



Shifting Perspectives | By Louie Fermor

Am I frustrated that there's a snowstorm on the day of the event? Am I actually upset that this year turned out to have a long winter? No, not at all. So much of the way we see each other and the way we see the seasons depends on storytelling: the story of what is or isn't normal weather, the story of what is or isn't a normal mind.

Truly? I can't help but feel it's risky to complain about snow these days. Our winters have been shrinking. I don't want to say snow isn't wanted and risk scaring it away early. It feels like risking losing time with a friend who's already leaving.

Complaining about the winter seems to be a habitual choice for small talk, though. So maybe I should do it anyway?

I've come to peace with small talk by understanding it as one of the ways people 'echo-locate' each other in the landscape of social dynamics: a way to say hello and get some surer footing about where you both stand, in relation to each other and the place you both find yourselves in.

Before realizing this, I used to feel frustrated by small talk. I find it charming and rather sweet now; the amount of small talk someone needs can be an indicator of how displaced they feel in that moment, and that they may be seeking the comfort of familiar footing. I can only empathize with that feeling. And, after some time, they may join me for a walk on less well-tread conversational paths and the so-called 'real things'.

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I like to look out windows to get my footing. That's the first thing I do after arriving at the event. I find a quiet table next to the floor-to-ceiling windows at the Sam Centre and put in my earplugs. I spend some time watching the snow fall and match my breathing to its gentle pace.

'Neurodiversity', as a term, doesn't describe much, in the same way that 'biodiversity' doesn't describe much other than the process of how plants and animals in an ecosystem will diversify over time. They'll diversify in behaviour, habitat, plumage, even leaf type. 'Neurodiversity' describes the human part of that: humans are animals and, like the rest of the earth, we will diversify over time and that includes our bodies and brains. Neurodiversity really is just natural.

'Neurodivergent' is where things get interesting: in order to define something as divergent, you have to specify what it's diverging from. This is when norms we otherwise take for granted come to the surface, and we start to scrutinize what a normal mind even is. It begs the question (like someone running one of the event booths later said to me after a few minutes of small talk), "What does that even mean? Divergent from what?"

The neurodiversity advocacy movement asks us to take what has previously been cast as a deficit and instead see it as an opportunity. What has been labelled as 'divergent' and why? And who says so? We can ask: how is the story being told and who is telling it?

We could switch from seeing an April snowstorm as something frustrating and unusual to, instead, increasingly rare precipitation to be grateful for. We could switch to seeing how the multi-paced and multi-viewed trajectory of autism advocacy is a strength, rather than a weakness or as something to be fixed or worry about. People develop asynchronously and so do awareness movements. Autistics are not a monolith and maybe the autism advocacy movement isn't one either.

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Before leaving the event, I go to look out the window again. Outside, between the pale grey sky and white ground, everything is washed in the kind of soft light our neuro-inclusive spaces aspire to. Sitting at the tables again, I smile, because this irony sometimes comes to say hello to me at events, summits, and protests: in all our heartfelt attempts to design spaces that are more inclusive and affirming, we often end up replicating what nature already offers. We go so far to describe ourselves as different, only to come back to realizing we are just as well-matched with the natural world as everyone else.

I'm not frustrated with the snowstorm: it's a welcome reminder of this.



Louie Fermor is a professional artist and writer of English-Scottish settler descent residing in Moh'kins'tsis on Treaty 7 territory (Calgary, Canada). Right now, they are working in oil paint and fiction but they have a wide range of mediums.

Via themes of history, naturalism, queerness, and neurocomplexity, they explore portraiture and storytelling--including both the stories we've committed to the pages and the stories we tell ourselves.

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