

My name is Jesse King and my monologue is called “What I’m Worth”

In 8th grade, I remember being in social pragmatics class, hiding myself from the window in the door so that nobody would be able to see me. The teacher placed a picture of a person smiling down in front of me and said “what is this person feeling?” as though I was 6 years old.

I thought this must be some kind of trick question, are they being passive aggressive or something? I answered “happy”, to which she replied “and how do you know that?” What do you mean how do I know, she’s smiling, it seems pretty straightforward.

The stupidity of the question isn’t why I remember it though. It’s the shame. There’s a reason I was hiding from the window. And there is a reason she was talking to me like I was 6. It’s because that’s how she thought I, an anxious, ADHD, autistic 14 year old boy, needed to be talked to and I didn’t want other kids passing in the halls to think so too.

Sadly, she wasn’t the only one to treat me like that. And when enough people talk to you like that, you start to think to yourself “this is what I’m worth.”

I didn’t always feel like that though. For most of my life, I’ve been able to make friends pretty easily. Even at the start of 8th grade, first day of drama class, I met my best friend, who is my best friend to this day, because I saw a kid sitting alone in the back of the auditorium, and I started talking to him, smile on my face, which grew bigger when I found out we were both really into Dragonball.

The sad thing though, is why I wanted to talk to the kid in the back of the auditorium. It was because I was trying to escape my special ed teacher, because I knew that if I didn’t, I’d be placed in the same group as the other special ed kids, just like literally any group activity in Middle School, and prevent me from making new friends... again.

Like, why am I being forced to take social prags classes if you don’t want me to use the skills I supposedly need this class for. I was constantly told

how friendly I was, yet I was forced to take part in all these groups and activities where I was treated like I wasn't capable of making friends, and after a while, you start to think "this is what I'm worth."

I remember at the start of 9th grade, the first day of Math class, my class was made up of all special ed kids and one seemingly neurotypical kid. She looked around, horrified. I remember thinking to myself, "she's looking at me like she's in a class with monkeys."

I remember that same year being in Wellness class, and we were doing the ropes course, and one more person had to do the rope swing, and I kind of wanted to, but wasn't sure, and I see a group of kids look at each other and one comes over to me and says "Hey Jesse, do you want to do the rope swing", like I'm 6. After enough kids look at you like that and talk to you like that, you can't help but think to yourself "this is what I'm worth."

It used to be different though. I remember when my Mom first told me I was autistic, I was happy. I was proud. I thought I had just been a freak, but I was just autistic. I was so proud that when my Mom told me I wasn't severely autistic, I got upset. But in time, that turned to shame.

One day, in English class in 9th grade, I think that's when it hit me. No matter how much I tried, no matter how much I wanted it, I would never be accepted. I thought to myself "I'm less than human. This is what I'm worth."

That realization and years of kids and teachers alike treating me like I'm less than them hit me in one swift strike... and I broke. I flipped over a table and ran back to the special ed room, where I flipped over a few desks, and started bawling on the floor.

But... it would get better. Let's fast forward to 11th grade. I needed an extra art credit, so I picked one that my friend, who was also neurodivergent, was taking. Theatre For Change. And soon, it was time for a group project (...yay...), and just my luck, I was put in a group with my friend, and a neurotypical girl.

You can imagine what I was prepared for. The treatment that isn't exactly bullying but you can just tell they think less of you, it comes from experience.

“This is what I’m worth,” I thought again. But... it didn’t happen. She sat down next to me, and while my friend wasn’t doing as much work, I was doing my best, and she treated me like her equal.

She treated me with a level of respect and kindness that I had forgotten how it felt to be treated with by most people. I went home that day and said to my older brother “teach me how to walk the dog!” (not with quite as much gusto, but you get the point).

I got an actually good hair style for the first time, and I started wearing nice clothes instead of just throwing on whatever random T-shirt I pulled out of my drawer.

Never before had my confidence been boosted so much in one fell swoop, and it only went up from there. In 12th grade, I had more friends than I ever had in my whole life, many of whom I’m still close friends with. This... this is what I was actually worth.

All it took was one act of kindness, just one person treating me with respect, treating me like an equal, like I was worth something. What I want you to take away is this. I would guess most neurodivergent people can relate at least a little to how I felt. So be like that girl I met in theatre class for someone else. Be the one that treats them with genuine kindness and respect

I know what it feels like to feel like you don’t belong in the world of “normal people”. To feel like you would do anything to be like them, but to know that no matter how much you want it or how much you try, you will never be accepted. But I also know how wonderful it feels, the sheer sense of euphoria... of being proven wrong. And that feeling. That is what every single person is worth.

My name is Toby Proctor-Goddard, and my monologue is called “Neurodiversity, Stigma, and the Problems with Curing.” It’s such a pleasure to be here with all of you today, and to talk about my experiences, which I’m sure some of you will resonate with.

When I was a toddler, I was diagnosed with autism. This diagnosis has influenced everything I do, and every decision that I make. Like many on the autism spectrum, it took me longer to engage in some of the practices that neurotypical kids start engaging in much earlier in life. For instance, I did not start talking until age 4, and it generally took, and still takes me longer, to learn things that many people learn rather quickly. I have witnessed firsthand what it is like to be different from the norm in a town where most people are neurotypical, in terms of academics, sociability, and emotional well-being.

In my opinion, many neurotypical people do not want to interact with people who are neurodiverse. This is especially the case socially, as people often view neurodiverse people as “socially awkward”, not smart, and therefore do not want to engage with them. This shows up in many ways. For instance, towards the end of elementary school, I remember when I was in recess playing soccer with my neurotypical classmates. At these games, there were two teams, always with a team “captain”, who were students. These captains were responsible for choosing who was going to be on their team. In my class that year, there was one other person who shared my diagnosis, also playing these games. The captains would choose people, but I remember that the two of us were always the last people to be chosen onto a team, and the captains would often take a long pause before choosing us to be on one of the teams. This example from my life shows the stigma of my neurotypical classmates towards me and my one neurodiverse classmate.

People who are neurodiverse do not deserve this stigma attached to them. We are special in our own unique ways. This leads me to another point, which is that there is a lot of ideology in life that neurodiverse people need to be “cured.” This ideology is highly problematic, since it fails to recognize the talents and gifts that neurodiverse people like myself bring to the world. Our society does not value neurodiversity, and just because we may need more support in areas neurotypical people can need less support, does not mean that we do not deserve to be supported.

For instance, I recently saw a story on a friend’s social media page. He is a recent college graduate, now a special education paraprofessional in a

public school. He is autistic, and said on his social media story “I hate being autistic.” While he did say statements that I did agree with, like “Don’t tell autistic people they need to try harder”, he said in his story that he did not like the concept of neurodiversity. I have not talked to him for a while, but this made me quite sad. He is a wonderful person with so many gifts, and not being autistic would take away a whole part of who he is.

It would also make me incredibly sad if someone said to me that I need to be cured. I believe, and people have said to me, that I have many gifts to offer to the world, like having a strong working memory, and mentoring and helping others. I can memorize things, and it stays in my head for a very long time. If I were not autistic, then I would likely not have a strong working memory. In addition, I mentored two neurodiverse high school students last year. I believe that being an autistic mentor to neurodiverse students is an asset, since the mentees can relate to me better. Most importantly, it has a big potential to empower the mentees, to help them realize that people in positions of authority can be neurodiverse and are successful in these roles. If I were not autistic, then I probably would not have been as good of a mentor, since I would not have personally understood or related to their disabilities and experiences.

So if there’s one thing I want you to take away from my speech today, it is that neurodiverse people like myself do not need to be cured. We are often really good at things that people who are neurotypical are not. We have a label, which is a big philosophical debate among neurodiverse people, whether or not people want to have this. However, a label does not always equal badness. Lots of people with their disabilities use their label since they are proud of it, as if it's a part of their identity that they do not want taken away from them. It is not our fault that we get treated unfairly, it is a problem that society imposes on us. We need to be paid attention to, need to be loved and supported. Things need to be set up in a way so that we can succeed. So, I call on you to think about how you can support neurodiverse people better.

Thank you.

Different, But Not Less!

My name is Rebekkah Tunik. I am 20 years old, and I live in Newton, MA.

When I was two years old, I was handed a challenge that will last my whole lifetime: a diagnosis of severe Autism. Doctors told my parents that I would not have a normal, typical life. They said I wouldn't be able to go to college, pursue a career, or live independently.

We lived in Framingham until I was three years old, and I didn't get enough services I needed. My parents decided to sell our home and move to Newton because of the amazing special education programs. They've also hired many therapists to work with me outside of school. When I moved to Newton, I went to a special preschool called Newton Early Childhood Program (NECP) because I needed a lot of services. I received 35 hours of therapy each week in school and at home.

- Who wants to spend 35 hours of therapy? Isn't that exhausting?

I've had ABA, music therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy. All of my therapists made a big difference.

Over the years, I've made so much progress that I am able to do the stuff most neurotypical people can do. An example would be living in my own apartment. If I didn't have the independence, I would end up in a group home and not do the activities I wish to do. Another example would be pursuing a career in early childhood education. Instead of my parents following the doctors' advice, they've put countless efforts in making my life a better place. I'm thankful to be where I am today given the support and guidance I received from family, friends, therapists, and teachers.

I went to Newton South High School and I graduated in 2021. At Newton South, I was involved in sports and clubs, with peers with and without special needs. When I was younger, I had a hard time making friends. But I have learned a lot since then. In High School, I was involved in many extra-curricular clubs and opportunities such as Best Buddies, Alpine Ski Team, and Unified Sports. Because I participated in all those activities, I was able to make new friends, and I felt very connected to the South community. Unified Sports in particular taught me how to be a team player, be confident, persevere, and most importantly, promote inclusion, awareness, and acceptance for people with and without disabilities.

When I was about age seven, I said to my parents I want to be a role model for children with autism. (pause) Since I attended NECP as a child, I want to work as a special needs preschool teacher in a classroom with a mix of special needs and neurotypical children. I've always hoped to give back to the community and make a difference in children's educational path.

Even though I didn't start talking until I was 7 years old, I've accomplished so much with the help of my aides, therapists, teachers, and family than I ever thought possible. Now, I attend UMASS Boston and I'm studying to become a special-needs preschool teacher. I am a straight A student. This summer, I worked at NECP as an Assistant Teacher, the school I went to when I was a child. I live in an apartment by myself, next to my parents and younger brother.

None of this would be possible without support from the people who have helped me along the way. My friends, family, and teachers have all encouraged me over time, and I know they are still there for me. They are my inspiration to work hard so I can overcome my challenges when they come up.

Even though I experience life differently from a neurotypical person, my mom asked me to remember this motto: "Different, But Not Less." (pause) I try to live "Different, But Not Less" in everything I do. I want everyone to know that being different should not stop you from exploring your interests, education, and opportunities. I promise you that if I can do it, so can everyone! (politely point to the audience using two hands)

Thank you for listening!

Ben Majewski

This is me.

I am a person with disabilities who leads a full active life.

I have worked at Mass General for over 10 years. I am a Resource Specialist in the Down Syndrome program. I share my experiences as a person with Down syndrome to patients and their families. I talk about the activities I do and how I manage my health. I have many medical conditions common to people with Down syndrome like, celiac disease, hearing loss and sleep apnea. Patients can see me as a role model. Parents can know that their young children can do many things and be healthy too. I can relate!

Mass General is important to me so I also volunteer one day a week at the hospital delivering reading materials to inpatients. I also help out at the Food Pantry in my town.

In addition to my work at Mass. General Hospital and my volunteer jobs, I am a busperson and dishwasher at an Irish pub in Newton called O'Hara's. It's fun to see all the people in my neighborhood who come in to the restaurant. I have worked there for over 12 years.

When I am not working or volunteering, I like to be active.

I participate in lots of Newton Park and Recreation activities including soccer, baseball, zumba, yoga, basketball and golf. I enjoy spending time with my family and hanging out with my friends when I'm not busy.

I also live independently in a home for other people with disabilities in Newton Highlands.

I get around using Lyft and can walk to my O'Hara's job and to the grocery store.

As you can see, I do a lot of the same things that other people do. Sometimes though, I need help with managing my responsibilities and everyday tasks like shopping or taking my medicine.

I have had a lot of opportunities in my life. People with Down syndrome may seem different but we want to be accepted and involved in our communities.

I have received a lot of support from my family, my co-workers, my schools in Newton and MassBay Community College, and the Barry Price Rehabilitation Center in Newton.

These programs have helped me to be successful! My message today is to be more inclusive so everyone can have opportunities like me.

Thank you.

Hi! My name is Claudia Maibor and I use they/she pronouns. My monologue is called Setting the Standards of Kindness.

When I was in elementary school, I, along with four other neurodivergent kids were bullied by the rest of the grade. We were the last ones for any group project, and nobody would play with us at recess. I remember walking after people who had been nice to me all day, and them pretending like I wasn't there. I kept calling after them and they ignored me. I remember the feeling of invisibility, which hurt more than I can explain. The bullying lasted all six years, but it got worse as it continued. I felt so alone and insecure. I felt like it was me that was the problem. My elementary school also didn't have a good Special Education program, so I wasn't supported in the ways that I needed to be. I would have trouble expressing my emotions and feelings, and instead of helping me learn how to do that, I was often punished for "acting out." Guess who was surprised when it didn't work to fix my behavior!

When it was time for me to go to middle school, my mother had me transferred to Brown, and then on to South for high school. At these places, I was taken care of and I made wonderful connections with amazing people. Brown had a zero tolerance policy for bullying, and they meant it. I remember when I had a problem with a kid in one of my classes who called me names, and Principal Jordan put a stop to it immediately. At South, I was faced with new challenges, and was met with more warmth than I can imagine. I had a family at South, from the nurses (and Bailey) that I visited every day who essentially adopted me, to both of my amazing guidance counselors, to the teachers I had, and finally, my phenomenal dean, Dr. Marc Banks. These people helped me learn new coping skills and other tricks to navigate a world where neurotypicality is what we needed to strive to be. I wouldn't be who I am today without each and every one of those people.

Outside of school, I was at Boston Children's Hospital for psychiatry. They were monitoring and administering medications to balance me out. I had a lot of great psychiatrists there, and they all supported me and didn't make me feel like I was the problem. Outside of Children's, I had therapists that gave me "more tools in my toolbox." One of these tools is four square breathing, which helps me calm down and steady my breathing.

Throughout my life, one thing has remained the same: me needing to "manage" myself and match society's standards of what being neurodivergent means. But let me make one thing very clear. There should be no "expectations" of how neurotypicality presents. Just because I'm not nonverbal doesn't mean I'm not neurodivergent. Just because I'm not ticking as much as the other person doesn't mean I don't have tics. Not all disabilities are visible. There is no "normal" to how people present or not present their differences.

So what is my main point? We need to start changing things. We need to start calling people out when they cross lines like when people ask inappropriate questions or pick on kids that are different than they are. We need to start educating people about this. We as a society need to start normalizing not being "normal". I have had to fight for so long just to get the accommodations to give me a fair shot at anything. I'm done forcing myself to fit other people's molds like I've done all my life—to make other people's visions of me accurate. Because we are not the problem. I shouldn't have to change or mask to fit your definition of normal. We shouldn't have to change to make you more comfortable.

So put in the effort. Learn something new, and maybe give kindness another chance. Thank you.

Walk Like a Man, Talk Like Superman — Bobby Lovett

When I was four, I'd wear my dad's ski mask and play cops and robbers with my brothers. It felt fun to play the bad guy. When I wore my Superman pajamas, I'd fight my dad and he'd play along, and for a moment in my very weak life...I felt powerful.

I have a vivid memory of being too weak to open the car door, of learning I had hypotonia and hypermobility, weak muscles and loose joints, a lifelong condition. I'd never be Superman.

Half of children with autism also have hypotonia. And that's only the beginning.

According to the CDC in 2008, 1 in 6 children are born with developmental disabilities. A tenth of that portion of the population is diagnosed with autism. The more often kids are diagnosed, that the concept is normalized or destigmatized, the more people say...why is this happening? People weren't autistic before. It's the vaccines, the radiation, the chemicals.

Or maybe they were, and you just didn't notice.

When autism became a replacement for the 'R' word I started out by correcting people, but as a kid it became rapidly clear that many children and adolescents had never even heard of autism. They didn't know what it looked like.

They didn't know what it looked like in me.

In high school, when kids called things "autistic," I'd casually mention that I was too. They'd try to wave it off, uncomfortable with the thought that maybe their comments were hurting people they respected and cared about, not just the strangers they wanted to hurt. Sometimes when people talk about it, I can tell they probably have it too. But to hear that would scare them. It'd remind them of the help they didn't get as a child, or the help they didn't give. It'd make them think of the help they need now. That their parents needed. It's easier to think that normal means the opposite of helpless. But everyone needs some kind of saving. Some just need more of it than others. And that's okay. It's stronger to admit you need help than to reject it in case someone sees you fall. It's disappointing, because then they miss their chance to watch you rise. And you miss your chance to actually pull it off, if only for yourself.

I got into acting because I've been acting every day of my life, but for once I could do something fun. Everyone talks about their "weird and quirky" side, but only some of us can attest to that feeling of perpetual social rejection, constant inadequacy, constant confusion, and feeling misunderstood. That seemingly endless feeling of being overwhelmed and paralyzed because the people around

you don't have any more patience than you do...except they're older, bigger, stronger, quote en quote "smarter."

Through acting, I found power, I found confidence, I found words and ways to say them that I'd only ever been able to put on a page. And the longer I did it, the faster I got. The smarter I got. My special ed teachers taught me how to make eye contact, even though I never want to. They taught me how to listen...to hear and be heard.

I stopped feeling like an outcast, and I just became 'unique.' I've been called 'special,' but nobody ever says it in a 'disabled' way. I'm just fun. I'm a blast, not a burden.

But it still feels wrong.

Every day I've used my power to show autistic people there's another way. But any performance is subjective. When I was a senior playing the lead, I told a freshman I was autistic too, and at first, he didn't believe me. He thought I was bullying him.

...

I don't wanna be Superman anymore.

I want to go home. I want to make my funny noises, I want to have my freak outs, I want to hide. I don't want to be compassionate to people.

But the thing is...it's true that when Superman stands up for the meek and defenseless, he's Superman. Except he's always Superman. He's Superman when he does the dishes. When he does Secret Santa. When he meets with friends for coffee. When he loses someone. When he gets into arguments with his parents. When he goes through breakups and meets new loves. When he goes to the doctor. When he uses the bathroom. When he reads. When he's reprimanded. He doesn't have a choice.

So no matter what happens, I will always be Superman. And I kind of like that.

My name is Erin Ryan Heyneman. I'm from Melrose, but as the program says, I have strong ties to Newton. My parents, Kate and Steve Ryan, met at BC. My dad grew up on Brookline Avenue across from the College. For the older folks in the audience, there were 10 Ryan kids - you may know one or two. I'll try to rattle them off like in Good Will Hunting: Stevie, Jackie, Joey, Peter, Larry, Sheila, Moira, Kathleen, and Polly. I'm Stevie's daughter.

Like most others speaking tonight, I am proudly neurodivergent. I struggle with things like executive functioning and task avoidance and task initiation. I have an auditory processing disorder, and "verbal disinhibition," or the lack of a filter when I speak.

Unlike most people here tonight, I think, my neurodivergence was actually *acquired* (meaning I wasn't necessarily born with the traits of neurodivergence). If you're like wait whaaat? How? Well, I didn't begin showing signs of neurodivergence until a brain injury I sustained four years ago.

The same brain injury that causes my physical impairments that you can see also is responsible for the change in my processing, thinking, and skills. Here's the short version: almost 4 years ago, I sustained a brain injury caused by another extremely rare catastrophic stroke-mimicking Multiple Sclerosis flare. In the course of 6 hours, I lost all motor function on the left side of my body. I call this a brain injury because the damage from the MS lesion was so severe, it created a "black hole lesion" that essentially is loss of tissue. Wait, it's a "necrotizing black hole lesion," that's like the medical term.

In the time since, I've learned to walk, drive, and use my arm again (I also experience chronic pain in my shoulder). The damage occurred in the right hemisphere of my brain (so, my left side was affected). The damage occurred mostly in an area called the motor strip, it scrapes up against the area which, according to the brain injury association of america, is associated with (wait for it): Attention; Concentration; Self-Monitoring; Organization; Executive functioning; planning, and inhibition. And I now exhibit the Hallmark traits of neurodivergence. An example I'd like to share - our director, Jesse King, has been patient. with my scattered responses, and I even overhauled my entire talk last night. This is not just patience, though: it's accommodation. So thank you Jesse for accommodating my needs.

I also experience emotional dysregulation in a new way. Remember the Ryans of Chestnut Hill? Well, yeah, I was raised catholic. I mean, Seamus Heaney has made serious headway adding to the Irish-catholic "ok to cry canon." But I grew

up holding back my tears. If anyone saw them spill over, a quick joke was all it took for me to smile through them and think “omg I’m crying how silly of me.”

Now? Crying is kind of my whole personality. A short list of the things that have made me full on cry in front of people - not even counting in private:

Making a new friend

Watching my cat watch the movie the aristocats

Pretty much any time I talk about my brain injury (careful we aren’t done yet)

When I’m overwhelmed by beauty, or belief, or the everyday,
of course loss, and of course rebirth. I cried on New Year’s Day.

So, the black hole lesion led to a pretty major shift in my emotional regulation, and I have leaned into the tears; it helps to have so many examples when teaching my kids that it’s okay to cry (but I bet they wish there weren’t so many examples).

It will be four years this summer. When I first got back from the hospital, my children Paul and Marie had just turned 4 and 6 respectively. While they literally jumped for joy and screamed mommy on that July day, they soon noticed the changes that had occurred in my physical body and in my affect. The parent who had loved reading them stories could barely get through Each, Peach, Pear Plum without severe difficulty concentrating.

My son started asking me sweetly when “Regular Mommy” was coming back. Today, after years of intensive therapies using a number of modalities: Speech Language therapy, meditation, neurofeedback, concentration and memory games (not to mention the physical rehabilitation) I’m still not the “Regular Mommy” they would have remembered. And my fear that they wouldn’t remember the old me - that came true. But they stopped asking for Regular Mommy a long time ago. While they might gasp upon seeing a video of me dancing, or lifting them high in the air, they don’t ask for regular mommy to come back. I mostly don’t, either.

Thank you :).

Inclusion — Rick Halloran

When I was born, I didn't realise how my life was gonna turn out. Being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder has led me to a life full of a mix for positive and negative things. Yes of course, I have been both a happy guy and a sad guy at many points throughout this life, but I always try to choose to be happy! That's how I have always been taught to see the world and my future.

I strived to fit in, it's been like that for a while. As someone who lived with autism, I felt as if there are some important opportunities I missed because of how I learn things in a slower way and how I can process and move forward. One thing I wished is that I felt more included, it always seemed like my classmates would leave me out of important things that I wish I could have done more of, such as hangouts or parties. Especially as I went to middle school in another part of Newton where I just got to know some friends. They didn't seem to take the time and get to know me as well as I wished, which is why I didn't get any special invites to their bar mitzvahs or any party they had. This was mostly the case of my neurotypical friends I made outside the special ed program I was part of back then. By the time I reached adolescence and my teen years hit, I learned about my neurodivergence. What I mean by that, is I learned more in detail of how much it affected me throughout early childhood and the purposes of me working with a 1:1 aide, taking occupational and speech therapy both in and out of school, and of course, how I was differently viewed in the eyes of my parents, other students and school staff. At age 12, I got to learn about how my disability has affected people in the past, but one of the lessons I learned was about inclusion among your peers, classmates and colleagues. I took the lesson of inclusion and up until now have stuck with it for a while. I never found it okay to discriminate or leave anyone out of something, especially because of their differences and disabilities.

There's many instances where I learned about inclusion and how to be able to fit in. From being able to perform in plays and musicals throughout public school and to getting my first job as a summer camp counselor. A bunch of those moments felt super inclusive to me. Many people who have autism or some similar challenge can have a tough time stepping out of their comfort zone and even getting up to speak, like I am right now, or performing the way I've been used to for quite a while. Being in shows has meant a lot to me from my youth and when I discovered my passion for it many summers ago at a camp with many young neurodivergent kids. So during the afterschool program in elementary school, I was involved in all the plays: The Sound of Music, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and Peter Pan. Then from middle to high school, I was casted in almost every show I tried out for

and my favorite show and role I got to do was Bill in Mamma Mia! One of the main supporting roles. I felt that at Newton South with the theatre program, I felt included as many of the other kids in special ed programs at my high school did not have the courage or trust themselves to be on stage for a public performance. I gave it my best effort and my experience from what I've been doing since early elementary school and took it during my senior year of high school when I performed in Mamma Mia! This summer, I got to work at this camp as an employee and inspire the young kids with neurodivergence to be better versions of themselves. In other words obviously, I got to co-teach them important life lessons, and the appropriate ways they can interact with their peers. Some life lessons would include collaboration and what it's like for the campers to work as a group the way the staff do as a team! Throughout my job this summer, the subject of inclusion... it came up frequently during professional developments and staff meetings. As I got to be part of an organization where a lot of us should feel as we belong, and to feel valued, respected and seen for who we truly are as people.

Yes, the aspect of inclusion is to include, meaning make sure everyone has a chance to do anything they set their mind to, involve them in activities and embracing differences. Supporting each other as different people is a way of being kind, compassionate and understanding. Some people with autism have higher challenges and barriers than others, but it doesn't mean they should not be included in any way. This goes a long way, as you would get more of a chance to see what the real world is about. Feeling qualified even as a neurodivergent person can give you many opportunities to do just that.

Overall, if you accept others for who they are as a person, they will simply accept you too and it would mean a whole lot to you. For reasons beyond how important life is, if every person was the same, life would probably be incredibly boring. We come from a great big world where people live in a society where anyone with a disability can turn out to be very special.

My name is John Curley and my monologue is called: “How embracing my neurodivergence has made me a more effective educator”.

I was fired from my very first job. It was September, 1988. I was 5 years old and I had just been named the fire chief of my kindergarten class. My task was simple enough - go out into the hallway, put on the coat and plastic helmet and then run back into the class and yell “fire!!” so that everyone could practice safely evacuating from the building. And I rocked that outfit. And then I ran into the room and yelled “sire!! sire!!” because I had a significant speech impediment. And nobody moved. And the teacher took the equipment from me and told me to sit down and someone else got to lead the class to safety that day. And I remember going home and crying my eyes out to my parents because I didn’t understand what happened to me. And what I didn’t realize until much later in life is that what the real pain was that day wasn’t that my classmates didn’t move when I said fire, it was that my teacher allowed them to stay still, and allowed me to feel that figurative burn.

Now, I was fortunate to learn strategies so that I could compensate for that specific challenge; however, it was not the last time I would face a diagnosis or challenge. At one point or other in my life, I’ve been diagnosed with what I call alphabet soup: ADHD; OCD; Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD), Major Depressive Disorder... those are my greatest hits.

Yet, because of that earlier experience, for most of my life, including most of my adult life I shied away from accepting that I was disabled. Rather, I believed that I had these individual diagnoses that were ultimately to be overcome and then eventually put behind me, rather than an immutable part of me. And then, a breakthrough happened. Or rather a breakdown.

A few years ago, I had reached a point where it was no longer sustainable to keep fighting against the self-loathing and internalized ableism, and I checked myself into the hospital and took a leave from my job. It was during that nadir of my life that I dug in and worked on myself. Call it radical acceptance...call it ‘there are two-wolves inside of you’... it was the start of doing the work of embracing who I truly was. This work opened the door for me to become a much more effective educator.

When I was ready to return to work, I could now tap into a deeper pool of empathy. For I've experienced those same feelings of shame, fear, and self-loathing as a lot of the students I work with. The same feelings of burnout at having to "mask" during the day in order to fit into ableist standards at school or work. A quick aside - when I speak about masking, I'm not referring to a physical mask for health and wellness reasons, like a surgical or N95 mask but rather the idea of hiding or concealing traits in order to avoid 'negative consequences'. For example, my brain thinks in song lyrics and movie/TV quotes. That's how I process information. And while that serves me well at trivia night, it's not exactly copacetic to yell "None shall pass!" at a colleague when they tell me about grading essays over the weekend. And having to suppress that natural tendency is mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausting.

So, back to empathy - Too often people believe that neurodivergent people lack empathy, when that couldn't be further from the truth. The most empathic people that I've encountered in my life have been neurodivergent. We need to disabuse ourselves of this notion and challenge the narrative of neurodiversity that has been sold to us from mainstream media.

Additionally, I've learned that I can use my position as an educator to advocate for students, while simultaneously teaching self-advocacy skills. My lived experience has taught me that the phrase "nothing about us without us" is fundamental, as disability is often left out of the conversation related to DEI work and other diversity efforts.

When Covid-19 was raging and the first wave of students and staff to return to buildings were in special education, the "experts" making decisions never included disabled folks in those conversations; disabled folks... those who are expert in adapting to survive in a world constantly trying to kill them.

I also know that having invisible disabilities provides me with privilege inside of the disability community. And that, combined with the other privileges I'm afforded in my life as a cisgender, straight white man, I can use what I've learned as an advocate for racial and cultural diversity to force disability into those same spaces. Something I am incredibly proud of is getting to work with colleagues, students and alumni of Newton Public Schools to create multiple affinity days throughout the past few years. These days have begun to change the dialogue around disability in our schools from awareness to acceptance.

Additionally, being transparent and showing students my authentic self has helped me develop stronger relationships by allowing them to see me as “human”. This also allows them to see someone ‘like them’ successfully (most days) navigating adulthood. And when I make mistakes, I own them out loud. I ask for help. I lean into that internal (or more often external) dialogue and allow for students to experience my metacognition.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are approximately 4 million teachers in America. Disabled teachers are important, yet there is still incredible stigma associated around having a disability. I wonder how my own journey of self discovery would have been different if I had more disabled teachers, particularly neurodivergent teachers. Not just on that day in kindergarten, but any day during my 12+ years in school.

Thank you.