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Long drawn to animals, Ezra (greeting a four-legged friend at a park near his Los Angeles home) is fond of approaching strangers to ask to pet their dogs. Sometimes he does more.

In a quiet corner of the Los Angeles Zoo, an 11-year-old boy in an orange fleece jacket paces in front of the lemur cage, his eyes tracing the movement of the limber creatures as they bounce from floor to limb to ledge. “I love these guys!” he says, barely able to contain his glee—or his volume. “They’re *sooooo cuuuute!*” Other visitors come and go: moms pushing strollers, couples, a den of cub scouts. But 20 minutes later, the boy is still there, so enthralled he’s leaping in the air while passersby exchange looks that ask, “What’s *wrong* with that kid?”

That boy is my middle son Ezra, and this hour among the animals at the zoo is a ritual the two of us share almost weekly. Other fathers teach their kids to golf or fish. I take Ezra to the zoo. Ezra has autism, and though doctors label him “high-functioning,” the neurological disorder affects everything about him. If most boys are a whirlwind of motion, he is a hurricane. On a bad day, he sits at the dinner table for 45 seconds, exactly long

FINDING MY SON AT THE ZOO

LIKE MANY CHILDREN WITH AUTISM, EZRA LIVES IN A WORLD OF HIS OWN— EXCEPT WHEN HE IS AMONG THE ANIMALS • BY THOMAS FIELDS-MEYER



He'll pause for a staring contest with an orangutan, but like many children with autism, Ezra (at the Los Angeles Zoo with dad Tom) has trouble sustaining eye contact with humans.



Besides animals, Ezra's other passion is cartoon characters (including Gummy). He can recite the premiere date of every Disney animated feature since 1937.



Ezra (No. 14) sharing breakfast at home with (from left) his dad, brother Noam, mother Shawn and brother Amiel.

“WHAT DOES HE FIND SO SOOTHING? EZRA CAN’T, OR WON’T, EXPLAIN: ‘I JUST LIKE LOOKING AT THE ANIMALS’”

enough to down a few spoonfuls of macaroni before jumping up to pace the kitchen. In the midst of a loving family, he prefers isolation—what my wife, Shawn, once called “Planet Ezra.” He avoids eye contact, answers questions with a mumbled phrase, then peppers us with random snippets about what’s on his mind: the exact running time of the *Cars* DVD (116 minutes), the sugar content of a bowl of Cheerios—or the baby pig photo he Googled last week.

I bring Ezra to the zoo, usually on Sunday afternoon, because there, all of that melts away. I let him flash our membership card, we pass through the familiar gates, and I watch him sprint to the sea lions. And he transforms into a different boy: calm, open and happy. “Oh, *there’s* the little ocelot. You *see* it?” he says later, a lilt in his voice, eyes wide with innocent delight.

In our 70-plus visits I have struggled with the monotony. How many

times can a grown man watch a meerkat nibble a nut? But I have never tired of watching my son. Something here pacifies him: the animals, the familiar routine, maybe the combination. What does he find so soothing? Ezra can’t, or won’t, explain: “I just like looking at the animals,” he says.

He always has. Starting at age 2, he spent hours in silence, lining up plastic toy zebras and dinosaurs in symmetrical patterns across the back porch, screaming if one of his brothers—Amiel, 20 months older, and Noam, nearly two years younger—nudged a stegosaurus out of place. (See box for more on autistic children and

animals.) Shawn and I found Ezra’s solitary routines peculiar. But we weren’t troubled until he was 2½ and a preschool teacher told us about how he spent his mornings flipping through picture books, oblivious to his classmates. Though we were careful to avoid labels at first, just after Ezra turned 3 a psychologist gave him one: autistic.


Shawn, a rabbi, tried to make spiritual sense of the situation. I was more pragmatic, searching online into the night for any bit of information and soliciting other parents’ advice about schools and doctors. We both tried desperately to connect with our son. One afternoon at the therapist’s office, after weeks of

frustrating attempts to penetrate Ezra’s wall, Shawn was in tears and I was silent. “You need to mourn,” the counselor said. “For whom?” I asked. “For the child he didn’t turn out to be.”

That awful night I wrestled with the idea of grief and realized it simply wasn’t my instinct. I had never carried preconceived notions of what my children would become, and to this day I have not wept over Ezra. Instead I poured love on the kid he *did* turn out to be—a quirky but affectionate boy who answered questions by repeating the question. Like many kids on the autism spectrum, Ezra speaks obsessively about obscure topics such as

breakfast cereals and clay animation. Strolling in our neighborhood, he once greeted an adult by saying, “Hello, do you know about Gummy?” At a playground, Shawn and I watched hopefully while Ezra chased another boy, seemingly in a game of tag. It turned out it wasn’t the boy Ezra was pursuing, but the Elmo picture on his cap.

His connection with animals was something deeper. At 3, Ezra was so enamored of reptiles that he would go everywhere—the playground, the bathtub—clutching a small toy alligator in each fist. Our family was setting out to visit relatives in Portland, Ore., when an airport security screener searched



“‘YOU NEED TO MOURN,’ THE COUNSELOR SAID. ‘FOR WHOM?’ I ASKED. ‘FOR THE CHILD HE DIDN’T TURN OUT TO BE’”

After struggling with her son’s diagnosis, Shawn (with Ezra at home) started a network of support groups for parents of children with special needs.

Ezra’s backpack and found his foot-long plastic crocodile. “He can’t carry that on,” she said, as Ezra began to cry. The toy, it seems, was too lifelike. Never have parents begged so much for a piece of green plastic to be let on an airplane, but she wouldn’t relent.

When we started visiting real animals in the zoo, a new part of Ezra came to life—and with it a part of me was renewed too. He had only been once or twice when, one night in the bath, he began listing a long series of animals—tigers, bears, rhinos, hippos—and I quickly realized he was ticking off animals in the exact order we had seen them. On a visit soon after Ezra, all of 5 years old, raced from the car to the gate, then dashed through the zoo, leaving me behind—feeling bewildered at how disconnected he seemed. On the drive home I asked him why he hadn’t paused to look at the animals. *Silence.* I kept asking until he answered: “I saw them.” And I understood. Ezra had catalogued all the species in his mind; he drew comfort from finding them where they were supposed to be.

On another afternoon I encouraged him to go slowly and hung back to see what he would do. We arrived at the

sea lions just as a zookeeper brought a pail of fish for lunch. Ezra leaned on the metal rail for half an hour, entranced. It was the kind of breakthrough for which Shawn and I sometimes had to wait months. I thought of how Ezra could barely sit at the cafeteria table and how he endured karate lessons only while asking the instructor every two minutes when the hour would be up. As I watched him smile with delight I felt a deep sense of hope mixed with sadness—hope that he was taking pleasure in something, sadness that it was not with other people.

For those relationships, unfortunately, remained unfulfilling. We enrolled him in special education programs for kids with autism and later a school focused on teaching social skills to kids like him, but Ezra is a loner. When we inquired of his doctor, a talented autism specialist, about this, she assured us that Ezra will have close friends—someday. “Maybe one or two,” she said, “kids who share his interests.”

Fortunately he has his brothers, who play and fight with him as if he were any typical sibling. Ami, 12, and a social magnet at school, could not be more different but goes to any length to

defend Ezra. Noam, 9, used to naturally draw Ezra into silly games. Now he guides him to an online chat room where kids can log on and pretend to be penguins. For a brief period all three enjoyed the zoo, but as with most kids, Ami and Noam’s interest waned.

Ezra’s just soared. For his 10th birth-

ANIMALS AND AUTISTIC KIDS

Autism affects 1 in 150 children, often causing serious problems with communication and social relations. But many autistic kids like Ezra have an affinity for animals. Why? Temple Grandin, a Colorado State University professor of animal science and a high-functioning autistic, says “some autistic kids can understand what animals are thinking and feeling because, like animals, they can’t rely on language to communicate. Their world is based on pictures and sounds, smells, tastes and touch.” Grandin has developed her own interest in livestock into a career; she advises parents to “use that fixation on animals—or trains, or whatever—and broaden it. That obsession is a huge motivator.”

Questions? Visit autismspeaks.org.



People ask Ezra (at home with some of his animals) if he wants to become a vet or a zookeeper. “Right now,” he says, “I’m just focusing on my childhood.”

“I ASKED IF HE HAD SEEN A WOODPECKER. ‘WELL, I HEARD ONE ON A HIKE ON NOV. 28, 2003. IT WAS A FRIDAY’ ”

day, he received a 624-page animal encyclopedia that became his constant companion. He pored over it in synagogue as if it were the Torah itself. On the school bus, while other kids played with their Game Boys, Ezra inhaled data about habitats and extinction rates. Not long after that, on a trip to the zoo in Portland, my father pointed out what he thought was a monkey. Ezra corrected him. “That’s not a monkey, it’s a siamang, the largest gibbon,” he said. “Lower risk of extinction.” As Ezra rushed on, my dad took out his Treo and accessed the Internet. “He’s right!” Dad said with a delighted grin.

What gave me encouragement was that he didn’t just remember the animals. He had a remarkable recall for his interactions with them. When a school reading assignment mentioned a woodpecker, I asked if he had seen a woodpecker. “Well, I heard one on a hike on Nov. 28, 2003. It was a Friday.”

He accumulated an extensive mental diary whose entries he would share spontaneously at random moments, over pizza or in the car. “Remember in November of 2005,” he said over his oatmeal, breaking into laughter, “when that baby threw her daddy’s hat into the otters?”

Rather than let him build a storehouse of animal trivia all alone, Shawn and I try to make his interest in animals a point of social connection. At a conference Shawn met Temple Grandin, a well-known autistic author. “Whatever he shows an interest in, encourage that,” Grandin told her. “That could turn into something.” And a school therapist helped him create cards on which Ezra drew animals, with descriptive captions—“Frog is feeling guilty because he took chameleon’s fly”—to help him understand human emotions.

Of course learning to live among real Homo sapiens is a more complex

proposition. One Sunday at the zoo, a woman approached us. “I think my son knows your son from school,” she said. Ezra did recognize the boy, who, it turns out, shared his passion for the zoo. This was an opportunity, I thought, for Ezra to reach out to a schoolmate. The two boys just trudged on, taking note of the dromedaries and gray wolves, but oblivious to each other. I was disappointed, but, as parents learn, you can’t choose your kids’ friends.

I remember that incident after we’ve left the lemurs on our most recent zoo trip, and gone on to the chimps, the gibbons and the snow leopards. When Ezra was younger, Shawn and I carried the hidden wish that with enough intervention, perhaps one day Ezra would fit in like any other kid. Now our dreams are different: that he will make a friend; that one day he can live on his own; that perhaps he’ll find love. As he and I walk hand in hand toward the exit, I wonder if the joy Ezra feels among his animals will ever permeate the rest of his life—and hope my little boy will someday feel as content and comfortable among his own species. ●