



Naz Nami

MAY THE POWER BE WITH YOU, ALWAYS

Autism, Masking, Trauma, and
a Reclaiming of Self

Disability Studies

Collection Editor

DAMIAN MELLIFONT

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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Disclaimer

This book was written from a deeply personal perspective shaped by my own lived experiences, professional observations, relationships, grief, healing, spirituality, clinical work, and reflections surrounding neurodivergence, trauma, masking, and humanity. It is not intended to represent every autistic experience, every disability experience, or every perspective within the neurodiversity community. Autism exists across an extraordinarily broad spectrum of support needs, communication styles, intellectual abilities, sensory experiences, identities, cultures, and life circumstances. No single narrative can fully capture that complexity.

Some autistic individuals may resonate deeply with these pages, while others may not identify with certain experiences, interpretations, emotional themes, spiritual reflections, or philosophical viewpoints presented throughout the book. That diversity itself deserves respect. Neurodivergent individuals are not a monolith. Some people experience autism primarily through disability and profound daily challenges. Others experience aspects of autism as deeply connected to creativity, identity, meaning, or perception. Many experience both simultaneously. All of these realities are valid.

This book was never meant to romanticize suffering, deny disability, minimize support needs, discourage evidence-based care, or speak over autistic individuals whose experiences differ from my own. It was written as a personal and human exploration of

masking, survival, healing, trauma, burnout, identity reconstruction, self-compassion, and reclaiming dignity after years of misunderstanding. It reflects one voice among many.

If any part of this book unintentionally caused hurt, frustration, exclusion, offense, or invalidation, I sincerely apologize. That was never my intention. My hope was not to define autism for others, but to create language for experiences that many people, especially late-diagnosed and heavily masked neurodivergent individuals, often struggle to articulate. My intention was to offer compassion, humanity, understanding, empowerment, and hope.

I also recognize that many ideas surrounding autism, trauma, masking, neurodiversity, and mental health continue evolving rapidly within research, clinical practice, disability studies, and autistic-led advocacy spaces. Some concepts discussed in this book reflect emerging theories and perspectives rather than universally agreed-upon conclusions. Readers are encouraged to continue exploring diverse voices, especially autistic voices across the spectrum, including individuals with varying communication methods, support needs, racial and cultural backgrounds, genders, and lived experiences.

Above all, this book was a personal journey. And perhaps most importantly, it was a journey towards compassion for the nervous systems we carry, for the people we once were, and for one another.

Epigraph – may the power be with you, always

If you found your way to this book while exhausted, grieving, masking, burnt out, confused, emotionally overwhelmed, or simply trying to survive another day inside a world that often misunderstands you, I want you to know something before anything else: This book was written for you.

It was written for the child who learnt too early how to become invisible. It was written for the teenager who studied human behaviour like a survival language. It was written for the adult who kept functioning while privately collapsing under the weight of exhaustion, hypervigilance, and self-surveillance. It was written for the people who spent years believing they were defective simply because their nervous systems experienced the world differently.

This book was written for the ones called too sensitive, too emotional, too intense, too quiet, too awkward, too complicated, too difficult, too much, or somehow never enough. More than anything, this book was written for masked autistics by a fellow autistic.

It was written for the people who survived through performance. The people who became experts at adaptation. The people who

learnt how to disappear in order to belong. So many neurodivergent individuals carried entire universes inside themselves while smiling politely through exhaustion. Many became so skilled at functioning externally that even the people closest to them never fully understood how much effort ordinary life required. Behind competence there was often burnout. Behind perfectionism there was fear. Behind professionalism there was hypervigilance. Behind the mask there was usually a human being longing not merely for success, but for safety, understanding, rest, and peace.

Throughout this book, I did not want merely to discuss autism clinically. I wanted to honour the emotional, psychological, relational, spiritual, and deeply human experience of existing as a neurodivergent person inside systems that often ask people to abandon themselves in exchange for acceptance. I wanted to create something that did not reduce autistic individuals to stereotypes, pathology, checklists, or functioning labels. Beneath every diagnosis is a human life. Beneath every behaviour is a nervous system carrying history, adaptation, grief, hope, sensitivity, and survival. I apologise if I invalidate your experiences in any way.

This book was also written for my children and for younger generations growing up now with language many of us never had. I hope you grow up understanding that your nervous systems are not mistakes. I hope you never confuse sensitivity with weakness or emotional depth with failure. I hope you protect your joy fiercely in a world that sometimes rewards emotional numbness more than authenticity. I hope you learn earlier than many of us did that being different does not make you less worthy of love, belonging, dignity, or peace.

I also hope you learn to celebrate the misunderstood parts of yourselves instead of hiding them automatically. The intense imagination. The emotional depth. The sensitivity. The strange interests. The quietness. The intensity. The softness. The awkwardness. The ways your minds notice patterns other people miss. So many autistic children grow up believing they must earn acceptance by shrinking themselves. I hope your inner child learns something gentler. I hope they learn they were never too much to begin with.

This book was written for my patients too. So many of you trusted me with your stories, your grief, your psychosis, your loneliness, your trauma, your humour, your silence, your sensory overwhelm, your resilience, and your humanity. You reminded me repeatedly that healing never begins through humiliation. Healing begins when human beings finally feel seen without being reduced to symptoms alone. You taught me that behaviours are communication, that nervous systems carry stories, and that beneath even the most dysregulated moments there is often pain asking for understanding rather than punishment.

This book was also written for my fellow clinicians, therapists, nurses, psychiatrists, educators, caregivers, advocates, and healers trying to create more humane systems. I hope the future of mental health continues moving further away from rigid normalization and deeper towards compassion, sensory-informed care, trauma-informed practice, neurodiversity-affirming approaches, and genuine listening. Sometimes people do not need to be fixed immediately. Sometimes they need to be understood first. Sometimes healing begins simply because another human being stayed present long enough to listen without judgment.

More than anything else, this book was written to **empower**. Not empowerment through perfection, endless productivity, or becoming indistinguishable from everyone else, but empowerment through truth. The truth is that your nervous system deserves dignity. The truth that sensitivity can coexist with strength. The truth that survival deserves honour. The truth that softness is not weakness. The truth that authenticity is not moral failure. The truth that human diversity has always existed and always will.

I hope you leave this book understanding that masking was never proof you were false. It was proof that you adapted intelligently inside environments that did not always feel safe. I hope you forgive yourselves for surviving the only ways you knew how. I hope you stop measuring your worth solely through productivity, emotional suppression, social performance, or how comfortable you make other people feel. I hope you begin allowing yourselves something more: Rest, honesty, embodiment, boundaries, joy, connection, and peace.

I hope you find relationships where you are not required to perform constantly in order to receive love. I hope you build lives where your nervous systems can finally exhale. I hope you discover that healing does not always arrive dramatically. Sometimes healing looks ordinary and quiet. Taking medications consistently. Sleeping enough. Drinking water. Attending therapy. Allowing sensory comfort. Asking for help. Saying no without guilt. Resting before burnout. Sitting beside another human being who understands your exhaustion without requiring explanation.

And if nobody has told you this clearly before, let me say it now: Your existence already carries worth. You do not need to

earn humanity through exhaustion. You do not need to earn love through masking. You do not need to earn belonging through self-erasure. You belong here already as you are, not someday after enough healing, enough productivity, enough emotional regulation, or enough self-improvement. You belong here now.

This world desperately needs more humanity, not less. It needs people capable of deep feeling, creativity, imagination, emotional courage, honesty, empathy, tenderness, and pattern recognition. It needs nervous systems willing to question systems that prioritize performance over well-being and conformity over compassion. Perhaps your sensitivity was never the thing that needed to disappear. Perhaps it was part of the medicine all along.

If you find yourself tired, sit down next to me for a moment. You do not need to explain everything here. You do not need to perform wellness here. You do not need to hide every scar here. I will listen to you not to force you into normalcy, not to reduce you to diagnoses, and not to fix you immediately, but simply to witness your humanity with respect.

Because unconditional peace does not emerge from becoming perfect. It emerges slowly through compassion towards ourselves, towards one another, towards the frightened child we once were, and towards the nervous systems that carried us here despite everything.

Healing is not linear. Some days will still feel heavy. Some mornings the mask may return automatically. Some wounds may ache unexpectedly. Yet even then, life can still contain tenderness, beauty, meaning, laughter, creativity, connection, and moments where the nervous system finally feels safe enough to rest.

May you continue healing gently. May you continue reclaiming your brilliance. May you continue protecting your joy. May you continue softening towards yourself. May you continue celebrating the misunderstood parts of who you are instead of apologizing for them. May your inner child finally experience the safety, tenderness, and acceptance they deserved all along. May you continue becoming more fully human rather than less.

And wherever life takes you next, I hope you remember this:

Your story did not end with survival.

It began there.

And may the power be with you, always.

Abstract

This book combines memoir, clinical insight, and current research to explore autism, masking, trauma, burnout, identity, and healing through the lived experience of a late-diagnosed autistic psychiatric nurse practitioner. Rather than viewing survival strategies as pathology, it reframes masking, hypervigilance, perfectionism, justice sensitivity, and sensory adaptation as intelligent responses to environments that often demanded self-erasure. Integrating perspectives from psychology, neuroscience, disability studies, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), narrative therapy, and neurodiversity-affirming practice, the book invites readers to move beyond performance towards authenticity, self-compassion, and meaningful connection while offering clinicians and caregivers a more humane understanding of autistic experience.

Key words

Autism; masking; neurodiversity; trauma; autistic burnout; identity; self-compassion; neurodiversity-affirming care

Contents

Warning		xvii
Introduction		xviii
Learning objectives		xxii
Part I	Survival as intelligence	1
Chapter 1	The alien girl	3
Chapter 2	Invisible labour	11
Chapter 3	Autistic justice sensitivity	21
Chapter 4	Sensory pain	27
Chapter 5	Schrödinger's cat was murdered	33
Chapter 6	The mirror would not stay still	41
Chapter 7	Autistic burnout	47
Chapter 8	Grief	55
Chapter 9	The children who learnt to disappear	59
Chapter 10	Gentle unmasking	69
Chapter 11	The body keeps masking despite unmasking	75
Part II	Healing	81
Chapter 12	Regulating an intense nervous system	83
Chapter 13	A life worth living	95
Chapter 14	Learning safety inside the body	105

Chapter 15	Rewriting the inner narrative	113
Chapter 16	Welcoming the acceptance	121
Chapter 17	Relationships without disappearing	129
Chapter 18	Competence without collapse	139
Chapter 19	The philosophy of enoughness	149
Chapter 20	Gentle activism	157
Chapter 21	Honouring survival: Beyond ableism	163
Recommended discussion questions, assignments, and projects		171
References		173
Recommended further reading		183
Index		185

Warning

This book contains explicit references to, and descriptions of, situations which may cause distress. This includes references to and descriptions of:

- Suicidal thoughts, intentions, and actions
- Violent assault
- Ableism, discrimination, and microaggressions

Introduction

Some books begin with certainty. This one begins with questions. For most of my life, I tried to understand why I experienced the world differently from the people around me. I watched others move through conversations with apparent ease while I analyzed every word before speaking. I wondered why certain sounds, fabrics, or crowded environments could leave me exhausted while others barely seemed to notice them. I questioned why fairness mattered so intensely to me, why I became overwhelmed by injustice, and why relationships often felt like puzzles that required constant study rather than something that unfolded naturally. I assumed these experiences reflected personal shortcomings because I had no framework to understand them. Like many late-diagnosed autistic adults, I spent years believing I simply needed to try harder.

My search for understanding became the driving force behind my education and career. I studied microbiology because I was fascinated by the complexity of living systems. I later became a nurse and eventually a psychiatric nurse practitioner because I wanted to understand the human mind and relieve suffering. Every patient I met expanded my curiosity. I cared for individuals living with severe mental illness, trauma, autism, intellectual and developmental disabilities, addiction, and profound emotional pain. Their stories challenged many of the assumptions I had learnt from textbooks. Over time, I realized that behaviours often made perfect sense once a person's history, relationships,

sensory experiences, and environment were taken seriously. What appeared confusing on the surface frequently reflected a nervous system that had learnt remarkable ways to survive.

As my professional understanding deepened, my personal life began to unfold in unexpected ways. My children's experiences, particularly my son's autism diagnosis, led me to learn everything I could about neurodevelopment. I immersed myself in books, research articles, conferences, and conversations with autistic individuals. The more I learnt, the more familiar everything felt. Memories from my own childhood resurfaced with new meaning. Experiences that had once seemed unrelated gradually connected into a coherent picture. My lifelong tendency to study people instead of intuitively understanding them, my sensory sensitivities, my deep need for fairness, my intense interests, my exhaustion after social interactions, and the feeling that I was constantly translating myself all belonged to the same story. My diagnosis did not change who I was. It gave me a language that allowed me to understand who I had always been.

That realization transformed more than my understanding of autism. It changed how I viewed adaptation itself. For years, I had interpreted masking, perfectionism, hypervigilance, people-pleasing, and relentless achievement as evidence that something inside me needed fixing. Looking back, I began to see them differently. They were sophisticated survival strategies developed by a nervous system trying to navigate environments that often felt unpredictable, confusing, or unsafe. Those strategies helped me build a career, raise a family, and accomplish goals I once thought impossible. They also came with a cost. Chronic exhaustion, burnout, anxiety, identity confusion, and the

persistent feeling that I had to earn acceptance accompanied me for much of my life. Appreciating both the wisdom and the burden of those adaptations became one of the central themes of this book.

Although this story is deeply personal, it reaches beyond my own experiences. Throughout my clinical work, I have met countless people whose behaviours were misunderstood because no one paused long enough to ask what those behaviours were communicating. I have worked with autistic individuals who spent years hiding their differences, people with intellectual and developmental disabilities whose distress was dismissed as noncompliance, and individuals whose trauma shaped every aspect of their relationships without ever being recognized. Again and again, I found myself returning to the same conclusion: Understanding always changes the way we respond. When we recognize the role of the nervous system, trauma, sensory processing, and life-long adaptation, judgment often gives way to compassion.

The chapters that follow combine memoir with psychology, neuroscience, disability studies, trauma-informed care, and therapeutic approaches that have influenced both my clinical practice and my own healing. You will encounter stories from my childhood, reflections from my work as a psychiatric nurse practitioner, discussions of masking, justice sensitivity, autistic burnout, grief, identity, relationships, and the process of gradually building a life that feels more authentic. My hope is that these ideas are accessible to autistic readers, family members, clinicians, educators, students, and anyone interested in understanding human behaviour with greater depth and kindness.

Writing this book has reminded me that healing rarely begins with finding a better mask. It begins when we become curious about the lives we have lived, the strategies that carried us through difficult seasons, and the stories we have told ourselves about who we are. When those stories are viewed with compassion instead of shame, they often become easier to rewrite. I hope these pages offer that opportunity. Whether you see your own experiences reflected here or gain a deeper understanding of someone you love, I hope you finish this book with greater appreciation for the remarkable ways human beings adapt, survive, and, with enough safety and understanding, gradually learn to become themselves again.

Learning objectives

After reading this book, readers will be able to:

- Describe how autistic masking develops across the lifespan and explain its relationship to trauma, chronic stress, identity development, and autistic burnout.
- Explain how sensory processing, justice sensitivity, emotional intensity, and other autistic characteristics shape behaviour, relationships, and well-being from a neurodiversity-affirming perspective.
- Analyze how ableism, environmental demands, and social expectations influence autistic experiences and contribute to masking, psychological distress, and barriers to authentic participation.
- Apply principles of trauma-informed and neurodiversity-affirming practice to better understand autistic experiences, moving beyond deficit-based interpretations towards greater empathy, clinical curiosity, and inclusive practice.
- Evaluate evidence-informed strategies for promoting authenticity, self-compassion, psychological flexibility, emotional well-being, and meaningful relationships, drawing on concepts from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), narrative therapy, mindfulness, and contemporary autism research.

Part I

Survival as intelligence

1

The alien girl

Istanbul is a relentless city, a place that moves with such force and indifference that a sensitive child can feel sanded down before they have words to describe what is happening. The air carries the friction of ferry horns splitting the Bosphorus before sunrise, vendors calling out beneath apartment windows in rising crescendos, traffic pressing forward without rhythm or apology, and neighbours speaking through thin walls as though loudness itself might solve what cannot be solved. Even silence in Istanbul is textured. It hums with anticipation. It waits. The city demands alertness from everyone, but some nervous systems absorb that demand more deeply than others. Mine did. Long before I understood anxiety or trauma or autism, I understood vigilance. I understood that environments could change quickly, that moods shifted like weather, and that paying attention mattered.

My grandmother said I was a late talker, but when language finally arrived, it did not emerge gradually in hesitant fragments. It arrived whole, memorised, rehearsed, strangely formal for such a small child. At three years old I approached strangers and repeated the same greeting with identical cadence every time: "Hi, what's your name?" Adults laughed warmly and called me clever. What they saw as charm was actually replication. I had discovered a social sequence that produced positive outcomes

and replayed it exactly. I did not yet know how to improvise conversation naturally, so I borrowed language before I inhabited it. Looking back, there was already something theatrical in the way I interacted with people, not manipulative, but constructed, as though I were learning humanity through observation first and participation second.

I watched people constantly. Other children seemed to move through social interactions instinctively, but I studied them the way someone studies a foreign culture whose customs determine survival. I catalogued how long eye contact lasted before someone looked away, how girls leaned into one another effortlessly without calculating distance, how boys interrupted conversations without fear of punishment, and how laughter appeared spontaneously at moments that did not always make logical sense to me. Human interaction felt choreographed in ways I could perceive but not naturally access. Stray cats made more sense than people ever did. In Istanbul, there are always cats, sovereign and unapologetic, stretched across warm sidewalks or slipping beneath parked cars with effortless self-possession. I fed the same injured one near our building almost every afternoon and admired his clarity. If he trusted you, he approached. If he did not, he left. There were no hidden meanings beneath his behaviour, no emotional reversals, no invisible contracts requiring interpretation.

Inside our apartment, however, emotional interpretation became instinctive. I did not possess words like hypervigilance or emotional dysregulation, but my body already understood unpredictability. I noticed the tempo of footsteps in the hallway, the sharpness of a cabinet door closing, Mother talking to herself and laughing hysterically, the silence between sentences,

the tightening of someone's jaw before their tone changed and became physical. Children are not meant to monitor adults this closely, yet my nervous system did not ask permission. It scanned automatically, constantly trying to predict rupture before it arrived. There is a particular loneliness that develops when a child becomes emotionally alert before she becomes emotionally safe. Mine lived quietly beneath composure. Adults described me as serious, mature, gifted, observant. What they did not see was the exhaustion beneath that attentiveness, the way my body remained partially braced at all times, as though life itself might shift violently if I stopped paying attention for even a moment.

I preferred soccer with boys because the rules were explicit. A goal either counted or it did not. Physics did not gaslight you. There was comfort in systems governed by structure rather than emotional fluctuation. School, however, depended upon subtler social codes that I could observe but not always perform correctly. I was too intense, too precise, too emotionally serious in ways children notice immediately. I learnt early that competence could function as protection. If I excelled academically, people around me softened towards my awkwardness. If I became useful enough, intelligent enough, impressive enough, perhaps belonging could be earned strategically even if it never arrived naturally. So, I smiled brightly at teachers, volunteered eagerly, silenced myself during lessons, and asked rehearsed questions with carefully measured warmth to show my engagement. It was not insincerity driving those interactions. It was *adaptation*. Somewhere deep down, I already understood that achievement created safety more reliably than personality ever could.

Books became refuge long before people did. The Encyclopaedia Britannica absorbed me completely, volume after volume of contained knowledge obeying its own internal logic. I memorised migration routes, historical timelines, volcanic systems, trade patterns, and obscure facts about countries and rare animals because facts soothed me in ways relationships often could not. Facts behaved predictably. Volcanoes erupted because pressure accumulated beneath the earth's crust. Empires collapsed for traceable reasons. Animal species adapted systematically to environments that either sustained or threatened survival. The world inside books followed coherent rules. I studied religions too, especially rituals surrounding death, trying to determine whether even endings obeyed some larger structure I simply had not decoded yet. I wanted proof that somewhere in existence cause and effect still aligned cleanly.

The mosques intensified my sense of foreignness in ways I could not articulate at the time. I remember struggling to pronounce Arabic words correctly while the imam corrected me sharply, his frustration carrying an edge that made my entire body tighten with shame. The other children formed sounds effortlessly from somewhere deep within their throats, while mine felt mechanical and misplaced in my own mouth. I remember thinking, not rebelliously but logically, why would my body naturally know how to form sounds it had never been shaped to make? Religion, as it was presented to me, felt strangely performative, dependent upon a kind of embodied fluency I could imitate but never fully inhabit. That realization altered something quietly but permanently inside me. I stepped back from devotion not because I lacked spirituality, but because belonging itself often