

## Speaker - Jack Cunningham Wordsmith - Jayne Woodhouse

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I'm Jack Cunningham, I'm 19 years old. ... When you look at me, what do you see? ... I suppose I look pretty ordinary to you, and the things I like doing are ordinary too, like running, table tennis, watching films, gaming, and memorising all the flags of the world. ... Just the normal sort of things people of my age enjoy – well, except for the part about the flags, that is a bit weird I admit. ... So, I expect you're thinking I'm just another typical lad. And you're right! I am a typical lad.

Then, it might be hard to believe that, for a lot of my life, I've been on the outside looking in. Because when I was eleven, I was told I had Autism Spectrum Disorder.

When I learned about my diagnosis eight years ago, it felt kind of reassuring at first, because for my entire life I'd been treated differently. It helped me understand why I did some of the things I did, the things I'd always thought were normal. ... Okay, I thought, maybe I'm not normal after all, and that was pretty depressing. ... But saying someone is 'autistic' or 'normal', those are both just labels and labels shouldn't define who we are, or how people think of us. ... I've used my label to help give me a sense of identity, but now, more than anything, I want to show you that labels are only words. That's all they are and, at the end of the day, while every one of us is different in some way, we are still all human beings.

I had a rough time at school, I was bullied and I found it really hard to make friends and be part of a social group. Sometimes, I'd come out with these random things and people would just laugh at me, and that was really confusing. ... And every single lunch time, I was always sitting alone, usually on a bench somewhere. Part of it was because I needed my own headspace, because I felt exhausted from socialising, but at the same time I really wanted to be involved and nobody could see that. ... And it wasn't just the social aspect, because in Year 7 I was put in the bottom set for every subject, every single subject. I felt like that was the world telling me, okay, I am stupid.



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After I got my diagnosis, students at secondary school didn't understand. They'd take one look at me and think, maybe we need to speak to him in a special way, or take special care around him, when what I really wanted was to be accepted for who I was. ... But they treated me differently, as if I was some kind of half-human. Like, they pity-laughed whenever I joked, or they spoke to me very simplistically and condescendingly, even if they didn't intend to. They just didn't know how to talk to me.

Some of the students actually used 'autistic' as an insult. ... I felt like a freak with that label. It made me doubt myself for the longest time. I still have some of that, because I still doubt myself a lot, but I know now that's just part of my personality.

What I want to say to all those people is, look where I am now. ... I'm standing here, in Salisbury Cathedral, in front of hundreds of people. And every one of you is looking at me and listening to what I have to say. How amazing is that? ... It makes me feel incredibly proud that I got to this place, where I feel so much stronger and happier.

I've been through a whole transition from seeing myself as some sort of monster, to knowing myself as someone with a special gift to pass on to others. I've learned how to reflect on what happened to me and communicate those feelings to the world. ... I can only tell you about my own story, but I also want to say these things for the all the people who don't have the ability to speak out like I do. I want to give those people a voice too.

So how did this transformation happen? It has to be down to the role drama has played in my life. Drama was the very first thing I ever felt I was good at in school. Then, in 2017, I joined a youth theatre company and it changed everything. For the first time, I'd never felt more included, or more listened to. I didn't have to be concerned about being autistic, because labels didn't matter – we were all just people with the same passions and goals.



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And I owe a lot of my skills to my autism, like writing and performing, and working behind the scenes, so drama has enabled me to transform that label into the engine that drives me forward. It's given me a safe space where I can express how I feel, and empowered me to make this speech today.

I'm now in my first year studying drama at university. ... So, look out everyone! Because in ten years' time, you'll be seeing me on the red carpet, at the premiere of my latest Hollywood blockbuster - the Tom Holland of Salisbury. ... And you might want to take that selfie with me tonight at the end of the show, while you still have the chance.

Now you've looked at me, finally let's look at you. ... I know that every single one of you must have felt on the outside at some point in your life. Even if you don't have a disability or anything that gives you a label, like I have, you can still relate to me on some level, because we're all human.

And as for my label, none of it really matters any more.

Because I'm having my say, I'm finding my voice.

