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# Acting for Cassandra – Asperger’s Syndrome in Separation & Divorce

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A tragic character of Greek mythology, Cassandra was admired by the god, Apollo. He mentored her and gave her the gift of prophecy. But he was angered because she accepted him only as a teacher, and not as a lover.

The Greeks were aware that an individual repeatedly not believed would suffer profound moral distress. The name Cassandra was chosen to represent the long time family member or partner of someone with Asperger’s Syndrome (AS), a high functioning form of autism. As with the Cassandra of Greek myth, these individuals often experience moral distress. They also become pathologized, typically developing reactive depression or the appearance of neurosis, exactly the behavior expected for a normal individual subjected to prolonged moral distress (Hackett and Henderson 2002). This pathologization of the party without the dysfunction is also a theme seen in the early work of Lenore Walker.

The Cassandra concept is particularly relevant for the case of an AS partner with children. She or he (we will use “she” in this context, because AS is at this present time, recognized in more males than females) will come to the law office and correctly inform her counsel that there are or may be potential safety issues regarding the parent with AS parenting alone. However, she may be viewed as a result of this reporting as being an alarmist or, even worse, a parent with parental alienation issues. Thus, though she accurately predicts future harm to her children, she becomes the party labelled as abnormal. British Family Court Barristers Hackett and Henderson observe in their recent *Family Law* article that it is, ironically, the non-Aspergers Syndrome mother who will most often be incorrectly identified as the problematic parent. Later, when the predicted child safety incidents occur, they are easily rationalized and normalized and the existing pattern of problems subsequently remains unidentified. This is the result of professionals inadvertently failing to identify the overall pattern and diagnosis.

This so called *Cassandra Phenomenon* is increasingly recognized in the field of autism however, and the term is now used by the internationally-recognized experts on Asperger’s Syndrome: clinical psychologist and author Tony Attwood (Australia) and Marriage Counselor Maxine Aston, formerly with the RELATE Program of England. Support for individuals experiencing this

problem is provided by the international non-profit organization, FAAAS, Inc. (Families of Adults Afflicted with Asperger’s Syndrome, Inc.) out of the U.S.

In the family law literature, AS has been addressed only a handful of times. This is a result of the very recent recognition of this problem. It has been the subject of four reports in British law journals (Young, 2001; Hackett & Henderson, 2002; District Judge Mitchell, 2003; Jennings Linehan & Schloss 2003) and two reports in the child welfare literature in Great Britain and Canada (Forrester & Aston, 2000; Jennings Linehan & Schloss, 2003).

The Cassandra Phenomenon was the topic of lectures by Maxine Aston at the third FAAAS, Inc. International Conference, co-sponsored for the second time with Massachusetts Mental Health Center, a major teaching hospital of Harvard Medical School, in Boston, 2003. FAAAS stands for Families of Adults Afflicted with Aspergers Syndrome. The AS partnership in general and the Cassandra Phenomenon in particular have been addressed in lectures by Dr. Tony Attwood at major conferences in England, Australia and the United States. Another speaker at AS conferences is Dr. Venetia Young, a physician and family therapist who also counsels couples where one party has AS. Dr. Young authored the law journal article entitled “*Encounters with Asperger’s Syndrome in the Solicitors Office*” (*Family Law*, 2001) in part to alert the British family law bar to the clinical problems and legal issues in the more difficult custody and access cases involving a parent with AS. The UK and Australian family courts appear now to be aware of adult autism and its role in child welfare cases and in the sometimes complicated custody and access disputes that come about in these families.

U.K. Family Barristers Hackett and Henderson wrote their article “*Asperger’s Syndrome in Child Contact Cases*” in part as a response to Dr. Young’s feature article in *Family Law*. Both articles were subsequently addressed by U.K. District Judge John Mitchell in his *Family Law* article, “*Contact and the Unusual Parent.*” None of these articles is more than 3 years old, a fact that speaks to the novelty of this issue in the family law context.

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The international conferences form an important part of the literature on the AS marriage, family and parenting. Transcripts are available on the FAAAS, Inc. website, [www.faaas.org](http://www.faaas.org). Important in this collection is the lecture outline entitled "*The Healing of Cassandra*," which is the result of Aston's ongoing research into AS partnership and her lecture at the Harvard teaching hospital on its impact on the non-autistic spouses, usually women and often women who are mothers.<sup>1</sup>

The conference transcripts serve to amplify the voices of family members from around the world who openly discuss with a clinical psychologist what it is to be in a relationship with a person with AS. In none of the regions where the conferences have taken place do these family members feel they have a meaningful voice in their family courts, presumably because custody and access assessors, family lawyers, children's lawyers, and social workers are not all yet fully aware of this unique neurological syndrome and its impact on children and partners (see Jennings Linehan & Schloss *International Family Law* 2003) before during and after separation.

A recently published American book, *Asperger's Syndrome and Adults... Is Anyone Listening? Essays and Poems by Partners, Parents and Family Members of Adults with Asperger's Syndrome* (Rodman, 2003) discusses the 'side-effect' of this neurological disorder on others. Rodman's book offers the reader a view into the lonely world of Cassandra. Included are valuable articles by author and activist Brenda Wall (England) "When Love Is Not Enough," a piece by Marguerite Long (Australia) "Behind a Glass Wall," and a paper by disability activist and author Judy Singer (Australia), "When Cassandra was Very Very Young," from the viewpoint of the now adult daughter of a mother with Asperger's Syndrome.

The National Autistic Society of Great Britain has published a book (2001) written by couples counsellor, Maxine Aston, entitled *The Other Half of Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide To Living in an Intimate Relationship with a Partner Who Has Asperger's Syndrome* (2001). It describes, in part, the AS marriage from the perspective of 'Cassandra'. It briefly addresses marital breakdown and how it might look depending on who left the union. Aston has also written more recently the successful book *Aspergers In Love* (2003) which examines the important aspects of relationships that are complicated by the presence of AS and it covers off a number of pertinent issues to family lawyers such as communication and parenting with Aspergers Syndrome.

Liane Holliday Willey (1999) wrote her important book *Pretending to be Normal: Living with Asperger's Syndrome* in part, in an effort to illustrate how a wife and mother with AS struggles in her relationships as a partner and as a parent living with this difficult condition. Holliday Willey offers us valuable insight into the experience of mothering by a highly educated (the author holds a PhD in education) and observant woman with the AS diagnosis<sup>2</sup>. Parts of this book evoke great compassion in the reader, yet other sections leave the reader feeling distinctly uncomfortable, especially with respect to issues concerning the best interests of the child. Holliday Willey was recently in Toronto and is a regular speaker at the Geneva Centre for Autism in the city. Her work is an important piece in the education of professionals, including divorce professionals, about autistic individuals and their families and the often overwhelming struggles they face on a daily basis.

The controversial article co-authored by Welsh social worker Ruth Forrester with Maxine Aston "*Living with Asperger's Syndrome*" was published in the British social work journal *Community Care* in 2000. This pioneering article offers insight into some of the more difficult AS marriages. It addresses abuse that may occur in some AS marriages and addresses the effect that *the very idiosyncratic problems* have on non-autistic spouses and children. *The Asperger Marriage* (2002) is a controversial book written by a married couple with children, one of whom has the diagnosis. They propose what the authors consider to be practical solutions and advice on dealing with the kinds of marital challenges that AS poses to partnership. This book is seen in the autistic community as being a supportive guide to parties who wish to reconcile or work on the marital issues that have arisen with the presence and context of Asperger's Syndrome.

Critics of the former article argue that AS marriages are not as dysfunctional as its authors describe. In contrast, critics of the latter commentary point out that the authors paint a subjective portrait of denial, offering up the Pollyanna version of AS partnership. The U.S. support organization FAAAS has noted that both perspectives, however far apart, have something important to offer the legal profession in their education about separation with Asperger's Syndrome.

In truth, there is no single, representative AS marriage. There are only individuals struggling in these marriages. Interestingly, when one partner is on the spectrum and the other is not, the union has been termed a mixed marriage, by some members of the autism community, reflecting their view of AS as a kind of cultural difference rather than as a neurological disorder. The geography of autism is

not yet fully mapped out however. As clinical psychologist and University of Toronto Professor Jordan Peterson has noted, in loyalty to personal interest subjective meaning can serve as an antidote to the overwhelming temptation constantly posed by the possibility of denying anomaly. And there is a great deal of anomaly and paradox in the syndrome Hans Asperger identified, and a great deal of anomaly in these families. However anomalous, the presence of Asperger's Syndrome in separation, divorce and child protection must be addressed by professionals. It is an important landmark on the family law map.

Because every adult with AS is different, so too are the marriages, affected as they are by a significant neurological difference. Some of the variation among AS marriages may result from variation in the severity of the AS, and it may also depend on the number of successful accommodations provided by the non-AS partner and children. Other important clinical and non-clinical factors that may influence the instability in these marriages, such as the number of co-morbidities in the AS party suffers, the mental and physical health status of the non-autistic partner, and importantly the neurological status of their children.<sup>3</sup> Many adults with AS will have spectrum sitting children. This is of course an important feature that must be addressed also in post separation planning.

It must be remembered too, that parents with AS often have quite astounding gifts and these gifts ought to be shared with their children in the creation of parenting plans or residential schedules/access arrangements. As well, in spite of an often seeming remoteness and aloofness, these parents are often very connected to their children. Lawyers acting for individuals with Aspergers Syndrome need to learn as much as they can about the condition and how it affects communication and how it impacts on relationships. Such individuals struggle greatly with and must overcome many difficulties and as such they too need understanding counsel.

In the now vast literature on Asperger's Syndrome, strikingly little is available concerning marriage and divorce in families where there is autistic spectrum disorder. This is a glaring omission given the knowledge base already available regarding AS differences.<sup>4</sup>

For family therapists, marriage counsellor Maxine Aston has written "*Asperger's Syndrome in the Counselling Room*" (2003), and British activist Brenda Wall along with FAAAS, Inc. recently prepared a brochure concerning *Asperger's Syndrome partnerships*, which is available at the FAAAS, Inc. website. The first printed acknowledgement that persons with AS marry and have marital difficulties resulting from their autism was a fact sheet published by

the National Autistic Society of Great Britain, "*Help for Partners of People with Asperger's Syndrome*". Wall, a pioneer in this field, met with Dr. Francesca Happe (Senior Cognitive Psychologist at the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College, London and widely respected author on autistic spectrum disorders). Dr. Happe subsequently helped persuade the National Autistic Society of the U.K. to publish the first fact sheet in 1998.

Several other self-published flyers and newsletters have been prepared by groups and individuals supporting relatives of individuals with Asperger's Syndrome. These have been instrumental in the successful implementation of Cassandra-related initiatives. Currently, Aston is offering a support group known as The Cassandra Unity Project through a family counselling centre in Coventry (U.K.). A sample of the other spousal support groups include ones organized by Karen Rodman (FAAAS, Inc. USA) by Linda Newland (Aspires, USA), and Carol Grigg (GRASP, Australia) as well as the group Aspouse (Australia) and an unnamed group in Toronto (Canada) run by an autism advocate.

Support groups for spouses are notably absent from the larger organizations that support persons with autism. This matter raises interesting questions. Hopefully this omission will be remedied with time. These large, funded and publicly-supported organizations typically offer sibling support and parent support groups for families with autistic children in them, but have failed overall to acknowledge the concept of the Cassandra Phenomenon. The reasons for this are beyond the scope of this article.

This article offers one perspective only of a multi-faceted issue. Non-autistic men marry women on the autistic spectrum, and they have a story to tell that family lawyers need to hear and understand. Women on the spectrum are often drawn to men on the spectrum because of lifestyle similarities. There are gender issues within autism that need to be explored. Adult children of parents with autism have only now found their voice. Minor children of autistic parents need help to find theirs. Spouses of autistic partners are still searching for assistance and validation from publicly supported organizations. Persons living with autism spectrum disorders have important stories to tell and they need the compassion and understanding of family lawyers and others involved in supporting them through the significant life transition of separation.

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\* *FAAAS Inc. (Families of Adults Afflicted with Asperger's Syndrome, see [www.faaas.org](http://www.faaas.org))*.

<sup>1</sup> Many with AS have successful marriages. Aspires is a group in the US that supports parties in these marriages and their website has a great deal of literature on supporting these relationships.

<sup>2</sup> Asperger's Syndrome does not appear to present the same way in women as it does in men and lawyers and social workers need to be particularly aware of this unusual diagnostic circumstance. For more information see Christopher Gillberg and Tony Atwood's extensive work in this area.

<sup>3</sup> Many adults with AS have children with AS or who are otherwise on the autistic spectrum diagnosed with PDD-NOS or other autistic conditions.

<sup>4</sup> There are a few articles available. See: *The Parent with Neurological Disorder. Are their Children at Risk?* (Schloss and Jennings Linehan in *OACAS Journal* 2003), *Special Needs Practice Issues for Ontario Mediators* (Jennings Linehan 2003 in *Solutions OAFM*) and "Who's Minding the Children? Child Contact and the Neurologically Impaired Parent", (Jennings Linehan & Schloss 2003 in *International Family Law*).