

Book Review of Visual Thinking

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Whitney Lee is an Autistic Disability Rights and Mental Health Activist.

They enjoy reading, writing, anime, and playing with their dog.

I am an Autistic Disability Rights Activist and Mental Health Consultant. As a kid I admired Temple Grandin, a livestock industry designer and animal scientist. Like Grandin I am an Autistic visual thinker and animal lover. I too aspired to have a career working with animals. I pursued an education in wildlife sciences. Life altering chronic illness is what led me to my current career in consulting on disability and neurodiversity.

I was excited for the opportunity of reading and reviewing Dr. Grandin's recent book *Visual Thinking: The Hidden Gift of People Who Think in Pictures, Patterns, and Abstractions*. I still view her as a significant figure in disability and women's history, and in the history of animal sciences. I did have qualms going into this as well. I disagree with Grandin's current views on Autism. Despite my differing views, I was excited to read Grandin's new book because I am a visual thinker, and I have learned a lot through her books over the years.

My review of *Visual Thinking* primarily focuses on the first half of the book. It was excellent. I learned a lot about the impact of modern education policies and a culture that looks down on manual labor and technical skilled labor. It is a necessary read for anyone who works in business,

education, or government. It highlights factors that contributed to the outsourcing of manufacturing and the decline in technical trades. *Visual Thinking* brings attention to major problems in education including standardized testing and one size fits all learning.

America's largest companies are not producers; they are consumers. Grandin points out two factors that contributed to the decline in American manufacturing; education policies that screen out visual thinkers and a culture that looks down on trade schools and technically skilled trades.

I greatly appreciated the description on verbal thinking and the questionnaire that allows the reader to figure out how much of a verbal or visual thinker they are. I was not surprised that my results came back indicating I am mainly a visual thinker. I also have a decent dose of verbal thinking.

Grandin argues that removing hands-on education has screened out an entire generation of visual thinkers. With the No Child Left Behind Act and the subsequent policies, education has become more focused on test scores than preparing students for future careers. Hands-on learning opportunities including recess, fieldtrips, CTE and art courses have been reduced or eliminated in schools across the US. These are the courses visual thinkers need.

Mathematics is another reason visual thinkers are being screened out of engineering and other degrees. Grandin describes how she was screened out of veterinary medicine due to algebra. If we want to cultivate innovation, gutting hands-on learning and requiring abstract math is the wrong way to go about it. Many early inventors were visual thinkers who did poorly in math and were instead mechanically clever. Algebra is unnecessary in daily life and unnecessary to most trades. Geometry and statistics are much more applicable to most career choices. More importantly it is better to reinforce basic math skills than requiring advanced math courses for graduation.

I learned that apprenticeships are still offered in the USA. I thought apprenticeships were of a bygone era. While vastly underutilized, apprenticeships still exist. On [apprenticeships.gov](https://www.apprenticeships.gov) there is a vast array of career opportunities that offer paid learning such as the arborist program. Attitudes that looked down on technical schools and insisted college is for everyone have contributed to a generation of staggering student loan debt.

As much as I enjoyed the book there were a few issues I had. While sparse, they are significant enough that they need to be addressed. Grandin's views appear dated and

discriminatory towards nonspeaking people and those like me, people with significant disabilities. She is also dismissive of my career and the careers of my fellow Autistic advocates. (Subsection The Disabilities Trap even suggests prioritizing a career over Autism.) At times advice comes across as out of touch with younger generations and ignorant of intersectionality.

The subsection "The Disabilities Trap" in the "Screened Out" section was the most problematic. While the section briefly covers the history of atrocious acts of ableism, it never uses the term ableism. Ableism is discrimination against disabled people.

Dr. Dr. Grandin calls parents who have limited views of their disabled child's potential as having a disability mindset. The views and actions she described are not those of a disability mindset, but an ableist mindset.

Disabled people can also have an ableist mindset and struggle with internalized ableism. I know I did. For years I denied being disabled and did what I could to eliminate my 'negative' traits. Acknowledging ableism and identifying as a disabled autistic have not limited me, they empowered me.

Visual Thinking does an excellent job at explaining the biology of autism; however, it does a poor job at educating the reader on autism, neurodiversity and disability. In disability studies there are many frameworks disability is looked at. The two most common are the Medical Model and the Social Model. The neurodiversity movement views neurodivergence as a disability only under the social model of disability. [Stella Young](#) explains the Social Model of Disability in her Ted Talk, "We are more disabled by the society we live than by our own bodies and diagnoses."

Ironically for a book on visual thinking it is implied that those who can't speak don't have valuable minds. Nonspeaking people are referenced by examples of how incapable they are, such as being unable to dress themselves or experiencing meltdowns. Amy Sequenzia combats this line of thinking in her post on "[More on Functioning Labels](#)." My favorite quote from the blog is, "Who knows in which body the next brilliant brain resides."

I have learned the most about disability neurodiversity from my nonspeaking coworkers and fellow activists. Groups like Communication First and Neuroclastic have done a lot to dispel the myth that speech is required to be intelligent.

Grandin breaks autistic people into a binary. Either we are socially awkward geniuses, or we are significantly disabled and nonspeaking. I have been both, sometimes

within the same week. The autism spectrum is not linear. It is multifaceted and dynamic. Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition. Most of what makes us Autistic is not observable. I have been diagnosed as having both mild Asperger's and Autism Level 2 in various times in my life. My ability to camouflage my traits determined my diagnosis. Camouflaging happens when neurodivergent people live in a way to pass as neurotypical. Think etiquette, manners or social rules. [Camouflaging](#) while socially advantageous exacerbates depression and anxiety.

Despite my disagreements with parts of *Visual Thinking*, I still highly recommend reading the book. There is a wealth of information to be gained, especially regarding education and industry. Businesses will learn the benefits of creating a workspace that is inclusive to visual thinkers and other neurodivergent people. Policy makers will learn what needs to change in education to cultivate the next generation of innovators, builders, and scientists. Educators will learn how to better accommodate different learning styles. People learn about underutilized opportunities and creative ways to apply their talents in the workforce.