Alien Superpowers

Written and Performed by

Daniel Maskit

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1. Intro

Last year, on my 54th birthday, I discovered that I am an alien. I've always felt different. Now I know that I'm an extra-terrestrial.

You've probably heard of my planet, a place which, sadly, few of you will ever get to visit. My planet is a place called Autism.

After months of anxiety, and a lifetime of feeling like somehow I was on the wrong planet, this diagnosis actually came as a bit of a relief. I was starting to worry that maybe there was something actually wrong with me.

2. Career Overview

The thing is, I've lived a rather extraordinary life. After earning a Ph.D. from Caltech I've held research appointments at MIT and Stanford, before moving to Hollywood and embarking on a twenty year career in visual effects for feature films. Working on such projects as *I, Robot*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Dark Knight Rises,* and, of course*, Harry Potter.* Somehow, I got married, we celebrated our twentieth wedding anniversary last year, I've travelled extensively, exhibited and sold photographs, became a published author. I baked our wedding cake. I've run sixteen road marathons, fifteen ultramarathons, and..., you get the point. At the same time, I've never really understood most of what other people consider fun. I'm seldom comfortable in social situations, and I spend a great deal of my time on my own, not necessarily but choice.

 At work I've seen many of my colleagues elevated into more respected, and more valued, positions while I have been held back due to a lack of 'soft skills.' I've spent uncountable hours trying to unravel the nonsensical rules of office politics, and endured endless coaching on how to 'better fit in.' Strangely, my suggestion that others should adjust to my way of communicating is generally met with a blank stare. I'm given advice on how to conceal my

feelings, while others seem incapable of adjusting to the idea that someone might be truthful with them.

3. Standards

Organizations such as businesses on this planet are built around sets of principles derived by studying the brains of the local inhabitants. We call these studies things such as psychology and management theory, and they're used to develop codes of conduct governing how people are expected to interact with one another. It appears, that the ability to follow these codes is actually more important than one's ability to contribute. Those who don't behave as expected often find themselves marginalised.

It's time to change this conversation. The framing is all wrong. It's true, for most of the people from my planet your compassionate accommodation of our difference is a gift that might save us from a lifetime of dependence. For the rest of us, though, the question isn't how should we change our behaviour to better fit in, but how must you change your thinking to get the full advantage of our abilities. This is not going to be a comfortable conversation.

4. Vision

A central point in this discussion is one of vision. This is an area where, whether I speak literally or metaphorically, people from my planet greatly outperform people from the planet Earth. Earthlings have this curious belief that anyone who has the same sensory equipment as them must have similar abilities. As if! If I tell you that a polar bear can smell a seal at a distance up to twenty miles away, you have no way of conceptualising what that is like, but you will believe me. If I tell you that I can see a richness in the patterns of your world that you cannot, you will reject this notion, even though this too is true. If I can't persuade you that I can see patterns that you cannot, how will I ever convince you that this is an ability that extends across time and space as well?

I'm one of those people who knows exactly where to stand on the Underground platform before I board the train so that when I get off the train I'm as close as possible to the exit I want. When I lived in Los Angeles I reflexively memorised the timing patterns of every traffic signal within a mile of my house. I have a reputation for giving insanely detailed directions. When I do this, I can watch, in my head, no smart phone required, a street-level video stream of walking the route, and at the same time a top down view of a map tracing out the path I am describing. Conveniently for someone who writes software for a living, I can look at a problem and envision a computer system solving that problem. Not just a single program, but multiple programs on multiple machines, running in parallel, communicating with each other. I've noticed that many of my colleagues struggle to find ways to represent these sorts of systems. And it seems the best that they can do is to create a picture on a

screen or on a piece of paper. And I'm often confused when they show me these images because their pictures are two dimensional and static, whereas my model is three dimensional and dynamic.

One of the hardest things for me to explain is that when I look at a problem or a piece of mathamatics I convert it into abstract geometric shapes in my head. I honestly can't explain it any better than that. If a shape is comfortable I have no trouble working with it. If it's uncomfortable it's an irritant like a grain of sand inside an oyster. I feel like a lot of my life is spent smoothing these grains of sand into pearls, and then struggling to persuade others that my changes are an improvement.

5. Perfect Storm

For someone like me the workplace is a bit of a perfect storm. I don't behave the way I'm expected to behave so people are less inclined to trust me. Often my ideas are so out of step with what everyone else is thinking. Instead of an ability to persuade others that my ideas are better, I have an inability to understand how someone can fail to see something which is so glaringly obvious. It's hard to be polite when you're gobsmacked. Imagine walking into a classroom, and you see up on the board 'Sense and Sensibility'. The teacher is holding a copy of The Complete Works of Jane Austen. The person sitting next to you says something about being ready to discuss 'Hamlet.' How do you explain to them that they're clueless without telling them that they're clueless?

So I end up frustrated, everyone else ends up mad at me, my idea gets rejected, and we all spend months in an unheated Danish castle with a madman instead of having a lovely fortnight out in Somerset. There must be a better way.

6. Strengths

A good first step towards this better way is for me to be honest with people about why I behave differently. This turns out to be an excellent litmus test of people. I quickly get a read on who is going to be helpful and on my side, and who is going to pose an obstacle. Once I've identified my allies, I can get them to persuade others. First that I can be trusted, and second that my difference is a strength.

Just as I want others to value my strengths, I can use their strengths to help me. One of the areas where people from my planet often struggle is in predicting how earthlings will predict [sic], will respond, to things that we say to them. Despite decades of studying the inhabitants of this planet, and learning to mimic your behaviour, I still get this wrong. A lot. I'll say something which I think is neutral, or even positive, and be met with hurt or shocked looks. Or my wife will give me a warning "Daniel!" This is even worse in written communication. If I send something by email, or on Slack, that's SnapChat for adults, I often get told that I

come across as rude, or aggressive, or even nasty. I was once told that an email I had sent someone was "the nastiest piece of communication I have ever seen in a professional environment." I asked a friend what I had done wrong, and I was told that I had "said what everyone else was thinking, but was too polite to say." I don't think I'm ever going to understand how that works.

7. Translation

So please, spare me yet another lecture on "considering other peoples' feelings." Believe me I will have spent far more time than anyone else writing and editing and re-writing and editing before I hit send, and I still get it wrong. All the time. So why not normalise the idea that someone should read what I've written before I hit send? Often they'll have just small suggestions. Who knew there was a way to use the word 'but', with one T, in a way that comes across as rude and aggressive? Suddenly I can communicate more effectively. I no longer need a manager to smooth ruffled feathers. Magic.

But why stop at written communication? Why not have someone speak for me in meetings? Rather than telling me afterwards that I came across as being blunt, or dismissive of others, let me speak through an intermediary. Picture a scene from a film where there's a character who can only communicate through an interpreter. A question is asked. There's excited chatter in a foreign language, and the answer comes back and it's two or three words. Obviously there's a great deal that was said that wasn't translated, but that's okay as long as the important bits get through.

8. Conclusion

So now what happened to that perfect storm? I can now walk into a room and people know that they can trust me. If someone doesn't understand one of my ideas, there's a willingness to accept that maybe the fault is with them, and not with the idea. I don't need to persuade anyone that my idea is the best idea, someone else can do that for me. And now I have the time and space to offer guidance and direction to get everyone to a better place, and this all takes much less time and effort than our endless months with Hamlet's ghost.

It's true, for me to function on this planet I need your assistance to mitigate the many ways in which this world is built for your convenience and not my convenience. If you help me to use my talents to their full extent, I will show you ways to improve our world that you could never have imagined.

The combination of you doing the things you do much better than I ever will, and me contributing in ways you cannot, is unstoppable.