

# **Exhibit 1**

**Final Report for Defense Counsel**  
**By John Elder Robison**  
**US vs. Dylann Roof**  
**December 28, 2016**

Defense counsel retained me in October 2016 as an expert on autism and related conditions. My autism expertise springs from first person experience as an autistic person, as a parent of an autistic son who is now 26, and as a counselor and teacher to autistic individuals. I am knowledgeable about the description of autism through my work establishing autism definitions for the World Health Organization, and I am knowledgeable about diagnostic and treatment issues and autism's connection to violence through my service on the US government's top-level autism committee.

I am a 59-year-old autistic adult best known as a writer and advocate for autistic people in the areas of civil rights, public health policy, medical science, education and social support services. I am the author of four popular books on life with autism – *Look Me in the Eye*, *Be Different*, *Raising Cubby*, and *Switched On*.

*Look Me in the Eye* and *Be Different* have been widely adopted as special education readers for autism instruction in schools and colleges. They are accepted parts of the public-school curriculum in Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Michigan, Texas, and in many local school districts. Both books are also assigned reading for hundreds of college courses. They are widely recommended to parents when clinicians deliver an autism diagnosis for a child.

I'm also author or co-author of more than one hundred articles on autism and developmental difference, both in peer reviewed scientific journals and in popular media. I teach about autism at William & Mary in Virginia where I am the neurodiversity scholar in residence and at Bay Path University in Massachusetts where I am a professor of practice.

My appointment at William & Mary is housed in the president's office of diversity and principally seated in the department of psychology. My appointment at Bay Path University is in the department of education.

In 2011 the Secretary of Health and Human Services of the United States asked me to join the Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee (IACC.) I have now had the honor of serving two Secretaries over the past five years in that role. Our committee produces the strategic plan for autism for the US Government, and the annual summary of advances in autism research and treatment for Congress. For the past four years, my area of specialization on the committee has been recognition and detection of autism in people of all ages. For the annual reports, I co-author the summary and introduction in conjunction with the head of the office of autism research coordination (OARC) and the director of the National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH.)

With respect to defining autism, I have served since 2012 on the World Health Organization's ICF Autism Core Set steering committee. I am one of two representatives from the United States, and one of three representatives from the North American region. The World Health Organization is responsible for generating the standard definitions of all disorders – including autism – and defining aspects of human function. This fall we released the latest ICF Autism Core Set.

Additionally, I am co-founder of TCS Careers or College, a Massachusetts secondary school program for teens with autism, emotional problems, and other developmental challenges. We work with children and teens that are at risk for becoming violent, and becoming self-injurious. Our program serves the public school districts of Western Massachusetts.

Over the last decade I have met with thousands of autistic people including a great many young adults. In 2012, when Adam Lanza (the Newtown school killer) was reported to be autistic I took a lead role in writing the official statement about autism and violence on behalf of the IACC. My focus at that time was the fact that autistic people are much more likely to be victims than perpetrators of aggressive violence.

### **Scope of Work Performed**

Autism is a complex neurological difference, poorly understood by those who do not have a personal connection to it. For some autistic adults, autism confers upon us a mix of disabilities and exceptionalities. For many children and young adults, autism is primarily disabling, and it can be painful, both physically and psychically.

Autism is disabling when our different brains have trouble accommodating the organizational demands of school or work. Autism is painful when our communication disabilities make it hard to make friends or make us targets for ridicule and bullying.

Mr. Roof was diagnosed with autism in the summer of 2016, but he does not accept the diagnosis, which came from a psychologist retained by the defense. He told me, *The state's psychiatrist said there's nothing wrong with me. I am just a sociopath.* In my experience, it is common for people to deny autism diagnoses whether out of shame and embarrassment or due to lack of insight and rigid thinking.

To advise Mr. Roof's defense counsel I made two trips to South Carolina (in October and November) for in-person interviews and reviewed an extensive list of materials they provided. On November 19 I delivered an initial report that detailed my meeting with the defendant at the Charleston detention facility. That report is integrated with only minor changes into this larger document. This report also includes details from:

- Interviews with counsel regarding defendant's appearance and behavior during their encounters;

- Interview with defendant Dylann Roof (as reported in my Nov 19 Declaration);
- Interviews with defendant's mother (Amy Roof) and grandparents (Joe and Lucy Roof);
- Review of video visits (at Charleston detention facility) between defendant and family members;
- Review of confession;
- Review of school and medical records;
- Review of defendant's journals and website;
- Review of personal photos provided by defense counsel.

In this report I have paraphrased many passages of dialogue that are written in italics. When I have quoted from written materials those passages appear within quotation marks.

Throughout this document I have named the defendant Dylann when I refer to him as a child, and Mr. Roof when I refer to him as an adult. When I paraphrase, he is referred to as Dylann because that is what everyone I interviewed called him in conversation. Mr. Joe Roof refers to the grandfather and Mr. Benn Roof refers to the father. Ms. Roof refers to the mother Amy Roof, and Mrs. Roof refers to Lucy Roof the grandmother. Mr. Roof's siblings are referred to by their first names (Amber or [REDACTED] and Mr. Benn Roof's second wife (they married and divorced during Dylann's childhood) is Paige.

I reviewed written materials related to the case in the public domain, including the online document referred to as "Dylann's manifesto." I was also able to find and view numerous photos of the defendant, and photos he had uploaded to his "Last Rhodesian" website.

Mr. Roof wrote that he was stirred to action after reading about the Trayvon Martin case, and searching out "black on white crime" statistics. I read about that case, and searched out the same statistics. I also read material on the Stormfront and Council of Conservative Citizens websites Mr. Roof mentioned.

On October 7 I traveled to Columbia to meet with counsel and family members, and I returned on November 4. Afterward, counsel provided more video and written material for my review. This report is a synthesis of all the above materials, videos, and in-person interviews interpreted in the context of my knowledge of autism, and insight in this area.

In some cases I observed the same or similar observation in more than one of the sources available to me. Therefore there is some necessary repetition as the similar observations are sometimes noted in multiple sections. I apologize for that; I've tried to keep it to a minimum while still allowing each section to stand alone for purposes of analysis and discussion.

## The Videos

I was given several hours of video interviews between Mr. Roof and family members from the video visitation system at the Charleston detention facility where Mr. Roof was housed.

The jail's visitation system allows family members to sit at a console in the public area of the jail. The inmate sits at his own console in the secure area of the jail. Each person sees the other on video screen, and conversation passes through an old-fashioned telephone handset. Visits last half an hour, and are recorded. Those videos were made available to counsel, who gave them to me for study.

I viewed videos of meetings between Mr. Roof and his sisters, his mother and her boyfriend, his father, and his grandparents. While the visitors in the videos changed there were a number of points of commonality that were driven by Mr. Roof. I have elucidated some of them below:

Mr. Roof appeared to fixate on the most trivial points. For example, in one exchange he spent ten minutes questioning whether his grandfather and uncle would eat one, two, or three meals together and why his grandfather would possibly want to do such a thing. The grandfather was clearly confused by the intensity of the questioning and its ultimate point but he tried to answer his grandson with good humor.

Mr. Roof tended to lead the conversations, no matter what his relatives said. In the example above, the grandfather had actually said, *I'm looking forward to seeing your uncle and my grandchild*. Instead of replying with an appropriate answer, like "I'll bet you are looking forward to seeing them," Mr. Roof stuck to his topic of interest with, *So are you going to eat dinner with him? Why would you want to do that?* It was clear to me that the grandfather was thinking of his other grandchild, and I could not tell why Mr. Roof was so focused on the meals.

The disconnect between them was obvious, but just as obviously, the elder Roofs loved their grandson and they persisted in trying to connect with him. For that reason, the conversation was a success. Watching them, I remembered my own childhood and how I failed at connecting to my peers even as I succeeded in conversing with adults. In this case, though, young Mr. Roof was already an adult and his disconnect must have manifested itself elsewhere in life, making it hard to acquire and keep friendships or jobs. Most other people lack the conversational patience of loving grandparents.

That was a classic illustration of how an autistic person can be totally oblivious to the unspoken (and sometimes spoken) undertone of meaning in a conversation. The exchange also illustrated the extreme focus and unusual interests that are so common in autistic people. People sometimes say autistic people can't see the forest for the trees, but we know every single detail about one tree branch. The mealtime exchange certainly illustrated that, and the videos were filled with similar passages.

At one point Mr. Roof's grandfather asked about his teeth. *Is that a chipped tooth you have there? No*, he responded, *they are just crooked. We need to get you to an orthodontist, son*, his grandfather said. At that, Mr. Roof burst out laughing, and he continued to giggle for quite a while. *They don't have orthodontists in jail*. Then he went on to talk about how terrible dental care is in jail, and how they pull your teeth out for the slightest problem. His grandparents were visibly distressed.

Mr. Roof's laughter was an example of the inappropriate reactions autistic people can display in conversation. Given that he was the person who would suffer the terrible dental care, why did he laugh? I can't answer why, but I can certainly say that sort of disturbing and weird seeming response is common for many autistic people.

Every visitor asked Mr. Roof how he was doing. In most every case he responded that he was doing fine. Listening to him talk I formed the distinct impression that the order and structure of jail was a comfort to him. He said the jail clothes were comfortable, and he had plenty of time to sit by himself and read. Autistic people tend to like ritual, routine, and order.

When his mother and father came to visit, he would ask them for books – many of which were foreign classics, or historical tomes. The books he requested described worlds very different from the one he inhabited.

While visitors always asked how he was doing, Mr. Roof never asked about them. That is a very common behavior in autistic people, one that is sometimes incorrectly interpreted as a narcissistic trait. It is a sign of self-focus, but it has a different cause in autistics. A narcissist is defined as a person who has an inflated sense of their own importance, a deep need for admiration and a lack of empathy for others. For that description to be meaningful, the person must have awareness of others, and I saw no sign of such awareness in Mr. Roof's behavior. Autistic people tend to be clueless about the feelings of others, and so do not think to ask. A narcissist, in contrast, imagines himself "more important" than someone else.

Through many hours of recorded interviews, I saw one example after another of Mr. Roof missing social cues from the people he interacted with, and stumbling in conversation as a result. Many people would interpret that behavior as dismissive or uncaring with respect to the other person. However, my own life experience and extensive research shows it to be in most cases oblivious, rather than deliberate. Careful observation allows us to distinguish that difference in motive, and in Mr. Roof's case the result supports one of the major points of an autism diagnosis. To me that was one of the clearest signs of autism in him. He also failed to display the expected empathetic responses; another strong sign of autism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Here is how the DSM5 describes the breakdown I observed, in the context of the autism definition: [To receive an autism diagnosis a person must show] Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions. All those things were clearly visible in the videos.

I did see flashes of emotional response from Mr. Roof. Two examples were when he asked his mom about his cat, and when the FBI agent asked where he wished he was at the end of his confession. In the first example, he displayed sudden excitement and animation, and in the second he looked wistful as he said he wished he were home with his mother.

Mr. Roof seldom expressed joy, sympathy, or other common emotions that were called for by the normal ebb and flow of family conversation. Most often he just showed a fixed half-smile. In one visit Mr. Roof's sister remarked on that, saying, *you never have any feelings*. In fact, autistics are sometimes described as "innocent narcissists."

Another point struck me as I viewed the videos. Mr. Roof never inquired about anything from his former world "outside." When asked how he was doing, he always said, "fine." The only exception to that was with his mother. He would ask her how his pet cats were doing. That detachment from the physical world is also common in autistic people, as is a seeming preference for animals over people. Autistic people who have great difficulty reading nonverbal cues from humans may have exceptional abilities to read animals, and they may also prefer the simpler (less deception or manipulation) nature of animal-human relations.

Another thing that struck me was Mr. Roof's expression. For most of the time – several hours of video – Mr. Roof wore what I'd call a slight smirk, as if he were in on some secret joke a great deal of the time. His words suggest he was not in a state of continuous amusement, but fixed and unexpected facial expressions are very common in autistic people too.

At no point did Mr. Roof share any clue that he was frightened or even worried about what might happen to him in the future. Never once did he say, *I'm scared*. Nor did he say, *Do something to help me*, beyond sometimes asking for the superficial assistance of depositing money in his jail commissary account. Mr. Roof seemed totally unconcerned. He was certainly aware that prosecutors were seeking the death penalty with the greatest of vigor, and his total absence of visible anxiety suggested a profound disconnect from the grave reality of his situation. During those visits he was truly behaving as a young man in his own world.

It is interesting that the behaviors detailed above parallel the description of an autistic person in Leo Kanner's seminal 1943 description of autism. In that paper Dr. Kanner wrote of his patient, "He seems to be self satisfied. . . He does not observe the fact that anyone comes or goes, and never seems glad to see father or mother or any playmate. He almost seems to draw into his shell and live within himself."

Another thing that struck me was how Mr. Roof presented himself. In every interaction he was unfailingly polite. He never swore, and never raised his voice. He spoke softly, and there was a gentleness about him that seemed most incongruous in light of what he had done. His limited education showed itself in grammatical errors, but he never missed his manners. For a person who had committed such a heinous series of murders, and then spent a year confined in jail, it

was amazing that he seemed devoid of anger, fear, rage or any other strong negative emotion. He seemed very much on an even keel.

Appearances can be deceiving with autistic people. Studies have shown what happens when autistic people are exposed to disturbing scenes alongside non-autistic controls. The autistics show no sign of distress, while the controls are visibly upset. Yet heart rate or skin conductance monitors show the autistics to be more profoundly affected than the controls.<sup>2</sup>

Many autistic people can also be diagnosed with a condition called alexithymia. In laymen's terms alexithymia is the inability to recognize one's emotions for what they are. For example, a person with alexithymia might be exposed to a situation that would stir strong emotional response. The person might not know what to say, and he might just smile fixedly. He feels something inside, but cannot get in touch with exactly what it is. You might ask him what he is feeling and he'd say "I don't know," or even, "nothing." My observations of Mr. Roof with his family are consistent with alexithymia.

Current research suggests 50% of autistics also have alexithymia. That would help explain both Mr. Roof's semi-fixed expressions and his inappropriate responses.<sup>3</sup>

The overriding sense I got from the videos was that I was watching a child (or a person with serious emotional developmental delays) as I watched Mr. Roof. I knew the defendant in the recordings was now twenty-two years old but he presented as a teenager. The thoughts he expressed were childlike, and his appearance was distinctly adolescent. One component of autism is developmental delay and Mr. Roof clearly manifests that in the recordings I examined. That sense would be reinforced when I later met him in person.

## **The Grandparents**

Defense counsel took me to meet Mr. Joe Roof and his wife Lucy at their home. The Roofs received us graciously and we spoke for several hours. Mr. Joe Roof told me racism was not part of his grandson's upbringing, and he didn't understand where his grandson's ideas had come from. He believed they emerged fairly recently. For example, in the months before the killings, his grandson had asked him several times if he thought the Holocaust was real.

Mr. Joe Roof said his grandson asked if he could stay with his grandparents on several occasions in the month before the killings. In hindsight, he said, he could see his grandson must have

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Lindsay Oberman first presented this at the 2004 Society for Neuroscience conference and it has been confirmed and expanded by Minio-Paluello and many others since.

<sup>3</sup> This was first noted in Dr. Michael Fitzgerald's 2007 paper, *The Overlap Between Alexithymia and Asperger Syndrome*. [Asperger Syndrome is a form of autism] The idea that 50% of autistics are also alexithymic has been supported by many studies since and was the subject of popular articles in the magazines *Spectrum* and *Scientific American* in the summer of 2016.

been under great stress. He went on to explain that Mr. Roof's relations with both his parents had become strained by his social withdrawal and his seeming lack of interest in getting a job. A month before the murders his parents told him he could no longer stay with them unless he worked and paid rent. His mother had also terminated internet service at the home where he lived with her. At the time of the murders he was staying occasionally on his dad's sofa, with friends on the floor of their trailer, or sleeping in his car.

Mr. and Mrs. Joe Roof both told me about a younger Dylann, and how he would engage them at their home. *He'd come upstairs, and pull out the encyclopedia. He'd read us passages from it, and then ask us if we had known this thing or that. He was a very smart boy.* He read to them in the manner of a teacher lecturing to students. That is very characteristic of an autistic person. In fact autistic children are sometimes referred to as "little professors."

Dylann's pedantic and unidirectional conversational style would have been a significant point of disability in engaging peers. However his immediate family was used to him, and engaged him as he was. If his social disability prevented Dylann from reading the tone of his grandparent's ongoing conversation he would not have had any idea that he was "barging in" when he interjected his own ideas into their conversation. It's important to understand that point. The autistic person does not know his conversational behavior is rude, or that he is interrupting, because of his disability.

The conversation then turned to Dylann's arrests and trespass trouble earlier that year. His grandparents told me what happened. *The news media reported that Dylann was going from store to store in the mall, saying weird things.* Mr. Joe Roof shook his head in reflection. *But maybe that was just Dylann, trying to get a job and not knowing what to do.* For what I think was the first time both grandparents recognized their grandson may have had significant neurological disability, and not just laziness. Perhaps he hadn't known how to get a job, I suggested, and he was terrified and therefore acted strangely.

A person who can't read others is at a particular disadvantage when trying to talk to a stranger. When he's trying to do something unfamiliar he is very likely to say or do the wrong thing, and fail. That may well have happened with Mr. Roof at the mall. Yet the parental response – that their son was an adult and had to engage the adult world – was typical. The tragedy here is that no one recognized a very real disability in young Mr. Roof. He never received any supports or counseling and he became increasingly disconnected as he grew older. In this case, disconnection seems to have led to a deadly and unexpected outcome.

## **His Mother**

Amy Roof initially declined a meeting with me – reportedly saying she had somewhere else to go. When I finally did meet with Ms. Roof, she talked a lot about Dylann as a young boy, but did not seem to have much knowledge or information about who he became or how he spent his time as an adult, though they had lived in the same house.

Ms. Roof told a story of unrecognized autism, and accommodation, that spanned her son's entire life. In a two-hour interview at her home she told me about a boy that was always by himself in school and at play. *He had a few friends, but no really close friends*, she told me. *He was usually alone when I watched him play, but I guessed that's what he wanted.* From an early age Dylann showed a need for routine, and some unusual sensory sensitivities. *His clothes had to be just so*, she told me, *and I always washed them in his favorite detergent so they smelled right. His shoes had to be tied just so, and he would get upset if we didn't follow his routine, but that didn't usually happen because I always followed his routine. I gave him whatever he wanted.*

It sounded like Ms. Roof accommodated her son's autistic needs all his life, without giving a thought to whether they might be unusual or disabling.

*For the past five years he was mostly in his room*, she told me. *We'd ask him if he wanted to go to dinner with us, or go into town, and he'd say he preferred to stay home with the cats. He really loves those cats.* Being the parent of an autistic son myself, I know how hard it can be to get someone out of their room.

Ms. Roof said Dylann did well in school at the beginning, but he ran into trouble as he progressed into middle school. He went from being a solid B student in elementary school to failing in middle school, and he did not successfully progress beyond ninth grade despite repeating the grade at his regular high school and then transferring to an online charter school.

It is very common for autistic children to follow that pattern. In the lower grades children mostly learn within themselves. They do not have to interact and join groups to get good grades. There is little organizational stress, because everything is handed to them, task by task, by the teacher. Then comes middle school, and high school. Suddenly there are class changes, and the student has to interact with several classrooms full of different kids each day. Teachers assign homework, which requires organizational skills many autistic kids don't have. They expect kids to work in groups, something many autistics have great trouble with. The portrait of an autistic child who performed brilliantly through grade school and ran totally off the rails by high school is unfortunately all too common in the autism community.

Ms. Roof told me that Dylann was concerned about his health, and believed he was disfigured or damaged. Some autistic children develop such ideas as a way to explain being rejected by their peers. The thought is, *if they don't want to be friends, (I) must be damaged or defective.* For most autistic children, such ideas fade harmlessly with age as "harmless hypochondria." For others those delusional ideas grow and may even become part of a broader psychosis. That is one of many possible maladaptive behaviors that may spring from autism, particularly when it is unrecognized and untreated.

As he got older, Ms. Roof said her son became increasingly anxious and withdrawn, but he refused to see a therapist or psychiatrist. When she moved to her current residence (about six

years ago, by her account) Dylann retreated to his upstairs bedroom and essentially dropped out of society. He let go of the friendships he had, withdrew from most face-to-face contact, and spent all his time online.

She said that isolation was broken by a few forays into part time work, but none were sustainable. Dylann formed a few friendships, but per his mom, never had a “best friend.” She said his favorite activities were watching television, spending time on his computer, and playing video games. He didn’t engage in social or team activities.

Playing almost exclusively by himself, failing to make friends, having a strong need for routine and ritual and exhibiting extreme sensitivity to clothing are – when taken together – strongly suggestive of autism.

### **School and Medical Records**

The picture painted by Ms. Roof was that of a lonely, isolated boy who grew up without many friends, and then turned inward and onto the Internet. School and medical records bear that out. The early records show a young child who’s a solid B student. He’s of average height, but very skinny for his age. He was also a bit more likely to miss school.

Reading the records, I saw how the older Dylann got the more school he missed, and the worse his grades got. As I noted before many autistic people (including my son and myself) followed that pattern.

In June of 2004 Dylann’s mom brought him for his 10-11 year old checkup. His health was good. In the course of his checkup the pediatrician asked Dylann a number of questions, which would be repeated at his checkups for the next 8 years. The questions covered such things as “Do you have a yard to play in?” (He did) This interview was noteworthy because it was the last time Dylann answered “yes” when asked if he had a definite bedtime.

A year later he told the doctor his favorite activity is playing video games. For the first time he professed interest in girls. Also for the first time he has asthma/wheezing. Now and at every future checkup Dylann would say there’s no definite bedtime.

Over the next four years there seems to be some family stress. Medical records show Dylann and his mom received low income assistance, and they moved four times in that period. Ms. Roof had a succession of boyfriends in those years, so family life with her was somewhat unstable. By that time his father had remarried and his second wife – Paige Roof – helped take care of Dylann. It may be that all that family change was just too much, and contributed to autistic withdrawal. Whatever the reason, by 2006 (at age 12) Dylann was telling the pediatrician that he did not eat with his parents or siblings, do chores, or have a definite bedtime. His grades were slipping, and tardiness and absence were on the rise.

The year 2010 was not a good one for Dylann. His father and stepmom were getting divorced and that household was in a state of upheaval. His mom was just moving in with her new (and current) boyfriend, so there was change in that household too. Dylann turned 16, and stopped going to school. A truancy hearing followed, and Dylann left his regular high school for an online program that his dad helped set up. At some point Dylann moved in with his dad.

That's year's doctor's notes read, "Quit high school and doing home school. Acne bothers him wants to stay at home. May consider psychological counseling for avoiding school."

His sister Amber seemed to be a stabilizing influence, but she had moved out a few years previously. Dylann was left with a choice of living with his mom and mom's new boyfriend, or his soon-to-be divorced father. Doctor's notes say that Dylann refused to see a therapist. A year later his problems were mounting. The doctor noted insomnia and "unreasonable or irrational fears of going outside the house."

For the first time his doctor noted excessive snacking with juices and soft drinks. Dylann said he was on the computer 8 hours a day. His mother said he could not read or do math at grade level. He was disengaged from the online high school, and mostly staying in his room.

In the fall of 2012 his doctor's record lists the first reports of anxiety, but Dylann refused counseling. He continued to complain of acne and a deviated septum. He was experiencing wheezing. The doctor's report says he does not sleep, and is oppositional. He uses electronics 8 hours a day. In this visit the doctor notes what seems to have been building for a few years. "Dylann has problems with peer group and does not go outside the home." Yet they are still hopefully checking the boxes that all is well, because another area on the report says, "Good school performance," (he was failing) and, "No problems with one's peers." (He was totally disconnected, according to his mom). The pediatrician again recommended psychiatric counseling, but he refused.

In the fall of 2013 Dylann was sufficiently disconnected from school that they held a truancy intervention, to which Dylann responded, "Been to doctor a lot, but no real excuse." He did not ask for another chance, or resolve to try harder. Two months later he dropped out of Provost Academy online school. He had spent three years in the ninth grade.

One thing that is noteworthy about the school and medical records is that they make no reference to Dylann having racial trouble, getting into fights, or indeed anything that would be predictive of his 2015 crimes. The school and medical records support the statement in his diary that he only came to be radicalized in that regard much later.

Undiagnosed autism is certainly one explanation for Dylann's teenage problems. Unfortunately, autism does not seem to be his only problem. Autism seems to have disabled young Dylann socially, and that led to a host of other problems, all of which were unaddressed either because no adult saw them, or because Dylann refused counseling and none of the adults in his life insisted that he get the help he needed.

## Dylann's Journals

In February of 2012, George Zimmerman shot and killed Trayvon Martin in Florida. The case made national headlines. Zimmerman was charged in the killing in April of 2012 and acquitted in July of 2013

According to an undated journal Dylann kept, that predates the killings, the Martin case is what triggered his interest in race, and specifically in "black on white crime." He wrote, "My name is Dylann Storm Roof . . . I was not raised in a racist home or environment . . . Every White person has a small amount of racial awareness because of the number of negroes in this part of the country . . . The event that truly awakened me was the Trayvon Martin Case . . . I read the Wikipedia article . . . it was obvious Zimmerman was in the right."

Looking at the history for that particular Wikipedia article, the discussion Mr. Roof refers to was not added to the page until May 18, 2013. If we accept the previous paragraph as a true account of his "racial awakening" we can say with reasonable certainty that his exploration of online racism began in the summer of 2013. Mr. Roof would later confirm that in a statement to the FBI after his arrest.

Based on his own statements (in the journal and during his FBI interview) it looks like Mr. Roof formed his racial ideas entirely as a result of online interaction. Furthermore, it appears his interaction was mostly one-way; in other words he read quite a lot but contributed little original thought. The ideas in his journals seem to follow what's available on Council of Conservative Citizens, The Daily Stormer, Stormfront and other similar websites.

Mr. Roof's writing is clear, but formulaic and unoriginal. He makes statements like "white people are superior," or "blacks are lazy." But he does not back those words (which can be found on countless white supremacists pages online) with any original thoughts or examples from his own life. I was surprised at the degree to which he embraced white nationalism, given his seeming lack of personal experience.

Later, in his FBI interview, he would assure the agents that the Internet was his only source of racial knowledge. He said he had not talked to friends or family because, in his words, they would not approve.

Mr. Roof turned 21 in the spring of 2015. He had already been given a car, and once he turned 21, he was able to buy a gun with birthday money from his parents. Putting those dates together, it appears that the process of racial radicalization that led Mr. Roof to kill nine people in June of 2015 took place in little more than a year and a half.

Mr. Roof also authored a second journal while he was in jail. In both diaries, I noted the near-total absence of reference to the feelings of others. His only comments about the feelings of strangers are superficial and general:

“Black people view everything through a racial lens. They are always thinking about the fact that they are black. This is part of the reason they get offended so easily.”

“Every face on that bus was as black as coal except for a young white boy’s toward the back. He looked as if he was in a living hell and I believe he was.”

I found it very interesting that Mr. Roof wrote many pages of diatribe about the evils of black people, yet he does not have any anecdotes of any blacks harming him. It’s as if he absorbed the idea of a “black threat” without any real awareness of the humanity of black people. This corroborates his statement to the FBI in which he said he never suffered harm from a black person.

## **The Confession**

I read the confession transcript and viewed video of his interviews with the FBI. Mr. Roof’s descriptions are significant as much for what they don’t say, as what they do say. He describes the technical details of the scene with great detail. He knows exactly how many bullets he had, in how many magazines. He described the bag he carried them in, and the clothes he wore. He was able to draw a layout of the room, and show his movements to draw and shoot the gun.

Yet he said nothing about the people he shot. There are no descriptions or details of them. In fact, he did not even know how many people were involved. On several occasions the FBI agent asked how many people he shot and he said four or five, when the actual number was twice that.

In recalling details Mr. Roof fixates on things, with no details of people. He can recall the tables, the chairs, and the fabric of his gun bag. But there is not a single detail about a person except for one thing. Height, age, dress, hair color go un-described. The one thing he noticed – they were all black.

That disconnection from people with a focus on mechanical details is common in autistic people. I have experienced that myself, when people ask me to recall seminal events in my life. When I do that I remember the details of the scene, the tools, the equipment . . . but I remember few if any details about the people.

Earlier in this report I noted the discussion of anxiety in Mr. Roof’s medical record. I also mentioned the possibility of depression in his teen years. During his confession, after explaining how he shot all the people, he told the FBI agents that he’d loaded his last magazine in the gun and walked outside expecting to find the police. He was amazed that no one was

there. When the agents asked him if he'd planned to fight the police he was quick to say no. *That's why I had the last magazine [in the gun]. It was not to shoot cops, you see. It was to shoot myself.*

Based on that statement we must consider the role of depression in this crime. Other mass murderers have "gone out in a blaze of glory," killing themselves at the end of their sprees, or being killed by the police. By Mr. Roof's account that was what he expected to have happen. But as he gained time and distance he changed his mind. He put his gun in the back seat, and when police pulled him over, he surrendered without a fight and without harm to himself.

### **Meeting With Mr. Roof**

On the morning of Saturday, November 5 I traveled to the Charleston Detention Facility with attorneys David Bruck and Kim Stevens. After signing in we entered a small private meeting room that was divided by a wall in the center. The wall had a heavy glass window with a screen to allow conversation to pass. Our side opened into the lobby. The other side opened into the prisoner area of the jail. We looked through the glass into an empty prisoner room as we awaited Mr. Roof's arrival.

After a few minutes the door opened and Mr. Roof appeared. I was immediately struck by his boyish appearance. His face was fixed in a slight smile; some might have called it a smirk. The boyish look and limited and inappropriate (inappropriate because he knew we were there for a very serious matter) facial expression are both common in autistic people.

One component of autism is developmental delay. Many people assume delay is limited to cognitive function. That is not always true. In conjunction with that, autistic people are often described as looking "child-like" or much younger looking than their age.

From the beginning, missing or inappropriate facial expressions have been part of the description of autistic people. Drs. Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger – the two "fathers" of today's autism diagnosis – both observed that in their respective clinics in Baltimore, Maryland and Vienna, Austria in the 1940s. In his 1943 series of case studies on autism, *Autistic Disturbances of Affective Contact*, Dr. Kanner wrote this about one patient: "He never looked at the person while talking and did not use communicative gestures."

In 1944, in his thesis titled *Autistic Psychopaths in Childhood*, Dr. Asperger wrote of another patient, "while appropriate reactions to people things and situations were largely absent he gave full rein to his own internally generated impulses."

Similar traits were plain to see in Mr. Roof from the moment we first met. He continued to stand in the door, looking at the ground. The two attorneys greeted him and I waved a hello from my seat behind them. *I can't stay and talk to you*, he said, as he moved to exit the room.

*Hold on, Dylann, attorney Bruck responded, we need to talk to you. Jury selection starts Monday.*

The conversation that ensued was not like that of an attorney questioning and counseling his adult client. Rather, it was immediately recognizable by any parent who has had to entice a recalcitrant twelve-year-old out of his room. Attorney Bruck's voice was gentle and coaxing. Mr. Roof's voice was almost inaudible. His speech was close to monotone, with a trace of fear or anxiety. Limited prosody (monotone) speech is common in autistic people.

The back and forth went on for several minutes during which time Mr. Roof appeared focused on the corrections officer who was waiting outside the door. He showed no concern for his lawyers who had come to see him on a Saturday morning, nor did he evince any urgency about preparing for his upcoming criminal trial, which was scheduled to commence the coming Monday.

*I can't stay and talk to you. I told him (meaning the correctional officer) to wait I would just be a minute.*

Each time Mr. Roof said that attorney Bruck would gently counter, *The officer knows you need to talk to us. We need you to stay. Please sit down.*

This went on for several minutes. For a person who was about to go on trial for his life the conversation struck me as detached from conventional reality. The back-and-forth carried on something like this:

*Dylann, we need to go over some papers and your clothes for court on Monday. It will only take a minute.*

*A minute? Just a minute?*

*Yes, Dylann, it will be very quick.*

*No, I have to go.*

*Dylann, we really need you to go over this.*

Mr. Roof did not appear interested in the papers his attorneys wanted to go over, and I wondered if he would leave almost as soon as he had entered. It looked like attorney Bruck was losing Mr. Roof's attention when attorney Stevens stepped in. *Look, Dylann*, she said, holding up her cell phone. She told him she had photos of the clothes one of the team members had just purchased for him to wear.

With that, he relented. The clothing turned out to be his real interest.

*Take a look at these and see if they are what you want.*

She held the phone up to the window so he could see the picture of a shirt or sweater. He leaned down and looked closely into the screen.

*OK, I will stay but I can only stay a minute.*

Mr. Roof sat down. After some introductory banter (which Mr. Roof was largely unresponsive to) the lawyers told him they did not want him appearing before potential jurors in jail coveralls. They discussed how he had come to a previous court appearance in coveralls despite their wish to the contrary. Both attorneys reaffirmed that it was important he dress appropriately on Monday.

Mr. Roof said he liked the look and feel of the jail coveralls quite a lot and he had previously expressed very specific requirements for clothes he would be willing to exchange for them. That brought them back to the photos in attorney Stevens' cell phone. As she held them up to the glass he reviewed each one intently and questioned details of every single image.

*What is the pattern of that shirt? I can't see it.*

She zoomed in to show the weave of the fabric and a discussion of the hooks and loops ensued.

Mr. Roof had very specific ideas in that regard.

*Where is the brown one I asked for?*

Attorney Stevens flipped quickly through her photos, hunting for the requested image. She explained the attributes of each article and how it corresponded to his wishes. She also explained which items were in hand and what was on order.

With all this it was clear to me that Mr. Roof's clothing concerns went far beyond the simple desire to be dressed presentably, which was all his attorneys wanted. Mr. Roof's fixation on details seemed to me clearly obsessive. At several points he dismissed articles of clothing as "dorky" but in most cases his questions and objections revolved around the weight of the garment, its weave pattern and finally the style. To him, there were right choices and wrong ones, and the wrong items could not possibly be worn.

Attorney Bruck was mostly silent for that exchange. Where the first dialogue sounded like a father coaxing his twelve-year-old out of his bedroom, this conversation with attorney Stevens was like a mother talking to an autistic five-year-old who was unwilling to get dressed for school because he feared his clothes would be uncomfortable. I have observed many almost-identical encounters between staff at our school and young autistic children. But Mr. Roof was not a child. Immature as he appeared, he is 22. For that reason the exchange struck me as highly unusual.

Mr. Roof remained in a state of nervous agitation throughout the meeting. He got up, he sat down, and he got up again. Whenever his attorneys tried to direct his attention to matters of his defense he deflected. For example, they tried to tell him about witnesses they proposed to call, and he said he had to go. Then he changed his mind. He would take a look. *Show me the list*, he said, and attorney Stevens held her laptop up to the glass so he could read.

*Who's that*, he asked, pointing to a name on the sheet.

*She's one of the officers*, his attorney answered.

With that, Mr. Roof just moved on, showing no further interest. He had no question about what the witnesses might say, or why they were going to be there. I wondered if he was too

nervous to engage his attorneys in a constructive conversation about his defense or if he was oblivious to the magnitude of what was happening.

Mr. Roof spent more time quizzing attorney Stevens about the details of the clothes she was supposed to get him than he did about witnesses. He showed far more interest in thread patterns than potential testimony that might get him sentenced to death. I wondered if he was unable to see the issue of the trial due to extreme autistic self focus or if he was paralyzed by fear. Whatever the cause, I could see he and his attorneys had a serious problem if he was expected to take part in the construction of a defense.

Listening to him speak it was obvious Mr. Roof is an intelligent young man. But he seemed disconnected to the point of non-functionality. He was not at all catatonic; he was just in his own world through most of the meeting. He looked at the floor or off to the side through most of the conversation; a common trait of autistic people. His inability to focus on what his visitors wanted (trial preparation) and his obsessive focus on what he wanted (clothes that met his rigid specifications) was very characteristic of autism, both with respect to sensory issues and inability to recognize the thoughts and interests of others. Autism professionals refer to the latter as, "having a weak theory of mind." Obsessions and rigid thinking are also traits of autism, and they were clearly evident throughout this conversation.

Autistic individuals often have great difficulty shifting focus from one task or item to another. That causes observers to describe our minds as both fixated and very rigid. Thanks to our lack of mental flexibility we are often said to "miss the big picture" even as we have extraordinary command of some minutiae. That was certainly evident when Mr. Roof explored every possible detail about the attire he would wear to court even as he remained largely uninformed about the more important issues: an outline of the upcoming proceedings or the witnesses who would be called.

I wondered if a slower pace would allow Mr. Roof to resolve his concerns over clothing and move on to and evaluate and comment upon meaningful aspects of defense strategy. A person who was unfamiliar with autism might well dismiss the clothing concerns as irrelevant but to an autistic person who might feel tortured by the feel of "wrong" fabrics their correct selection is indeed paramount.

As the attorneys showed him paperwork he seemed bored and detached but I could not tell if he was disinterested in the defense issues or just overwhelmed by the decisions he felt were necessary around his clothes. Mr. Roof's detachment was broken when the subject of autism came up.

*Mister Robison has come from Massachusetts to meet with you, attorney Bruck said.*

*I don't want to talk to him. I don't have autism. Nerds and losers have autism.*

It was clear that the idea of autism did not fit with his self-image.

Attorney Bruck persisted in presenting me as an interesting person for his client to talk to:

*You're concerned about how your Wikipedia page looks. Mister Robison has a Wikipedia page too, and he knows how to manage when untrue things get posted.* While I appreciated attorney Bruck vouching for me I could not help but marvel at the idea that Mr. Roof was on trial for his life and he seemed more concerned with the feel of his clothes and the risk of personal embarrassment over his depiction on Wikipedia. To him, those things were much more important.

After a few minutes of non-productive back and forth the attorneys stepped out, leaving me alone with Mr. Roof.

*I appreciate you coming here, but I don't need your help. I'm not autistic.*

*There's nothing wrong with me. The state psychiatrist told me there is nothing wrong with me. He said I don't have autism. I'm just a sociopath.*

It appeared that Mr. Roof was comfortable with the idea of being seen as a sociopath, and I actually saw a brief bigger smile at those words. Mr. Roof did not seem to realize the jurors in his upcoming trial would not be likely to share his seemingly positive view of sociopathy. Nor would they be likely to think a person described that way would "have nothing wrong with them," as he suggested. He rejected the idea of autism whatever I said. His response was, *Nerds and losers have autism.*

*Don't tell me I have autism.*

Then he said something I found striking:

*I'm going to get pardoned in four or five years. This doesn't matter. Please don't come here and testify for me. I don't need or want you here.* He spoke with what seemed like the greatest earnestness.

Prior to that moment I had seen many traits of autism in Mr. Roof. However that statement struck me as different. It seemed delusional, particularly as he seemed so serious when he said it. No reasonable person could plan and commit mass murder, admit what he had done to the authorities, and then contemplate his exoneration and release a few years later.

Detachment from reality and psychosis are not traits of autism. I realized I'd seen that before, when I reviewed evidence of psychosis and delusion while analyzing the actions of Newtown killer Adam Lanza. After those killings the media reported Lanza was autistic, and there was a substantial outcry against innocent autistic people, particularly kids in school. IACC members agreed that we had to make a public statement and I took a lead in formulating it. In our committee we had discussed research that shows that while autism does not necessarily produce delusion and psychosis, it is not protective against them either. In other words, an autistic person is just as able to suffer serious mental illnesses as anyone else, and autism actually increases the risk for some disorders.

Watching Mr. Roof I recalled public health studies presented to IACC that said autistic people are two to five times more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety, and nine times more likely to commit suicide. One report – from the British group Autistica – said 60% of autistic

people had suicidal ideation.<sup>4</sup> In our committee we discussed the serious threat that presented to mental health, and how that can contribute to breakdown and disconnection.

Mr. Roof told me the attorneys were making things up about him, to make it look like there was something wrong with him. He repeated he was not autistic, and he said he'd written a letter for the court about the behavior of his lawyers. Once again I was struck by the dissonance between what was actually going on and what he perceived. In the short time we spent together it was obvious to me that Mr. Roof's legal team was very strongly committed to his defense, and was acting in his best interest. It was surprising to hear that he had formed the exact opposite impression.

If I were on trial for my life, I would encourage my attorneys to say or do anything in their power to present me in a way that would get merciful treatment from the court. The idea that Mr. Roof would reject his attorneys' advice about with the suggestion that "autism is for losers and nerds" was shocking given the context. The only explanation I could see is that people (in a more normal context, like diagnosis in public school) are often ashamed of an autism diagnosis, and one of the biggest problems in delivering autism services to teens is rejection of the diagnosis by the individuals and their parents.

That concern is generally thought to be founded on fear of embarrassment in the community. Mr. Roof has a much more serious problem to face. Yet he seemed unable to even consider the idea of autism, even as he embraced the suggestion of sociopathy, and it frightened me that he might end up sabotaging his own defense because he placed personal embarrassment ahead of defense of his life in the courtroom. In addition, his statement to me that he would be pardoned in a few years made it seem like his grasp on reality and his resultant decision making problems went well beyond embarrassment.

Given more time I wondered if Mr. Roof might come to accept the direction of his defense team in representing him. We never got to discuss that.

He said he had to go. And he left the room.

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Lisa Croen of Kaiser Permanente first presented IACC data showing autistics were nine times more likely to commit suicide at our Sept 23, 2014 meeting. The Autistica study, which confirmed and added to her data, was presented at our October 16, 2016 meeting. Both presentations may be viewed in the online IACC archive. Dr. Croen's presentation was *Psychiatric and Medical Conditions Among Adults with ASD*. The Autistica presentation was titled *Tackling Early Death in Autism*, and was presented by Jon Spiers, Chief Executive, and James Cusack, Ph.D., Director of Science for Autistica UK.

## **How Autism Contributed to the Shaping of Mr. Roof**

According to his mother, Mr. Roof was usually by himself as a child. She recalled him playing alone, and he did not form many friendships. Those he did, were not sustained. That was the first sign of autistic isolation. Unfortunately Ms. Roof did not recognize it for what it was. Behavioral therapy from an early age might have connected young Dylann to the world, and knowledge of autism could have shaped the next twenty years of parenting for a more positive outcome.

Social disconnection is common in autistic people. With typical kids social connection improves with age, but for autistic children the opposite is often true – it worsens. As we become teens the social world we must navigate grows much more complex. For many autistics the challenges are just too much, and one strategy is to retreat into one's room. In fact, autism expert Dr. Tony Attwood has a memorable quote about that. He says: "What does an autistic teenager do to cure his autism? He goes into his room and shuts the door."

Social disability is a major component of autism. Young autistics can hide that by not being social. Among autistics, "I prefer to stay in my room," may be a euphemism for, "I am scared to come out and try to engage people."

When Ms. Roof told me about her young child she described how he sometimes lined up his toys, his insistence on things being certain ways (for example, arranging blocks or crayons in a particular order), and his need for routine – all classic traits of autism. Describing his teenage years she spoke about his collection of books and exactly how they needed to be maintained. She recited one trait of autism after another to the extent that I wondered how the pediatrician missed them. The answer may be found in the denial I was met with when I mentioned the word. Records indicate the family was poor when Dylann was young, and there is shame and denial associated with both poverty and disability.

I saw possible evidence of shame's influence throughout the family. Shame and denial took a destructive form when teenage Dylann dismissed psychiatry as fake, and refused therapeutic interventions. None of the adults in Dylann's life countered that view and insisted he seek the help that he desperately needed. That contributed to Dylann's worsening disability as he moved through school. Collectively they closed the door on the most likely path to help, without even recognizing how much it was needed.

The chaos in Dylann's family life during those years was also a significant contributing factor to his development. Dylann's parents married and divorced before he was born, but they got back together for his conception. Dylann's mom had a number of boyfriends through his childhood, and lived in five different residences. His father remarried, then moved to Florida, and then moved back and divorced. For a child who craved order that must have been terribly stressful.

Some autistic youths will focus on a special interest early, and study intently to master it. In that way they may become highly self educated even as their grades in school are poor. Dylann does not seem to have done that, judging by his GED test scores and his spoken and written communications. Instead he turned to video games and television, neither of which has much educational value.

We know from the medical record that Dylann complained of anxiety as a teenager. The medical record notes his irrational fear of going to school, and the fact that he stayed in his room all day. He failed at school, and at his attempts at employment. In view of that it's hard to imagine he was not seriously depressed as well. By age sixteen, it appears he was afraid to come out of his room. The real tragedy is that his parents let him stay secluded, and did not succeed in getting him into constructive therapy. A successful intervention at that point might have yielded a very different outcome today.

### **Autism, Vulnerability and Poison Online**

Autistic young adults are often more gullible and susceptible than typical peers. That is a result of social disability – they may have limited instinctive ability to “read” others and form correct opinions about what is true and what isn't. At the same time, our social failures can give us an extremely strong desire for social acceptance. In addition, an autistic person can be more vulnerable to online influence.<sup>5</sup> Typical people read ideas online and compare what they read to the opinions of people they interact with at work, school, and in the community. Ideas that are far from the thoughts of one's peer group may be challenged or discarded. In that way the influence of the Internet can be limited by an individual's real-world experience. However, the autistic person's world is more likely to be limited itself, so the typical checks and balances are weak or missing.

An autistic person (the description of Mr. Roof paints a clear picture of this) may not have a community of peers to talk to. He may have few sources of contrasting ideas or perspective. In that environment, he may absorb ideas that are totally at odds with the prevailing wisdom of the community in which he lives. While it may happen to anyone, for an isolated autistic person the Internet risks become a dominating and damaging influence. I have seen examples of that with other autistic teens in our school program.

Almost all young Americans turn to the Internet for information today. In my experience, autistic people – because of their disability in face-to-face interaction – tend to rely on the Internet more than their typical peers. They are also more vulnerable to believing what they find online because they often lack a real-life social circle with whom new ideas may be discussed.

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<sup>5</sup> This is explored in the 2013 paper *Differences in Social Vulnerability among Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Williams Syndrome, and Down Syndrome* by Marisa H. Fisher, Andrew L. Moskowitz, and Robert M. Hodapp.

As an example, several of my autistic students have come to me asking if the Holocaust was real. When I was a teenager no one questioned that, and I was at first surprised. Now I'm not. I've come to see that the online presentation of "fake history" and "fake news" can look totally real and convincing, especially to a person whose broader knowledge of the world is limited. In that regard autistic people again tend to be more vulnerable.

Twenty years ago this was not an issue, because most of what people read was curated and edited news stories or books. Fringe ideas like Holocaust denial did not reach the broad public and they were not part of what was discussed in public school. With the rise of the Internet all that has changed. Young people are no longer protected from fringe ideas; indeed they are a "targeted market." All they're left with is the protection of community; the idea that respected elders (hopefully teachers are in that group) and peers will help them understand what's real and what's not.

That's what happened when my students came to me with questions. I could show them an opposite point of view and the evidence of its truth. In most cases I have been successful, but that requires that the students trust our collective wisdom. That required the existence of a strong relationship.

What happens when an autistic teen or young adult has no friends? Then there is no one to counter false stories, many of which have very dark and potentially damaging messages. Thanks to the Internet people can find validation for fringe ideas online even if the real-life community would roundly reject them. The more they read online, the stronger their beliefs become. Autistic people who absorb fringe ideas may know that "other people" believe differently, but they become certain they know the truth. They may even begin to feel privileged, being one of a small number of people who know the secret. Fringe sites like Stormfront really foster that thinking.

That is the manner by which socially disconnected people can internalize poisonous fringe ideas. To them, the ideas are not "fringe" because in their isolated Internet world, they have the same weight as any other ideas. What they absorb may be harmless misunderstandings of science, or they may be ugly things like racism.

The Internet also presents another threat that is heightened for autistic people. Folks with autism tend to develop restricted interests that they may explore with exceptional concentration and focus. For children, that tends to be a disability, for example when they can't jump from topic to topic in school as required. For adults it can be key to success, or it can remain disabling. When an autistic person focuses on a subject like racism his social blindness may prevent him from seeing through or recognizing the underlying hatred. An autistic person may not have the social awareness to put such ideas in their proper social context, as "fringe" opinions. Consequently an autistic person is more likely to read material like what's on Stormfront.org and believe it. And as he turns his focus more and more to the topic, he may become super-absorbed and obsessed.

A typical person might spend a few minutes or an hour studying one topic. Then they move on to something else, and many activities are social. In the course of those social activities people talk about their interests and reflect on how others respond to their ideas. That does not happen for some people with autism. Thanks to autism we may stay focused on a topic to the point where others say we are obsessed. Our social disconnection may then deprive us of the opportunity to shape and temper our thoughts by bouncing them off others in our community. In a sense, the material we are reading becomes our community, and it can easily become totally unbalanced and self-reinforcing.

Autistic people are often described as “rigid.” We may have a hard time accepting other points of view. Mr. Roof showed that very clearly in our interactions and in his writing. That may make it very hard to change his mind once it’s made up.

In addition to rigid thinking, autistic people tend to have trouble recognizing alternate points of view, or accepting those other viewpoints as valid. Researchers attribute that to the autistic person’s weak ability to “read” other people. Without that constant stream of data, autistic children may not develop the sense that others have thoughts that are different from their own. If an autistic child grows to adulthood without developing that sense it can present a real disability. Mr. Roof seems to manifest this trait, in which people who disagree with him are stupid, nerds, or worse.

Holding a different view from the autistic person becomes a sort of character defect, or cognitive weakness. It’s as if the autistic person is the center of the universe and those with different ideas are just not smart enough to see with his clarity and light. Needless to say, that self-centered thinking does not serve autistics well in relating to others.

Apparent self-centeredness in an autistic person comes from the inability to read others. When it occurs in an otherwise bright, articulate person it is particularly troubling because other people tend to interpret that behavior as extreme arrogance or assumed superiority.

Time and again, when watching him in videos and then watching him in real life, I saw Mr. Roof dismiss contrasting points of view sharply, without a moment’s hesitation, even when I knew him to be wrong. Autistic people can be so certain of themselves that it causes the people around them to question their own beliefs or knowledge. For example, in an interaction with his mother she said something he didn’t agree with during a jail visit:

*That’s not what I wanted, he said.*

*Dylann, honey, that is just what you told me you wanted.*

*No, it’s not. You’re being dumb. What I wanted was this other book.*

*Okay, Dylann, I’m so sorry.*

And yet, when I backed up the video, it was just as his mother said. He was wrong and his mother was right, but he was so certain of what he’d said (wrongly) that she backed down. That wasn’t a big problem in their relationship, but the tendency to tell peers and teachers they

are dumb or mistaken increased the likelihood the autistic person will be dismissed and isolated, which can actually reinforce his fringe thinking.

In summary, the picture that paints is that of an autistic person who is overly susceptible to online influence because (for him) the counterbalance of real-world peers with contrasting opinions is lacking. The picture also shows an autistic person who has a very hard time changing his mind once made up (it may be well-nigh impossible) and who has a very hard time seeing the validity of viewpoints that differ from his own. Such a person – when they adopt dangerous ideas online – is in real trouble when they absorb rigid fringe thinking and then run up against the reality of mainstream society.

### **The Turn to Violence**

A diagnosis of autism is not predictive of a person engaging in aggressive violence, particularly toward strangers. When autistic people are violent, the most common target by far is ourselves. Self-injury and self-mutilation are serious problems in the autism community, particularly for people who are more severely impacted by autism. Studies show young autistic adults are at least nine times more likely to die by their own hand than the general population. Social isolation is a recognized factor in teen and young adult suicide. Autism by its nature often leads to social isolation, and for a bright young man like Mr. Roof that can be unbearably painful, and sometimes deadly.

In fact, Mr. Roof may be a prime example of one who was overwhelmed by pain. He failed to make friends all his life. He failed in school, and he failed to get and keep a job. By his own journal admission he failed at what he wanted most – to fall in love. In an effort to urge him out into the world, his mother cut off Internet access at home, leaving him even more alone. In his last month of freedom, he found himself turned out of his room – his primary safe place. He was moving his belongings from place to place and living part-time in his car. He had limited social skills, and no valuable job skills. Seen in that light, he had little to live for.

Four pieces of suggestive evidence exist:

- Words at the end of his pre-murder journal suggest he contemplated his own death;
- The notes left for his mother and father read like suicide notes;
- He told the FBI interviewers that he expected to face the police at the church and shoot himself without shooting any police;
- Mr. Roof had no plan left when he walked out of the church. He had planned all the prior steps. He chose the location, secured his weapon, bought and loaded extra magazines, and hid everything inside an innocuous looking bag. When his shooting ended, and the police were not there to kill him, he had no next step. It is reasonable to assume that is, as he said, because he expected his life to end, and no further plan was needed.

The arguments for the Charleston church shootings being an incomplete murder/suicide are very strong. That would make this crime consistent with previous research that says most autistic violence is ultimately directed inward, to the self. In this case it is particularly tragic that it came to that point, then went so wrong, and took nine innocent lives.

While it is true that autistic people are more likely to be victims than instigators of aggressive violence, it also appears that a number of the teenage and young adult mass killers in the past 20 years have been autistic. I noted this myself when reviewing the known data about recent mass killings in the wake of the Newtown tragedy, and other researchers have made similar observations, though the reasons remain unclear. It has been suggested that autism, previous head injury, and psychosocial stressors are all more common in mass murders than in the general population.<sup>6</sup>

Autism is a spectrum condition. While every autistic person has by definition some degree of social communication disability, it is much more severe in some autistics than in others. Autism also affects people at all cognitive levels, and the interplay between those two things is that a highly intelligent and highly isolated person is at the highest risk to feel pain over his disconnection. An autistic person with less isolation is likely to be less hurt by this, as is a more cognitively challenged person who is presumably less conscious of the isolation.

Mr. Roof is a very clear example of what I feel is the most vulnerable autistic group – a bright but highly isolated and socially disabled young adult. This is also a group that is identified as at-risk for suicide. I believe he is also vulnerable because of his denial of autism. That causes him to make bad choices because he does not see how his disability colors how he sees the world and others in it.

The next factor that might confer either resilience or vulnerability to dangerous behavior is whether the person is receiving treatment and supports. We have developed good evidence-based therapies for helping autistic young people organize themselves (executive function) and engage others successfully (social skills.) Successful interventions make these individuals more successful, happier, and therefore much less likely to act out, particularly with violence.

Familial and individual autism acceptance are strongly predictive of better outcomes. It's hard for any mental health service to succeed in an atmosphere of rejection. Mr. Roof lived with denial and rejection of autism, and he consistently refused mental health services. That is associated with worse outcomes throughout the autism community.

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<sup>6</sup> See *Neurodevelopmental and psychosocial risk factors in serial killers and mass murderers*, published in *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, Volume 19, Issue 3, Pages 288-301  
Clare S. Allely, Helen Minnis, Lucy Thompson, Philip Wilson, Christopher Gillberg.

## The Future

This report represents my best effort to understand Dylann Roof and his crimes. But it is not within my power to fully explain what he did, and why. No one can explain his actions from outside.

In my opinion, Mr. Roof's emotional development is not at the point where he can answer for himself today. That's not so unusual for a young man with autism. There's an example that illustrates that in my own life. My first book *Look Me in the Eye* is widely praised for the emotional insight it brought to the feelings around growing up with autism. My experience with undiagnosed autism informs my teaching, my work with autistic people, and this report.

At the same time my book was released another popular memoir of autism came out – *Born on a Blue Day* by Daniel Tammet. Mr. Tammet's book also relates a story of growing up with autism but his is not layered with emotion or interpretation as *Look Me in the Eye*. It's "just the facts, ma'am," as the saying goes. After speaking with Mr. Tammet I have come to believe we are very similar. I think the difference in our books – the presence or absence of emotional expression – comes from the fact that I wrote my story at age 50, and he wrote his at age 25.

Since the release of our books I have seen many examples of autistic people who acquired emotional maturity in adulthood, far later than might be expected in the typical population. Knowing that, I believe there is hope for Mr. Roof to develop a power of self-reflection and insight, and I hope that comes to pass.

I declare under penalty of perjury that the foregoing is true and correct, to the best of my ability.

Executed this 28<sup>th</sup> day of December, 2016

John Elder Robison

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'JR' with a large loop extending to the left.