Four new friends sit around a table at an outdoor café in Helsinki, typing on handheld devices. Shyly, Tracy sends Henna a message asking if she might like to visit him. Avoiding eye contact, Henna types back that she will need to ask her mother. The scene could be that of any group of teenagers, awkward and bashful, more comfortable texting than engaging in face-to-face conversation. The difference is that the typists range from young adults to middle-aged. And all of them are autistic.
In the documentary *Wretches & Jabberers*, Tracy Thresher and his friend Larry Bissonnette, who is also autistic, travel from Vermont to Sri Lanka, Japan, and Finland to meet with other autistic adults. Both men grew up not speaking: Larry spent his childhood in institutions, while Tracy attended special-education classes where he passed his days doing puzzles. As adults they learned to type and acquired some verbal abilities. Today they are advocates for their condition, speaking (with the aid of their keyboards and assistants) at conferences about the myths and realities of autism. The goal of the tour, Tracy types in the film, is to “make a difference in the lives of people who can’t talk but are intelligent.”

The idea of a sentient self imprisoned in an uncooperative body speaks to our greatest fears of isolation. We want to believe we are all capable of expression, given the right tools. In one scene in the movie, a Sri Lankan visitor asks if the men think any autistic child can communicate, or if he needs a special talent. Larry types in reply that all people want communication; it is not a talent but a basic human desire.

Making that desire a reality can be complicated. In the film, Larry, Tracy, and the autistic adults they visit type on special keyboards using a method called facilitated or assisted communication. It is a laborious process supervised by a trained assistant who sometimes supports the hand or arm of the typist to help control impulsivity and motor functioning. It is also controversial. Skeptics claim that assistants can affect the messages being typed by manipulating the hand or arm of the typist. In the early 1990s, U.S. courts ruled that facilitated communication could not be used as evidence in cases of abuse by caretakers of autistic people, as the accusations could not be independently verified.

“This is a field where blood is let,” says Douglas Biklen, who popularized the method and is also a producer of the film. Because of the controversy surrounding facilitated communication, he and the film’s director, Gerardine Wurzburg, chose subjects who could type with no physical supports, to eliminate questions of authorship. Still, some critics worry that the film may give parents of autistic children false hope. “For any parent, they should look at these men [in the film] and have hope to get their child to as high a level as they can get,” says Louis Kraus of the Autism Resource Center at the American Academy of Child
and Adolescent Psychiatry, which does not endorse facilitated communication. “But it’s a complex scenario. There’s classically a small percentage of autistic children who can communicate at that level.”

The film makes no overt claims about the efficacy of facilitated communication. It suggests that all people have something to say, and their messages may surprise us. “I hope the film raises questions about literacy and competence for all kinds of people,” says Wurzburg, whose previous film *Autism Is a World* was nominated for an Academy Award. During the lunch in Helsinki, Antti, a 21-year-old who cannot speak, types that the table is divided between the “wretches,” autistic people who struggle to communicate, and “jabberers,” nonautistics who speak without effort. The poor wretches, he writes, are better than the jabberers, though the jabberers don’t know it. *Wretches & Jabberers* suggests that the two groups are more alike than any of us may realize.