Delusions of Grandeur
by Terry Ann Thaxton

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Introduction

“Many Hollywood movies (As Good as It Gets, A Beautiful Mind, Silver Lining Playbook) tell us that with enough love (or some magic bullet), anyone with a neurological challenge can become happy and successful. ‘Happy’ is not a word I’ve ever heard my son use to refer to his state of being. For most of his life, I’ve been trying to love him enough to relieve him of his neurological differences that make navigating in this world too much of a challenge. It hasn’t worked.

“Oliver Sacks’s work has always fascinated me. I enjoy reading about the brain/mind connection: The Psychopath Test by Jon Ronson; Mindsight by Dan Siegel; Thinking, Fast and Slow by Daniel Kahneman; Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Talks Too Much by Susan Cain.

“I started ‘Delusions of Grandeur’ as a series of notes and observations as a way to understand Adam’s odd, but functioning, friendship with David (not his real name). Writing the essay helped me not only understand their relationship but also sort out my reactions to those movies and to people who insist I ‘find the joy’ in having a special-needs child. I love my son, but I know that with every step forward—which I do celebrate—there will come another, often tougher, obstacle. I am, however, learning to appreciate the attributes I developed because of my brilliant and unique son.”

-Terry Ann Thaxton
Delusions of Grandeur

by Terry Ann Thaxton

David is a certified helicopter pilot, a professional chef, tried to serve in the U.S. Army but was discharged prior to enlisting because he bit a hole in the side of a sergeant’s cheek, has a medical degree, is a ninja, is the mathematical e-mail assistant to a physicist at Harvard, and, to keep the hundreds of girls who are after him at bay, started sleeping on the couch in my son’s apartment. So he says.

The single fact I know for certain is that David was born in 1982—I’ve seen his birth certificate. His delusions, according to psychologists, are considered “nonbizarre.” Different from “bizarre” delusions, nonbizarre delusions are those that are within the realm of possibility. Certainly these claims could be true; however, with a little fact checking, I’m sure I could disprove each of them. He’s held only a handful of jobs since I met him, most of them lasting a couple of weeks, the last one ending when, as David says, “Nick pissed me off, so I had to stab him.” (No arrest?) A bizarre delusion, one psychologist told me, would be if David believed he was housing multiple generations of rats in his stomach.

David has been my son’s best friend and occasional roommate for the past four years, and I expect they’ll be friends for a good long while, even though Adam has always, up until he met David, had trouble keeping friends. He’s always wanted friends, yearned for them, but he is unable to hold age-appropriate conversations. He could not talk with other children or teenagers or adults about anything other than dinosaurs or worlds he’s created. When he was three or four, this was not a glaring problem, but as he approached his teen years and adulthood, it kept him friendless.

When Adam entered kindergarten, his teacher called me regularly to report Adam drawing dinosaurs in the dirt during recess instead of playing with the other children, bouncing in his desk when he was supposed to be sitting still, reading encyclopedias when he was supposed to be working on the next assignment. Adam scored in the 99th percentile in all the standardized tests they put on his desk, but he could not complete his math homework. He was able, by the time he entered kindergarten, to outline the entire DNA structure of a universe he’d created in stories and drawings but could not, no matter the consequence, put on his pajamas.

Adam never liked to be left alone in the dark. His dinosaur friends might be attacked by snakes or worms. “He cries to get your attention,” my mother would say. He cried every night. My mother told me that he would, and should, cry himself to sleep. “He’s three years old,” she’d say. “If you give him too much attention, he’ll never grow up.”

She was right. He has never grown up. But I do not think it is because I comforted him too much.
as a child or gave him too much attention. We lived with my mother for the first three years of his life, until I got a job at a bank and could afford to rent an apartment. By then, Adam was lost in his world of dinosaurs. He knew, and could read and recite, the names of more than a dozen of them. He drew dinosaurs, pretended to be dinosaurs, and by the time he entered kindergarten, the only thing he wanted to talk about was dinosaurs and the imaginary worlds he lived in with them.

For Adam’s sixth birthday party, he wanted to invite his entire kindergarten class. My intuition told me not to have it at my apartment or at my mother’s house, where Adam would surely feel trapped with all those children. At a city park, my mother, his kindergarten teacher and all his classmates celebrated Adam’s birthday. Adam cried the entire day.

“The boy needs more discipline,” my mother said. I knew she was right: I was a bad mother. I concluded that my being a bad mother caused him so much unhappiness and loneliness.

At his birthday party, he cried while he opened his presents. He cried while he climbed the monkey bars. He cried but wanted to play red rover. Then he screamed and climbed up a tree.

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The first time I met David, he was squatting in the cradle of the camphor tree in my front yard. Adam, who was now in his twenties, had needed a few dollars for snacks and had stopped by my house on his way to a live role-playing game. He had developed friendships through these games, with other young adults who have some trait that makes them misfits in our world. David had been riding along in the car with him.

After living with Adam for several months, David told me he would be inheriting $2 million. His aunt, it seems, worked for a very rich old guy—was his nurse—and when he’d died, he’d left her his millions. David came up with numerous plans for his money: he aimed to buy a big house, maybe two (one for him and one for Adam), start a porn film company, start a video game company, travel to Japan with Adam, and start a Native American restaurant that would focus on Hawaiian cuisine. His aunt had deemed these plans good, so she agreed to give him her take, which was to be $10 million. Thus, David had been feverishly putting together plans for investing (spending?) $12 million. I was pleased when the porno company idea vanished. I wasn’t keen on Adam being involved in this venture—however real or imagined it was. Adam does not recognize David’s delusions as delusions; rather he tends to believe David and support his pursuits. Perhaps this is because David has been Adam’s longest and most loyal friend. Perhaps Adam accepts David’s delusions because David is the one person in this world, other than me, who accepts Adam’s quirks.

Most people recognize a problem with David immediately, and those people end up being beaten up by David. Most people learn within a few minutes that David has invented the machine that cures degenerative disc disorder and is working with a famous doctor on the Time Machine. Fortunately, David never directly asks anyone else to give him money for his plans. He’s ever-generous with his planned fortune: he asked me if I wanted a new car or a new computer. I went for the car. He also knew from Adam that I get frustrated with my job, and David offered to set me up as the CEO of a new company.

No doubt we are all a little delusional. Without a small dose of delusion, our self-confidence or
sense of place in this world might wane. We manage to delude ourselves into thinking we are important, that our jobs and our lives are necessary to keep the world running, or at least to keep our part of it going. Delusions keep us moving forward, delusions keep us in relationships, delusions keep us (dare I say?) sane. Whether I choose to call it delusion or hope, I have to decide, each day, that my contribution to the world has some value.

When Adam was young, in his early teens, I held on to a great hope (delusion) that he would expand his love of dinosaurs and become a respected paleontologist. I hoped that he would graduate from college, find pleasure in traveling to exotic places to study animal life and publish important papers on fossils and discoveries.

In the fifteen years that followed kindergarten, psychologists suggested that Adam might be schizophrenic or bipolar or depressed. Or just NOS (not-otherwise-specified). NOS is a diagnosis professionals give to people who don’t fit into any one of the approximately 300 categories in the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). In other words, if there isn’t a word for the way your thoughts and behaviors don’t fit into the “normal” or “abnormal,” “NOS.” This comes with a wide range of treatment possibilities. You might benefit from simple cognitive therapy—by chatting once a week with a mental health specialist. You might be prescribed drugs for psychotic episodes (that you don’t have), you might take several antianxiety and SSRI medications or, like Adam, you might be placed in a mental hospital three times by the time you’re twenty years old for banging your head against the wall or running away or riding your bike into traffic or jumping off the roof of an apartment complex.

The treatment Adam enjoyed most was talk therapy, and talk therapy meant that my insurance company would pay someone to listen to Adam’s fabulous stories of the animals on planets he created. His creatures looked like dinosaurs to most people, but they were actually Adam-created creatures—some with no faces, some with several ears and eyes, some with clothes draped over a skeleton, some who could speak English, some who wore chains instead of scarves. Adam created new languages for his creatures to speak. This way, no one other than Adam knew what they were saying to each other. He could interpret what they were saying—depending upon who asked him to interpret. If he was particularly angry with a teacher, he might tell her that this creature was telling the other creature, “You’re so stupid.” If he was hungry, he might tell me they were talking about getting a burger. If Adam was tired of talking, he’d tell his psychologist of the day that his dinosaurs wanted to kill everyone on the planet.

One psychologist suggested he quit high school, get his GED and try taking college classes. Since he was so smart, perhaps the reason he wanted to stay buried in a book or drawing creatures was boredom. Adam was willing to try college, provided I’d go with him. Every weekend for several months before even signing up for classes, I drove Adam to the community college campus and walked around. As we walked, Adam told me the latest story about his world, which animals were living there now, which characters were beginning to inhabit the world, how they got there. He agreed to take an art class, but only if I took it with him. We stood in line for registration. Soon I realized Adam was not with me. I found him, curled into a ball in a corner of the room. He was eighteen, on a college campus, and there were dozens of other people his age looking at him. I left the line, went over to where he was and asked if he wanted to leave. We could register another day.

The first day of art class, he made it halfway through before running out, but then he made it through the class for several weeks. Each time he ran out, I followed him, apologizing to the teacher. I’d coax him back in after break. He did not finish that semester in that class, but the
following semester he took the class again, without me, and finished it. He took another class and passed it, and another. But he grew tired of “knowing more than the teacher,” he said, and stopped going. He just wanted to draw and write about his worlds.

It’s not that Adam hasn’t tried to grow up, nor is it that I haven’t tried to force him. I’ve taken him to every psychologist who was recommended to me, and I’ve tried every treatment plan suggested.

One evening when Adam was twenty years old, after having visited a new psychologist earlier in the day, I walked Adam out the front door of our house and said, “Where would you go if I said you couldn’t come back in, if I said, ‘Just leave?’”

He started to cry. “I don’t know,” he said.

He went to his room, curled up in a fetal position on his bed and fell asleep crying.

I went to bed that night holding on to the familiar guilt I’ve carried with me Adam’s entire life: not only have I raised a child who cannot take care of himself; I continue to cause him emotional pain.

The psychologist we’d seen that day had probably suggested tough love was the way to handle Adam: another adult child who hadn’t grown up.

Adam still draws and writes about new worlds and planets. He’s now past thirty. His planets have evolved to include human-like creatures that attempt to teach the “normal” people how the world should work. Adam has always wanted friends, and he had a friend or two throughout his childhood. His friends were the odd kids, kids who had been outcast for one reason or another. In elementary school, Mike was his buddy. They hung out in culverts catching bullfrogs and lizards, building houses for them and creating scripts in which they became human-like, with conflicts all their own. Bullfrogs with no money. Lizards with no cars. In high school he made friends with some guys who were into role-playing games—both video games and live role-playing games. These games come with a set of rules. You develop your character, and all your actions are part of the game. This is how he met David.

When Adam was twenty-one, after he’d been on Ritalin for three years and Depakote for four, a behaviorist came to the house to determine whether or not he could receive state assistance with job preparation, since he no longer wanted to take college classes. The behaviorist asked me if anyone had ever mentioned Asperger’s syndrome. She suggested I take him to a neuropsychologist for testing. Adam did not want to go. He was tired of psychologists.

But I dragged him to yet another one. Dr. Gorman confirmed Asperger’s, a disorder on the autism spectrum that primarily affects a person’s social and adaptability skills. Unlike autistics, Aspies (as a person with Asperger’s syndrome likes to be called) have very high language skills. Like autism, Asperger’s causes one to withdraw into one’s own world, to be highly sensitive and afraid of sounds, touch, other people and all the stimuli from our world. If something new or unexpected happens, a person on the autism spectrum will not only suffer the normal stress that we all have with change but will become frantic—causing him possibly to run in endless circles, repeat a phrase over and over, bang his head against a wall repeatedly or engage in any number of repetitive behaviors in an attempt to escape the change. Developing or even changing a
routine takes years.

The only reason Adam was willing to try on the autistic diagnosis was that it came with no drugs to take. For the past nine years—since the autism diagnosis—Adam has embraced autism as a way to explain his inability to navigate the world. Autism helps him make his life make sense. He can now articulate to people he meets why he cannot look them in the eye, why he cannot stand at the socially acceptable distance, why he cannot read their emotions and why he will argue endlessly about a particular topic.

With the autism diagnosis, Adam allowed the behaviorist to work with him on conversational and social skills. She successfully helped him develop some confidence and taught him to allow for small openings to deal with his daily physical needs.

Adam met David after Adam finally moved out of my house and rented a room from Derek, who was friends with Maria, who was friends with David. Two years later—after Adam had moved out of Derek’s and was living in his own apartment within a mile of my house—David and his then roommate Gary were kicked out of the trailer they were renting, Adam let them sleep on the floor and couch in his apartment. Having two people in the apartment caused Adam to pace in a frenzy, and he received complaints from the downstairs neighbors. Gary moved back in with his own parents, leaving David the only extra person in Adam’s apartment. At first I was not pleased with this arrangement, since I am Adam’s financial support. Though David had been working as a cook at a Bob Evans Restaurant, he now did not have a job—because of the stabbing incident. But it became apparent that Adam needed me less when David was around, so I let him stay. I did a background check on David, just to be sure I’d guessed correctly—that David’s stories were fiction. Now we’ve added his name to the lease, making it official. David sleeps at other friends’ houses at times, but Adam’s apartment is his home base.

Talk of David’s $2 million windfall began a couple of years after he started calling Adam’s apartment home base, a year after he and Adam had worked out their zombie-invasion safety plan. David’s aunt would be receiving almost $20 million, and she was going to take half for herself, then split the other $10 million among her nieces and nephews. David found out about this in July of that second year at Adam’s apartment. But there were a few obstacles along the way. At one point the money was to arrive that November, but then the old geezer’s ex-wife took the will to court. Then there was probate. But all was set to be resolved by the following March 20.

While waiting for the money, David and Adam spent their time meeting with artists whom they might employ for the video game company, potential accountants, and business advisers. They spent time driving around looking at houses. This delusion gave them something to do with their otherwise idle time—well, it was never really idle. They’ve always organized and attended role-playing games (RPGs), Adam has always been writing a second novel or web comic, David has always been busy e-mailing physicists at Harvard, they both blog and IM with folks all over the world. And they go to the 24-hour Walmart at 2:00 am to buy groceries so that Adam doesn’t have to be around very many people all at once.

At one point, David planned to also buy several dilapidated apartment complexes, a plan he told me about one day when I stopped by the apartment.

“I can buy them for $50,000,” David said.
I was standing in the foyer of the apartment, and David, without any introduction, leaped from the floor onto the back of Adam’s couch and crouched there like a frog.

“I’ll rent them out for cheap,” he said.

He’d hired two of his female married friends to run the complexes, and they were busy hiring maintenance folks. This was especially enticing when the economy crashed, which would allow him to purchase these complexes for roughly $10,000 each. He would make a tremendous profit.

But then March 20 came and went. Word was that David’s aunt could not be found. David assumed she got the money, returned to her drug habit, and lost it all. Au contraire. A couple of weeks after March 20, David said she resurfaced and told him that the money was in the final stages of legalese and should be coming soon. Now the plan was that if the money didn’t come by the end of April, David would begin working as a mixed martial artist or ninja fighter, at which, he said, he could earn $15,000 per fight. The good news for me was that the apartment complex purchase, the porn company, the trip to Japan and the publishing company were all off the table. David had decided the way to go with the $12 million was to put it all into a video game company, where the profit margin would be huge.

When David was in kindergarten, he told me, he became angry and stabbed his teacher with an ink pen. For punishment David’s dad—who’s not his biological dad but a guy David’s mother has lived with since David was three—took David out into the woods and left him there for two years. David learned how to survive on his own. This is why David can kill a boar with his bare hands and why he eats bugs and dirt.

I think it is entirely possible that his father took him out to the woods and dropped him off. Two years? I doubt it. I can see that a five-year-old might perceive a day or even several hours as years. Either way, I wonder if this could be where a psychotic break happened. Is this the root of David’s delusions? There are numerous causes for delusions of grandeur. While my hypothesis is among them (a combination of “dysfunctional cognitive processing” and “motivated or defensive delusions”), other possibilities include “genetic or biological.” Delusions can also be drug-induced, be caused by dementia, stem from depression or be related to other mood disorders. David does not take drugs. Adam has no tolerance for drug-takers. He will not hold an RPG at someone’s house if there is even cigarette smoke lingering.

Whatever the cause of David’s delusions, it is terribly sad that he must live with them. Adam’s neuropsychologist told me that most people with delusional disorder never get the help they need because they don’t know they are delusional. If they were to get medical help, there are antipsychotic drugs that would eliminate most of the delusions and allow them to live fairly normal lives. It is advised, however, not to confront a delusional person with his delusions—this causes added stress and usually results in sending the delusional person into a rage. I kept thinking that if I could get David diagnosed by a professional, he could get government aid. But as it is, he hops from job to job, usually telling the permanent cooks how they should cook or (he says) holding another employee’s head down in a vat of oil, which gets him fired.

I try to stay focused on the good part: his delusions are grand, not paranoid, and they are nonbizarre. No aliens coming to take over the apartment, no snakes living inside the couch cushions.

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David says that his mother is an exotic dancer and occasionally gets mad at David’s “dad,” and she runs off to another city, where she dances for new crowds. And even though the family owns an island in Hawai’i, she always returns after a few weeks of dancing to their trailer in the Florida town on the outskirts of Orlando, and all is well. David has two sisters, Treasure and Paradise, and an older brother. Adam can’t remember the older brother’s name. Adam has never remembered names of friends. He remembers the color of their hair or what they were wearing, but never the name.

I am always amazed at how many people throughout the years have suggested an immediate treatment plan that would cure Adam’s “quirks.” I have had to face the complexities of the brain. I am not a neurologist or neuropsychologist. I will never know, as they do, how and why the brain does what it does. Nor do I wish to minimize the seriousness of mental illnesses or brain disorders. Sometimes I think that if I could just figure out the cause of David’s delusions, I could get him to a psychiatrist who could help him. If I could figure out how to train Adam to do his own finances, I wouldn’t have to worry about how he will live after I’ve died.

Adam knows he does not see and respond to the world the way the rest of us do. Since he does not look retarded, people assume he is normal. But within a few minutes of talking with him, you know he can’t carry a conversation. While he was growing up, I thought of him as creative and unique and decided that his decision to wear his clothes inside-out was a sign of rebellion against conformity in public schools. Only when he became an adult and pretended to be one of the characters from his stories in public did I begin to feel embarrassed by him. He took to wearing a brown trench coat and cowboy hat, and at times—we might be in the mall or at a park—he would fall to the ground and hop around on all fours.

Other people noticed strange public behaviors as well. In restaurants, after he was finished with his meal, Adam got out of his chair and lay on the floor. Or he’d run out of the restaurant, screaming that his potatoes were too hot. When he was a child, these behaviors didn’t cause much of a stir—another child angry with his mother for something. But once he’d grown into a six-foot-tall adult male, it was obvious to people that something was not right. What other people most often say when I attempt to explain Adam’s inability to navigate the world is that if I’d just provided enough structure for him when he was younger, he would be fine. For those of us who deal with a child or sibling with a brain malfunction, the Hollywood-ending notion that with enough love or concern you can cure mental illness leads to our ever-growing guilt and frustration. Every day I want to do something that will make Adam’s life less chaotic, less traumatic. Every day I want to undo anything I might have done that has made his life more difficult than it needs to be. No matter what I do, it’s never enough. It will never be enough.

Now that Adam is in his thirties and still relies on me to oversee his finances, make sure his kitchen is clean, make sure he has necessary supplies, I am jealous of other parents. Adam will always need me. At times I resent this. I’m jealous that other parents, although they worry about their grown children, can leave town for extended periods of time. They don’t have to avoid the question “What does your son do?” They don’t have to explain the oddities and subtleties of autism. They don’t have to wake up at 3:00 am because their grown child calls, screaming that he is out of toilet paper or salt.

Once a week, I take Adam to lunch. In addition to this being routine—something he very much needs—I know that I am Adam’s grounding wire. I am the one person he has counted on his entire life. I am the person who lets him scream and punch walls. I don’t take it personally. I am the one he calls at 3:00 am; I am the one who reminds him that he could use a small piece of a
paper towel and that tomorrow I will buy more toilet paper.

The prognosis is not happy-happy-sunset-peaceful for Adam or David. For some parents or friends, I’m guessing that this knowledge would be unbearable. And for me, too. I sometimes want to take them down to the homeless shelter and drive away, leaving others to deal with them both. Many people, still, have a suggestion for treatment: a way to make Adam employable, a way to make David stop his delusions and hold a job longer than two weeks.

These miracles don’t exist, or if they do, I’ve not discovered them yet. For most of his life, I hoped Adam would grow beyond his emotional age of twelve into what could be referred to as a “normal and full life.” Most often, there is no happy ending coming when you’re dealing with brain disorders. There are only moments here and there when I can forget they exist.

One evening, though it was seventy-five degrees outside, David was wearing a stocking cap when he and Adam walked to my house from their apartment. On David’s forehead were two bumps I’d not seen before; I wondered if he’d gotten into a fight or injected himself with Botox. One bump protruded just above his right eyebrow, and the other was just above it. They had walked so that David could clear his head. They stood on my front porch, leaning back on their elbows on the porch rail. David said, “I don’t think it’s too late for me to change careers.” I struggled not to laugh. He’d gotten a new job about three months earlier, cooking again for a Greek restaurant at their newest location, but six weeks into the job, he threw a twenty-pound pot across the kitchen at a coworker, he said, and they laid him off. I wanted to ask him about his current career. What was it? I wanted to know.

His new career idea was to take some marine biology classes so he could study sharks. This interest came to him because of two things: (1) his current “social dilemma,” he called it: a girl he’d gone to college with in Miami a few years earlier had been trying to track him down; (2) his family comes from a long line of sharks. The girl was now in California and wanted David to come out there. David’s dilemma was that he’d been dating Crystal for the past six months, and he didn’t know if Crystal would consider going with him or if he’d be willing to leave a sure thing (Crystal) for this old girlfriend, who was now in California.

Adam asked me for some water. I invited them inside.

“Can David borrow one of your sewing machines?” Adam asked.

He knew I had two: an old one that I no longer use and a newer one I use for mending. Before he studied marine biology, David wanted to make some costumes, which he was sure he could sell for thousands of dollars to fund his trip to California. “I could sew them by hand,” David told me, “but it will take a much longer time. I need the money now.”

The psychologists I’d seen for Adam’s first twenty years kept offering solutions to Adam’s “quirks.” One of his teachers once congratulated me for having such a creative and odd child. I didn’t know if she was serious or sarcastic. Friends and family have offered solutions. Many have suggested that if I’d just forced Adam to get a job when he was fifteen, he’d be functioning at age level by now. These are not stupid people, but I do think they are a bit delusional. Adam is not going to snap out of autism.

What is the difference, really, between delusion and hope? Was I delusional during Adam’s
childhood, always looking for the answer to his meltdowns? Perhaps it was hope that kept me searching for someone, some book, some theory that would flip the switch and make Adam normal.

I don’t think of myself, now, as being hopeless; rather, I am realistic. Finally. It took more than twenty-five years for me to understand how to help Adam, how to mother him, how to help him be as independent as is possible. I hope he’ll someday be able to manage money a little bit better, but I have no delusions of him becoming a scientist.

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Adam and I are eating at Anthony’s Pizza, and Adam explains what I think is a new light theory: “Now, since light can be used to bend space and time,” he says, “it can be used to create ‘weak points.’ Let’s go back to the imaginary string; we know parts of the pond can be weakened or broken, so if we grab the string and use it to stir the pond, we could look down into it and perhaps find other ponds by diving in.”

Earlier, at lunch, I asked him if anyone ever accuses David of being delusional. No one has done that, he says, but they often tell David he’s full of shit. David then transforms into a ninja and beats them up. Adam never stays around to watch these fights because I have scared the bejesus out of him, telling him that he can’t go near a fight and risk going to jail. He and I both know he would go insane in jail. We both know that when he was in kindergarten, in 1985, high-functioning autism was unheard-of. If you were autistic, you were also mentally retarded, and Adam was far from mentally retarded. We both know that his suicide attempts and subsequent hospitalizations were a result of his not being able to live in this world. He wanted out because no one, including me, understood how impossible it was for him to sit still in a room with fifteen to twenty other children. Today, Adam tells me he’s working on another chapter of his novel, working out details of the nonhuman characters in his made-up world.

“At every conceivable moment,” Adam continues, “an infinite number of universes are being created, so any time you screw with this sort of thing, you’re making a new universe inside whatever it is you’re using to stir the current universe with.” He tells me that David is going to use this hypothesis to spark an entirely new universe, a universe outside the one we know, where, one day, we will all, definitely, live happily ever after.

Terry Ann Thaxton’s two books of poetry are Getaway Girl (2011) and The Terrible Wife (2013). Her guidebook/anthology Creative Writing in the Community is forthcoming from Continuum Publishers (October 2013). She has published poetry and essays in Rattle, Connecticut Review, Hayden’s Ferry, Teaching Artist Journal, West Branch, Tampa Review and other international literary journals. She is associate professor of English at the University of Central Florida, where she directs the Literary Arts Partnership.

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Questions

1. "No doubt we are all a little delusional. Without a small dose of delusion, our self-confidence or sense of place in this world might wane," Thaxton explains. Are David's delusions any different than those Thaxton says we need to "keep us moving forward?" Where can we draw the line between delusion and hope?

2. Before Adam was diagnosed with Asperger's, he didn't fit into any of the 300 categories of the DSM. In what way does Adam "not fit" parallel other aspects of his life?

3. What strategies that you can find that Thaxton uses to avoid sentimentality in this essay?

4. Read the Oliver Sacks quote again that prefaces this essay. In what ways are Thaxton and her son's life better now that they have a name to define his disease? Has knowing made their lives any different?

5. What does David offer to Adam that Thaxton is unable to provide? Why do you think Thaxton chooses to include his story as well in the essay?

6. Do you believe Thaxton when she says she's a bad mother? Is she justified in the resentment she feels that her son will always need her?

7. Throughout the essay people offer reasons to explain Adam's behavior. An example of this is Thaxton's mother who tells her that "the boy needs more discipline." In looking at other examples as well as this one, how do these reasons reflect each person's character?

Writing Prompts

1) Have you ever been in a position where someone questioned your authority? Write a personal essay that examine this moment and the impact it had on you.

2) Has there ever been a situation where you were deluded into thinking something was possible that wasn't? Write an essay that delves into your own "delusion of grandeur."

3) Research a subject you want to know the answer to. It could be a particular period in history or an aspect of science you've always wanted to understand. Write an essay that ties your findings to an important moment of your life.

4) Write an essay that explores a time when because of who you are you didn't fit into an established norm or group.