

IDEAS

Why I always announce my son's autism

My husband thinks strangers would figure out for themselves that Zack is profoundly disabled. Now I know why I never take that chance.

By Whitney Ellenby
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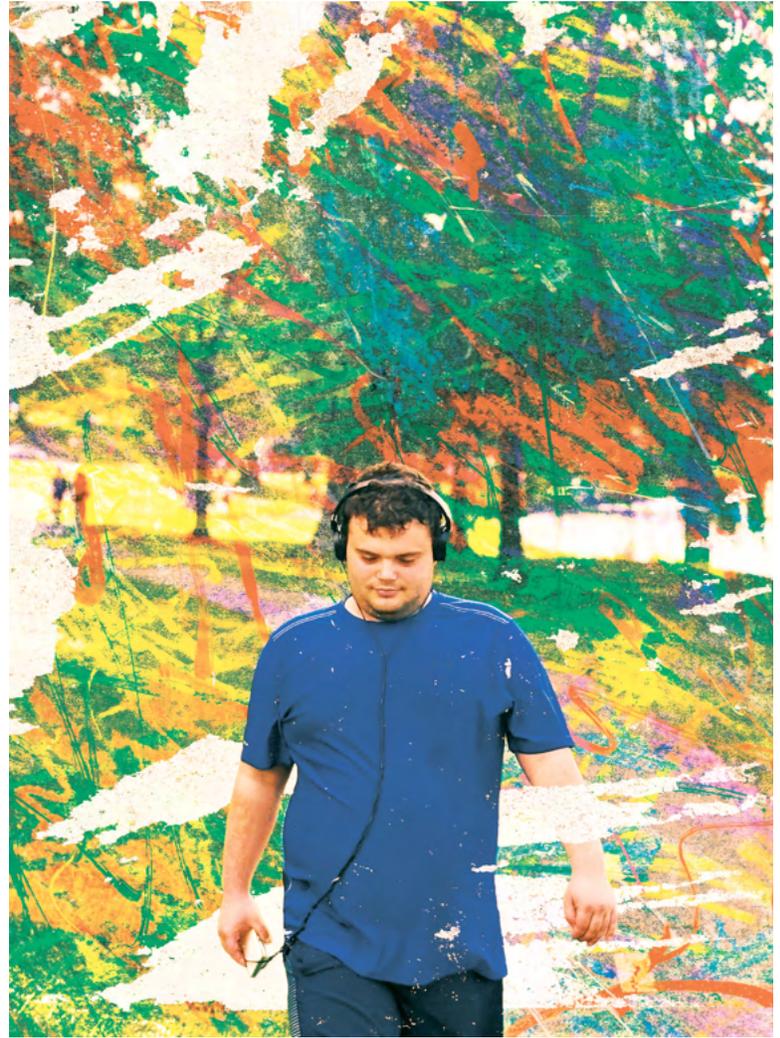


PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LUIS G. RENDON/GLOBE STAFF; PHOTO COURTESY OF WHITNEY ELLENBY

Whitney Ellenby is a former disability rights attorney in the US Department of Justice and the author of the 2018 book “Autism Uncensored: Pulling Back the Curtain.”

My handsome, broad-shouldered 25-year-old son does not merely walk into a coffee shop. He gallops in, bypassing everyone waiting patiently in line to belt out: “Hot chocolate! And cookie! And chips!” It doesn’t matter that minutes prior to his entrance I coached him to “remember, other people live in this town.” His enthusiasm triumphs. In a conspicuous move not even seasoned shoplifters would attempt, he quickly grabs and unwraps a large cookie, devouring it in plain sight while scouting out his preferred table to sit.

In these split seconds I absorb a familiar scene — bewildered strangers stunned into silence, heads swiveled in horror, mouths agape. Most unnervingly, small children cowering behind their parents’ legs, having instinctively leapt back at the erumpent entrance. My husband and I are in tow, gently bodychecking Zack to contain his excited arms. Then my husband, his head bowed and eyes avoiding contact, silently grips Zack’s arm and steers him to the farthest table possible. He pivots Zack into a seat and stands protectively in front of him, his back to the glaring crowd, as if erecting a physical barrier between my still-voluble son and irate bystanders.

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I take an entirely different tack. I know what onlookers are thinking: *What the hell is going on? Does this guy not see there’s an entire roomful of people? That he just scared kids? What the hell is wrong with that guy?* I intercept their collective thoughts and calmly announce, “Hi, there! So sorry for the disruption, my son has profound autism and doesn’t understand how badly he just startled you. He’s just very, *very* excited to be here!” A palpable exhale is unleashed. Shoulders suddenly unclench. Heads begin nodding as low chuckles and sympathetic smiles spread throughout the

crowd. Smiling, I continue, “Please explain to your children, or else I’m happy to,” bending down to whisper to some visibly shaken ones, “Do you know what ‘special needs’ means? Well, my son, Zack, he has special needs, but don’t worry, he won’t hurt anyone, he’s just *super* loud!”

Sometimes the public exchange ends there. More often it provokes an avalanche. Some people approach me to confide that they get it, they have a cousin with autism. Some commend me for standing so resolutely by my son. Others are consumed with curiosity: How do I manage such a strong, vigorous young man? Am I ever afraid of him? There are no questions I won’t answer. It’s as if I’m giving a press conference.

I have only one detractor on site — my husband, who murmurs with asperity, “Why do you *always* do that? They would have figured it out!”

“Because,” I answer unwaveringly, “I see something you don’t: The emperor has no clothes.”

I am referring to an idea in Steven Pinker’s recent book, “When Everyone Knows That Everyone Knows.” The Harvard cognitive scientist uses the classic fairy tale “The Emperor Has No Clothes” to illustrate a crucial point about how we humans rely on one another’s private but commonly held thoughts in deciding how to behave ourselves.

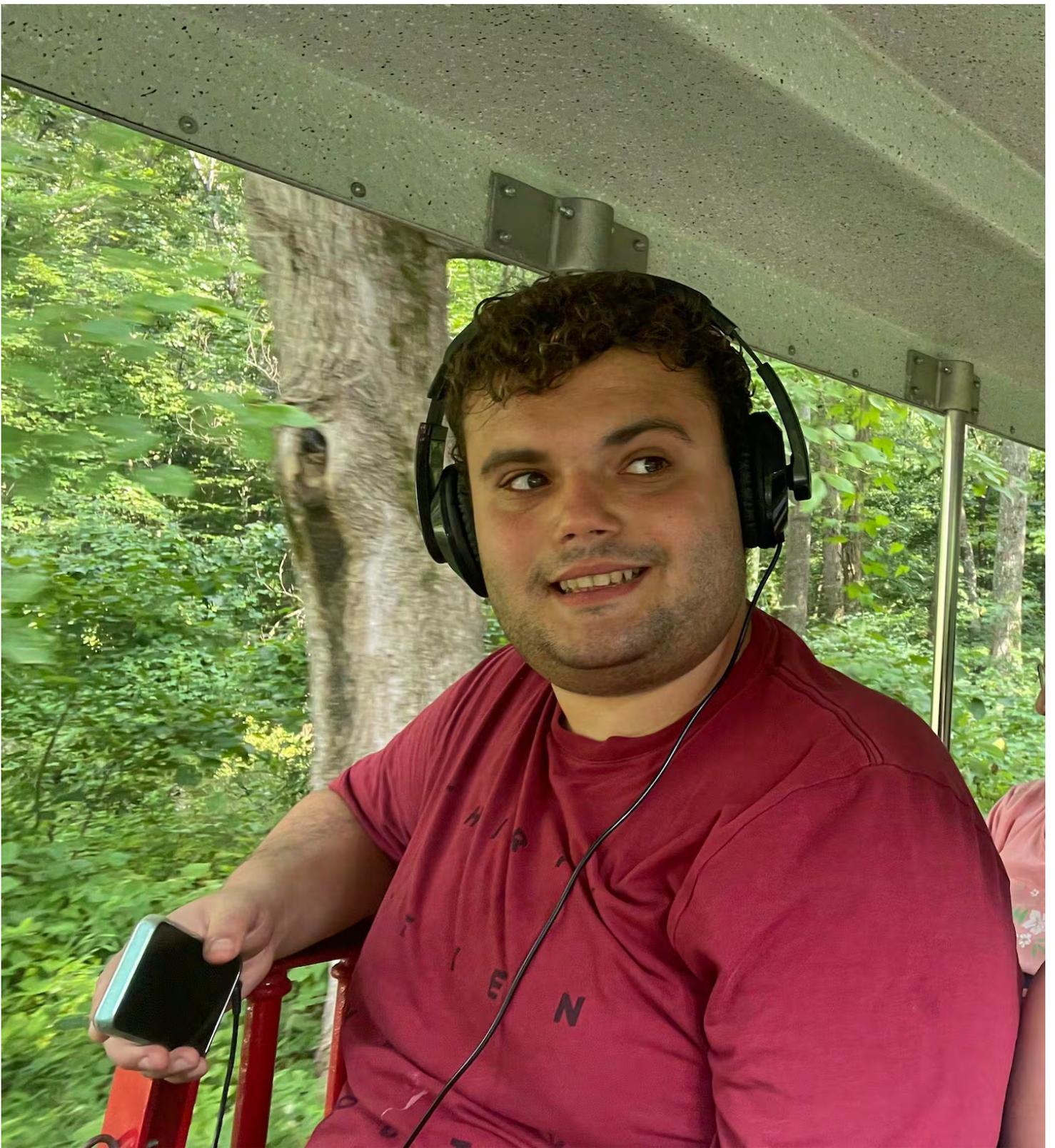
In the fairy tale, a pompous emperor who prides himself on fancy new clothes agrees to wear a new creation that weavers tell him appears invisible only to those who are ignorant or stupid. Although all his officers see the farce, that there are, in fact, no clothes, they obediently prop up the illusion of a decorously clothed despot to avoid appearing to be fools, even allowing the emperor to parade down the streets before his townspeople completely naked. The townspeople, each seeing the truth but too uncomfortable to state it aloud, continue the pretense — not because they believe it but

because they each know that everyone else knows it's not true but won't dare speak it aloud. Not until a young boy punctures the charade by crying out "But the emperor has no clothes!" do the townspeople openly acknowledge the fact, and then they begin loudly hazing the emperor for his own foolishness.

According to Pinker, this phenomenon of "everyone knowing what each other knows" is deeper than a simple shared understanding among strangers. It involves multiple recursive layers of knowledge through which we routinely understand everyone's thoughts about everyone else's thoughts. In interviews, Pinker playfully recounts the dizzying layers of "common knowledge":

"I know something, you know it; I know that you know it, you know that I know it; you know that I know that you know it.... Ad infinitum."

Pinker contends that such common knowledge is essential for social coordination on everything from driving on the correct side of the road to using paper currency to buy goods. Critically, what matters is not the efficacy of the protocol (driving on the right side of the road isn't inherently *better* than driving on the left) but that everyone adheres to it, precisely because we know that everyone else is adhering to it and that they know we will. Without common knowledge, society would collapse.



Zack Hunter Reuben on a trolley in Maryland in 2025. COURTESY OF WHITNEY ELLENBY

Nowhere in his book does Pinker mention autism, yet he supplied me with a way of understanding why I feel compelled to disclose Zack's condition to bystanders and why that causes discord with my husband. My husband and I have dueling concepts of what

constitutes common knowledge.

My husband assumes that because autism has become so prevalent in media coverage and TV and movie depictions, bystanders who see Zack's strikingly atypical behavior will surely conclude that he has autism. As Pinker would put it, my husband assumes that autism is common knowledge, and therefore no explanation is owed when a young man behaves in ways so obviously incongruent with his age.

I assume the opposite. Even bystanders who have experience with autism cannot possibly decode Zack's disruptive behaviors [when they unspool so rapidly and without warning](#). Zack is huge, muscular, voluble, with no physical or other markers of a disability. *Is this a frat boy playing a rude prank? Might this guy be mentally ill and dangerous?* That my husband keeps walking beside Zack, head down, wordlessly gripping Zack's arm, to my mind gives the appearance of a parent hoping the townspeople won't notice the denuded despot — or when they do, they will be too intimidated to publicly acknowledge it. I'm not about to risk misapprehension about Zack's identity or intent; seconds are all it takes for someone with a clenched fist to grab him by the collar and approach his innocent face. More than once, I've intervened to stop him from being punched.

I'm also not about to let bystanders be frightened into silence, suspended in uncertainty about whether they've just encountered someone who threatens their safety. From my perspective, the only common knowledge when my son bursts into a public space with objectively frightening volume and gestures is that his behavior is inappropriate.

So I'm like the boy in the fairy tale who blurts out the truth. The difference being that in my scenario, the truth is *not* commonly known, so I must quickly establish it. Pinker explains that common knowledge can be spontaneously created: "If something is public, if it's conspicuous, if it cannot be taken back, if it's 'out there,' if one of us sees it

at the same time we see someone else seeing it, and they see us see it, that can generate common knowledge in one intuition.” Zack’s behavior fits all these descriptions, so I time my disclosure to coincide with his entrance. Using Pinker’s framing, what I’m actually saying is: “I know that my son just behaved inappropriately. I know that you know that my son just behaved inappropriately. I want you to know that I know that you know that my son behaved inappropriately — here’s why.”

I decided years ago that I would not confine my son to our house or deprive him of enjoying spaces everyone else enjoys, provided he can be there safely. But I also recognize that every time I enter a public space, I’m effectively forcing my lived experience onto strangers. My candor is my bond with the public, my disclosure a gesture of respect. What my husband misapprehends is that I am also respecting my son by supplying the dignity of context through which he can be accurately, and fairly, understood.

What fascinated me about Pinker’s analysis is that he seems to know autism, *but he may not know that he knows it.*

Embedded in his analysis of recursive knowledge is a key clinical trait that distinguishes autism from other disorders: an inherent lack of awareness of social cues. The clinical term, “mind-blindness,” “refers to an individual’s difficulty or inability to understand and predict the intentions, thoughts, beliefs, and emotions of others.” But in Pinker’s social parlance, this defining trait could just as easily be called “the inability to formulate common knowledge.” So, to push the recursive paradigm further, when I disclose Zack’s autism, what I’m also tacitly saying is, “Please forgive him, my son doesn’t know he just startled you because of his autism. And he doesn’t know that you don’t know that he doesn’t know how to abide by social norms....” Ad infinitum.

But that’s not all I’m doing. I have been excoriated by autism self-advocates for “outing” my son without his permission, using stigmatizing language to describe his

condition. What those advocates misapprehend is that I'm not outing my son, his involuntary behaviors are; and another reason I announce his autism is that I'm not the least bit ashamed of it. I earnestly believe that advocates, much like my husband, are too close to the situation, perhaps too vulnerable to public opinion, to understand how frightening certain autistic behaviors can be to strangers. Or perhaps I see something they don't — that no matter how common the topic of autism has become, the individual manifestations of this disorder are not. In addition to gleeful entrances, Zack has also had full-body meltdowns complete with piercing shrieks and furious pummeling of his skull with his fists. And when they occur in public, I offer the identical disclosure and plea for patience for my son. Because familiarity with media depictions will never supplant the lived experience of witnessing a frustrated young person compulsively ravage his own flesh or scream in a pitch so fierce it momentarily paralyzes you in your tracks.

So, when I remain on the scene, educating bystanders about how autism can and does manifest, I'm revealing private knowledge — this is what it means to raise a child who's profoundly autistic and to try to visit all the places everyone else takes for granted — and seeking to make it common knowledge.

But that's not all I'm doing. Much as it might enrage disability advocates, I am also tacitly asking for permission to stay. Yes, legally speaking, I'm aware my son has an unequivocal right to access public venues. But if my child unexpectedly implodes, complaints from stunned and angry customers will effectively force us out. An interviewer once bluntly asked Pinker, "What the hell does this pretty interesting but wonky, nerdy concept have to do with real life?" Here's one answer: A carefully constructed public disclosure about my son's behaviors is the basis upon which his access to public spaces depends.

My goal reaches further than legal acceptance; I'm striving for authentic social acceptance, for Zack and others like him. Using common knowledge as the predicate,

I'm essentially brokering an agreement with strangers — I will disclose the truth, *and in exchange*, I am asking you to tolerate behaviors you would not otherwise from a young adult, because the only way my beloved child can navigate this world is if he sees it; and the only way he can participate is if he's allowed to do so on his own disabled terms. I am not only trying to acquaint Zack with the world; I am trying to acquaint the world with him. *Moreover, I want people to know that I want them to know, ad infinitum. Get it?*

For all my (and Pinker's) pedagogy, I'm delighted to report that my experience for more than a decade generally has been a gigantic embrace of Zack across multiple spaces (gyms, airplanes, even tight elevators). I never underestimate the fundamental decency and compassion bystanders show Zack, who deserves to feel welcome. Zack feels it, too. I often remind him in whispers, "The riches of the world, the cakes, the gym, the water parks — they exist for you, too, right?" *Yes*, he whispers back, eyes locked on mine. But when something like the proverbial parting of the waters accompanies our every entrance, and when I make my efforts to massage common knowledge, I can't help but lovingly razz him, "Zack, *it's good to be the king*, right?" And without a hint of irony, he answers yes.

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