill, the backward, and the physically disabled. I have also had the pleasure of being with others labeled 'autistic.' This was the only group who spoke my own language so well that I realized that much of what I thought of as my personality was in fact my individual expression of many of the misunderstood and confusing symptoms of autism."

Perhaps the most astonishing—and exciting—indication of the potential of Williams's insights for treatment generally, comes near the end of the book. In two poignant episodes, she describes her initial encounter with other autistics, first with the son of a teacher for autistic children, and then with some children from a camp for autistic children. Having come through a process of self-discovery, she felt that it was time for her to meet other autistic people: "I'd met a world of so-called 'normal' people—the people I'd aspired to be like. Now it was time to meet people still trapped in the place I had come from and in some ways still was in."

Williams immediately related to these autistic people in "their world" and was able to verbalize what they were thinking. In the first episode, "Perry [the son] came over to where I was, laid himself out, face down, on the floor in front of me, arms pulled up tightly against his sides as he shook with anxiety.

"'Look at me,' I said, reading the same action I'd seen so many times in myself. 'Look, I'm daring to be touched.' I had looked straight at Perry lying there as I said it, tears rolling down my face as I read his behavior as one might a book. . . . I had never felt I'd understood another individual so well."

At the camp for autistic children, Donna Williams, shortly after arriving, was able to calm an hysterical little girl, because she recognized the reason for the child's terror. A counselor was trying to tuck the screaming, cross-eyed child into bed with a doll. Williams knew that the doll was the source of the fear, representing the emotional connection with another person which an autistic finds so frightful. Taking the counselor's place, she removed the doll, gave the girl a hairbrush to stroke, and showed her a way to calm herself through the repetition of a tune and the tapping of its rhythm on her arm, as she had herself used. As the child quieted down, she uncrossed her eyes and focused directly on Donna's face for the first time.

### **The remarkable Jeanne Simons**

Seeking a better understanding of autism after reading *Nobody Nowhere*, we were very lucky to find a book called *The Hidden Child*, which describes the Linwood School for autistic children in suburban Maryland, founded in 1955 by Miss Jeanne Simons (Jeanne Simons, *The Hidden Child*—

*The Linwood Method for Reaching the Autistic Child*; Woodbine, N.Y.: 1986). Simons, a pioneer in autistic treatment and clearly an extraordinary human being, appears to reject the precepts of behavior modification (to which we are opposed in all cases) as a way of treating autism. In example after example, Miss Simons shows how she sought to discover the why of a child's behavior and helped the child come to an understanding of the cause of the behavior and of how to change it. Because of her approach, she was able to solve many mysteries of compulsive behavior which were otherwise incomprehensible. Her often fascinating, heart-warming discoveries, a number of which are personally related in the book, make the same point as Williams: The mind of the autistic person is working but trapped inside an emotional prison.

Behavior-modification techniques are often used on autistic individuals. While these techniques appear to "work" insofar as obtaining the desired behavioral "results," they provide the individual with no greater understanding of himself or the world. They "work," in part, because autistic people, in an effort to bring order to what they perceive as chaos, will grasp onto routines and structure. But this so-called science has to go.

Behavior modification denies the difference between man and animals. Early behaviorist B.F. Skinner, famous for endlessly putting rats through mazes decades ago, used the same techniques on humans as he used on rats. Later practitioners developed more sophisticated means of manipulation, but the axioms necessarily remained the same. The behaviorist approach fundamentally denies the creative spark of the human mind known in Christianity as *imago viva Dei*, or "the living image of God." All of human progress stands as proof of the fact that we are not like animals. We can think and solve problems, and we engage in a process of perfecting ourselves. This capacity exists in autistic people, but it is obstructed and not accessed in the same way.

Donna Williams proves beyond any doubt that she is actively engaged in this process of perfection. Having had in childhood almost no relation to reality, as a young adult she discovered her own identity and then some of the universal aspects of autism itself, and through that process progressed to the point of being able to self-reflexively describe that exceptional process of development. Donna Williams today is the answer to all those who favor using behavior modification techniques. To treat *any* human as though he or she were no better than an animal, is to deny what is human in us all.

Particularly striking in reading *The Hidden Child* and *Nobody Nowhere*, is how closely Donna Williams's suggestions for dealing with autistic children (provided at the end of her book) parallel the approach pioneered by Simons. That Simons came up with the same idea "from the outside" as Donna Williams does from the inside, is high praise for the Linwood method she developed. An indication of the comparison is shown by the following excerpts. Donna Wil-

liams's suggestion from the Afterword is as follows:

"If loving parents can try to stand objectively away from their own emotional needs and relate to such children always in terms of how those children perceive the world, then the children may find the trust and courage to reach out step by step at their own pace.

"This, however, ought only to be an interim measure. Gain the child's trust and tell him or her that you accept who and where he or she is. Through trust he or she may develop interest in 'the world,' and at first this exploration should be on the only terms he or she knows—his or her own. Only once this is firmly established should you take the safety net away slowly piece by piece. This is the way to make a transition from the child's sense of self of itself *as* the world to a new sense of self *in* the world so-called 'normal' people share.

"This method, in complete contradiction to normal interaction, is *indirect* in nature. In this way it is less all-consuming, suffocating, and invasive. The child can then reach out, not as a conforming role-playing robot, but as a feeling, albeit extremely shy and evasive, human being. The best approach would be one that would not exchange individuality and freedom for the parents', teacher's, or counselor's version of respectability and impressiveness. At this point I ought to make it clear that I am not espousing soft options. One must tackle war with war and disarmament with disarmament. I am saying that the war must be thought through, sensitive, and well paced."

This principle, of encouraging the child to come from "his world" into "the world" while recognizing the child as an individual human being, is the core of the Linwood method, which starts from the assumption that the behavior of a given child represents the "only options available" to him or her:

"At Linwood, all children are accorded a right to their individuality, but the staff also know that eventually they have to fit into an existing world. Their task is to observe each child and to structure the environment in ways that make it supportive, responsive to his needs, and conducive to growth. As Jeanne Simons put it:

"And that's why we walk behind the child. He feels your protection when you walk behind. If you give him a chance to go any direction, he may be wrong when he goes this way or that. Just follow him. If it's a dead end, pick him up gently and bring him to the main route. But never think that you know the answers, because you are dealing with an individual who may want to go very different routes which for him may be better. That's why I feel more comfortable behind the children, so I can see where they are going.' "

At a time when behaviorist assumptions (and solutions) dominate much of the psychological field, we may be grateful for Donna Williams's ray of light in the darkness, as well as for finding *The Hidden Child*, and hope that both of these books will inspire all those whose lives are touched by autism.