

**Book Review**

Reviewer

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**Uniquely Human: A Different Way of Seeing Autism****By Barry M. Prizant with Tom Fields-Meyer (2015)**

New York: Simon and Schuster, 272 pages

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"I have seen hundreds of children with autism who visually fixate on something: their fingers, a toy they carry with them, a fan, garden sprinklers. You could call that 'autistic' behavior, or you could watch, listen, pay attention, and ask why they do it" (p. 9). The purpose of *Uniquely Human* is to reframe how we as family members, members of society, and professionals view people with autism. Dr. Barry Prizant shares his humanist perspective on autism based on over four decades of research and clinical experience as a speech-language pathologist directly working with individuals with autism and their families. Rather than focusing on the differences, deficits, and pathology of autism, Dr. Prizant, as a world-renowned expert on autism, demonstrates that individuals with autism are *people*. It is our responsibility to treat others with respect, seek to understand the motivation behind their actions, and in turn, change what we do to provide appropriate supports. Given the prevalence of autism, the likelihood of encountering a person with autism is high.

*Uniquely Human* is an important, insightful read for everyone, especially for those who work with people with autism and their families.

Dr. Prizant has organized *Uniquely Human* into two parts—(1) understanding autism and (2) living with autism. Dr. Prizant engages his readers with jargon-free, accessible text. He helps us empathize with people with autism through his own stories as well as those of parents and professionals. Most powerful, though, are the stories from people with autism. Throughout the book he provides examples of how behaviors of people with autism are not unique to people with autism, but are shared by others as well. He repeatedly reminds his readers that these behaviors of people with autism are *human* behaviors, though they might differ in frequency, intensity, or timing.

Dr. Prizant emphasizes that to understand autism, it is imperative to closely observe, listen, and pay attention to not only "what" people do, but to "when" they do it, and "why". Dr. Prizant shares

the mantra of Ros Blackburn, an adult with autism: “If I do something you don’t understand, you’ve got to keep asking, ‘Why, why, why?’” To truly understand autism, Dr. Prizant makes the analogy that one needs to be a detective. By taking the time to answer “why”, one is able to discover the meaning behind the action or behavior and address the root cause rather than just trying to reduce or eliminate behaviors that on the surface seem random or nonfunctional. Dr. Prizant points out “most of the behaviors commonly labeled ‘autistic behaviors’ aren’t actually deficits at all. They are strategies the person uses to feel better regulated emotionally” (p. 20). Unlike intervention approaches for autism that prioritize reducing or eliminating these behaviors, Dr. Prizant’s approach, based on the SCERTS (Social Communication, Emotional Regulation, and Transactional Support) model in which he is the lead author, does not. Instead, Prizant’s approach prioritizes building the coping strategies, capacity, and self-determination of people with autism. Through this strengths-based model and providing appropriate supports, concerning behaviors wane as they are replaced naturally by more desirable behaviors.

Throughout *Uniquely Human*, Dr. Prizant effectively makes the argument that people with autism are *humans* like the rest of us and should be treated with compassion, respect, patience, and honesty. A theme of this book is that people with autism are special, and like *all* people, have value. Investing the time and energy to get to know and understand people with autism helps us discover and gain an appreciation of their ideas, perspectives, and feelings. As he intended, Dr. Prizant helps his readers understand autism. In his chapter, “What It Takes to

‘Get It’”, Dr. Prizant explains the qualities of someone who “gets It”—someone with empathy, the human factor, sensitivity, shared control, humor, trust, and flexibility (pp. 139-140). He provides countless real-life examples as well as guiding suggestions and tips to engage successfully with people with autism. Through his own experiences working with parents and stories shared by them, he also acknowledges the huge role that parents play in their children’s development and recognizes that parents are the experts on their children with autism.

This book is a must-read for anyone who has ever or will ever be touched by someone with autism. Dr. Prizant has given me, as a speech-language pathologist who works with children with autism and their families, a new perspective about how to view autism and behaviors associated with it. More importantly, though, the insights gained through reading *Uniquely Human* are relevant not only to help understand people with autism, but *all* people.

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