



Abandon
All Assumptions
Except One

#socialhumility

Carol's Club CAROL GRAY SOCIAL STORIES

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There are echoes between this project and a new Ted Talk by Amy Laurent and Colleagues:
[“Compliance is not the goal: Letting go of control and rethinking support for autistic individuals”](#)

I encourage you to watch it!

Background

“Abandon All Assumptions Except One” is a group Carol's Club project. It is based on my keynote presentation at the annual Honestly Autism Day, on April 6th in Hunt Valley, Maryland. The presentation was a tour of four of my most memorable teaching

mistakes, and the introduction "Social Humility." Social Humility is a new term without a definition. You are invited to contribute to the development of the definition, and share case examples of it in practice, at #socialhumility.

My Most Memorable Teaching Errors



I began my career teaching career in September of 1976 with five children with autism, four of them pictured here on the playground with me in November of that year. I was destined to make mistakes during the decades to follow.

Please keep in mind that I made them with the best of intentions, and with the information that was available to me at the time!

Eric and the National Anthem (1976)

One of my earliest mistakes occurred with Eric and his family in the initial months of my teaching career. In the course of a meeting with Eric's mom, I learned that every evening at dinner, following their blessing but before anyone ate, Eric would insist that the family stand and sing the National Anthem. I told Mom that the activity "couldn't continue," that Eric should not be allowed to do that. I offered to come to dinner to support Eric's family as they began to teach him that the National Anthem was no longer going to be a part of their dinner routine.

I arrived late in the afternoon and played with Eric and his brothers and sisters. I helped set the table and prepare dinner. Then we each took our seat at the dinner table and said the blessing. "National Anthem!" said Eric. The family exchanged nervous glances as Dad began to pass the food. "NATIONAL ANTHEM!" Nervous silence. "NATIONAL ANTHEM! NATIONAL ANTHEM! NATIONAL ANTHEM!"

What I observed next was more similar to trauma than a tantrum. It lasted for over an hour. Talking over Eric's screaming and tears, I turned to his mom and asked, "Is it a *problem* for your family to sing the National Anthem each evening?" She thoughtfully and quietly replied, "Well, no... we kind of like it." With those words, at 8:30 in the evening, we all gathered around the table, said grace, and sang the National Anthem. I learned that it's a mistake to assume what someone "has to learn." Assumption is never a good source for goals.

Becky and the Plant Mister, 1976

Becky, at four years of age, was the very first student placed on my caseload at Jenison Public Schools. She's second from the right in the photo at the start of this article, a beautiful little girl with brown hair and huge brown eyes. Becky would swing in her back yard for hours at a time, including the brutal winter months. When we first met, Becky was not speaking. Her eye contact was fleeting and accidental. At the time, "they" (experts) were stressing the importance of eye contact. Teach that first, they said. It made sense to me - after all, how could I teach Becky if she *isn't* looking at me?

I developed an activity to improve Becky's eye contact. The materials were simple: two chairs, Becky's favorite apple juice, and a plant mister. Becky and I would sit at eye level with one another. I sat in a child-size chair. Becky sat facing me on an adult chair. I would place the nozzle of the plant mister next to my eye with it pointed at Becky, my finger ready on the trigger, "Look at me, Becky!" Whenever her beautiful brown eyes made (even the most fleeting) contact with my own, I'd say, "Good looking at me, Becky!" as I gave her a squirt of apple juice in her mouth. We did this activity for fifteen minutes, four times a day. The equivalent of one instructional hour.

Becky and I kept in touch after she graduated from high school. We'd go out for a Coke or to dinner. On those occasions, Becky never mentioned the origin of our relationship. We'd talk about our families, current activities, and often about our shared interest in animals and dogs.

One year, Becky and I went out for dinner together during the holidays. Nothing unusual about that, except that Becky started recalling in detail things that I had done as her teacher. She gave a detailed account the Tweety Bird costume that I wore for Halloween the first year, recalled noteworthy things that her classmates had done, and shared how she loved the enormous sensory ball in our classroom. Then she mentioned the squirt bottle activity and asked, "Why did you squirt me in the mouth? I described my rationale.

Becky started to laugh. She laughed so long that she began to cry (I had never seen her cry) and fell over onto the bench seat on her side of the table. People were starting to look! I went down on my side of the table and asked Becky to keep in mind that, as funny as the activity seemed to her now, it was my first year of teaching and "they" were saying that we should teach eye contact. Becky sat up and, wiping the tears from her eyes while still laughing, said, "Do you know what I used to *THINK*? There you sat with a plant mister! Every time you squirted me in the mouth, I would think, "But, I am not a plant!" I learned that it's a mistake to assume that what makes sense from one vantage point, makes sense.

Eric and the Meaning of Interrupting

Eric was a student with autism in our grant-funded inclusion and vocational program. He had a problem with interrupting, an issue that extended back fifteen years. Regardless of what Eric's high school instructors said, he had a response. It didn't seem to matter if the instructor was talking with Eric individually, or if Eric was part of a small group or with the entire class. When Eric had something to say, he said it.

For years, I tried to teach Eric to raise his hand, wait for a turn to talk, and listen when others are talking. In my office, when Eric and I discussed why and how students raise their hands, he would raise his hand when I asked him to practice. Despite Eric's sincere and frequent promises to 'Stop interrupting,' his interrupting continued unabated. After a decade of positive behavior plans and interruption interventions, Eric had never held his comments back or raised his hand in class hand for a turn to speak.

One day, Eric attended an all-school assembly with a guest speaker. The speaker walked onto the auditorium stage. He began by saying, "I'm going to talk to you today about change...". Eric had never been fond of change, and today was no exception. He shared his comments from his seat, loud enough for all to hear.

I was unable to attend the assembly; I watched Eric's interruption of it several times on a videotape of at home. I consumed a lot of ice cream, straight from the container. I was frustrated; thinking it was time to move on to a different position. I decided that I would apply to teach kindergarten in the fall.

The next day, I called Eric down to my office to review the videotape of the assembly, with a large display tablet for notes. Eric and I watched the videotape of the assembly several times and took notes to compare our perceptions of what had occurred. Eric said there were two people in the assembly, Eric and the speaker. Suddenly Eric's 'interrupting' made sense to me. Eric was doing what I had taught him to do as a young child; if someone talks to you, you answer. From Eric's perspective, he was attentive, responding to his teacher who, at the time, was the invited speaker.

After Eric had shared his description of the assembly, it was my turn. I told him that I saw about five hundred students. In the course of comparing our notes, Eric said he wanted to "...stop interrupting." He began to create a list of things he needed to do to accomplish that, for example: "1. Raise my hand. 2. Listen when others are talking. 3. Give others a turn." It was a list of all of the skills that I had tried to teach him over the last several years. Eric returned to class with his list. Shortly thereafter, for the first time in any class, Eric raised his hand.

For years, Eric had confidently told me that he would, "Stop interrupting." I mistakenly had assumed he knew what that meant. At the same time, I had underestimated his potential. His abilities exceeded the boundaries set by my assumptions.

The conversation between Eric and I was a turning point. We had invested years into the interrupting issue, and the importance of taking turns in conversation, without success. Placing the same information in writing made a critical difference. Eric understood and applied what he read. I learned that assuming the exchange of accurate meaning is no guarantee that it has occurred.

Defining Social Humility

I have a theory that when working, playing, and interacting with others, especially people with autism, it's important to abandon all assumptions except "Social Humility." What is Social Humility? It's a social assumption, a paradigm, and it is the *opposite* of social arrogance.

Social arrogance adheres to assumptions rooted in the belief that "there's a right and wrong way to perceive and respond to others, and I've got it right." In "The Eighth Habit" (2004), Stephen R. Covey describes how there is a space between every stimulus and response, a split second where we decide what to say or do. In that space are a million or more possible options. People tend to become routinized and restricted to a few. "How are you?" "Fine, thanks." In the space between stimulus and

response, Social Humility replaces reliance on tradition, routine, or intuition with time to think and respond meaningfully and respectfully. I am convinced that we can respond far more effectively to people with autism from our side of the social equation.

It was socially arrogant for me to suggest that Eric's family abandon singing the National Anthem at dinner, or to use a plant mister to teach eye contact without regard for how it might be perceived, or to assume that Eric and I both understood the term "interrupting" in the same way. Social Humility is the opposite of that. But can something be defined by what it isn't? I'm not suggesting that it can, but there is some precedence for it.

In 1996-1997, I wrote a three-part article, titled, "Gray's Guide to NeuroTypical Behavior" (Gray, 1996-1997). The purpose of the article was to bring attention to the many things that people without autism say and do and how it compounds the social impairment "in autism." In the first part of the article, "Appreciating the Challenge We Present to People with Autistic Spectrum Disorders" (Gray, 1996), I began with a discussion of the elusive meaning of the term "normal" in practice as well as in published reference materials:

The word 'normal' is readily understood in practice, but difficult to define... According to the dictionary, "normal" is *what's left* if there is no mental disorder. The DMS IV is consistent with the dictionary definition: normal is that which is *not found* in the DSM IV. This tells us what normal *isn't*, but doesn't tell us what normal *is*. This may also explain why we are more confident in our ability to identify that which is *abnormal* over *normal* (p. 9)

If we can define terms according to what they aren't in the dictionary, it suggests that we might be able to define Social Humility in the same way. I believe we can do better. That's where you come in. I invite you to submit descriptions of socially humble responses, ideas, thoughts, or any suggestions related to how we might define Social Humility @ #socialhumility.

References

Gray, C. (1996). Gray's guide to NeuroTypical behavior: Appreciating the challenge that we present to people with autistic spectrum disorders. The Morning News: Jenison Public Schools. Jenison, MI.