

***Benjamin Breaking Barriers: Autism — A Journey of Hope***  
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*Discussion Questions*  
*for classroom use and reading groups*

Benjamin has spent a lifetime learning skills that most people take for granted. Have you ever had a hard time learning something that others seem to find easy? How did that feel? What thoughts went through your mind? Did you feel different or excluded?

Benjamin has experienced various difficulties with developing speech and being able to express himself verbally. Think of a time when you had something to say, but it came out wrong, or you couldn't find the words to express yourself. How did that feel? How did it affect your interaction?

Motivation is a key issue with autism, as is repeatedly illustrated by Benjamin's story. What motivates you in different circumstances? When are your motivations internally driven by desire, and when do you depend on external rewards to accomplish something? What happens when you are lacking in motivation? How do you feel, and what is the result?

Fixations can be a major hindrance to a person with autism. Have you ever experienced an "earworm"—a song that keeps repeating itself in your mind? Have you ever obsessed on a particular thought? How do you feel when this occurs? How does it affect your thinking and actions?

The arts—and music in particular—have been a lifeline for Benjamin, both as a means for expression and as a ticket into social interaction. They have also facilitated much of his therapy. What role do the arts play in your life? In what capacity do they support your emotional, mental, and physical health? If the arts were cut out of your life, what impact would that have?

Benjamin has, at various times, had difficulty dealing with sadness—both within himself and when others display the emotion. Have you known people who seem to shut down emotionally? How do you feel in response? How do you interpret their behavior?

Benjamin's autism causes him to create rituals that might help in controlling/managing himself and/or the world around him, thus creating a perception of safety/predictability. What rituals do you engage in? How do you calm yourself? How much predictability do you need in order to feel secure?

Benjamin was teased and bullied at school. Can you think of ways to prevent such behavior? Have you ever exhibited such behavior to someone who is different? If you have children of your own, how might you help them learn compassion and kindness? How can appreciation for differences be developed?

Benjamin wears his heart upon his sleeve, and this is partly due to his autism—he isn't capable of playing "mind games". Have you known someone to be completely transparent about their feelings—particularly positive ones? When is this a gift? When can it cause problems? Think of a time when you were young and felt great joy. As you grow older, do you find your expressions of joy changing? Do you ever hide or suppress your joy? If so, why?

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### *Discussion Questions: (continued)*

Benjamin derives great joy and satisfaction from performing, and loves the “high” feeling he gets on stage. When you engage in an activity you love, do you experience magical moments? How is this state of mind different from ordinary day-to-day consciousness?

Four major areas of a person’s life are impacted by autism: language; social skills; sensory/motor functions; interests. Do you know anyone who exhibits autistic traits? Would you treat them differently if you knew they had a diagnosis? Does “labeling” someone affect your perception of them? What are the advantages and disadvantages of having a label?

The disabling aspects of autism can distract one from recognizing the affected person’s strengths. Imagine every aspect of your life being run according to your weaknesses. How would others perceive you? How would you feel and act in response?

Autism causes difficulties with picking up on the subtle clues of communication. Consider the layers of subtext and body language contained in a conversation. What happens when someone doesn’t “get” implied information? What feelings arise for each side when misunderstanding or lack of comprehension occurs? How might you change your style of communication when interacting with someone who has autism?

There is as much variance between people on the autism spectrum as there is between “neurotypicals”. Certain traits and behaviors are hallmarks of autism, but these manifest on a continuum from mild to severe. Do you know anyone with autism? Discuss the similarities and differences between the various persons with autism known to your discussion group.

Benjamin’s mother has repeatedly looked for life’s “silver lining”, and has made the best of a difficult situation. If you approached your life in this manner, what might change? Can you take something you consider a liability (a weakness or problem) and turn it around so it becomes an advantage? What are your sources of strength and inspiration? Is there an element of acceptance that might facilitate your process?

Nowadays, persons with physical disabilities have access to wheelchair ramps, curb cuts, and other physical supports. With autism, the disability affects thinking and behavior in ways that aren’t always readily recognizable as being autism-driven. For example, someone with autism might come across as acting purposefully anti-social, as unreasonable, or as immature (ie. child tantrums). Can you brainstorm ways in which autism can be accommodated—in schools, the work-place, in restaurants and other public facilities? How might sensory challenges be accommodated in public spaces (for example, a quiet calming-area with dimmed lights)?

Educating people about autism is a vital first step towards building understanding and compassion. Now that you have read Benjamin’s story, how can you help with this? Beyond education, how might our attitudes/actions as a society shift in order to better accommodate the growing population of persons with autism?