



Newsweek

My Turn: Seeing a Smile I Had Not Known Existed

I never understood what drew my autistic sibling to the Pentecostal church. Then I went with him.

By Liz Grossman
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March 19, 2007 issue - Under the fluorescent lights and lazy ceiling fans of a Pentecostal church in Milwaukee, I watched my oldest brother crouch down and rest his head in his hands. He began to pray silently, moving his lips. Two pastors knelt alongside him and rubbed his back. They, too, began to pray. It was a remarkable sight, because our family is Jewish. Even more remarkable was the fact that my brother was allowing himself to be touched.

My brother Tim was diagnosed with autism as a young child in the '60s, but as he grew up his symptoms seemed closer to Asperger's disorder and severe OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder), while he displayed the savant characteristics of autism. If Tim ate at a restaurant, a certain amount of time had to pass before he allowed himself to return. Before he could enter a room he would have to cross and recross the threshold. He couldn't quite balance his checkbook, but he could tell you what the weather was like on April 17, 1981.

I was 12 years younger than Tim, and out of my five brothers, he's the one I spoke to the least. As I reached my teens, he thought I was materialistic and shallow; I thought he was intense, peculiar and downright scary when he got mad.

My brother was always reliable, hardworking and could manage physical jobs based on repetition—it was his interpersonal relationships and social interactions that suffered most. At 40, Tim was college-educated with a job, a car and a small apartment I never saw, but imagined looking like his old room at home: immaculately stacked piles of old newspapers, brown lunch bags filled with broken glass from kitchen mishaps, 14 of the same style of polo shirt hanging in perfect alignment.

A co-worker at his office, where he filed medical records, invited him to his first Bible study. It wasn't long before one class became a service he looked forward to every Sunday. All the while, he continued to attend temple with our family on the High Holidays and took part in our Seders and holiday parties. "Are you trying to cover all of your bases?" our father would joke.

I was intrigued. I had no idea what Tim did on those Sunday afternoons, but I knew that it filled him with a kind of peace no medication or doctor ever had. After church, he'd come over to our parents' house for family dinners with a sense of calm, his eyes settled, his body slightly less rigid. He even began making a habit, one of his thousands, of giving our mom a quick hug before he'd head home.

I realized that joining Tim in his element was the only way I'd ever elevate our conversations past a casual hello. I asked him if I could meet him at his church.

That hot Sunday in July, he seemed a little shocked that I actually showed. We walked together to his usual pew, on the right side, second row from the front—the spot he always takes at our temple. In the first 10 minutes, my brother introduced me to more people than I'd known him to befriend in his whole life. A young man with a kind face, but a body that wouldn't stop fidgeting, turned around and asked, "She your girlfriend?"

"This is my sister," Tim said with a smile I hadn't known existed.

The service started. As the emotional songs swelled, I felt the vibrations through the floor and padded pew, but my brother seemed to feel them even more strongly, and began clapping, swaying and singing. His usual straight-backed posture was softened by a ballad called "Holiness" that had him calmly lip-syncing along. He peeked over to see if I was watching him.

When the pastor asked everyone to grab hands and try to feel the Holy Spirit together, I held my brother's hand for the first time ever. We bowed our heads to pray while a slim woman, in a modest plum blouse and

long flowered skirt, held his other hand and began to speak out loud to herself in an unknown, indecipherable language. Growing up, we often heard Tim talking to himself for hours on end. "Do you ever do that?" I whispered. "I have, but I won't do it today," he told me.

When it came time for open prayer, Tim went up to the front of the room and crouched down on the gold velvet carpet in front of the altar. All around him people cried into their hands, shook their heads as they prayed, some bawling, others pleading to an invisible entity. My brother lay close to the ground, quiet, relaxed and content.

By the time Tim returned to his seat, I was exhausted and drained and feeling slightly guilty. I hadn't even attempted to pray. "How do you feel?" I asked him, "Elated," he said, his intense hazel eyes growing wide. "Do you think the rest of the family will come, too?" he asked as he clutched a black leather Bible none of us knew he owned. I hope they do.

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