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**Review of the book *Niezwyczajni ludzie.
Nowe spojrzenie na autyzm*
(Uniquely human. A Different Way of Seeing Autism).
Barry M. Prizant, Tom Fields-Meyer,
Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego,
Kraków 2017**

Autism Spectrum Disorders have attracted a lot of attention of scientists all over the world. Despite many interesting reports, researchers are still searching for answers to some burning questions in this field. Amongst them are Barry Prizant and his co-workers (among others, Amy Wetherby, Emily Robin and Amy Laurent) who developed SCERTS (Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support)¹ model. The abovementioned model comprises some guidelines for parents, educators and therapists concerning their work with children with autism spectrum disorders. What is more, Prizant has been carrying out long-term observations and studies on the phenomenon of echolalia as a way to learn a language. Due to the fact that he travels around the world with his lectures, workshops and trainings, his activity is universal and comprehensive for all cultural communities. The book *Uniquely human. A Different Way of Seeing Autism* is a result of forty years of the author's scientific activity. It was created with the participation of many people (among others, co-author Tom Fields-Meyer, a long-time associate and friend of Barry M. Prizant). Highly emotional and wise, it encourages to make a change in our percep-

¹ B.M. Prizant, T. Fields-Meyer, *Uniquely human. A Different Way of Seeing Autism*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2017, p. 243.

tion of people who suffer from autism spectrum disorders. Already in his short preface, Prizant puts a great emphasis on the role of therapeutic work with the people with the autism spectrum (social communication, emotional stability, interactions with others.)

According to the data provided by the American Centers for Disease Control, nowadays autism is one of the most frequently diagnosed developmental disorder. One in 50 schoolchildren suffers from it². However, I am critical of his words (referred to a number of times in the text, e. g. p. 14, p. 17) defining autism as a disease (?/!) which requires proper treatment. After all, the definition of autism (according to the binding, e. g. in Poland, International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems ICD-10 of 1993) makes it clear that: *“autism is an overall developmental disorder characterised by inadequate or impaired development, showing itself by the age of 3, which involves abnormalities in each of the three spheres: social interactions, communication and limited, repetitive repertoire of behaviours”*³.

Despite this inaccuracy (perhaps caused by incorrect translation from English into Polish), it is impossible to disagree with the author, that our perception of the people struggling with autism should be changed. Reading the book is supposed to bring up a new paradigm in special education: *“instead of classifying permitted functional behaviours as the symptoms of pathology, we shall study them as a part of many strategies helping to cope with, adapt to, communicate in and face the world, which overwhelms such people, arousing their fear.”* And further: *“...how to create a strategy for dealing with problems and offer support, that will prevent alarming behavioural patterns and will naturally lead to those more desired?”*⁴ Thus, instead of rejecting “autistic”, “inappropriate” behaviours, we should rather ask: what function do they perform? The whole book is divided in two major parts. The first part: “Understanding autism” contains six chapters: “Ask why?”, “Listen”, “Fascinations”, “Trust, fear and control”, “Emotional memory”, “Social understanding”. Undoubtedly, the issues discussed there open up the

² B.M. Prizant, T. Fields-Meyer, *Uniquely human. A Different Way of Seeing Autism*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2017, p. 15.

³ E. Pisula, *Autism. Reasons. Symptoms. Therapy*, Wydawnictwo Harmonia, Gdańsk 2016 – 4th Edition, p. 33.

⁴ B.M. Prizant, T. Fields-Meyer, *Uniquely human. A Different Way of Seeing Autism*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2017, p. 17.

hearts of the readers and inspire them to delve deeper into autism and, most of all – understand it. Two issues addressed deserve special attention: the ability to listen and the phenomenon of echolalia. Listening is the basis for proper communication. If we are unable to listen, children, incapable of communicating verbally, become frustrated and angry, which is not the result of aggression, but an attempt at communication. Raun Kaufman (the first child of Son-Rise Programme)⁵ shows, that autistic children communicate in a “foreign” language (compared to Swedish), which is incomprehensible for us. Barry Prizant, observing autistic people, studied the phenomenon of echolalia. He proved that this type of speech (communication) is not just meaningless “parroting”, but a verbal speech that serves a purpose. However, therapists who fail to understand echolalia and thus encourage parents to interrupt it every time, cause a speech impediment. What is more, by doing it, they prevent every attempt at communication and obstruct their process of learning and bonding with the world. The second part – “Living with autism” – is divided into next six chapters: “What has to be done to have that something”, “Wisdom of the group of friends”, “True Experts”, “Perspective”, “Arouse a spirit” and “Important questions”. This part carries a very significant message: “There is no way to grow out of autism – as explains Dena Gassner, mother, who has an autism spectrum disorder herself – you grow into it”⁶. Stories of the families, who share the difficult experiences of common growing up of their children from the early childhood, through the preschool time, adolescence, until adulthood, are extremely valuable. This is an incredible paper about a power of love, understanding, acceptance and great respect. Parents, who find out that their child is autistic, at first become lonely and isolated. Suddenly people, who have always been for them, start to withdraw. Barry Prizant, through the prism of his forty-year experience, maps out new paths of therapeutic work, helps to achieve a successes conditioned by autistic children’s, and later adult’s abilities

The language used by the author (despite the difficulty of the problem of autism) is accessible and comprehensive. It gets through to the broad

⁵ R.K. Kaufman, *“Autism, breakthrough in the mindset”* Vivante Publishing House, Białystok 2016.

⁶ B.M. Prizant, T. Fields-Meyer *Uniquely human. A Different Way of Seeing Autism*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2017, p. 190.

audience (teachers, therapists and parents). Reading the book gives a new perspective on autism, as a „unique dimension of humanity“.

I believe that the publication, by providing new content, enriched with the data from the author's proprietary research and his long-term observations, is a valuable contribution in the area.