

A conversation with John Elder Robison,
author of LOOK ME IN THE EYE

Q: What inspired you to write LOOK ME IN THE EYE?

A: If you had asked me about many of the events described in the book ten years ago, I would have said, “no comment” because I was ashamed of my shabby past. But then my brother [Augusten Burroughs] wrote *Running With Scissors*. I was terribly afraid no one would ever speak to us again after reading about our past in his book, but in fact the opposite happened. The way people embraced us and saw our lives as a source of inspiration and not ridicule . . . that was what started me on the road to writing a book.

Then there was the interest from the Asperger’s community. Aspergians would turn up at every one of my brother’s readings, wanting more, and people always asked about me.

And finally, when my father died in 2005, the time I spent with him unlocked many long-lost memories of childhood. Sounds and smells and feelings from almost fifty years ago returned with remarkable clarity as my father told me stories in his last days.

Q: When you were young and constantly being labeled “weird” or “defective,” how did you envision yourself as an adult? What did you want to be when you grew up?

A: Like most three-year-old boys in 1960, I wanted to be an astronaut. Then, later, I wanted to operate bulldozers and cranes. And after that I wanted to be a locomotive engineer. Sadly, I was never old enough to obtain employment in any of those fields.

As a teenager, I became interested in music and electronics, and I discovered I had a talent for making musical instruments sound different. Musicians wanted what I could deliver, and I wanted to be wanted, so that became “what I wanted to be.” At the same time, I had a talent for fixing cars, and people wanted that, so that became a second thing I wanted to be when I grew up.

I was very lucky that two of the things I wanted to do were also things people wanted me to do. I’ve been fortunate – I’ve always worked at things I liked, and I’ve never had to punch a clock just to bring home a paycheck. Those interests carried me forward thirty years, at which point I had left electronics, turned my love of cars into a multi-million dollar business, and acquired an interest in photography.

Q: Did you feel vindicated when you first found out that the lifetime of labels were not true, and that what you had been experiencing all your life had a name? Were you embarrassed? Did you immediately want to connect with others who had the same diagnosis?

A: I was just thrilled to learn that I was not defective, and that there were others like me. My first urge, once I learned about Asperger’s, was to find out all I could about it, and how it applied to me. Then, I set out to learn exactly how I differed from the rest of the world. I also learned that the rest of the world has a name. They are called NeuroTypicals, or NTs. I began a ten-year quest to blend in with the NTs and I’ve succeeded pretty well at this point. At this point, I have made the transition from weird to merely eccentric, and that’s a really good place to be.

I was also curious about other Aspergians, but at the time I had no idea how to meet them. I wasn’t online in those days. One of the thrilling things about becoming an author is that I now meet new people every day, both Aspergian and NT, and they’re almost all nice.

Q: You write in your book about how machines were easier to deal with than people most of the time. What could you count on in a machine that you could not count on in a person?

A: Machines do not lie, cheat, or steal. They do not attack or act unpredictably, though it may seem they do if one’s understanding of the machine is limited. Above all, machines are governed entirely by rules and logic. People, as a rule, are not.

A machine can be counted on to do one of two things: work as designed, or break down. Humans . . . they can do anything at all. There is no predicting them. For someone with Asperger’s, that can be especially puzzling and stressful.

Q: You designed the iconic fire-breathing Les Paul guitars for the band KISS. What was your very first thought after seeing how amazingly well they worked for the first time?

A: It was one of the proudest moments of my life, hearing the crowd roar when they saw Ace playing my guitar. And I felt that every time I saw them play my equipment, all over the world.

Q: A lot of people envy the the rock ‘n’ roll roadie lifestyle. Did you enjoy it?

A: Life on the road had no special appeal to me. In the book I write about the fact that drugs were of no great interest to me, and if girls were throwing themselves at me, I didn’t have the social skills to recognize their advances. Frankly, I’d rather have been home or in my lab, during the day.

But at night, I loved our performances. I loved the action, the power, the excitement. In addition, the people on the crew and the people in the band accepted and welcomed me. At that time, I’d been a reject and misfit all my life, and that was a wonderful feeling. The best part of being out with the bands was being accepted by other offbeat, creative, and smart people. And seeing the way audiences loved my creations.

Q: You’ve given nicknames to a lot of the people who are closest to you (like Varmint for your brother and Unit Two for your wife). Why is this important to you? And how do they feel about it?

A: I never liked having other people’s names for things imposed on me. If I felt an animal should be called Dog, I did not like having some grownup tell me his name was really Spot. If I thought a pet should be called Dog, I called him Dog. I am very direct. That’s an Aspergian trait.

I have always been very independent, and resistant to authority. I guess my choosing of names is just another manifestation of that.

And you asked how the subjects of my naming feel about their names . . . I feel sure Dog is very happy to be Dog, and be my friend. Sometimes Cubby and Unit Two get confused and object but at the same time they know they are special, and that I’ve named them from fondness. So even if I embarrass them at times, they probably think it’s OK.

Q: In LOOK ME IN THE EYE, you write about famous musicians and how, unlike everyone else, you always viewed them as “just people.” Do you categorize people at all?

A: I think we all categorize people in some way. It’s true I don’t categorize people as “famous” or “not famous” but I certainly categorize people I’ve met as “nice” or “not nice.” And if they’re not nice, I don’t continue to associate with them.

People are surprised to find that their categories - like fame, race, age, occupation, or appearance - don’t mean much to me. I notice people who are insightful, creative, and smart. I guess my internal categories are different from most folks.

Q: It seems like you spent a lot of time tormenting your younger brother as a child. Does he ever feel resentment toward you?

A: I was a typical big brother. I dug holes and stuck him in them, and I dangled him out windows, and I chased him around some, but that was just normal big brother behavior. My brother grew to adulthood with all his fingers and toes, and all four legs intact. As I told him as a child, the only thing I cut off was his tail, and he was too small to remember that. We were very attached to each other and are even closer now that we are adults, living across the street from each other. The only time he seems to resent me is when something goes wrong with his stylish house or car and he has to call on me, his un-cultured, un-civilized, un-mannered, proto-human big brother, for help.

The fact is, my brother and I got molested, beat up, and abandoned as kids. Many of the grownups we knew would have ended their days in prison if their treatment of us had come to light in today’s climate. We have a unique bond because of everything we went through, and how we ended up.

And if a bear or mountain lion invades my brother’s house, rest assured that I am the first person he will call, long before dialing 911. I have always looked out for him.

Q: What's the most memorable reaction you've gotten to the book?

A: A few months ago, I participated with eight other authors in a book reading at Lifespire – a social services organization - in New York City. There was a nonverbal, very autistic young man in the audience that night. He bounced and fidgeted, and his mother cautioned the crowd not to touch him, and to ignore his outbursts. When my turn to read came, a change came over him, and he paid rapt attention to me. At the end of my reading, he walked over and shook my hand. His mother was amazed at his behavior. At that moment, I realized that my story touched something deep within people, and I felt very good and proud.

Q: What do you hope readers will take away from your book?

A: I hope young people who are struggling to find their way in life will see that I made a good life from a pretty poor beginning. I hope my book will help people see folks on the autism spectrum in a new light. In particular, I hope those people will rethink some of the conventional wisdom like, “John wants to be alone,” which in my case, was completely wrong and very hurtful. I hope that readers who see how I attained success in four careers, and also married and raised a family will realize that childhood dreams really can come true.