

Excerpts from *The Reason I Jump*, by Naoki Hagashida, a very smart, very self-aware, and very charming thirteen-year-old boy with autism.

After reading these samples, write a one-page reflection in which you (paragraph one) summarize the content of the excerpts, including 2-3 short direct quotations and (paragraph two) describe your reaction to this reading. Does it affirm or contradict your previous experiences with and / or impressions of people with autism?

**Q16** *Is it true that you hate being touched?*

Personally, I have no particular problem with physical contact, but sure, some people with autism can't stand being hugged or touched. I don't know why, to be honest—I guess it just makes them feel uneasy. Even the way we adjust our clothing to match the season, putting on more clothes in winter and fewer in summertime, this can be a very big deal for people with tactile issues. Acting accordingly as situations change is a tough call.

More generally, for a person with autism, being touched by someone else means that the toucher is exercising control over the person's body, which not even its owner can control properly. It's as if we lose who we are. Think about it—that's terrifying!

There's also the dread that by being touched our thoughts will become visible. And if that happened, the other person would *really* start worrying about us. You see? We put up a barricade around ourselves to keep people out.

**Q18** *When you're on one of your highs, what's going through your mind?*

Sometimes people with autism start laughing like a hyena or appear to be having enormous fun on their own without any obvious reason for it. You must be wondering, *What on Earth's gotten into him?*

At times like these, we're having "imaginings." Or not quite imaginings, but we experience pictures or scenes in our minds that pop up out of nowhere. Maybe it's the memory of something that made us laugh, or maybe it's a page from a book we read.

This might be hard for you to understand. But try to see these "highs" as a stronger version of those times when you remember something funny and can't help but chuckle about it.

**Q25** *What's the reason you jump?*

What do you think I'm feeling when I'm jumping up and down clapping my hands? I bet you think I'm not really feeling anything much beyond the manic glee all over my face.

But when I'm jumping, it's as if my feelings are going upward to the sky. Really, my urge to be swallowed up by the sky is enough to make my heart quiver. When I'm jumping, I can feel my body parts really well, too—my bounding legs and my clapping hands—and that makes me feel so, so good.

So that's one reason why I jump, and recently I've noticed another reason. People with autism react physically to feelings of happiness and sadness. So when something happens that affects me emotionally, my body seizes up as if struck by lightning.

"Seizing up" doesn't mean that my muscles literally get stiff and immobile—rather, it means that I'm not free to move the way I want. So by jumping up and down, it's as if

I'm shaking loose the ropes that are tying up my body. When I jump, I feel lighter, and I think the reason my body is drawn skyward is that the motion makes me want to change into a bird and fly off to some faraway place.

But constrained both by ourselves and by the people around us, all we can do is tweet-tweet, flap our wings and hop around in a cage. Ah, if only I could just flap my wings and soar away, into the big blue yonder, over the hills and far away!

**Q24** *Would you like to be “normal”?*

What would we do if there was some way that we could be “normal”? Well, I bet the people around us—our parents and teachers—would be ecstatic with joy and say, “Hallelujah! We’ll change them back to normal right now!” And for ages and ages I badly wanted to be normal, too. Living with special needs is so depressing and so relentless; I used to think it’d be the best thing if I could just live my life like a normal person.

But now, even if somebody developed a medicine to cure autism, I might well choose to stay as I am. Why have I come around to thinking this way?

To give the short version, I’ve learned that every human being, with or without disabilities, needs to strive to do their best, and by striving for happiness you will arrive at happiness. For us, you see, having autism is normal—so we can’t know for sure what your “normal” is even like. But so long as we can learn to love ourselves, I’m not sure how much it matters whether we’re normal or autistic.

**Q55** *Why can you never stay still?*

My body’s always moving about. I just can’t stay still. When I’m not moving, it feels as if my soul is detaching itself from my body, and this makes me so jumpy and scared that I can’t stay where I am. I’m always on the lookout for an exit. But even though I’m forever wanting to be someplace else, I can never actually find my way there. I’m always struggling inside my own body, and staying still really hammers it home that I’m trapped here. But as long as I’m in a state of motion, I’m able to relax a little bit.

Everyone tells people with autism, “Calm down, stop fidgeting, stay still,” when we’re busy moving around. But because I feel so much more relaxed when I *am* moving, it took me quite a while to work out exactly what their “calm down” even meant. Finally, I’ve come to understand that there are times when I’m not supposed to be moving about. The only way we can learn to do this is by practicing, a little at a time.

**Q23** *What’s the worst thing about having autism?*

You never notice. Really, you have no idea quite how miserable we are. The people who are looking after us may say, “Minding these kids is *really* hard work, you know!” but for us—who are always causing the problems and are useless at pretty much everything we try to do—you can’t begin to imagine how miserable and sad we get.

Whenever we’ve done something wrong, we get told off or laughed at, without even being able to apologize, and we end up hating ourselves and despairing about our own lives, again and again and again. It’s impossible not to wonder why we were born into this world as human beings at all.

But I ask you, those of you who are with us all day, not to stress yourselves out because of us. When you do this, it feels as if you’re denying any value at all that our lives may have—and that saps the spirit we need to soldier on. The

hardest ordeal for us is the idea that we are causing grief for other people. We can put up with our own hardships okay, but the thought that our lives are the source of other people’s unhappiness, that’s plain unbearable.

**Q58** *What are your thoughts on autism itself?*

I think that people with autism are born outside the regime of civilization. Sure, this is just my own made-up theory, but I think that, as a result of all the killings in the world and the selfish planet-wrecking that humanity has committed, a deep sense of crisis exists.

Autism has somehow arisen out of this. Although people with autism look like other people physically, we are in fact very different in many ways. We are more like travelers from the distant, distant past. And if, by our being here, we could help the people of the world remember what truly matters for the Earth, that would give us a quiet pleasure.