

# Affinities: Should Therapy Be This Much Fun?

By Ron Suskind, Cornelia Suskind and Dr. Dan Griffin

*Just because you don't understand something does not mean it is wrong.  
-Merlin*

## **Backgrounds of key players:**

**Ron Suskind** – From early on, I told stories. I'd fit together the mess of complex, on-rushing reality by mixing characters – some drawn from real life, mixed with fantasy characters or situations – into improvised tales. Kids like attention, especially from mothers, and this brought me plenty – telling stories to the dinner guests – and I passed countless hours role playing my heroes (actors, athletes), acting out dramas and doing imitations for laughs. Was my imaginative life richer and more vivid than the norm (and I did choose story writing as my profession), that gave me added advantages to engage with my son on the plane of his affinities? Maybe, but not in a way that rises to a material distinction. We all walk about in this era housing rich imaginary constructs; internal narratives, stitching together fantasy and reality into a vessel – a story of us – that moves, grows and provides a platform for consciousness. As humans, we are all storytellers. With affinity therapy, we must rely on this innate capacity, and harness it, in a temporary, timely and targeted way.

**Cornelia Kennedy Suskind** – I was a shy child from a large Connecticut family, who built a deep interior life, playing for hours by myself or with one close friend, a neighbor, to develop a rich tapestry of interpretive play. It wasn't until my early teens that I began to emerge, to become more social and gregarious. I was a teenager who read and wrote short stories; a lover of literature, an English major in college, but with strong executive functions. When Owen was diagnosed at 3, Ron and I divided the labor based on each's inclinations and strengths. I was with him 24/7, working with therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists and teachers, becoming an expert – with Ron by my side -- on theory, practice and latest research on autism. I eventually home schooled Owen for two years, to create an environment where we could harness his affinity to help build skills and basic knowledge. I felt Ron's best engagement, during his limited time (he had a day job), was to carry forward what he then called "Disney Therapy," and work with Dan Griffin to expand the therapeutic model we'd been improvising since Owen was six. Ron, Dan and Owen – who, in his way, drove many innovations – hit it off, while I pressed them all to be rigorous in documenting and contextualizing what we were discovering, which Ron and I dubbed Affinity Therapy.

## **Dr. Dan Griffin**

I grew up in Queens New York City. I was a quiet, odd kid – I spent a lot of time living in my imagination- I wrote stories, kept diaries, had a Pantheon of Heroes - Superman, Robin (Batman's sidekick), the original astronauts, Beethoven, St. Joan, Van Gogh, and Charlie Parker. I read incessantly about these various figures and tried to incorporate whatever they had that I didn't. Let's say I was born to get involved in Affinity Therapy.

### **Memories of my first engagement with Affinity Therapy – Reflections of Dan Griffin**

Some folks working with Owen expressed concern that his intense interest in Disney stuff was problematic – along lines of it being self-stimulatory, withdrawal behavior, resulting in less relating to others and avoidant of reality. However what I observed when we engaged with Disney was to the contrary.

The affective charge in the room immediately went up, whether it was Ron, Cornelia or Walter in the room with Owen and me. The elevated affect held joy, intensity, greater focus, spontaneity, laughter, and heightened relatedness. Disney improvisations made room for mutual novelty, consequently, self-stimulation went down. Most striking was the increased motivation Owen displayed to address issues he was having difficulty with. He engaged toward . . . rather than away.

Of all the diagnoses I have worked with, autism is the one that comes closest to the affect of discussing religion and few people are agnostic about the perplexities, even in secular France (Sauret, 2014). The scientific debate over the best approaches can often seem irrational and emotionally driven. When I started out in this field, "autism" was a rare disorder. Throughout the 1980s, the DSM-III reported an incidence rate as 1 in 10,000 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's most recent study found that one in 68 children has autism, up from one in 88 two years earlier. Autism is anything but rare.

The predominant narrative regarding most all disabilities is the medical model: disability is seen as a nominative pathology: a disease, degeneration, or deficit inside an individual. The medical model situates autism as a stable constant within the individual, as if the affected individual would present with the same symptoms across settings. While this is the case with cardiac conditions, diabetes, or hepatitis, there are striking differences in the role context plays in the life of autism (Constantino, J. N. 2011). A person diagnosed with autism can appear acutely impaired in one setting and smart but pretty darn quirky in another, depending on the "goodness of fit". Most of us should credit our luck of landing in "well-fitting contexts," that is, life conditions that do not overtax what we can cope with.

A second confusing factor is the "moving target" nature of psychiatric diagnosis in general and autism in particular. There are not many chronic medical disorders one can be diagnosed with one week, and not the next, with the only change being the time between one edition of a diagnostic system and its updated version. Asperger syndrome shares the fate of Pluto: It's there, but we can't call it what we used to call it.

Affinity therapy's roots in family systems, narrative and Jungian concepts, metaphorical experience, improvisation and strength-based activities offers parents a way of harnessing their unique connection and perch to the benefit of each member of the family. I submit that such a model is a more constructive frame for making sense of what to do about autism than the medical model. Behavioral and developmental therapy approaches work well for a large number of youngsters with moderate to severe autism. Public educational systems work pretty well for a large number of youngsters needing to learn to read, write, and learn arithmetic. Neither specific therapeutic approaches nor education succeeds with everyone (Allen, K. D., et.al. 2000).

A careful behavioral approach can help develop virtually any skill. Two colleagues and I trained 8-year old girls with no previous softball skills to achieve batting averages over 500 and a 65 percent successful fielding rate in league competition using the principles of "Applied Behavioral Analysis" (or ABA), "errorless learning" and "pivotal response training". The "Floor-Time" or "DIR" (Greenspan, S. I. & Wieder, 1997) model comes closer to Affinity Therapy, as it prioritizes "following the child's lead" and then challenging the child to master new developmental milestones. However, Affinity Therapy holds the promise of creating a context that facilitates positive change in all members of the family.

There are many features of autism that result in isolation, life-long dependency on others, vocational achievement far below what interests and intelligence predict, and diminished quality of life. Improving the target weaknesses is worth every effort. A fuller identity is liberated when the burden of social difficulties, fixed interests, compulsive behavior and peculiar sensory reactivity are reduced.

Some frequently occurring co-variates of autism are difficult to construe as defects-exceptional working memory, fierce attention to detail, prodigious "splinter skills" in music, math, art. Some of these are cast in a new focus through the lens of the Intense World Theory (Markram, H., Rinaldi, T., & Markram, K. (2007). Various corporate policies are being established to purposely hire people on the "spectrum" (Worstell, T., 2014). There are also the well-known achievements of Temple Grandin, Nobel Prize winner and mathematician Vernon Smith and more recently, a 14 year old PhD candidate and potential challenger to Einstein, Jacob Barnett (Castillo, 2011) .

*"After all, the really social people did not invent the first stone spear. It was probably invented by an Aspie who chipped away at rocks while the other people socialized around the campfire. Without autism traits we might still living in caves"*

*- Temple Grandin*

## **Enter the Affinities – Ron Suskind, Cornelia Suskind, Dan Griffin**

In the “Intense World Theory” of autism, hyper-functional neural circuitry in the brain causes a state of over-arousal, leading to self-soothing, withdrawing behaviors, like perseveration or self-stimulation. The goal of these behaviors strikes us as similar to the goals of Zen meditation, which is to calm or soothe oneself, both in mind and body. This calm permits the ability to focus oneself, detach from troubling thoughts and bring about a positive emotional state. Affinities are frequently identified as “self-stimulatory behaviors,” yet they may have Zen-like applications.

Owen loved Disney movies from the earliest ages, like many kids his age, and watched them with peculiar intensity after autism's onset at age 3. He repeatedly watched specific sections of each movie in his personally chosen library. He often pored over short segments. Eventually, we realized he had selected these segments to analyze and deconstruct. In doing so it soon became apparent that Owen was constructing a pantheon of characters that would become the “data” for his theory of personality, his working model of how the world works. Owen attended to plot, themes, language and most particularly the Characters and how they related to each other.

It struck us (Ron and Cornelia) early on -- and Dan when he began treating Owen at 13 -- that this was a reliable point of connection between Owen anyone who was familiar with Disney movies. Owen was using themes and segments from the movies the way many people may use sports standings, politics, and the weather: as a way to connect to others.

### **An Example of Neuro-typical Affinity**

What is the music you gravitate toward when you need to get “pumped up”? As a cultured individual, you can enjoy a many musical styles. But where do you go when you NEED music? Does music help make sense of painful feelings and difficult situations? Do your choices coincide with the music you listened to high school and college? Do you try desperately to get uninterested others, like your kids, to give it a listen? That is your “Music Affinity”.

### **Family**

Parents have the most intimate and familiar connection with their children. A therapist holds a candle, but parents and siblings have the potential to focus that intimacy like a searchlight. Parents are the most important people in their children's lives, and it is reasonably safe to assume that children are the most important people in the life of a parent. The realm of affinities can provide a bridge between parent and child like no other. Affinities offer the opportunity to narrow the focus and dive deeply with a child.

A well-functioning family is not defined by the absence of stress or conflicts, but by how effectively the family handles them, as it responds to changing conditions and the developing needs of its members.

The systems therapist's job is to locate and mobilize underutilized or hidden strengths, helping the family outgrow constraining patterns of interaction that block problem solving and growth.

*There ain't no rules around here! We're trying to accomplish something!*  
-Thomas Edison

### **Affinity Therapy is a Family Therapy.**

The root of “therapy” is “healing”, and intense, joyous engagement and sense of purpose improves the lives of each member of a family affected by autism. Families using Affinity approaches can help heal some the stress and emotional pain experienced by each member.

What is most meaningful to parents, and facilitated by successful affinity strategies:

- Activated “hope” for all the players, i.e., optimism about the near and distant future; a current sense that all are engaged in a worthwhile pursuit
- Increased frequency, intensity, duration and perceived quality of interactions between family members
- Increased affective intensity between family members in situations beyond the affinity sessions?
- Increased their motivation to try new things and openness to experiences that were previously avoided. For example, asking for help in public place, independent travel, and initiating contact with other
- Increased attunement to incremental meaningful change. This is important because there are two possibilities - one is that parents exaggerate change - see it where it is not occurring, the other is that they fail to recognize how small change is taking place. Identifying small increments is a key to success.

### **Some Critical Factors**

#### **Curiosity**

The key word is curiosity. The key to curiosity is attention. And attention is the “key to kingdom”. Everything becomes more interesting when we pay attention to it. The first step to anything positive begins with attention- we become more what we pay attention to, what we think about, particularly emotions. Curiosity and attention is the real gold we offer each other, and fundamental to affinities taking wing.

#### **Metaphors**

The metaphor helps us grasp big ideas with a few words, and a good one can generate desired novel action and resolve, it guides without prescribing. A good metaphor is often more helpful than a list of do's and don'ts because it prompts new behaviors by evoking novel thinking and a constructive emotion. A really good metaphor expands knowledge into imagination. It bridges the gap from smart to wise. It captures a big idea with a small net. It can point us toward novel ideas, feeling and action.

A metaphorical example: **The Right Stuff**. With regard to test pilots, The Right Stuff is the mysterious combination of courage, agility, and presence of mind to cope with any crisis that a test pilot may encounter.

What is the Right Stuff of Parenting? Like test pilots, it includes reflexes, commitment, flexibility and the ability to see the bigger picture. And metaphors can help cultivate the right stuff and might be the basic ingredient.

Disney also provided the opportunity for much practice with metaphors, similes, irony and sarcasm. The Disney characters are ideal for this kind of distilled deconstruction– all the behavior of the characters is oriented to advance the plot (except for humor). There is almost no extraneous action, no “wasted moves”. The stories parallel the events in life that we are just not prepared to face. We learn that heroes and sidekicks offer guidance for confronting the unknown and what does not seem survivable.

### **Widening the Cast**

Drawing from Carl Jung (1990), we linked Disney characters to archetypes (such as those in myths, fairy tales, biblical stories). The hero is one of the main archetypes.

Others include:

- The maiden - who represents purity, innocence, and, naivete.
- The wise old man - reveals to the nature of our collected wisdom the collective unconscious.
- The "dark father" the master of the dark side.
- the animal archetype, representing humanity's relationships with the animal world. These include many of the “sidekicks” in Disney movies.
- The trickster's role is to hamper the hero's progress and to make trouble.

The archetypes and the interchanges between characters provided a foundation of adaptable scripts for day-to-day interactions for Owen. They helped decode human motivation (e.g., love, envy/jealousy, power, insecurity, loyalty, friendship, etc.), lying and subterfuge, and complicated things like ambivalence and the role of memory. Eventually Owen took the characters to heart and formed mental representations of the characters as they differed in their relationships and contexts. Their inconsistencies provided a clue to why people say or do one thing in this situation and something quite different in another one. The complexities came alive, and Owen began to be able to reflect the characters apart from the actual scenes he perfectly memorized. The characters' contradictions and unpredictability became predictable, as Owen attended closely to social details and contexts. These gains began to serve as a template for navigating the social world with greater predictive accuracy. All family members helped bridge the concepts to real life issues.

A key part of the therapy was in tapping unexpected metaphors. While a hero might seem like a natural choice, a brave knight or the heroic lion king, sidekicks were often more useful– the characters that helped the “hero” fulfill his destiny. These characters were usually archetypal and started with Owen's faultless memory for scripted lines but together we

helped them become guiding tropes: a consistent voice mixed with wit, warmth and faith that eventually could be applied to new situations.

Owen picked Merlin (from Disney's "The Sword in the Stone") as an early inner guide. Merlin never doubted in love's power over the most improbable circumstances, even more than magic. Later, Rafiki nudged the family members more devilishly than Merlin's more straightforward challenges to Arthur. He did not seek to make others comfortable. ("Can't cut it out, it will grow right back.") Iago modeled irony and wit ("Uh, am I missing something here? We're about to take a permanent residence in the Netherworld and Genie's gonna straighten out his sock draw...").

What image goes with the person? The image and the metaphor can help trigger the tipping point: the addition or increment that seems unimportant, but unexpectedly is just the amount of additional change that will lead to a large result and enough to bolster the child or parent to move to a different pattern of action. The metaphor can increase our "self-efficacy" -- our judgment about being able to perform a particular activity.

Self-efficacy is a person's "I can" or "I cannot" belief. Unlike self-esteem, which reflects how individuals feel about their worth or value, self-efficacy reflects how confident people can cope with the challenge before them.

People with low self-efficacy toward a task are more likely to avoid it, while those with high self-efficacy are more likely to attempt the task, but they also will work harder and persist longer in the face of difficulties. And the social world is rife with difficulties.

*"Now, don't you get any foolish ideas that magic will solve all your problems, because it won't?"*

*- Merlin*

## **Some Lessons Owen Drew From Aladdin**

1. What is it that makes a person like another person? Aladdin has it all wrong- why does he believe what he believes? Are there things about yourself that you have tried to hide from other people or make them believe something else about you? What happens when you pretend to be someone you aren't? What makes you who you are?
2. If you met your prince or princess, what might you be tempted to lie about in order to impress them? What makes you think that is a good idea? What makes you doubt that?
3. Why is lying so tempting- given all the trouble it usually seems to cause? Is it ever ok to lie?
4. Would it be a good thing if you got everything you wish for? Pause....then, how could you know? All you know is that you want it and you think it would be a good thing, but as Jafar finds out, you might discover that getting what you wish for could be a catastrophe.
5. The Genie is imprisoned by the bottle; are the other characters prisoners in ways that are not as easy to see? Are you a prisoner of something you long to become free of?
6. Did you ever make a promise to a friend when it seemed easy and then discovered later that it was really hard to keep your promise?

## **Mowgli at the Seder**

Freedom!-We used Passover as an opportunity to identify something Owen would like to be free of. He settled on working to be free of the fear of becoming a man. This tied easily to the dilemma Mowgli faced- not wanting to go to the man village because it would entail his becoming a man. To Owen this was wrong sighted- Mowgli has to fulfill his destiny, to become a man. Owen came to appreciate the inevitability of his destiny, which is to advance in age and ultimately become a man. He was sure that all it would entail was horrible, irreversible loss, and irretrievable memories. Owen was long unable to consider this was a perspective that could be tested. Mowgli helped him broaden his perspective and calmed some of his fear.

## **Talking to Yourself**

After being bullied in High School, Owen went through a variety of traumatic response therapies to get over the trauma, but found himself slipping, at 16, in to serious bout of regression. The notion that his self-talk, common among ASD, was more productive than the medical literature acknowledged (this is a behavior therapy strives to reduce) had dawned on us. The precise nature of its value, and mechanisms involved, remained unclear. During the bullying, Ron noticed that Owen seemed to be in sotto voce conversation with a particular sidekick – Philoctetes, or Phil, who trains Hercules for battle. Only later, was it clear that he was trying to gird himself for battle with the bullies. But as the regression deepened, Ron wondered which Sidekick would be appropriate and effective in guiding Owen now. Sitting with Dan, with Owen in the waiting room, he told Dan to ask Owen what one of the wise sidekicks would advise “a boy like Owen,” who wants to return to the past because the future – the adult world – terrifies him. In the session, moments later, Dan proffered this question, saying what would Rafiki tell the boy. Owen, without skipping a beat, said, “I’d prefer Merlin.” In Merlin’s voice, he recited a favorite line from the movie – “Knowledge and



wisdom is the real power" – and then launching into an improvised riff, still in Merlin's voice, that summoned interpretive speech and incisive guidance that was beyond anything he could manage in his own voice. This is a first full glimpse into the development of "inner speech," comporting with theories of Leo Vygotsky, a crucial capacity underlying self-knowledge and executive function that is generally considered beyond ken of those with ASD. Over the coming years, all members of Team Owen – Ron, Cornelia, older brother, Walt, and Dan Griffin – nourished, shaped and guided this capacity. But it is clear that Owen developed it before it was formally noticed and deepens it, freely and independently, in his young adult life. This is humbling and heartening: the goal, after all, was for Owen to need us less and, ever more, guide his own ship. More and more, our advice to him is, simply, "Sail on!"

### **A Smart Phone Metaphor Suggestion**

Most of us construe ourselves as a kind of first generation Ipod: a finite library of songs, that is, a more or less limited and fixed "self". Inconsistency



It is in our best interest to construe of ourselves as a later model, hot-spot, broad-band, well-connected Smart Phone. Such a device can gain access an expansive, virtually infinite array of abilities, personages and far-reaching archetypes. We are always more than we present what we believe we are. Those potentialities, that pantheon from heroes to sidekicks, are enhanced by our family, our culture and our experiences. If we are fortunate, we learn how to gain access to this trove of possibilities when we need to. Affinity Therapy provides a map to this trove of possibilities.



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