



Ivan reading the original copy of the letter on a train, on his 8th birthday.

Dear Ivan,

Hard to believe, but you are 8 years old, now. Being an 8-year-old means you are a big boy. Big boys have big responsibilities, I guess you always knew that... It means in particular that you will start to take a bath on your own. Isn't that exciting?

Daddy has a message to tell you. They say, as people grow older, they also grow wiser. So you are wiser, now. And you will be able to understand my message.

Each person is born unique. -----

----- So you are very special!

You are smart, too. You wrote your first computer program in the Python programming language at age 5. Remember that you made the program print out “ice cream cone” 7 times? Do you know many children don’t get to write their first computer program until middle or high school? You are ahead of them by 5 to 10 years!

--- You always spoke politely. You would say: “Yes, I do” and “No, I don’t” instead of simple “Yes” and “No.” And you would say “I think so” to show your agreement, or “In my opinion...” to express your disagreement. You are born a gentleman!

Today, I am going to tell you about how people describe different groups of people. When people are similar in some way, we often lump them together into a group. So you have Americans, Japanese, Mexicans, and people from all different countries. Some people are born boys, other people are born girls. So we call one group “male,” and the other group “female.”

People have invented so many ways of classifying people into different groups. I am now going to tell you about one of these classifications. In this particular classification, people are divided into two groups:

- (a) Autistic people, and
- (b) Neurotypical people.

In our family, you, your sister, and your Dad: we are autistic people. Your Mom is a neurotypical person.

Outside, in the world, there are not many autistic people. Some people believe that 2% of our population is autistic, but your Daddy thinks that 5% would be more accurate. That means that 5 out of 100 people are autistic. Or 1 out of 20 people is autistic, and the other 19 people are neurotypical.

That is, there are more neurotypical people than autistic people out there. So, autistic people are special.

What makes a person autistic? We the autistic people have powerful brains. Compared to other people, we see things and feel things more intensely. We tend to be more focused on things that we like, and we tend to feel very strongly about things that we don't like. All our sensory signals are "amplified" inside our brains. We are very smart and creative.

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That's about all about being autistic. Just like there are boys and there are girls, in our world we have autistic people and neurotypical people.

Being autistic is something to be proud of. We have powerful brains. We can see things in ways that other people cannot see, and we can solve problems that other people cannot solve. We are special.

Unfortunately, not everybody understands autism. Some people don't like autistic people. And many people think we are strange. And in a sense, we are strange, because we are special. It is perfectly OK to be yourself, as long as you remember to be polite to other people. For autistic people like your Dad, your sister, and yourself, our destiny is not to "fit in," but to "stand out"! Never let anyone tell you that you need to conform. We should strive to be leaders, not followers. Always keep your ability to invent, to create. Always keep your imagination alive.

We always need to be polite, and care about other people. Other than that, just try to be yourself, and have loads of fun, as you have always done.

There is no need to hide. You should feel free to talk about autism and being autistic, to anyone. At the same time, there is no need to tell people, unless they ask. So, it goes like this: there is no need to take initiative on telling people that you are autistic... no need to bring up this subject on your own. But if people do ask you about autism, then it's perfectly OK to talk about it, and tell them about how you feel, and all the fun and crazy things that you have done in your life: --- --- --- --- ---

Even though you, your sister and your Dad, the three of us are all autistic, there is a difference that makes you even more special. You have the "video-type" of autism. Your sister and your Dad have the "picture-type" of autism. Your sister and your Dad tend to be somewhat "static": we like to be quiet and draw 2D pictures. You on the other hand are "dynamic": you are constantly moving around and you like to build 3D objects. In fact, you and your sister are so different, that Daddy worried how you two were going to get along. It also took your Daddy many endless nights before he came to understand you. But isn't it wonderful that everything worked out at the end, and together with Mom, we are a whole happy family?

The fact is, your Daddy understands you, and he admires you. Because you the “video-type” people are even smarter than we the “picture-type” people. You are doubly special!

But, the only problem is, many people out there may not understand you.

Always remember this: you are not born to “fit in,” you are born to “stand out”! You are born to be a leader, not to be a follower. The world is yours to conquer. Don’t let the world change who you are. Instead, your destiny is to change the world, and bring a better life to other people.

Sometimes life is tough, sometimes life is fun. If we remember that, we can carry through even the most difficult moments. You have to let go minor things, for your destiny is to rise up above the world!

Mom and Dad are truly blessed to have you in our family. It’s a privilege to be your parents. And we thank you for the opportunity to be part of your life.

Meanwhile, just keep enjoying life and thrive, and be a cool eight-year-old!

From your Daddy,

Jason Lu