

Wretches and Jabberers
Synopsis

We are the perfect example of intelligence working out itself in a much different way. – Tracy Thresher

Tracy Thresher and Larry Bissonnette are two men with autism who have limited speech but a whole lot to say. As young people, both faced lives of isolation, unable to convey their inner intelligence. It was not until adulthood when each learned to communicate by typing - giving them a way to express their thoughts, needs and feelings - that their lives changed dramatically. After more than ten years of advocating for people with autism, they felt it was time to take their message global - to help people with autism in other countries around the world break through the isolation they both knew so well.

Tracy, Larry and their support team, Harvey Lavoy and Pascal Cheng, joined forces with Academy Award®-winning filmmaker, Gerardine Wurzburg, and Producer, Douglas Biklen. "Our goal was to shine a light on autism internationally. Larry and Tracy's journey allowed us to portray the global face of autism through the personal stories of six men and women throughout the world," explains Producer and Director Wurzburg. The result is the feature documentary, *Wretches and Jabberers: And Stories from the Road*, a provocative mixture of advocacy, personal portrait and travel adventure film - seasoned with liberal doses of humor.

The film provides a rare opportunity to hear directly from people with autism about how they understand and experience their own disabilities. Larry types, "Autism is not abnormality of the brain as much as abnormality of experience." Interspersed with their travels are glimpses of Tracy and Larry's formative experiences in the States. For Larry, 52, who spent ten years of his childhood in a mental institution, painting became his outlet. He finds that his art makes people "want to listen to his artistic voice not his autistic voice." However, he notes, "nothing I did...convinced people I had an inner life until I started typing." Tracy, 42, spent his school years in segregated classrooms isolated from his peers. His breakthrough also came from typing, when he was 23-years-old. Though he now communicates with audiences of all kinds for his advocacy work, Tracy admits that he is still prone to "intense anger" about his situation. "I have always been very angry about my autism and didn't get seen as intelligent until I was out of high school."

Despite their struggles, the two men reveal profound wisdom about their lives and convey their acceptance of autism as an expression of the diversity of humanity. This theme of diversity is underscored by the variety of customs, food and cultures of the people visited by the men - in Sri Lanka, Japan and Finland. Viewers share their eye-opening experiences as they negotiate the terrain of travel, culture and new friendships on what they aptly name The World Intelligence Magnified Tour.

"We live as outcasts in Sri Lanka." - Chammi Rajapatirana

The first stop is Sri Lanka, where Tracy and Larry visit old friend Chammi Rajapatirana, 35, who they have met at conferences in the US. In Sri Lanka, Chammi and his mother work to improve education for children with autism. Together, the group ventures down a narrow alley to a humble private school for children with autism and other disabilities. There, they meet with parents to demonstrate their communication skills, answer their urgent questions, and appeal to the parents to believe in their children's innate intelligence.

"You will be surprised how often we make wrong assumptions about ability," Chammi tells the group. Chammi reminds us these "wrong assumptions" are often based on one's outer behavior which, for people with autism, can be hard to control. When asked about his own behavior, why he gets up and runs away in the middle of a conversation, for example, Chammi explains that it is "killingly hard to figure out the pattern of movement I need to type my thoughts."

Can you believe two bald Green Mountain men made it to Sushi Land? Tracy Thresher

In Japan, Tracy and Larry meet 16-year-old Naoki Higashida who has been corresponding with Tracy via email. Naoki is an accomplished artist who has published more than ten books of his stories and drawings. He explains that drawing helps him to "convey his whole world. It is as if drawing fills holes in my heart."

While Naoki is an extraordinary teenager by anyone's standards, he is denied access to public school. Home-schooled by his mother, Naoki has little contact with his peers. Meeting Tracy and Larry is a revelation to him. He says, "I never had a conversation like this with people that communicate the way I do." He tells Tracy, "reading your [emails], I learned the word: advocacy." He is eager to join the men in presenting at a national autism conference at Tokyo University. There, in a proud moment for both, Larry and Naoki display their artwork side-by-side.

As the group prepares to leave Japan, Naoki says, "I learned so much from this experience. And these memories give me courage. And I'm so moved." His happiness during their visit is palpable and his mother's tears at this goodbye portray the deep meaning of this visit to her and her son.

"I'd like life to have more than cleaning, cooking and sauna." – Henna Laulainen

Their final trip is to Helsinki, Finland where they are interviewed by a Finnish filmmaker and present at the Autism Foundation Conference. Here, they meet Antti Lappalainen, 21, who spends his days in an activity center for people with disabilities using pictograms to fill out his schedule of cleaning and towel folding. When he reveals he is an avid reader and aspiring writer, his isolation becomes obvious. When asked, "Don't they know you can read?" Antti answers insightfully, "I think they are too scared." Later he says, "Language is everything I am. Completely different than my misunderstood appearance."

In Finland, Tracy and Larry are also introduced to Henna Laulainen, 23. Henna is one of the first persons in Finland with autism to communicate by typing, which she began at the age of 10. Still, she spends her days much as Antti does, doing mindless tasks like shredding paper in a daytime activity center. It is particularly moving when Henna says, "I would like to learn to live my life as others my age live." When Tracy invites her to visit him in Vermont, we sense the glimmers of a romance developing. Her statement about living the life of a normal young woman takes on a tangible meaning as she confers with her mother for approval to visit Vermont.

Later, as the group shares a lunch at a sidewalk cafe, Antti humorously declares the world divided into "Wretches" - those with limited speech - and "Jabberers" - those who can speak freely. He jokingly tells the group, "We poor wretches are better than jabberers. They don't know it yet, but we will tell it to them on Saturday [at the conference]." At the end of that conference, Antti strikes a more serious note, asking the audience to "dispel the darkness around us poor wretches. Take us for real people. Don't sideline us."

***"More about people than food."* – Larry Bissonette**

Ultimately, *Wretches and Jabberers* is about the life-sustaining power of relationships - the personal connections that most of us "jabberers" thought were impossible for people with autism. When Larry asks Tracy what he thinks the highlight of their trip has been, Tracy speaks of "building new lines of communication between people." His words are echoed throughout the film by the people they visit. Chammi reflects that "feasting on my friends' company, I store up memories," and Antti implores that "now is a good time to bind the strings of friendship between us strong people who will pass the message."

Throughout the film, Tracy, Larry and their compatriots inspire parents, educators and others with autism through their poignant narratives of personal struggle that always rings with intelligence, humor, hope and courage. Speaking to students at Tokyo University, Larry remarks "learning about autism requires a story-making about human experience that is weird and off-beat." And yet, through the film, we find that they are seeking the same things all of us do - spiritual understanding, respect for our intelligence, a purpose in life and friendship.