



AN INTRODUCTION BY  
HEATHER WHITEHALL-TROCHON

# FLYING AGAINST THE ODDS

ONE MAN'S JOURNEY TO NEW  
WAYS OF HEALING





# INTRODUCTION

## HEATHER WHITEHALL-TROCHON

WHEN I MET JJ IN 2006, we spoke about his cancer as a dark cloud that had passed briefly through his life. Back then we didn't anticipate its unwelcome reappearance on an otherwise untroubled horizon. Nor did we imagine it transforming into a mighty cumulonimbus, that most menacing of cloud formations associated with extreme weather, such as heavy torrential downpours, lightning or even tornadoes. No pilot wants to find himself flying into the eye of a cumulonimbus. But sometimes fate has other plans in store.



## FLYING AGAINST — THE — ODDS



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What we learned, as we were battered incessantly by the forces of nature, is that cancer, like the sudden onset of a storm, is indiscriminating. It can appear out of nowhere and strike anyone at any time, irrespective of age, color, gender or race. And, just like the lightning of that cumulonimbus, cancer can strike more than once.

As JJ has navigated his way through his own personal storm, I have been at his side in my role of “co-pilot.” Only as a team is it possible to land safely when the going gets tough. Our shared journey has taught us to be vigilant, to always be prepared for an unexpected bump in the flight path ahead. In writing this book, we wanted to offer readers a plan with which to navigate those bumps.

This is JJ’s story, but just as his cancer experience has been a shared journey, so was the production of this book.

My role was to put his experience into words. I have been his silent witness, observing from the wings as he spent hour after hour sifting through the latest research into natural cancer therapies, slowly gathering his team of elite professionals at his side.

Teamwork is a recurring theme in JJ’s memoir, as indeed it has been in his career as a pilot. He reached out to the very brightest minds in each of his fields of interest. And they responded with generosity and kindness, recognizing in JJ a man with an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and a blazing passion to share his insights.

But there’s more to the story. Much more..



Newly married to JJ, I began to notice certain quirks to his personality. I would join him regularly on his flights but, whereas I loved to discover new places, to step away from the well-trodden tourist trail and dive with abandon into the unknown, he was happiest when staying in the sanitized comfort of the hotel. I put this down to fatigue, since the stopovers were generally no more than forty-eight hours, and he had just flown the plane, after all! However, back at home, he also liked to follow set routines and didn't really enjoy socializing. Nor did we often go to restaurants, since he preferred to regularly have the same meals and to eat them in our home environment.

Over the years of supporting my husband, nursing him through sickness and then aiding him in his recuperation, I became increasingly aware of his need for structure, of his almost obsessive desire to watch the daily news, both on American and French channels, as well as his relentlessness in pursuit of certain ideas.

It wasn't behavior with which I'd had any experience, and it was the very opposite of my own. Sociable by nature, I love to find myself in unfamiliar surroundings, eating new types of food, going to the theater, to concerts, talking with strangers ... I was beginning to find our differences quite tricky to manage.

One day, speaking with an acquaintance, I discussed JJ's approach to life.

"Have you considered that he might have Asperger's syndrome?" she said, adding that her first husband was an "Aspie."

"Asp ... what?" I said, hearing the term for the first time.

However, something clicked, and I wanted to know more.



That evening, I opened Google and started some research of my own. What I found was fascinating and a complete game-changer in terms of my marriage and understanding my husband.

I learned that, historically, some of the world's most brilliant thinkers are thought to have had Asperger's syndrome, a condition often referred to as high-functioning autism or, more recently, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Michelangelo, the famed Renaissance artist, is said to have been obsessive and to have followed repetitive routines. Indeed, so intense was his focus that he dedicated eight years of his life to laboring on *The Last Judgement*. Thanks to his highly retentive memory, he was also able to generate many hundreds of sketches for the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Others suspected of having Asperger's include Abraham Lincoln, who apparently loved routine, was said to have a rigid nature, and also went on to become arguably one of the greatest presidents in America's history.

Another is Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who, despite his social difficulties, was a music prodigy and wrote his first piece at the age of five. And then there's Albert Einstein, who didn't speak until the age of three but went on to develop the theory of relativity. Back then, it was not possible to officially diagnose these geniuses, since so little was known about autism at the time. (1)

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(1) Asperger's syndrome is named after Austrian pediatrician Hans Asperger (1906–1980), who, in 1944, described four children in his practice who had difficulty with social interaction. It wasn't until almost fifty years later, in 1992, that AS became a standard diagnosis when it was included in the tenth edition of the World Health Organization's diagnostic manual, *International Classification of Disease*.



More recently, evidence suggests that Steve Jobs, the visionary behind Apple, was on the autism spectrum. He was certainly obsessed with detail and considered to be a slave to perfectionism. Indeed, Apple's iconic "Think Different" campaign from the nineties, largely written by copywriter Rob Siltanen, plays homage to those brilliant minds who pave the way for others to follow:

*"Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The trouble-makers. The round pegs in the square holes. ... They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do."*

As I connected the dots, I began to realize that my husband's own brilliant mind, his unyielding focus, clarity of thought and steely determination were traits most likely resulting from this condition, a condition that has often caused him to be misunderstood in a society that likes to place people in convenient "boxes,"

a society quick to stigmatize those wired to think differently.

In my husband's case, it is this unique wiring that has enabled him to think above and beyond the proverbial box. And, ultimately, to save his life.

I must add that although JJ was unaware, until recently, that he might be on the spectrum, he has always felt "different" to other people. He has never been officially diagnosed, but we decided to both take a test that is commonly used to determine whether or not someone has Asperger's. The test was divided into three categories: 0-29 (no autism), 30-33 (possible autism) and 34 and above (autism likely). My score came out at five, meaning there was absolutely no trace of it, whereas JJ's score was at the other end of the scale. Even without the test, it was patently clear.



I have not written directly about my husband's condition in his memoir, since my own "light bulb" moment only occurred in the summer of 2019. (The memoir covers a significant period of his life from March 2003 to September 2017.) However, you will notice it in certain aspects of his behavior. For example, when he knows precisely how long a certain TED Talk lasts, right down to the number of seconds. Or when he refuses to give up while trying to make contact with a well-known doctor, but only reaches the doctor's personal secretary. After umpteen attempts, the secretary appears to metaphorically wave a white flag, and JJ is finally put through to the boss. It is also telling that JJ was unable to fit in with the French education system, which back then didn't allow for anyone whose behavior was considered unconventional. It was only once he was sent to finish his schooling in America that he started to flourish. Even to this day, he still talks about his schooling in France as a miserable time in his life.

Despite not specifically mentioning Asperger's or ASD in the memoir itself, I felt that his story would not be complete or honest if I didn't use my introduction to shine a light on this part of him that makes him special. As well as making him an extremely professional pilot, able to work within a tight structure requiring absolute precision and unemotional decision-making, his very particular way of thinking has enabled him to assimilate with ease the latest scientific findings and to combine approaches for optimum results. It is this specific ability that sets him apart from most other cancer patients, along with his steadfast refusal to accept that there is no cure for the disease. Despite a stage four cancer diagnosis in 2012, JJ is determined to beat the odds that have often been stacked against him.



He is determined to be the exception rather than the rule. His story and his unique approach continue to give hope to others in his position.

To date, I have witnessed hundreds of people worldwide reach out to my husband. Indeed, not a day goes by without someone contacting him, asking for his help to guide them through their own cumulonimbus storm. Not only cancer patients, but also doctors from around the globe, all with questions to which today's medicine doesn't hold all the answers. JJ's personal story and his ability to explain often complex science in an easily comprehensible way have made him a point of reference for many.

Both JJ and I are aware that dark clouds may still be ahead, but we are also able to see beyond them. It is this message of optimism that we would like to share with you, the reader. But, for now, fasten your seatbelts and prepare to take flight with us.

Heather Whitehall-Trochon  
Biarritz, August 2020

