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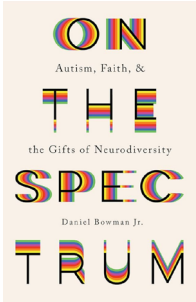
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Reading Daniel Bowman Jr.'s *On the Spectrum: A Review*

On the Spectrum: Autism, Faith, & the Gifts of Neurodiversity by Daniel Bowman, Jr. (BrazosPress, 2021).



I approach Daniel Bowman's *On the Spectrum: Autism, Faith, & the Gifts of Neurodiversity* as a writer with significant similarities to its author. Like Bowman, my own autism was not recognized until into my thirties; like Bowman, I am an English professor at a small Christian college; like Bowman, I consider matters of neurodiversity through the lens of my Christianity (see Urban, 2021). On all these levels, I appreciate Bowman's book, "a memoir in essays" (p. 44) in which Bowman, a longtime faculty member at Taylor University, puts forth from a broadly

Christian perspective his personal account of being an autistic person with a mid-life diagnosis, also offering his wider reflections on neurodiversity through his experience as writer and a teacher. The result is a genuinely valuable book that, despite its virtues, sometimes suffers from a tendency to put forth narratives and reflections characterized more by vagueness than specificity. Moreover, although Bowman's Christian faith is clearly a key animator of his memoir, readers who desire explicit Christian commentary throughout the book will be disappointed. More accurately, Bowman's Christianity is explicitly highlighted in certain parts of his book, but it is always implicitly present, a presence revealed, for example, when he calls readers to honor "the full humanity, the imago Dei [image of God]" of autistic people, a sacred dignity evident in "the work, and play, they've chosen for themselves" (p. 38).

Bowman's opening chapter, "Prelude: You Always Hurt the Ones You Love: Crisis, Diagnosis, Hope," first offers reflections on the "pain" and "trauma" (p. 11) he has caused loved ones, particularly, he suggests, his wife and two children. He reflects on the low life expectancy and high suicide rate of autistic persons, and he admits his own struggles with suicidal thoughts. He then recalls his journey in 2015 of first self-diagnosis and then professional

diagnosis for his autism, noting that in an earlier edition of DSM he would have been classified as having Asperger Syndrome. He notes his fragility, his alienation, his tendency to avoid calling friends and not answer his own phone. He describes some of his particular habits that accompany his retreat from others:

If I haven't pushed you away yet, I might if you see me blow on my knuckles, one hand at a time, left then right, then tap my legs with slightly closed fists. This one I will try, try so hard, to suppress. But it could happen. Or I'll stim in other, less obvious ways: I'll stand alone in the kitchen and eat half a jar of briny, salty pickles or even brinier, saltier olives stuffed with slick red pimentos. I'll cherish each small sting on the tongue. (p. 27)

This passage is quite effective. But such detail is missing in his recounting of his interactions with others. Regarding his wife, Beth, for example, he writes, "We had a fight on our way to the Indianapolis airport. I experienced what I would later call an extreme autistic meltdown"; he recalls, "Both of us were devastated" (p. 13). But he offers no details of the conflict, no dialogue between him and Beth, no specifics about what he did or said during his meltdown. Such guardedness characterizes much of the book.

After his Prelude, Bowman divides his book into seven sections that each contain several short unnumbered chapters. His first section, "Foundations," opens with "Why You Should Read This Book (and how): A Note to Neurotypical Readers," in which Bowman calls his volume "a book for a new era in thinking about autism, one increasingly defined by attention to diverse autistic voices" (p. 36). He expresses concern that most celebrated depictions of autistic characters are written by neurotypical writers, and he takes umbrage that such writers "attempt to represent, perhaps even exploit" autistic people (p. 36). Instead, Bowman affirms, "I and my fellow autistic writers can speak for ourselves" (p. 37). Along with this, Bowman resists the notion that autism and its characteristics can be reduced "to bullet points," a practice that "is a form of ableism" (p. 37). Instead, he exhorts neurotypical readers to read accounts written by autistic people and to get to know them and their stories.

A related form of ableism is “applied behavior analysis (ABA) ‘therapy,’” which aims to “replace the autistic brain wires with a neurotypical OS” (p. 40). Bowman laments the “many autistic adults who carry awful wounds from ABA” (p. 41), and he moreover pushes back against the stereotype that autistic people lack “empathy or compassion” (p. 43) even as he asserts that autistic people can excel in the arts. Importantly, when Bowman writes, to quote his subtitle, of “the gifts of neurodiversity,” he emphasizes that such gifts include the ability to strenuously pursue excellence in various realms of creativity and not simply the stereotypical autistic ability of being math and science savants. All of this is grounded, as I note in my opening paragraph, in Bowman’s strong belief that autistic people and their activities reflect their reality as human beings created in the image of God. Finally, he affirms that he writes “as an autistic poet who is a Christ follower,” specifically “a progressive Episcopalian living in the Midwest, a husband and dad and teacher at a small liberal arts college” (p. 44). His book is “an attempt to make some sense of my life, a life that still seems strange to me” (p. 44). Indeed, his book is an attempt to not only find his own voice as an autistic writer but to encourage other autistic persons to find their own voices and to exhort neurotypical audiences to listen to those voices. In this, Bowman is genuinely inspiring, and I feel motivated by Bowman to find my own voice by writing more deeply and consistently about my own life journey even as I feel moved to listen more proactively and intently to a greater diversity of autistic voices.

At the same time, Bowman early in his book slips into what I consider an unhelpful dogmatism regarding autism itself. He writes:

Autistic brain wiring occurs naturally, not through insidious means like vaccines gone wrong or bad parenting. And it occurs in about 1 in every 45 people, regardless of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, and other factors. It’s not true there is “more autism than ever before”—there’s not more than ever. It’s that the medical and psychological communities have grown better able to recognize and correctly diagnose it. Autism is simply more visible as a direct result of that knowledge. (pp. 39–40)

Bowman asserts all this without offering any concrete evidence, only a general reference in a footnote to Silberman (2015), with no specific page numbers. But his confident assertions fly in the face of the generally

accepted statistic that autism is diagnosed roughly four times more often in boys than in girls, although diagnosing autism in girls can be more complicated (Rudy 2023; see the various studies she cites), and Bowman's claims fail to engage and indeed implicitly dismiss various environmental factors that studies suggest make autism more likely even as the prevalence of autism continues to rise (National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences 2023; see the various studies cited, including a 2018 study that indicates a 1 in 36 ratio as opposed to the outdated 1 in 45 that Bowman cites). My concern is that Bowman, even as he calls for various autistic voices to be heard, here implicitly silences voices—including autistic voices—that run contrary to his rather doctrinaire statements.

I am similarly concerned by Bowman's belittling, in his chapter on "The Neurodiversity Paradigm," of an unnamed student writing in Taylor's student newspaper who described Taylor's autism studies minor "as a 'ministry' to 'help'—not to help autistic people, mind you, but to help their 'struggling families!'" (p. 64). He accuses the student of "position[ing]" the minor "very much in the White Savior and Western missionary tradition" and states that the student's "negativity, lack of comprehension, and absence of insight stung but didn't surprise me" (p. 64). I should note that I was easily able to find this student's article online, and I can only hope that its author, who was roughly nineteen years old when she wrote it, had thicker skin than Bowman if she read his book, which was published while she was still a student at Taylor.

I should add that her article, which represents words spoken by faculty and students connected to the program, says, contrary to what Bowman's commentary suggests, a good bit about helping autistic people, albeit not using the language of the neurodiversity paradigm Bowman celebrates. Perhaps even more importantly, I must challenge Bowman for his scorn toward the phrase "struggling families." Bowman's memoir suggests that his beloved wife and children are neurotypical, so perhaps he simply doesn't understand, but regardless of our individual family situations, we all do well to recognize that families facing the challenges involved with raising autistic children--particularly children whose condition does not likely afford them the opportunity to ever experience the kind of wonderful job, spouse, children, and deep friendships that Bowman describes himself enjoying—are indeed facing struggles with little respite, and they likely would appreciate

trained individuals who can minister to the struggles of every family member, neurodiverse and neurotypical alike. Elsewhere in his book Bowman rightfully exhorts all people “to attend carefully to” the other individual’s “personhood, to listen, to default to humility and kindness” (p. 208). In the above examples, I don’t believe that Bowman meets his own standard, but perhaps I am failing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Having said that, there is much to appreciate in Bowman’s book, including in his aforementioned “Neurodiversity Paradigm” chapter, in which he contrasts the rhetorically hurtful bullet points and terminology of the “pathology paradigm” (the paradigm employed by the aforementioned student article) with the language employed by the Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN), which emphasizes “differences rather than ‘abnormalities,’ ‘troubles,’ and ‘outbursts’” (p. 67). His narrative of his youth, his path toward Christianity, and his pursuit of the vocation of writer-teacher are effectively described in his chapter “A Portrait of the Autist as a Young Man”; within the section ‘Place,’ Bowman successfully makes the case for “Autistic Culture Making”; in the following chapter, “Riding while Autistic,” Bowman offers a detailed narration of the joy and peace he experiences while commuting to work on his 1975 Honda CB200 motorcycle; his description of the soothing effects of his shifting gears enlightened me personally as to why I experience a similar therapeutic effect while driving my stick-shift 1991 Volvo 240 wagon. In the section ‘Writing, Teaching, and Learning,” the chapter “Beautiful Loser: Poetry at the Mall” offers Bowman’s humorous telling of his delivering a poetry reading at the Artsgarden in Indianapolis, a place, he discovers, that “is glorified overflow seating for the mall food court” (p. 149); the large crowd, apart from four individuals, are there to eat lunch and visit with each other, not to hear him read. He reflects on the disappointing experience by stating that it involved “the right kind of loss”: “The loss of ego” (p. 152).

The book’s strongest section, perhaps surprisingly, is “Spectrum Interviews,” which contains three chapters, each made of an interview conducted by an individual who reached out to Bowman and established the rapport and trust needed to ask questions to which Bowman responds with substantive answers. Particularly impressive is “Interview by Molly: Senior at Rutland High School, Vermont.” In response to her question, “How have you learned to live with autism?,” Bowman’s answer is strikingly honest: “That’s simple: I haven’t.” He continues: “I’m not very good at being an adult human being

in general. My life is, at best, three steps forward, then two steps back.” Any progress “comes at a great cost to me and those who try to love me. But I’m forever trying. I must learn more about myself and autism and other people every month of every year, through reading and teaching and living in community.” Bowman states, “I’m committed to flourishing, for myself and for my family” (p. 198). And because of these commitments, Bowman continues, “I’m [also] committed to reconciling my flawed self to the flawed world in order to serve the common good, starting with my own home and community” (p. 192). Even more poignantly, in response to Molly’s question, “Do you ever wish that things were different?” Bowman answers. “Most of the time, yes” (p. 198). He continues:

This will upset some autistic self-advocates, but yes, many days I wish that I could just be a regular (neurotypical) person. Autism causes many difficulties in my life. I do believe that I’m on a journey toward integration. But it would be terribly dishonest to pretend that I’ve come to terms with my autistic life and have made total peace with it. There is a goodness in the attempt, but I’m not kidding myself. (p. 198)

The vulnerability Bowman exhibits here is genuinely moving, and it causes me to put into better context my above criticisms. Bowman’s book is indeed a vehicle through which he is living out the process he describes here. The other two chapters in the section, “Interview by Jenna: Writer, Mom, and Creator of Learn from Autistics” and “Interview by Brian: Pastor in Boise, Idaho,” are also deeply important. When Jenna asks, “What mistakes do neurotypical autism advocates make?” he replies, that the biggest mistake is “not listening to autistic people,” and Bowman particularly worries about parents’ “exploiting their autistic children, co-opting their stories for personal gain” (p. 207). He warns: “Don’t tell stories that aren’t yours to tell”; such parents “more or less pretend that they get it. They don’t” (p. 207). Bowman’s concerns are valid, but I also wonder what kind of a place he gives to parents’ having their own stories to tell, particularly parents who seek to represent their non-speaking autistic children.

Bowman’s distaste for non-autistic individuals telling autistic stories includes his disappointment in his university’s choice to perform Deanna Jent’s play *Falling*, a topic to which Bowman devotes a subsequent chapter.

He didn't attend the play "because I don't think I have any more patience for works about autism written by neurotypical authors. I've been on the #OwnVoices train for a while now, and I'm angry at the literary world for privileging neurotypical voices written about autism" (p. 219). But for all his championing of neurodiverse voices telling their own stories, Bowman's interview with Brian also reveals that, although Bowman resonates deeply with the "neurodiversity model" which "embraces the differences made possible by neurobiological distinctions, understanding autistic brain wiring as a naturally occurring variation and even a potential asset" (p. 214), he nonetheless is "drawn to [the] balanced view" that "acknowledges the limits of a neurodiversity paradigm," and recognizes the need for neurodiverse people to learn to adapt to "the surrounding environment" (p. 215). Bowman resolves to "continue learning how to make choices that can help me manage and even leverage my autism, honing its positives and minimizing situations that create disturbances for me"; at the same time, he tells Brian, "I would like to be better understood" (p. 215). I believe that Bowman's longing to be better understood even as he strives to better understand how to manage his autism captures well the mutual opportunities and responsibilities that neurotypical and neurodiverse persons ought to consider as we interact with each other. It also captures Bowman's continued implicit emphasis on honoring the image of God in all people.

Finally, I will highlight Bowman's more explicit discussions of Christianity. As his section "Community, Worship, and Service" reveals, Bowman focuses not on specific Christian doctrine but on how his autism influences his participation in community and service within the broader and local Christian church. In his chapter "Autism and the Church," Bowman tells of his discomfort within many church scenarios, admitting that at times "I'm overloaded and simply cannot participate in activities that fall in the category of church fellowship" and recognizing that church is "a complex, multilayered social environment, a gauntlet of unspoken rules and expectations requiring vigilant navigation" (p. 112). Thus, "If it's already been a long week, I may need a Sabbath that includes much more rest and time away from all people—including staying home from church" (p. 112). He encourages neurotypical churchgoers to not "to walk on eggshells or get everything right" (p. 113) as they engage their autistic fellow worshippers. Instead, "Just aim for greater knowledge and empathy. Listening to our stories—including reading books like this—is a great start" (p. 113). Similarly, in "Service and the Spectrum,"

Bowman admits how difficult it is for him to participate in various worthy church ministries—specifically his congregation’s meal ministry to the homeless—because of how overwhelmed he is by scenarios that involve numerous unpredictable aspects. Consequently, “I have to say no a lot” (p. 123). Bowman feels more adept at serving his students through faithful course preparation, grading, and spiritual encouragement. Reflecting on this reality, Bowman writes, “I’ve had to widen my faith to include a belief that these acts of faithful service are no less worship than serving a hot meal to the homeless. They are simply better suited for me as an autistic with very specific boundaries and limitations . . . and gifts” (p. 127).

In “Shining like the Sun,” Bowman focuses on his rejuvenating participation in Antler, a ministry inspired by the teachings of Thomas Merton, through which Bowman meets with three other men in rural Kentucky to fellowship honestly as they share a vision and spiritual journey “built on imagination and shalom, shunning the need to be right” (pp. 118-19), where he and his friends can “celebrate our glorious destiny as members of the human race” and “give thanks to the Creator who sustains us” (p. 119). Bowman’s spiritual assertions here seem intentionally vague, as are his descriptions of his activities and interaction with his Antler brethren. Nonetheless, Bowman makes clear that he as an autistic person thrives within a small, intimate, vulnerable fellowship that has shed the trappings and expectations of the typical organizational church. He encourages readers, “Join us. Create your own inclusive group of faithful misfits, a band of ‘both/and’ people who will exchange fidelity to ‘either/or’ dogmas for the imaginative love of God and neighbor” (p. 120).

Significantly, Bowman’s aversion to “either/or dogmas” connects closely to his later chapter “The Insidious Nature of Bad Christian Stories”; such stories are characterized by “[t]he immature need to have correct beliefs” (p. 145), “[t]he immature need to be continually comforted” (p. 146), and “[t]he immature need to separate good and evil into clear camps at all times, as opposed to the adult need to learn and let the wheat and the tares grow together until the harvest” (p. 146). It is worth mentioning, however, that various Christian believers who subscribe to a more intentionally orthodox doctrinal profession than Bowman articulates nonetheless share his aversion for the Christian “kitsch” (p. 143) he rightfully decries. Later in his book, Bowman shares his life-changing attendance at Calvin University’s 2008 Festival of Faith and Writing, an experience in which he engaged with

“serious literary practitioners talking in serious ways about making art and following Christ” (p. 231). This experience is clearly the antidote to the “bad Christian stories” he laments. At the Festival, Bowman writes, “I see my dream, my future [. . .] I find my tribe, my true home. I see something greater than I’d imagined”; for Bowman, the Festival “was a sacred space of initiation, a baptism into new life” (p. 231). (Full disclosure: I am a professor at what is now Calvin University, and I read Bowman’s book and wrote this review in preparation for my chairing Bowman’s April 11 session at Calvin’s 2024 Festival of Faith and Writing.)

All in all, I recommend *On the Spectrum* to those seeking a broadly Christian perspective on matters of neurodiversity and to anyone seeking to better understand the gifts and challenges of artistically inclined autistic people, recognizing at the same time, as Bowman himself notes, that reading his unique story cannot substitute for getting to know other individual autistic people and learning their stories. Although I have stated some reservations with the book, I have profited significantly from Bowman’s many insights and challenges.

—David V. Urban

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