

Autistic Author Offers Insights into Disorder Few People Understand

**Frank Boyett, The Gleaner
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Thomas A. McKean was an adult, and had only shortly before found out that he was autistic, when he first attended a local chapter meeting of the *Autism Society of America*.

The meeting started with everyone introducing themselves, and he was wrestling with whether he should pretend to have an autistic child, like most of the other participants. In the end, though, he decided to simply tell the truth about himself. "There was this dead silence in the room," he related. "Then there was this whisper: Oh my God! It's a miracle!"

McKean's appearance, Thursday night in Henderson, sponsored by the Western Kentucky Chapter of ASA, was not nearly as dramatic. But the approximately 130 who attended from a radius of 150 miles, asked many of the same questions McKean heard at that first meeting.

"Everyone was looking for information," he said. "I had a lot more of it than I knew I did."

Later, at the urging of a professional who deals with autism, he wrote a book to try to convey that information. In the past eight months, *Soon Will Come the Light: A View From Inside the Autism Puzzle* has sold 3,000 copies and a second edition will soon be coming out. For the past several years, he's been in demand at autism conferences, because it is relatively rare for someone with autism to be able to clearly express their thoughts.

So what's it like to live with a neurological disorder that few people understand? "Autism is black and white," he said, a land of extremes where there are very few shades of gray. Some frequencies of sound may be painful to the ear, the textures of some foods may be unpleasant, the actions of other people may be incomprehensible.

"They may be oversensitive to light. Fluorescent lights may drive them wild." One professional, he related, is even advocating that autism be renamed, "*Sensory Integration Deficit Disorder*."

McKean spoke of a nearly constant "low-intensity pain" caused by the perceptions of his senses.

"If you're in pain most of the time, the world is not going to be a very nice place to live."

Although many professionals estimate that up to 70 percent of those with autism have mental retardation, McKean disagrees with that figure. The problem, as he sees it, is that society has the misconception to equate verbal ability with intelligence.

"I think they are smart," he said. You have to look for it, but it is there. I'm sure all the parents in this room know what I mean."

And that topic relates to McKean's main advice for parents of autistic children: "Treat them like they have intelligence, whether they show it or not."

The 29 year old Columbus, OH resident occasionally flashed a sly wit. For instance, when asked why he was placed in a mental institution at age 14, he replied, "I was a rather rambunctious lad."

He said he doesn't remember much of his childhood; he didn't begin speaking on a regular basis until late. "There are times when you want to talk. But you go to say something and nothing happens."

And even today, he said, he watches other people in their interactions, to try to imitate better social skills. "I knew what was going on, but I didn't know why."