This section features original work on pathographies—i.e., (auto) biographical accounts of disease, illness, and disability—that provide narrative inquiry relating to the personal, existential, psychological, social, cultural, spiritual, political, and moral meanings of individual experience. Editors are: Nathan Carlin and Therese Jones. For submissions, contact Nathan Carlin at: Nathan.Carlin@uth.tmc.edu

Obbligato

MARK OSTEEN

"Rock a roll! Rock a roll!"

Cameron, my 14-year-old autistic son, was shouting. That was not unusual; the words were. Cam speaks mostly in single words and memorized scripts, but he'd recently started to enjoy rock music, and I'd just pushed Creedence Clearwater Revival's *Chronicle* into our car's CD player. We'd owned the CD for a year, but Cam had shown little interest in it. He was lukewarm this time too, until we got to "Travelin' Band," a flat-out screamer. By the first chorus Cam was rocking in his seat, and the rocking intensified as the song continued. He often twitches and sways, but these movements were different: toggling in time, he chanted, "rock a roll, rock a roll, rock a roll." Never had he done that before.

We stopped at a playground. Earlier that week he had refused to exit the car here, but this time he leaped from his seat and dashed toward the swing set, still repeating "rock a roll, rock a roll, rock a roll."

As he swung, the chant gradually mutated into "walking 'round, walking 'round," punctuated by guffaws and shouts. He swung and swung, shouting and testing the limits of the swing set with his 130 pounds.

Cam is on the severe end of the autism spectrum. He doesn't know how to read or write and can't tie his shoes, but loves to take white shoestrings apart strand by strand, hour by hour. Beset by overwhelming sights and sounds and confused by human nuances he can't interpret, he battens on smells for security. When he's introduced to someone new or meets an old acquaintance, he'll lean toward the person's neck and take a big sniff, or grab an arm and take a whiff of it.

In smell he trusts.

Music, too, has always made sense to him. The soundtrack of his childhood was composed of songs from music videos—mostly Raffi and *Kidsongs*—that he watched incessantly, along with his favorite movie, *Mary Poppins*. The same videos, the same foods, the constant loop of string play, the same schedule each day; repetition keeps him anchored, as if without it he might become lost in time. We try to respect his preferences, but even the most tolerant parent's patience gets strained by replay #732.

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Especially mine. I like to hear a new song or album once or twice, and then leave it alone for weeks. Keep it fresh: that's my motto. I am a musician, and repetition bores me when playing, too. One of the worst features of my career as a rock musician was having to perform the same songs several times per week. I would go on autopilot and forget the words, or introduce obscene "improvements." I was always pushing my reluctant bandmates to learn new tunes. Novelty was my drug.

Most of us enjoy a little repetition; Cam craves a lot. He requested "Poppins" every evening for years—and I do mean every evening, and I do mean years—so my wife Leslie and I have seen it 1000 times. I am not exaggerating. We have marched for miles around the house to "Step in Time," taken scores of jolly holidays with Mary, and downed so many doses of medicine with "A Spoonful of Sugar" that the first two notes of the song now trigger my gag reflex.

Young Cam listened to music constantly. He occasionally sampled everything from Pete Seeger to *Peter and the Wolf*, but showed no interest in rock or any other popular music.

One year after we made the agonizing decision to place him, at age 12, in a residential school about 80 miles from home, that changed.

Verse

Cam's love of repetition did not change, however. My sister bought him a John Mellencamp CD for his 13th birthday and it was a hit. The line "I need a lover who won't drive me crazy" drove *him* gleefully crazy (and us less gleefully so) every time he came home for a visit. He played it over and over and over. Years earlier I had performed a few of Mellencamp's hits in bar bands, so Cam's fandom prompted both a pang of nostalgia and a buzz of excitement.

For once our son was acting like a regular kid. Was this a sign of real growth? Or was it one more false alarm, another of those moments we had come to know too well, when he suddenly revealed a skill or interest we had never known he possessed, and then, just as suddenly, lost it forever?

He did not lose this one. Nowadays when he is home and we go for a drive—one of his favorite pastimes—we sample his CD collection. The tunes throw us into a time warp where Cam and I are peers. Listening to decades-old songs through his ears, obsolete bands like Foreigner seem fresh and vibrant.

It feels like the first time.

A few years ago I would have told you that following any musical genre is strictly a cultural phenomenon: kids want to be cool, so they learn to like what their peers like. Now I am not so sure, because as soon as Cam reached puberty, he started to crave loud, pounding tunes.

As Cam has aged, his autism has enclosed him more and more. Only gradually have I learned to alter my expectations; even more gradually have I tried to see the positive side of his condition. What, I've wondered, does he get from music? Can I teach him to play? Much later I realized that I might actually learn from him. Even then, I was a slow learner.

One thing I found out is that Cam does not care about fashions and fads. He has never purposely listened to Rihanna, Usher, or Drake, and appreciates anything pulsing and tuneful. That isn't to say that he doesn't have strong opinions. On the drive back to his school a few years ago we all enjoyed Three Dog Night's *Greatest Hits*; when that disk ended, we switched to a Steely Dan compilation. Cam hollered "back to Anandayoh!" along with "My Old School." Did he know that the song is about *not* going back to school?

Maybe so: midway through "Any Major Dude," the major dude in the back seat interrupted.

"Skip it!" he commanded.

Out came Steely Dan and in went The Doobie Bros. Cam interpreted "Rock Me a Little While" literally, seesawing in his seat and bopping his head up and down while semisinging "rock me, rock me." Playin' in a travelin' band!

Singing along is rare. Alone, he will belt out snippets from songs, or clap in time, but as soon as someone else starts singing—artist or listener—he rests. He can't handle the competing demands of singing and listening at the same time.

His contributions are usually subtler. Instead of singing the melody, Cam croons obbligatos, always wordless, always in key: complex countermelodies of his own invention. And his voice is amazing: he fills the house with hoots and squeals, usually ending with a piercing falsetto eeeeeeeeee! that would turn Frankie Valli green with envy.

At his graduation in 2010, he was voted "Best Singer."

Nor does he distinguish between music and the sounds of ordinary life. Language for him is more about melody than meaning: he repeats phrases in diverse pitches and tones until abstract ideas are leached out. He often keeps a rhythmic, wordless monologue going, repeating set phrases—"ah dee da day," or "um gadda begah"—in a range of keys and timbres. Slapping his chest in glee or anger, he is a drummer tapping out his own private cadence.

Recently he has started to make up his own tunes and sing them to himself. During one car ride he composed the "Today Song." The lyrics are straightforward: "Today, today! Today, today!" He is completely in the moment: today is the best day, the only day, that has ever existed.

Wild thing, you make my heart sing. And sometimes you make it dance.

Two Easters ago we had all grown bored by days of doing nothing. To shake things up, I put on a CD by the rock group Train and cranked up the volume. On our kitchen's springy cork floor, Leslie and I displayed our middle-aged moves: she resurrected some ancient high school cheerleader jumps and kicks, while I hauled out my old reliables—the foot-dragging, hunching, Joe Cockerish gyrations I formerly used as a rock front man. We nudged Cam to join in. At the first line of "50 Ways to Say Goodbye" ("My heart is paralyzed") the spirit moved him and he started to sway, then spun wildly around our small kitchen. Thrusting his head, stork-like, from side to side, he made jerky motions with his slim, muscular arms as his skinny legs gangled and bent. Cam's knees kicked high, a wide grin creasing his face as he howled along with the song.

Chorus

I am often in a hurry. I like to get things done, check them off my list, and push on to the next task. Patience is not my forte. My son, however, is on Cameron Standard Time, and he cannot be rushed.

At the end of one late-morning ride when he was 14, I decided to take him to a bakery we had visited previously. That time he had made his way inside, chosen a cupcake, and left without incident. But this time as soon as we hit the sidewalk he veered off and dashed toward a nearby convenience store. I followed him, only to discover that it was actually a liquor store.

Well, I figured, they must have Cokes. I bought one from the burly Russian emigre behind the counter. Cam growled and refused to move: he'd just realized this wasn't a 7-11. Overwhelmed, he dropped to the floor, popped the tab, and began guzzling his Coke.

The best way to handle these incidents is to wait him out, but if you appear to be doing nothing, people give you dirty glares. I would have explained, but the clerk was carefully looking the other way. I bribed ("want some ice cream"?), wheedled ("come on, bud, let's go ride some more"), and then tried to pull Cam up by hand. He went into what Leslie calls his "bug position": kneeling, he leans forward until his face nearly touches the floor. He seems to be trying to become as small as possible. I gazed at the ceiling and clenched my fists. Two male patrons stared quizzically at the teenager slumped near the craft beers. Sweat stood out on my forehead.

I tried to lift Cam up; he rolled onto his front. I tried again; he flopped onto his back. Then I asked him to count, which sometimes works, but did not this time. Finally, my nerves shredded to slivers, I grabbed his coat tails and slid him toward the door, rasping in a stage whisper, "Let's go eat your chips." I held out my hands. He arose and I hustled him across the street to the car. Both of us sat there shaking.

At that moment I realized that I could have ended the scene sooner by simply singing a song. An old favorite such as "This Old Man" would have quelled his panic and pulled him out of the bug pose. Why didn't I think of the old coot?

Leslie or I will start. "This old man, he played . . ."

Cam: One!

Les: He played knick-knack on my____

Cam: Thun!

And so on. The combination of counting and singing moors him in predictable rhythms, cocoons him in consoling numbers.

But there are limits. On one drive back from school, we were roaring up I-95 when Cam shouted, "Want to go home. Home!" This time *he* was the one in a hurry.

"We're on the way."

"Go home!" He was getting agitated, on the verge of reaching into the front seat to grab and slap us.

Les caught my eye. "Time for 'This Old Man.'"

We sang three straight choruses—stopping once to debate whether the rhyme for "nine" was "hind" or "vine"—and by the second verse a baritone in the back seat was heard intoning: "This oh man, he pay one."

As we commenced the fourth chorus, Cam shouted, "Say way," or something like that. I stopped singing. What was that?

"He played three," Les continued.

"I said when!" Cam yelled.

"Did you get that?" I asked. "'I said "when."'"

"My parents. They're so lame: they keep singing that stupid song," Les said. "What a teenager!"

We laughed for several minutes.

"Were you tired of the song, Cam?"

"Yes."

There is such a thing as too much repetition, even for him.

One night a massive evening thunderstorm knocked out our electricity, prompting Cam to pace anxiously and try every light switch in the house.

"The power is out, buddy. The lights won't work," I said. He had to test them again anyway.

We lit candles around the house. Cam was fascinated by his ability to snuff them out. No sooner did we get one lit than he picked it up, fixed it with autistic scrutiny and went "whooo." Out went the candle.

His face said, "there, I took care of that!"

As a child, on sunny days Cam would stop whatever he was doing to create shadows with his hands, observing them with mesmerized fascination, apparently unaware that he was creating them himself. Remembering those moments, I handed him a flashlight.

"The flashlight makes cool shadows if you turn it this way."

He shined the light up into his face, then blew on it as hard as he could. Nothing happened. Hell, it worked on the candles!

"You have to do it like this." I showed him how to operate the on/off switch.

Instead he huffed and puffed on the flashlight repeatedly, each time with a knit-browed intensity that meant something was on his mind. He did not blow with a "whoosh," as you would with candles, and he was not filling up his cheeks like Dizzy Gillespie. He seemed to be giving the flashlight a Bronx cheer. Afterward he regarded it quizzically and laughed.

Les said, "They must have a microphone at school. I'll bet they do karaoke." Of course! Why won't it make my noise louder? You call this a microphone?

A few weeks later another thunderstorm cut off our power. Les and I had been viewing a DVD in the den, while Cam, in the living room, watched *Aladdin* in his usual fashion: kneeling in the corner, playing with a string, and glimpsing the movie with sidelong, darting glances from slitted eyes.

When the house went dark, from the other room we heard "God!"—Cam's all-purpose curse word. If only he had a magic lamp! We tuned our battery-powered radio to a classical station and huddled around it. Within a half hour, we were all nodding off.

Like many autists, Cam confuses his pronouns. Nobody calls him "I," so how could that word refer to him? He is "he," or sometimes "eee"—a fusion of "I" and "he." The morning after the power outage, I heard him say, in a barely audible monotone, "Why is eee here?"

There are more than 50 ways to say goodbye.

Breakdown

If you'd told me when Cam was a child that at 19 he would speak no more (although he would understand far more) than he had at 5, I would have plunged into despair. After years of struggle and denial, I do accept my son as he is, and yet a part of me still waits for a breakthrough, for that eureka moment when hidden intelligence or an unknown talent bursts through the murk. I can't help myself. Maybe it is my version of Cam's incessant string play. Or maybe it is my impatience again: I just can't let things be, I have to *do* something!

And it's not always easy to support him in the adulthood he has been given. But he *is* an adult, and sometimes we need to be reminded of that.

When Les gives him baths, she likes to sing little songs that she made up years ago. One of them goes like this (sung to the tune of "Follow Me, Boys"):

"Scooter loo! Scooter loo! The little boy, that's you, that's known as scooter loo!" Cam usually claps as mom sings *his* song. One day she realized that the words no longer fit. "You're not a little boy, are you? You're a young man. You're a man!"

For the next 10 minutes Cam declared, "I'm a man!" again and again. Or rather, he said, "Eee a man. A *MAN. A MAN. Eee a man!"* The phrase echoed the old Spencer Davis Group song he has heard countless times. "I'm a man, yes I am!" That is, I am a person and I deserve respect.

At such moments we can't help but wonder how much he knows. A lot of language is cached in his head, bottled up and mislaid. Are there complex thoughts as well? Does he tell himself his story, as most of us do, feeling perpetually frustrated that everyone underestimates him? Does he protest inwardly when people patronize him or talk about him as if he weren't there? We are tempted to dismiss his speeches as

echolalia—like those scripts from videos and toddler books he used to repeat—but the phrases are often so apt, and stated so vehemently, that we know he means what he says. Like so much about Cameron, this is at once heartening and heartbreaking: the knowledge that he has the capacity to understand himself and his place in the world only makes his limitations more painful.

Cam accented that theme at the end of the summer when he turned 20. He had been home with us for about 10 days, following a week each at two different camps. In other words, he had lived through too many days with no schedule—his worst nightmare. On the day in question he wanted to do nothing; he didn't even want a string.

In the early evening, while working downstairs, I heard growling, wailing cries. I dashed upstairs. Les was in Cam's bedroom, where he lay on the bed. Three Dog Night's *Greatest Hits* was playing on his boombox.

"Cam is crying," she said, her own eyes welling with tears. It wasn't the tears that got to me; it was the expression on his face and his evident attempt to communicate . . . something.

"Ah, ay, ay, ay, ay, ay, ah!" he shouted hoarsely. It was a sentence, in rhythms of speech. There were no lyrics, but the melody was clear: despair. My son's eyes flashed and his brows furrowed as he tried his best to tell us what was on his mind.

Three Dog Night sang, "One is the loneliest. One is the loneliest number that you'll ever do!"

"Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah," he roared. "Aaaaahhhhh!"

"One is the loneliest number that you'll ever do!"

"Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah!" he shouted again. His face wore an expression of abject sorrow, lips turned downward and quivering, tears streaming from his eyes. He was unspeakably upset, but what was he saying? I lay down and spooned him, speaking softly through the block in my throat.

The CD moved to the next tune.

"Won't you try, try a little tenderness. Umm, hmm."

Leslie rubbed Cameron's head and back, soothing him with soft speech. "You are so strong. You are so very tough. We know it's hard, but you can do it, cause you're so strong."

I suddenly felt a pang, then a burst, of his frustration, his rage. *He* knew what he meant, but he couldn't find the words, couldn't find *any* words. All he could do was shout and cry.

My heart was paralyzed. Stifling a sob, I pressed my nose into his back.

"Won't you try? Oh, try some tenderness."

Cam let me put my left arm around him and squeeze him tightly. At last I was able to get a few words out.

"Mom and Dad will never let anything happen to you. We're always here, always thinking about you, son." I paused. "You are my hero."

I was not lying. For the first time in quite a while I recognized his bravery: the daily compensations he devises, the courage he shows in forging a life in a world where people dismiss and shun him.

The next song started. "How can people be so heartless? How can people be so cruel? Easy." I continued to hold and rock him softly. Little by little his cries abated. He was going back to school the next day. Was he sad about leaving home?

"I know it's hard to go back to school, but you can do it," I said.

"No, okay." He gave me a little push. "No, okay" means *no*. His eyes said, "that's not what I meant."

"Oh. You want me to leave?"

"Yeff."

Perhaps realizing that I might feel rejected, he asked for "Wynken, Blynken and Nod," which we have recited at bedtime ever since he was a toddler. The instant I spoke the final "nod," he gave me another shove.

Okay, maybe he was *not* worried about going back to school. But what *was* the problem? "I'm sick of this! I can't stay here." Or: "I don't know what's happening! I thought I was going back to school today!" Or: "Am I living here now? First there was school camp, then the mountain camp and now this. I don't know where I live!" Or was it more general: "I hate my life!"?

Les tried to put a positive spin on the incident. "We've been waiting all these years for a breakthrough. And it's finally starting to happen. It's astonishing."

Maybe so, but I couldn't shake the sight of his face: the trembling lip, the yearning eyes, the face contorted, burning to make us *hear* him. Those gestures were rich with meaning. Nor will I forget what I felt: my son is talking, and I can't understand him.

The songs did not end Cam's misery, but even though they were written and performed long before he was born, they seemed to express it for him.

Solo

Sometimes sorrow about the man my son could have been still washes over me. Such a wave smacked me as I read Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday*. The protagonist, a middle-aged neurosurgeon, has an adult son who plays blues guitar. As I read, I kept envisioning my own son hunched over, forelock falling over his face, picking out licks on his Fender with his long fingers. I imagined my pride, my warnings about the pitfalls of a music career (I've been there), even the envy I would feel over his youth and promise.

It's not that we haven't tried to teach him to play an instrument. Once we bought him a "magic lights" keyboard. It featured a bank of selectable songs, its keys illuminating to show which notes to play for a chosen tune. Press any key and the melody plays—backed with strings, drums, and the whole kaboodle. Cam ignored it. Before selling the toy, I asked our home aide to give it one more try, and later that day, from downstairs in my office I heard "When You Wish Upon a Star" wafting from above. I hustled upstairs to find Cam seated at the keyboard, tapping out the tune.

Together we picked out "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," "London Bridge," and then "The Saints Go Marching In." He played for a solid 15 minutes. It was a miraculous breakthrough!

He never played it again.

Mulling over this memory, I sink into despondency; so much effort, so little to show for it. Then I remember when Cam tried to teach *me* to play.

In 2004 he was hospitalized for a month; we visited him daily at the clinic. On one visit a nurse told us that he had been fascinated with a certain toy instrument. It had four colored buttons on the keyboard and four other buttons above that; on each one a cartoon frog played a different instrument: banjo, saxophone, piano, or trumpet. Cam pushed the banjo frog repeatedly until it cycled to "Oh, Susanna!"

After a few bars, the song stopped. I tried to show him that if he pushed the colored buttons the song would continue. Each time he nudged my hand away and pressed the frog button. When the tune stopped, I pushed the button to make it continue.

I was getting impatient: yet another thing he couldn't grasp. Soon Cam was pulling on my shirt and growling; he even pinched me on the arm.

"Okay, buddy, I'll leave it alone."

Then he punched the "Oh, Susanna" button. It played a few bars and stopped, but after a few seconds of silence, the song continued to the end. He had been trying to show me that the tune would play anyway, if I just let it be!

Don't you cry for me.

Despite his difficulties in concentration and poor working memory, my son's musical intelligence has long impressed his teachers. When he was 16, his school newsletter mentioned a Fourth of July luau, capped with a talent show. "The winner was Cameron, who wowed the crowd with his harmonica playing!"

Sure, he had probably just inhaled through it once or twice and then blown a simple "whee–hee" to finish the cadence built into the harmonica. I pictured him squaring his shoulders and blowing proudly, a little startled at the applause, repeating the performance, then putting down the "'monica" with the slight smile playing over his lips that meant "I nailed that!" Thirty seconds of harmonica playing are his equivalent of a typical kid's full-length piano recital.

Such 'monica moments remain rare, but eventually we found an "instrument" he could really play: the saxaboom. This is a bright yellow, gray, and red plastic toy saxophone with eight purple buttons on the front. Each button triggers a different one-measure riff (in E flat), followed by three bars of a funk rhythm pattern. Every few months he rediscovers its joys.

One button plays a bent half note followed by a blues lick. Cam will repeatedly push that button to make the half note streeeettcchh for several seconds: he holds and holds and holds the note until you think the toy will break. . . then lets it go, grinning in satisfaction at the culminating riff. Or he repeatedly hits a given button so that its phrase plays again and again without the funk pattern. Or he presses a button to start a melody, then pushes another before the first one finishes, creating an original melody worthy of the finest R & B saxman.

I found a YouTube video of Jack Black playing a saxaboom. For him it's a joke. An assistant minces out bearing the toy before him like a piece of fine jewelry. Black licks the imaginary reed, makes a couple of false starts, then pretends to blow into it while pressing the "keys." He always lets a whole riff play before switching to another. He never interrupts, mixes, or repeats patterns. People applaud wildly when he's done.

My severely autistic son plays the saxaboom better than Jack Black. His mashups are more creative, his melodies more original. For Cam, music is no joke.

Even if the saxaboom is not a real instrument, my son makes real music with it. Like all musicians, he works around his own and his instrument's limitations, combining raw materials, blending repetition and novelty to produce something that's his and his alone.

I looked in on him during one recent session. He held the saxaboom up to his left ear, listening intently, his right hand poised at the buttons.

Trading Fours

We have kept a collection of cheap plastic recorders—we call them "flutes"—in Cam's room for several years, but he seldom gives them more than a few desultory toots, and recently has abandoned them altogether. He does not understand that covering the holes creates different pitches, and he has never played a full song, but one night we heard him tooting by himself. Joining him in his room, I played a three-beat, one-note pattern and handed the "flute" back to him.

"Now you play what Daddy played!" Something clicked: for the first time, Cam grasped that by regulating his air flow, he could play more than one note. He copied my three toots.

"Great job, Cam!" I said. "Okay, Dad's turn again."

I played the same note twice and gave it to him. He blew a long tone and looked at me expectantly.

"Cam, play two notes: hoot, hoot," I said. He hooted twice.

"Wow! Incredible!" Cam smiled. He had grasped every musician's grand epiphany: people like it when you play requests.

"Play some more," I said.

He played some more. Each time he finished blowing, he raised his eyes for my evaluation. According to me, every effort was worthy of Charlie Parker, so he carried on. Before long we were performing a simple version of what jazz musicians call trading fours. I played a phrase, then he played a phrase, back and forth, back and forth.

Then he experimented. "If I take the mouthpiece off and put it back on upside down, will it still play? Yup." Anything was possible for him now.

At last he handed me the recorder. "Finished?" I asked.

"Fini," he answered.

As B. B. King would say, the thrill was gone. But so what? We had made music together.

One Sunday a few months later, Cam snatched up the saxaboom and launched into a free-wheeling jam while bouncing furiously on the bed. He was the saxophone player, the drummer, and the dancers all at once! I joined him on the yellow recorder, and there we were: two cats at a jam session. These are the moments we have learned to prize, the ones that come unbidden and cannot be hurried: not wondrous breakthroughs, just gleams of everyday radiance.

Counterpoint

I have learned that Cam loves music for the same reasons that non-autistic people do: It helps him feel his emotions more deeply and express them to others. It lets him connect with those he cares about. But I have concluded that he also relates to music differently from neurotypical people. Cam likes to hear the same things repeatedly. Is it sameness that soothes him? Or does he find new nuances, new delights with each listening? I'm not sure, but I believe that his intense focus allows him to detect beauties that most people miss. I am convinced that he hears more in a given song than I do. And he never chooses music to impress others or to follow a trend, but strictly for personal, aesthetic reasons. Duke Ellington used to say that there are only two types of music: good music and the other kind. Cam concurs.

Repetition, expression, creativity: people on the autism spectrum redefine these concepts. They are the obbligatos in the human melody, singing counterpoint to the strains of the neurotypical. The etymology of "obbligato" seems fitting. Originally meaning "required" (you were *obliged* to play it), the word evolved to signify the converse: an optional voice that winds around the main melody. But once you hear both melodies together, the obbligato sounds essential again.

My son and I may hear and play different tunes, yet we can create concord if I honor *my* obbligato, my obligation not to hurry or demand, but to listen and learn from him. I always wanted him to think like me, listen like me, play like me, but I have come to appreciate the value of listening like him. I no longer chafe at hearing those familiar songs. Raffi rules! And when improvising a solo, I use more repeated phrases. Repetition, I have discovered, produces a tension that makes the release more potent, and more musical. Most of all, I tune in to the music all around me: to the creaking of a door, the tonalities of a

dog's bark, the avian choir that greets us each morning ("Boods!" as Cam calls them), the vocal inflections that convey what people really mean. Cam has taught me that beauty can bloom from any sound, any rhythm. In short, I am learning to listen autistically.

Eeeeee!

Coda

Last fall we brought Cam back to his group home following a weekend with us. After a few minutes of hanging around, we brought out his boombox and slipped in an old favorite, The Doobie Bros. Our son shares the house with three other young men on the autism spectrum, each with different abilities and needs. They don't interact much, but they know when something novel and exciting is taking place. Leslie, on her way back from the bathroom, ran into Cam's roommate, a strapping redhead named Chris. The music had awakened him; he was stark naked.

"Hi, big guy! If you put your clothes on, you can get a snack and listen to some music," she told him.

Three minutes later, Chris, wearing a t-shirt and boxers, entered the kitchen and began rummaging through the cupboards. Adam, another roommate, appeared as well. Instead of dashing back and forth through the house as he ordinarily does, Adam sat serenely at the table. After he finished eating, Adam stayed put, humming along with the songs. Chris lounged quietly on the couch, paging through a magazine, smiling to himself. Ensconced in his favorite chair and operating on a shoestring, Cam listened to the music.

The Doobies sang, "I ain't got no worries, and I ain't in no hurry at all."

We felt the same way.