

Chapter 3

ABILITY IMPROVES WITH AGE

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Introduction

When I was asked to do this chapter on autism and aging, the first thing that came to my mind was that as I got older, my ability to think in a more flexible manner improved. My mind is like a vast Internet of webpages. In the sixth decade of my life, the database in my brain has more webpages containing memories of my previous experiences than it had in the second decade. To understand how to react to a new situation, I search my database to see how a new situation is either similar or different compared with information stored in my memory. My thinking is bottom up, and in my memory files I have memories of *specific* previous experiences. For example, on my very first project, where my company was building equipment at a meat plant, I criticized some poor welding and said it looked like ‘pigeon doo-doo’. The wise plant engineer mentored me and told me I had to apologize to the welder for my tactless comment. I apologized for the thoughtless words, but I did not praise the quality of his welding. I learned to differentiate between rude, tactless comments and legitimate concerns about welding quality. From this I learned that if I had a concern about welding, I should have gone to the welder’s boss and stated the problem in more diplomatic, technical language. I learned how to have better diplomacy to get a project done correctly.

Fill up the database with experience

In my livestock consulting work, I had many different opportunities to work for many companies and clients. This provided me with lots of specific memories for my database. The only way to grow and develop is to get out and have lots of different experiences. If a person never goes any place new, they will not develop. I have observed individuals on the autism spectrum who became more social and improved as they aged, and others whose range of experiences became smaller and smaller. I met a gifted artist with autism who was withdrawn and shy. When he started showing

his work in professional art shows, I saw a remarkable change in his personality. He became much more outgoing because he went to many art shows where he had to learn to socialize. To develop, individuals on the spectrum need to be 'stretched' slightly outside their comfort zone to try new things. Unfortunately, I have observed other individuals who become more withdrawn and reclusive as they aged. If a person stays in their room all day, they are not going to develop.

Problems with anxiety

Many adults who become reclusive often have high anxiety. In my own case, I became more anxious and had greater panic attacks during my twenties. In my early thirties, a low dose of antidepressant medications stopped my anxiety and cleared up my stress-related colitis. I have written detailed descriptions of this experience in my book, *Thinking in Pictures* (Grandin 2006). I was one of the high-anxiety individuals where a small amount of medication really helped me. Today I am still taking the small dose of the antidepressant desipramine. The newer antidepressants fluoxetine (Prozac) and sertraline (Zoloft) have helped many high-anxiety individuals. I also exercise every day by doing a hundred sit-ups on the bed. A short period of vigorous exercise every day improves my sleep.

Public speaking improvement

People often ask me how I got good at public speaking. Doing many talks and carefully reading written evaluations from students and conference attendees really helped. I accepted other people's advice and gradually improved my speaking skills. My early talks were not very good. In graduate school, I panicked and walked out of a lecture I was giving in a class. I froze because I did not have adequate notes. When I was invited to do my first cattle-behavior talks, I made sure that I had really good slides and pictures. This helped prevent problems due to freezing up. In 1974, I was invited to do my first major talk on cattle handling at the American Society of Agricultural Engineers meeting in Chicago. Fortunately, I practiced my talk and had it critiqued by another wise old engineer who was a work colleague. Tom was close to retirement age and he understood diplomacy. Most of the people who successfully mentored me on social issues were much older. People my age were less likely to be helpful. Even though my talk had great picture slides that illustrated many types of existing cattle corrals, my emphasis was on what was wrong with them. Tom made it very clear to me that my presentation was too negative. I took his advice and changed the emphasis to showing an example of a mistake and then showing how to correct and fix the problem. I still used most of the same picture slides, but I changed the emphasis from being critical to how to improve the design of facilities. I still showed the design mistakes, but I presented them in a more positive manner and explained how to correct them.

When I read evaluations of my talks, I learned to ignore the nasty comments and take advice from constructive comments such as ‘she always gives the same lecture’ or ‘she does not separate her opinion from research’. The first comment came early in my teaching career after lecturing to three different veterinary classes. My lectures were improved by using different introductory slides for each lecture. Even though the content of each lecture was different, I made the mistake of using the same introductory material. Using well-organized slides also stopped me from rambling and helped me to stay on the right subject.

Another thing I learned is that controversial subjects, such as religion, sex, or politics, should *never* be discussed in a professional talk. My message on better cattle handling would be lost if I got people’s emotions stirred up with ‘hot button’ issues. Today, in both my talks and written material, I differentiate my observations from scientific studies.

Sense of identity

My sense of who I am has always been associated with my career, and autism has always been secondary. Now in the sixth decade of my life, I feel even more strongly that my identity as a livestock specialist comes first. Presently, I have increased the number of short courses I have taught for the livestock industry. The night before I started writing this chapter, a long-term livestock industry client asked me what my legacy should be. We were having a final dinner after doing a three-day short course in Europe. I think he was wondering why I still continue when I am past retirement age. I told him that the students I teach are my legacy. I have a colleague at Colorado State University who feels the same way. After he retired, he returned to academia part-time to teach livestock classes. I can relate to his desire to get young students interested in the industry that he loved. I continue to do many talks on autism, but I am not going to let it take over. My emphasis to parents, teachers, and individuals on the higher end of the spectrum is to go out and become successful in a career at which you can be good. I have observed that the happiest individuals with autism have a career they love.

Young people fixated on autism

I am seeing too many young people who are totally fixated on their autism, instead of having an interest in something outside themselves. Autism is an important part of me and I have great interest in it, but it does not totally define who I am. When I was ten, I was fixated on kites and toy airplanes. As a teenager, it was horses, carnival rides, and cattle chutes. All these things are things that can turn into careers. Fixations need to be broadened out and used to motivate study and success. In my livestock work, I have met many people my age who are undiagnosed people on the mild end of the

autism spectrum. They have been more successful than many younger individuals who get hung up on 'their autism'. Many kids aged ten to late teens walk up to me and all they want to talk about is 'their autism'. My work colleagues with undiagnosed autism would rather talk about how to build cattle equipment or assemble concrete forms, or talk about 'the stupid suits' in the office. Their jobs range from meat plant engineer, welder, and computer specialist, to rancher. It really bothers me to see a young person in his or her late teens or twenties addicted to video games and collecting government disability checks. Then the next day I see work colleagues my age who are undiagnosed on the spectrum who have kept good, satisfying jobs. I am seeing too much of a handicapped mentality. Many of these successful work colleagues came from modest financial backgrounds. They had either learned a skilled trade or learned on the job. In many other publications, I have stressed the importance of teaching children and teenagers work skills. Jobs outside the home need to start at age 12 years, and it can be something simple such as walking dogs for the neighbor. To avoid problems with interviews, networking needs to be done to find the 'back door' to jobs. Younger kids need to do chores in the house that help the entire family, such as taking out the trash, doing dishes, and house cleaning.

Perfectionism

It was hard for me to accept that relationships with people are never perfect. The world is a very imperfect place and I had to learn to accept that. There will always be problems even with good friends and colleagues. Today I look at things by balancing the positives and the negatives. In my mind, I see the classic scales of justice. If the positive factors outweigh the negatives, then the relationship is worth keeping. Life is never perfect.

When I was in my twenties, I had a wonderful friend, Jim Uhl of Agate Construction in Scottsdale, Arizona. He had heard about my talents and actively tracked me down to design and sell feedlot design work. I worked with Jim on many projects in the 1970s. After several successful projects together, I had a ranch customer who was not completely satisfied. Part of the problem was that his ranch foreman was doing some stuff that today would be considered sexual harassment. Since I rebuffed his advances, he told his boss the corral did not work. This was the first time I had a customer who was not satisfied. My initial response was maybe I should just quit doing livestock design work. Jim talked me out of quitting, and I had to learn from the words of an old song that says, 'You can't please everybody, so you have to please yourself.' If Jim had not been there as another wonderful mentor, my career could have ended early.

Black-and-white thinking is often a problem for some people with autism. My thinking became less black and white as I had more experiences. Consulting was a great way for me to learn this because I had so many experiences from several hundred different clients to fill my database with many varied experiences.

Consulting business

Fortunately, I took the advice from an early seminar from the American Society of Agricultural Consultants. The instructor warned me to never get too dependent on a single client. To put it more simply – never put all your eggs in one basket. Then if I lost the client, I still had other clients. I often get asked how I keep from getting depressed. It is by always having lots of work to do. Most people would say I am a workaholic. But I find that keeping busy prevents depression.

Meaning of life

When I was young, I was on a quest to learn the ultimate meaning of my existence. I am glad that the Internet did not exist when I was in my twenties because I would have posted all kinds of rubbish. When I reached my mid fifties, I realized that, for me, the meaning of life was really simple: If the things a person does improves the lives of either people or animals, their life has meaning.

In this chapter, I have emphasized the importance of my career, but my autism talks and writings are also very important. My life has made a difference when a parent says to me that their child went to college because my book helped them. Another example is the lady who walked up to me at Denver Airport and told me that my book, *Thinking in Pictures*, helped her to understand her engineer husband and saved their marriage.

Making a positive difference is done one specific person at a time. In a dinner conversation recently, I also told my client that making a difference in a positive manner requires more work and time than making a difference by doing something bad. I used to think that there was some complex philosophical meaning of life. It is simpler for me now. I also realize that all the years designing things and supervising construction projects has affected my thinking. In construction, it is all about outcomes. You have to get the project done – and get it done right. The meaning of life is to help others have good outcomes, such as getting satisfying jobs. I have used the income from my books and speaking engagements to fund students. My students are going out and making positive changes in the livestock industry. I want to see talented individuals on the autism spectrum be successful. One of the reasons I have not retired from the livestock industry is that I am a better role model for young people if I have a job that is not related to autism. It is a career I developed before anybody knew I was autistic. When I was in my twenties, thirties, and forties, people just thought I was weird. I had to learn to sell myself by showing a portfolio of completed projects. I was really letting my work sell itself.

References

Grandin, T. (2006) *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism* (expanded edition). New York: Vintage Books.