

THROUGH THE EYES OF ALIENS

A book about autistic people

Jasmine Lee O'Neill

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The author, whose first book this is, is a poet, painter, illustrator and musician. She is also a mute autistic savant. The value of this book is the insight it gives the reader into how it feels to be autistic. It is the author's hope that as a result of reading this book, friends, family and professionals will have a better idea of how to deal sensitively and appropriately with the needs of autistic people.

The author contends that no two autistic people are the same and as a consequence each autistic person should be treated as a unique individual. The author states that the theme of the book is that difference can be wonderful and that autism should not be tampered with or altered. She argues that 'normalising' autistic people - forcing them into behaving in a way that is alien to their true natures is not just ineffective but psychologically and morally wrong. O'Neill comments that it is unfortunate that parents, teachers, doctors

and others should want to mould autistic people into something they are not. Trying to make an autistic child seem less autistic is to admit that one is not happy with him as he is, which can be devastating to the child.

O'Neill challenges a number of common myths about autism. Firstly, self stimulating behaviours (e.g., body rocking; hand flapping; swaying) which are characteristic of autistic people are negative features that should be checked. O'Neill points out these actions can provide autistic people with a pleasurable, reassuring and soothing connection with the senses. Secondly, autistic people are incapable of feeling or expressing emotions. O'Neill dismisses this myth pointing out that emotions are revealed differently in autism, sometimes being more pronounced and sometimes less evident than one might expect. Thirdly, autism is characterised by a failure to communicate. O'Neill indicates that all autistic people can communicate but that each autistic person has its own distinctive method of communicating. Fourth, autistic people are selfish. O'Neill draws a distinction between selfishness and self-centredness, which is the result of living a self-absorbed life. Fifth, autistic people are seriously disadvantaged by ritualistic and idiosyncratic behaviours. O'Neill counters that such ritualistic behaviours give reassurance and create order in the daily life of autistic people, whilst idiosyncrasies can be seen as a badge of individuality. Such non-conformity should be welcomed not discouraged.

What this book clearly highlights is the current inadequacy of our health, education and social services to cater for autistic children and adults. The book should be prescribed reading for all professionals who are involved, either directly or indirectly, in providing a service for autistic

children and adults. If only a fraction of the imaginative and insightful points made by the author are taken on board, we would witness a transformation in the quality of the services provided.

Robin Jackson