Hi, I’m Shaun Bickley. I work for Texas Advocates in Austin. I know I’m supposed to talk about my personal story, but it’s hard to do that under giant numbers presented to create fear and alarm.

I know something about fear, so I want to talk about these numbers and why they’re supposed to frighten you. They don’t tell you anything useful. They don’t tell you what kinds of people they represent: what we need or what we have, what our weaknesses are or our strengths are or could be. But I bet very few of you see this as a neutral or positive thing.

The current autism research agenda allocates $950 million dollars to autism research. Of this, less than 3% goes to services for autistic people. The vast majority goes to finding out why we exist and how others can stop us from existing. But what autistic people need, and want, is services and support, not fear and rejection.

I was diagnosed in 1994 at the age of 9. Before it was the popular thing to do. Like most people who were diagnosed when I was, I ended up in and out of segregated settings in school. I was told that my education was not important, making me act normal was.

In 10th grade, I was allowed regular classes, but with an aide who would follow me around—to class, through the hallways, to the bathroom—and speak to others for me, and this was not support. But it was more freedom than I had, and I knew it could be taken away. When I was 18, the school decided it no longer had any obligation to me, and since it still refused to listen to my wishes, I left. Because my home was unsafe and violent toward someone like me, I moved to Texas with a suitcase and spent some time on other people’s couches.

Being controlled is one extreme I’ve had to deal with in my life; the other one is having absolutely support, and the one doesn’t prepare you for the other. If an autistic person can ask for help, they are obviously too high-functioning to need it, and none is given. In my twenties I have frequently relied on others for help with food, not had my own place to stay, and yet not been able to navigate any formal system of services because they were designed to be accessed by my parents—who, after all, aren’t the ones who need it.

So like most autistic people I’ve had to be resourceful and adaptable in a way that able people don’t have to be. I get around without knowing how to drive by relying on others or, most often, myself. I figure out how to solve problems, and if I don’t, then I have new problems, or very old problems. But none of them is “autism.” Discrimination, harassment, being fired, being denied supports, being told what I and people like me think, lights that flicker and sounds that scream-- but nothing about autism. Nothing more about what I am than my eye color, but one of these is good and pure and one of these is… something to be eliminated. And this is what happens when you treat people as problems, instead of as people.

When I got my job for Texas Advocates, it was many things, but it was also a way out of poverty. But this is only possible because I had—and have support, from the staff at The Arc of Texas. Because my perspectives have been treated like an asset—because I have been treated like an asset, and not an accommodation to be made and swallowed. So don’t think of me that way either. I’m not an abomination, something to be cured for the convenience of others. Because what a cure is is getting rid of someone. Making them go away, making them disappear, making them not exist, rather than learning how to exist with them in a community. It is the laziest of genocides dressed as love.

And to my brothers and sisters, who have been listening patiently while I talked to everyone else about us—it was for you all along. There never was anything wrong with you.