Seeing Eye to I

Little stones that are pelted into the lake of consciousness should not throw the whole lake into commotion.
~Paramahansa Yogananda

Casey is reliably emphatic. Arm swung out, shirt turned around backwards, he gushes with frustration about Hat Day. "Why is your Polo shirt backwards?" I ask. Casey throws his arm forward with each syllable, "They didn't tell me it was Hat Day at school! I had to do SOMETHING!" He's not quite angry. A subtle hint of pride trails behind him as he weaves into the kitchen, Polo shirt still backwards, buttons open. I smile.

The following autumn, Casey is emphatic when returning home from his first day of school. In the front entryway he leans his small body forward, letting his mass of untrimmed sandy blond hair fall into his eyes. "My teacher doesn't even look at me when she's talking." Casey is rigid, angry, engrossed in rule recitation. The importance of maintaining eye contact has been drilled into him since he received the diagnosis of

Asperger's six years ago. Back then, he sat fixated on airplane models for hours, noting rudders and flaps and parts called ailerons (he taught me this word). Now, he spends hours planning his future airline: the equipment, the amenities, the brilliant name Everywhere Airlines.

"She doesn't look at you at all?"

"No!" Now both of Casey's arms are thrown out, illustrating the size of the problem. "She looks away! She doesn't even look at me!"

When he was younger, Casey conversed with walls, floors, geometric forms — anything but the person standing in front of him. His body twisted and turned mid-sentence, and words smashed together in an avalanche of information. Eye contact was only one social hurdle. Those days were square one, early intervention, an introduction to life in the mainstream.

It's difficult to believe that Casey's teacher has poor eye contact. She's an eye contact instigator, a specializer in the spectrum, and a maven in the mainstream. She knows the value of eye contact.

Yet Casey comes home again, exasperated, dramatic, wanting to throw his backpack down but knowing full well that it would break a rule of decorum. He's good with rules. He thrives on them. But he's at an age when he realizes some rules are actually about personal boundaries, not laws. Therefore he takes the frustration out on himself; he curls up in a fetal ball on the corner of the couch and moans. Practice tells me to wait until he's down to a simmer. When he turns and uncoils, I can ask him

questions subtly, carefully.

The moans cease. He uncoils.

"How was your second day of fourth grade?"

"She did it again!" The words spring out, and Casey recoils into his ball. His shaggy hair is slick with sweat, glued to his temple. Every other year Casey's hair is buzz-cut-short and easy to manage. This year he actually notices how the other boys are growing their hair out. The social worker calls this a huge step for Casey. "He's trying to fit in," she tells me. What I value about Casey is that he doesn't. Yet he's growing up, and I need to give him a little space. But not right now.

"What happened?" My hand presses firmly against Casey's back. The deep pressure might calm him. In the early days, I administered soothing deep pressure with a plastic therapy brush and joint compressions. He wiggles to reject the pressure. The hand doesn't work.

"She did it again!" A pillow on the couch muffles his voice.

"She-won't-look-at-me-when-she's-talk-ing!" Casey's words are a string of angry syllables. I'm not sure that I hear him correctly. This is precisely the reason Casey is still receiving speech therapy. His mouth can't match the pace of his ideas. The words come out in a soup of vowels and accents and consonants. If you break it apart, you hear the intelligence — the professor-like words such as "improbable" and "continuity" and "indeterminate." As a jumble, he simply sounds his age or younger.

"She won't look at you when you talk?" I ask. Casey groans in response

and pulls his knees tighter to his chest. "Are you absolutely sure about this?" Casey doesn't respond. It's the beginning of the year with a new teacher — a teacher with whom I will undoubtedly have numerous interactions. Contacting her so soon seems, well, too soon. But Casey isn't giving me much to go on.

The school calls me a day later. It's about administration, not behavior. There are forms to be signed, congenial smiles to be exchanged, and other new-school-year rites of passage. At the school, I'm thinking about forms — not eye contact — when a hand is extended. The knobby, arthritic hand belongs to a pear-shaped woman in her early 60s. Her hair is sprayed up and out like a yellow spun sugar.

"I'm your son's teacher," the woman smiles. Her eyes are too big for a human head — triple magnified by her double thick glasses. And there's something else about those eyes. The alignment? The focus? Her spun sugar head is directed right towards me, but those eyes are not.

"Did he enjoy his first day?" Her magnificent smile begs for affirmation.

"Historically his first week or so of school is a little rough, but I'm feeling good about this year!"

"So nice to hear!" She nods but one iris can't keep up with the gesture and slides towards the bridge of her nose.

Casey says his third day is fine aside from his juice flooding his lunchbox and rendering his sandwich strategically damp and unfit for his finicky consumption. The details are both banal and magnificent.

He describes the crust of his sandwich bread as a melting fortress's wall. Individual fissures in the bread are explained in painstaking detail. "A circle in the crust expanded to a large oval — like a swimming pool — and the juice drained through it making a tsunami over the peanut butter . . ." Casey makes an exquisite explanation of something otherwise trifling. But he does this many times a day. I interrupt.

"Casey, I met your teacher today."

"Did she look at you?" Casey's body goes rigid.

"Hon, she has a condition. One of her eyes doesn't work like it's supposed to, so sometimes it seems like she's looking elsewhere. But really, she's trying very hard to make good eye contact." Casey mulls it over.

"Oh," he's still thinking, but not quite as hard as before, ". . . that's too bad. It's kind of like a disease, right?"

"Right."

At that the topic is over — buried. Casey grabs one of his model airplanes — a McDonnell Douglas MD-80 to be precise. Casey talks to himself but knows I'm within earshot. "I think my airline will have special goggles for pilots with crooked eyes." His emphatic arm springs out in jubilation. "That way anyone can be a pilot!"

"That's a great idea!" I tell him. And it is.

~Julie Casper Roth