Autism and Neurodiversity: An Insider Perspective

Dr. Zur interviews Nick Walker, MA

Ofer Zur: Welcome to Zur Institute recording with Nick Walker on Autism and Neurodiversity. This is your host, Dr. Ofer Zur. Nick Walker holds a Masters degree in counseling, psychotherapy, from the California Institute of Integral Studies, where he's currently doing doctoral research on neurodiversity and teaching in the Interdisciplinary Studies Program at CIS. He has been active in the autism self-advocacy movement for over a decade. Since 2004 he has served as a co-facilitator of an online support group of autistic teens and adults with over 1800 members.

He has worked with autistic children and teens as a reading tutor and as a martial art teacher. Nick is a co-founder of Transformative Somatics, a training and consulting partnership. He gives lectures, training, and presentations on autism and neurodiversity to a variety of audiences including trainees, psychotherapists, and also provides consultation for therapists and other professionals who work with autistic children. His most recent project consists of leading training for a group of autistic adults on how to self-regulate during social interaction. Welcome, Nick, to this audio recording.

Nick Walker: Thank you.

Ofer Zur: Perhaps a good place to start will be is to get some general background about what got you interested in the topic of autism and your personal relationship to the topic?

Nick Walker: Hmm. I am autistic myself, and so I was, all my life, my generation was, most autistic people were misdiagnosed or not diagnosed, so all my life I was struggling with misdiagnoses in exactly what was going on with me, what made my mind different from everyone else's, and I actually ended up getting a correct diagnosis as an adult at the same time that I was working as a special needs reading tutor, working with autistic children. That got me very interested in learning everything I could about autism. I very quickly got involved in the autistic community, the autistic self-advocacy movement that was emerging at that time. I'm also trained as a psychologist and psychotherapist and so I bridged those two worlds as an autistic person and a person also with professional training.

Ofer Zur: What were you called? What was the label, the misdiagnosis. Misdiagnosis is probably a very soft name to a pretty traumatic occurrences.

Nick Walker: Yeah. I had a variety of diagnoses over the years when I was in school, when I was in elementary school, junior high school, high school. It seemed like every school psychologist who checked me out had something different to say. When I was younger it was always a personality disorder diagnosis, emotional disturbance, conduct disorder, and then of course, eventually the ADHD diagnosis became the latest trend, so everybody wanted to say I was ADHD even though I didn't fit any of

the symptoms.

Ofer Zur: I can imagine pathologizing versus diversifying is the story of your life.

Nick Walker: Oh yes, definitely, so it got me very interested in this, really gave me, my passion for the subject comes from a very personal place.

Ofer Zur: What can be best than we can take our personal experiences and create meaning through education and through interventions and to trying to educate the world to reduce suffering and increase richness.

Nick Walker: Exactly. I got my masters in counseling psychotherapy at California Institute of Integral Studies and I was planning on becoming a therapist but discovered in training ...the training at CIIS is excellent, excellent clinical training. But even there, really there's no good clinical training for a therapist around working with autism or other forms of neurological diversity, and that changed my mind about my path after that for my doctoral work. I decided rather than pursuing psychotherapy, I would write and teach on autism and neurodiversity. I felt like I could be of more use in the world and in the field helping to train other professionals and working with autism.

Ofer Zur: Yeah, so your effect can be bigger or larger in this regard.

Nick Walker: Exactly.

Ofer Zur: Perhaps a good place, the next line of questions will be, tell us your definition or description of autism and some of its characteristics so we learn to view it correctly.

Nick Walker: Autism is a neurological style and it's pervasive so it's not like there's one particular characteristic or trait that's autism. It's a really pervasive difference in how the brain processes information and in cognitive, emotional processes, sensory processes, so it's a very pervasive difference and there's a wide variety of manifestations of autism. Any given autistic trait might be present in any given autistic person or not, but if you look at the DSM, it's characterizing autism in terms of surface manifestations and in terms of a deficit model because that's what the DSM does. If you look at what autism is, the experience of autistic people and what the underlying mechanics are, one of the big things that happens, there's less filtering in the autistic brain. There's less sensory filter.

There's much more unfiltered receiving of raw sensory information and I think that's one of the biggest universal traits in autism is the intensity of sensory experience. Many of the other common characteristics of autism, it's often seen in terms of social deficit and such, much of it can be traced to the intensity of the sensory experience that, for an autistic infant, whereas a neurotypical and non-autistic infant very early on is focusing on the mother's face and learning this face-to-face interaction, these games of eye contact with the caregiver, for autistic

infants, there's too much sensory information happening for that focused attention to happen. Focus will tend to get caught up by other things so a lot of the early conditioning into back and forth social contact doesn't happen because there's so much other information coming in.

Ofer Zur: Are there any ... I know that in the field we try to differentiate between cause and manifestation of symptoms. You're absolutely right, the DSM, since the early years later on shifted towards just manifest symptoms rather than causality because ... I'm the last one to defend the DSM because I have so much critique of that as you know and probably the audience knows. Also if we try to go with the DSM to diagnose people according to the underlying reasons, then you have the psychodynamic psychoanalytic people fighting with a geneticist and with a cognitive behavioralist. Every theory has different underlying causes, but can you share with is, are there any ... with all the diversity, are there any kind of very broad symptoms that are being experienced almost objectively by an untrained eye that would be able to identify or are common for the people who may fit under the autistic description?

Nick Walker: I think even though it may look different in different autistic people, there's always a certain sense of foreignness. If you're a non-autistic clinician encountering a possibly autistic client, really what you're looking for is the sense that, autism is almost like a foreign language. Their social style is a foreign language, so body language is foreign. It means different things. You may see things, lack of eye contact or rocking back and forth. Self-soothing gestures that might be considered signs of extreme anxiety if you were dealing with a non-autistic person. It might mean something completely different in an autistic client. It might just be their way of processing sensory information around them.

There's a foreignness of body language. A sense of not quite fitting, and that often gets interpreted as all kinds of things. Aloofness or distress, but usually some oddness in eye contact, not making a lot of eye contact or staring more than most people would, and oddness of body gesture or speech patterns. There may be very sophisticated language use but it might not be in the ordinary rhythms of conversation.

Ofer Zur: That really helps a lot to show the richness of diversity within the manifestation of autism.

Nick Walker: Yeah.

Ofer Zur: If we take this idea further, do you have a certain kind of typology or you have different types of autism to try to make sense or—not make sense, but perhaps to sometimes categorize and typologize, help us organize our thinking and sometimes way of interacting?

Nick Walker: It's interesting because there's a big controversy about this happening right now regarding the DSM, because there's a dramatic change in how autism is being

classified in the DSM and the DSM 5 that's in progress, being worked on right now. There's the biggest typological difference has been there's ... in the DSM there's "Autistic Disorder," is what the official name is in the DSM, and then there's also Asperger's disorder in the DSM. This is the biggest distinction you see in typology. The only distinction though, if you look at the diagnostic criteria, the only real distinction is Asperger's syndrome involves normal or high IQ and it also involves no speech delays, no language delays. Those are really the only difference in the criteria.

What's happening in the DSM 5 is that Asperger's disorder is going to cease to exist as a diagnosis, as a diagnostic category. All of the variants, there's some other variants, PDD NOS—Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Other Specified—and Rett's disorder, all different, more rare typologies. All of this is being merged into a single diagnostic category, which is just Autistic Spectrum Disorder.

Ofer Zur: Okay.

Nick Walker: There's this recognition that what you're dealing with is a spectrum of diversity within a single category rather than a lot of different diagnoses or different phenomenon. It's all part of one thing. And I think this is very controversial.

Ofer Zur: What's your sense of that? Is it going in the right direction?

Nick Walker: Yes, I think it is.

Ofer Zur: Oh, this is the best thing I heard about the DSM 5 since the beginning. I'm so please to hear that.

Nick Walker: Yes, I'm a big fan of this change. I'm among the people in the autistic self-advocacy community who lobbied and petitioned for this change. Even within the autistic self-advocacy community there's division about it but I'm definitely 100% behind this change.

Ofer Zur: What you appreciate about it is that it really attends to the diversity. Does it also less pathologizing.

Nick Walker: I don't think it's less pathologizing, unfortunately, and I would, really I would like to see autism not pathologized at all. I would love to see it taken out of the DSM.

Ofer Zur: That's what I was wondering.

Nick Walker: This is a step in the right direction to recognize that these are manifestations of the same thing because the developmental course of an autistic person doesn't always look linear from the outside and autistic people may lose or gain their speech abilities, even might fluctuate dramatically from day to day. You see children who talk for a while and then stop talking or children who don't talk and suddenly start speaking in complete paragraphs at age 10. When you're drawing a line—Also,

another thing is that with the advent of the Internet and readily accustom-able computer keyboards, it's been discovered that a lot of autistic people who are non-speaking and considered to have a very low IQ's are actually quite smart and articulate when you put them in front of a keyboard.

This distinction between high IQ, low IQ, speech delays, or no speech delays actually turns out to be very ambiguous because a given autistic person will shift back and forth across these lines throughout their development.

Ofer Zur: That is helpful and I definitely will not complete the interview without asking you about digital technologies and how does it affect diagnosis and treatment, but a little bit more before we get to current digital technology. You mentioned some, but perhaps you can just give us a recap, what is the biggest myth/misconception and misunderstanding among which groups? Whether it's parents, educators and therapists, medical people, what do we see in terms of misconception, misunderstanding, myth?

Nick Walker: Oh there are giant misconceptions. Autism is one of those things that there are enormous myths and misconceptions about and I think the single biggest one, the single most widespread one, and this is the mass media, the mass media is very responsible for this, or very complicit in this particular misconception ... is that there is an autism epidemic going on. That there's a skyrocketing autism ray - this has actually been disproven. There's a wonderful book by Roy Richard Grinker, who interestingly is actually a grandson, I believe, of one of the authors of the original DSM. He's a sociologist and the book is called, "Unstrange Minds. Remapping the World of Autism," about how and why autism diagnostic rates have increased and how that creates the illusion of an actual increase in autism.

There's a lot of reasons for diagnostic rates to increase. If you look at diagnoses like Asperger's didn't exist. They weren't in the DSM until '94, I think, was when Asperger's was put in the DSM? So assessment and awareness of autism has increased enormously throughout the country, throughout the world.

Ofer Zur: As you said before, it fell into the ADHD, Oppositional Disorder, Retardation.

Nick Walker: Right, right. It didn't exist as a separate ... even the basic autism diagnosis for anyone didn't exist until the 1940's, 1950's. All that research happened in the 40's, where it was first conceived of as a phenomenon, so it's really just the steady course of awareness picking up more and more. I think to add to that, the things that make autism disabling, the things that make it very visible as problematic, really come down to a sensory overload. That autistic people do just fine in certain environments, and when you start to really see an autistic person struggling in the world where they might get diagnosed is where there's just too much overwhelm in terms of sensory information and things moving too fast, not giving them enough processing time, immersion in an intensely fast-paced social world.

These things are very challenging for autistic people and the world is becoming

more and more like that. The world is becoming more and more densely populated, more and more fast-paced, there's more and more technological noise even. That's making autism more visible because there are people who 100 years ago simply would've adapted to society.

Ofer Zur: Adapted more easy.

Nick Walker: Oh very easily, who can't now, maybe for reasons that nobody sees. As an autistic person, I tell you, I've learned to deal with sensory overload extremely well, where I rarely have major problems with it. I know that many do but there are stores I avoid going into because I can hear the fluorescent light or the heating system and it's really unpleasant and most people would never notice this. More and more, you get that it's impossible to get away.

Ofer Zur: You're right. The history of humankind is a history of increased speed from the mule to the horse to the engine to the car to the airplane to the rocket to ...

Nick Walker: Right, you get an autistic child who's rocking back and forth with his hands over his ears and that's obvious he's obviously going to get diagnosed as autistic. This same child, you might not see that behavior if he'd been born in a small Japanese fishing village and there was no noise from cars or electric appliances or anything. That's part of why the diagnostic rates have increased so much.

Ofer Zur: It's noise and speed if I hear you correctly.

Nick Walker: Oh yes, noise, speed. Yeah.

Ofer Zur: Stimulation.

Nick Walker: Stimulation. Increased stimulation. We're in a high-stimulation world. That makes autism more visible because it makes autism more challenging.

Ofer Zur: Is it harder for autistic children, I can imagine would be, to either multi-task or to hop from task to task?

Nick Walker: It depends. This is another thing about the characteristics of autism. Autistic people have specialized brains and they tend to be more highly specialized than non-autistic brains. Often what you get is a brain that works really well with particular kinds of systems and that's going to vary from brain to brain. There's a wide variety. There's a wide variety in terms of processing. Temple Grandin is an autistic person who these days is very widely known because there's a big documentary movie on her life or bio pic about her and she's published a lot of books and you know, a very well known autistic person and spokesperson for autistic people. She talks about thinking in pictures. She thinks in pictures and I know ... her mind lends itself to particular sorts of things because it thinks in pictures and there are autistic people who are great visualizers who don't necessarily think in still pictures but have spatial intelligence of particular kinds or really high mathematical or musical

intelligence.

There's—I have a mind that's particularly adept at certain kinds of pattern recognition and it's very much shaped my career and what I do in my life is that I have skill with a particular kind of pattern recognition. There's these gifts of being good in a particular specialized kind of thought, but at the sacrifice often of being able to manage other tasks, so autistic people do better in situations where they can be specialists in whatever it is that their mind is well suited to. That is definitely problematic in a school environment, where you're shifting to a different class every 40 minutes when the bell rings.

You get an autistic person who might be a mathematical genius; if you let him spend 10 hours a day in math he'll be the next Einstein but you give a 40-minute math class and then the bell rings and then he has to run off to another class and that's just not the right way for the mind to work in terms of jumping back and forth.

Ofer Zur: Yeah, that makes sense in some regard. My children go to a Waldorf school when so much of the learning is so individualized across the board. When each child can do so much of their own pacing as in Montessori or similar.

Nick Walker: Yeah, that's a much better environment for an autistic child I think than the way the public schools are under the No Child Left Behind, it's just really designed to leave autistic children behind.

Ofer Zur: Yes, very good. You mentioned earlier on, the very important concept of neurodiversity. I would like to do more justice for you to explain to us ... I mean, I know you alluded to that with naming it or without it, but give us your definition, characterization, and the importance of this construct.

Nick Walker: Neurodiversity is actually what I'm writing my doctoral thesis on and the basic idea of neurodiversity is treating neurological difference just like any other natural form of human diversity. Viewing a minority neurological style like autism, ADHD, dyslexia, as natural forms of human diversity and treating them as cross-cultural or diversity issues rather than pathologizing them. Looking at neurological variation the same way as you would look at ethnic diversity, racial diversity, gender or sexual preference diversity. The term neurodiversity was coined in the late 90's and there's a—neurodiversity emerged out of the autistic self-advocacy movement, and now there's a growing neurodiversity movement, which I've been a part of really, since its inception really. A growing neurodiversity movement that is still largely driven by autistic people but it's spreading beyond that.

Ofer Zur: You know it kind of dovetails so much of what my critique of the DSM and schizophrenia. When I lived in Africa, in some of the tribes in East Africa and Central Africa, there was a place and a role for a person who was talking to trees. It was a designation. They didn't lock him or her up. There was a role. There was another person who's job was to talk to the ancestors, to connect the past to the present to

the future.

Nick Walker: Exactly.

Ofer Zur: We now lock them up under schizophrenia and medicate them so they are zombies.

Nick Walker: Right.

Ofer Zur: But in the village, in an organic community, it seems like very similar to what you are saying. Neurodiversity or spiritual, just tolerance for differences. Not everybody went to the field and planted corn or went fishing. I remember there was a musician and every morning they put a bowl of rice and every evening a bowl of chicken in front of his hut because his role was to drum during the ritual when the girls going to the ecstasy, whatever it is...

Nick Walker: I lost you for a moment, sorry.

Ofer Zur: Say that again.

Nick Walker: The sound cut out for a moment. Sorry about that.

Ofer Zur: Are we back? Are we okay now?

Nick Walker: We're back, yeah.

Ofer Zur: Okay, so in this village, people had different roles. Not everybody fetch water, not everybody harvest corn. Some people talked to trees. There was a joker that was fed. There was a musician, and I think for me, I'm holding these images from my 20's living with the Massai and other tribes in Africa of the ultimate acceptance of diversity and neurodiversity and otherwise, without calling schizophrenia, without the DSM about Autism.

Nick Walker: Yeah, and there's a fellow named Thomas Armstrong who is an expert on multiple learning styles, education speaker, consultant, writer on education. He came out with a book last year called *Neurodiversity*. It was really nice to see that emergence in the mainstream. To see a fairly mainstream, non-autistic author write a book on neurodiversity and that's what he talks about, niche construction. Constructing social niches. A big part of the problem, these minority neurological styles like autism and even like schizophrenia are pathologized because we live in a culture that doesn't make a place for them. It's an industrial culture and it's this idea of people needing to be nicely fitted interchangeable cogs in the machine.

Ofer Zur: Exactly.

Nick Walker: But society is better off I think, the contributions when a niche can be constructed, when the needs of neurological minority members like autistic people can be

accommodated, they have enormous contributions to make because there is this outside-of-the-box thinking...

Ofer Zur: Absolutely.

Nick Walker: ...the solution to have different sorts of insights. This brings me back to the myth, the misconception that there's an autism epidemic. One of the problems with that misconception is it gives this illusion, this myth that autism is something new and this has led to some very, very dangerous other myths that have arisen. People looking for environmental causes of autism. The most harmful one has been, for a long time, there's been this persistent myth that autism was caused by vaccines, and of course, this is awful because it led to a lot of people refusing vaccines and children have died from it, children are dying again from vaccine-preventable illness because of this myth. It's scaring people away from vaccines.

Ofer Zur: Were mothers blamed for autism too, as mothers have been blamed for everything else?

Nick Walker: Oh of course, of course. Actually, that was the original was that, the psychoanalytic interpretation of autism; originally Bruno Bettelheim, famously wrote this book called “The Hidden Fortress,” way back in the 1950's. It was the first book about the causes of autism and he completely blamed it on mothers.

Ofer Zur: Let me ask you something kind of a little bit—it's tied together in a funny way. I know in the DSM, people make money out of ADHD and they make money out of diagnosing 2 years old with bipolar. I'm not cynical, I mean it in a very distressed way. What is the economic forces about the DSM 5 and rediagnosing, are other people to making money out of certain view of autism, the way we have about ADHD and bipolar?

Nick Walker: Yes, I think there are people making money out of it. People make money out of pathologizing autism because they prescribe medications for it. There's no medication that's proven to be good for it. I don't think autistic people should be ... the usual approach to autism on the part of parents and professionals, particularly when dealing with autistic children, but even with dealing with adults, is to force them to act like non-autistic children. Medication becomes a form of enforcing compliance. A way of drugging them into conformity and that's the case with ADHD children as well, of course. There's a big industry for that. There is a huge industry of behavior modification. There's this ... I guess we'll talk more maybe later on about treatments. How autism is worked with.

Ofer Zur: Actually, this would actually be a very good time to talk about what are your views stemming from your view of what the problem is or the problem isn't. What is appropriate? Not economically driven, not a social stigma, not education kind of no child left behind? What is the true healing approaches or treatment to autism, if any?

Nick Walker: Well, I believe we should not be trying to cure autism. I think one central idea in neurodiversity, this is a natural form of human diversity and I'm quite convinced that it is and that it has a valuable evolutionary purpose. It's a healthy form of biodiversity within the human species. We shouldn't be trying to cure it anymore than we should be trying to cure homosexuality or cure Christianity or Judaism or Atheism. Unfortunately the field of psychology has an ugly history of pathologizing difference and turning that into a tool of aggression.

Ofer Zur: And money making. It's a self-serving within my colleagues and your colleagues.

Nick Walker: It is self-serving. There's money in it, so I think in terms of helping autistic people, what we want is—social change I think is necessary rather than ... I think we need to be looking at the social model of disability here. That's also central to the concept of neurodiversity. It's a social model of disability, which emerged from the disability rights movement. The idea that disability is context dependent. It's not located within the individual. A person is not intrinsically disabled, the person is disabled in different ways depending on the context in which they are. We live in a culture, in a society that disables autistic people and so, making social changes to create better niches to better accommodate the needs of autistic people is the most important step. Not trying to change the people to fit them in the box but changing the shape of the box.

In terms of working with autistic people, skills training is essential and this is a lot of what I do now. Training autistic people...

Ofer Zur: Skills training like how?

Nick Walker: The skill of self-regulation, for instance. If you live in a world, if you have the sensory sensitivities, being prone to sensory overload, and you live in a high-stimulation world ...

Ofer Zur: How to cope with that, how to deal with that.

Nick Walker: Yes, exactly. Coping skills. How do you calm yourself, how do you stay calm especially for an autistic person who may lose the ability to be verbal in a high stress situation. How do you stay calm enough to function the way you want to function in a given situation? How do you get by in social worlds where the social style is ... rather than saying autistic people have social deficits, autistic people have their own social style, and we socialize just fine among ourselves. How do you teach autistic people to socialize with non-autistic people as a foreign language. Rather than saying your way of doing it is wrong, how do you teach it in terms of skills, this is how non-autistic people in this culture socialize. Here are ways that you can work with that. Here are ways that you can adapt when you need to.

A combination of creating social niches and creating a more neurodiversity friendly social environment, and professionals can work with autistic people to train them in these self-regulation skills and adaptive skills without pathologizing them.

Ofer Zur: Excellent.

Nick Walker: I also think that a lot of what gets interpreted as symptoms of autism are actually symptoms of the trauma of growing up in a world where one is pathologized, rejected. So many autistic people have posttraumatic stress disorder, just complex PTSD, just from their upbringing, from being rejected by their parents for how their minds work, being bullied in school, bullied by teachers and law enforcement officials, told their way of thinking and doing things is wrong all the time and so, you get a lot of anxiety, depression, trauma symptoms. That gets interpreted as being symptoms of autism but they can actually be worked with separately. They're trauma symptoms rather than autism symptoms.

Ofer Zur: Exactly. It's a result of a context that doesn't understand, or pathologizes, it and mistreats it, rather than the original style.

Nick Walker: Exactly, so if I had one thing to say—I do consulting work with psychotherapists who are working with autistic clients. They'll call me in to consult, and this is the biggest message that I try to communicate. The most important thing I try to communicate with a mental health professional is: treat the trauma and the depression and the anxiety. Don't treat the autism. Don't try to turn your autistic client into a non-autistic person, try to turn them into a happy, well-adjusted autistic person.

Ofer Zur: Beautiful. Now, kind of, towards the last part of the interview, which is really ... I'm so moved to hear that you thought about it and it's so educational. I'm just so pleased we are doing it. Some of the focus that I've been working on is the digital age. We have the Internet, we have the iPhone, the iPads, we have endless amount of apps, which create overstimulating but also brings a lot of tools. What are some of the challenges this digital age presents to people with autistic way of being, and what are also the incredible opportunities? I cannot think about any just because I'm not an expert on the field but there must be, since some of this digital technology also can benefit. If you can talk to on both aspects of that?

Nick Walker: Yes. For autistic people it's been actually more benefit. The benefits have been great. The challenges are not so much in the development of the technology. The challenges come from how as technology becomes more available to do things faster, the pace of society, the pace of life in modern society gets faster and faster and the level of stimulation. That's difficult for autistic people, the speed of life, but that's not because of the technology so much, I think, as it is that our culture still has this industrial age orientation of produce more, produce more. Our public schools are turning into factories that produce test scores. That societal mindset I think is especially hard on autistic people, who need to do things at their own pace.

Ofer Zur: How does that, for example, Facebook or iPhone apps are relevant to ...

Nick Walker: There I think, we're talking about actual online communication technology, that's

been extremely beneficial for autistic people.

Ofer Zur: In what way?

Nick Walker: So many of us are non ... either have difficulty with speech, have difficulty with face to face interaction, have been isolated in one way or another, and often, if we're not adapting to, we don't have skills that help us get by, professionals ... we don't find the right professional niche, it's pretty hard to adapt. It's very hard for autistic people to find employment often. There's economically, socially, and such, there's a lot of isolation. And especially for autistic people who don't speak or who really have trouble with the neurotypical style of social interaction. The internet really changed that because online, body language is not an issue. Being able to drive somewhere, having the money to travel somewhere is not an issue. You can just communicate with someone. Being able to speak is not an issue. You can communicate with someone if you can operate a keyboard or in some other way get your words on the screen, you can communicate with people all over the world.

Ofer Zur: In your own pace.

Nick Walker: At your own pace, exactly. An online discussion forum is asynchronous. It's completely self-paced. People come in when they're ready to type at their own pace and hit the enter key when they're ready to. I've often heard it said, the Internet has been for autistic people what sign language was for the deaf community. It really has been that big a difference and there wouldn't be a giant autistic community and a thriving autistic self-advocacy movement if it weren't for the existence of the Internet.

Ofer Zur: How interesting. Yeah that makes perfect sense. Are there any special apps that are relevant or software that is specifically helpful?

Nick Walker: For non-verbal, non-speaking autistic people, yes, having something like an iPad that will do text to speech is really helpful. There's all kinds of things. There's all kinds of, iPads are really big. There's been a lot of movement towards using iPads for autistic people. In fact, I believe Steve Jobs actually even talked about this when he introduced, kicked off the product line, introduced the iPad as a possible use for autistic people. It's very ... I don't have one myself but they're extremely useful in a lot of ways and because I don't have one myself, I'm not that familiar with the specific apps besides text and speech.

There's a lot just in terms of being able to show people what is a visual thinker. You can pull out your iPad, show people what you're thinking right there on the screen. Just as a communication tool even, or as a quick reference, research tool, learning tool, very useful and it's a very good interface. It's a visual, a very friendly interface, good visual interface that one can personalize. One can move things around, arrange it. This is how my mind works so this is how I'm going to set things up for myself. The fact that there are more and more opportunities to personalize how one's iPad or computer is configured means there's a lot more opportunity to make

it harmonious with one's own natural thinking style.

Ofer Zur: That makes sense. As we're almost done with our time for today, I have a feeling I could talk to you for another 20 hours. Give us final thoughts, hopes that we will be left with if you can. A way to wrap up your message, your vision, your hopes.

Nick Walker: I would say my biggest hope is for neuro diversity as a paradigm to catch on and this is what my doctoral work is about and my work in the world. For neurological difference not to be pathologized and to be recognized as a natural form of human diversity and for ... this is not just for the benefit of autistic people and other neurological minority groups. I think that this is necessary. Necessary maybe even for the human species in a way. Autistic people are the canaries in the coal mine. They're disabled and pathologized because the way that modern society is put together, the way the modern world works. All the noise and stimulation of it and the relentless drive towards industrial production. All of this is a hard world for autistic people to live in, but it's not working for non-autistic people either. As a mental health professional you know how many people are suffering from depression and anxiety all the time.

Ofer Zur: Well generally just living without meaning and purpose and connection to God or whatever.

Nick Walker: A world that allows more space for sensory experience and for the rich diversity of human experience, human cognitive experience, human diversity, and human sensory experience. A world that's well suited to autistic people in that way, I think is going to be better suited for everyone. A world, if we listen to autistic people and to what they need in the world, I think we end up creating a world that really maybe offers more opportunity for happiness and connection...

Ofer Zur: For everyone.

Nick Walker: ...For everyone, yeah.

Ofer Zur: Thank you so, so much and again. This audio will be part of an online course on autism that Nick Walker will offer for us and the institute is at www.zurinstitute.com. You have a website that you can give us a quick URL where people can follow up on your work too, Nick?

Nick Walker: Yes. I have a couple. There's a new one that's still in progress, which is TransformativeSomatics.com just all run together as one word. Transformativesomatics.com. That's for the consulting I do for my work. Consulting and teaching and training people, so that's the big one that I would recommend for that. I also run an Aikido school in Berkeley, California, and I work there in a way that—I have autistic students, ADHD students, so that's just open to everyone and that's AIKIARTS.com. Both of those are good ways to get a hold of me.

Ofer Zur: We'll put it also on our website, our new authors page, so people will be able to

follow up and I would like to thank you again for just such an important work and I really believe that what you do has ramifications for the entire culture, the entire society, and our hopefully openness to true sense of diversity and respectful way of different way of being. Thank you so, so much Nick. It was such a pleasure talking to you.

Nick Walker: Thank you very much.

Ofer Zur: Okay. Bye-bye.

Nick Walker: Bye.