

# Blinded by the Light: A Look beneath the Brilliance of Gifted Individuals

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Though the acknowledged Father of Modern Psychology may have come up with some, *er*, interesting theories, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) surely got it right when he described the goal of development for the healthy human personality as the ability to grow, develop, and be creative; that is, to be able to love, work, and play. Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) famously described a hierarchy of human needs that – after basic survival and safety needs – included those of belonging and esteem, attainment of knowledge, appreciation of beauty, and self-actualization, all of which support the near-transcendent state called Peak Experience.

In these and other theories of human development, we recognize a common theme: a search for genuine happiness. The paths to joy and meaning in life, as well as the forms they take, are many, but they share the features of self-respect, satisfying relationships with others, and a sense of purpose – of making a contribution to something larger than oneself.

No one's life proceeds without difficulty; various obstacles – major and minor, internal and external, systemic and circumstantial – will block the way at times. It's guaranteed. In order to be able to continue on the path, a person needs some idea of the desired destination, an awareness of one's personal assets and limitations that will affect the journey's progress, and some assurance that there are sources of guidance and support along the way.

Contrary to popular belief, individuals who are gifted do not necessarily have smoother, straighter, or more level paths to tread than others. Indeed, theirs are often steep and winding, frequently branching off into a bewildering number of forks or side paths. Rather than needing only a little general guidance and support, these individuals may require a great deal of specific kinds of help, ideally given during childhood and adolescence.

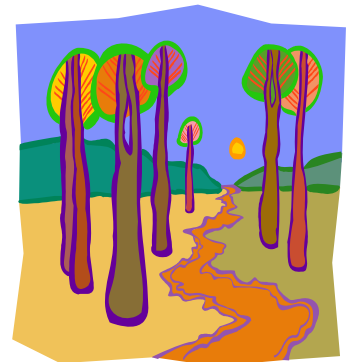
When we examine “maps” and information passed along to us by others who have sought to identify and guide the gifted, we should ask: What terrain has been traveled already, and have the passages been successful? What does the land look like, now? Do we need to seek alternate routes?

Let us consider how we – parents, educators, counselors, advocates and others – might facilitate the journeys of gifted individuals as they seek their particular destinies in love, work, and play.

### **Part I: Where are we, and how did we get here?**

*Gifted* is a term that has been a challenge to define, but to Paraphrase U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart: *I know it when I see it.* (Yes, the original remark gained notoriety in a very different context, but what good is a famous quote, if it can't be applied elsewhere?)

The attempt to fashion a satisfactory description and definition of “giftedness” has a long (and sometimes ignoble) history. In ancient western civilizations (as in “ancient Greece” or “ancient Rome,” kids, *not* the 1960s or 70s!) it was assumed that giftedness was a quality related to divinity or divine favor – a dubious gift, as it was often associated with a tragic outcome. They believed it must to belong to the realm of the supernatural, because it certainly wasn't normal! For centuries afterward -- well into the 1800s, in fact – giftedness was regarded as an aberration of nature, and a rather unfortunate condition for a person to have. It was widely believed that the mind was supplied with a finite amount of “nervous energy” which made it work properly, and to “use up” the supply too quickly was dangerous. *Neurasthenia*, aka nervous exhaustion, was feared as an inevitable development in those of outstanding intellectual capacity (and if the prospect of insanity didn't make giftedness unappealing enough, there was always the possibility of being derided as a fool, at best, or imprisoned or executed as a heretic, at



worst!) As the theories of Mendel and Darwin gained prominence, the traits of giftedness were attributed to accidents of genetics, but were still considered aberrant.

According to all of these explanations, giftedness was considered a deviation from the “ideal” state of humanity. The suspicion that something so outside the norm must be “wrong” and “against nature,” and therefore doomed to fail, has been a pervasive one. The notion of the lives of prodigies as being “swiftly-burning meteors,” the adage “early ripe, early rot,” or the accusation of “pushy parents” when an offspring demonstrates qualities associated with a human being many years older all demonstrate a kind of fear and mistrust of giftedness, even today.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, giftedness and extraordinary talent were identified retrospectively in certain individuals by the “novel behavior, unusual accomplishment, and uncommon perspicacity” (Grinder, 1985) demonstrated in their lives. As physicians, psychologists and other social scientists became more interested in the study of such individual differences, they sought ways in which they could identify or even predict an individual’s level of intelligence or potential for accomplishment.

Soon after World War I, U.S. civilian psychologists had access to the *Army Alpha*, an instrument designed for the quick classification and assignment of more than one million military recruits; it was the first group intelligence test. Another test, which had been created originally to detect degrees of mental retardation in French schoolchildren, was further developed in the U.S. by Lewis Terman. This was the Stanford-Binet (S-B). Psychometrists and educators began using these and similar tests with students from pre-school to graduate school in a kind of testing frenzy that caught the imagination of nearly everyone (Anastasi & Urbina, 1997); thus, John and Jane Q. Public were introduced to the concept of the IQ score.

In the 1920s, an arbitrary score of 115 IQ (S-B) “determined” who was gifted -- or not. About 10% of U.S. schoolchildren were so designated at the time. In 1958, educator/author/historian Walter Havighurst declared that a “*talented or gifted child is one who shows*

*consistently remarkable performance in any worthwhile line of endeavor.*” (quoted in Grinder, 1985 – boldface added) Using these parameters, nearly 20% of U.S. schoolchildren were labeled *talented or gifted*. In 1972, the U.S. Office of Education issued this definition:

*Gifted and talented children are those...who by virtue of outstanding abilities are capable of high performance...those with demonstrated achievement or potential ability in any of the following areas: (a) general intellectual ability, (b) a specific academic aptitude, (c) creative or productive thinking, (d) leadership ability, (e) visual and performing arts, and (f) psychomotor ability.*

More and more since then, the concept of *giftedness* has been used as a descriptor of children’s aptitude and performance in academic curricula, so that now the word “gifted” is almost inevitably paired with the word “student” (similar to such infamous pairings as “heartbreak” + “psoriasis” or “abject” + “misery”), and schools have claimed proprietary rights as possessors of the appropriate environments in which giftedness is manifested.

These definitions have probably caused not a few gifted children and their parents (often gifted themselves) undue struggle with their own goodness of fit – or misfit – with such a portrayal.

Then, in 1991, a group dubbed itself “The Columbus Group” gathered in Ohio’s capital to discuss the topic of giftedness and its meanings. Their discussion yielded a radically different definition:

*Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally.* (quoted in Morelock, 1992)

With this declaration, we are reminded that giftedness is *not* the exclusive domain of academia, *nor* is it dependent on the presence of extraordinary achievement; gifted kids are gifted even when they aren't at school, and even if they aren't producing stunning accomplishments. Furthermore, giftedness is not a condition unique to children; they grow up to be gifted adults!

## **Part II: Where are we going, anyway?**

More than fifteen years after the meeting of the Columbus Group, however, *giftedness* is still usually defined and identified according to what a person (read *student*) produces/achieves.



Though the life journeys of gifted people may include travel along some paths with breathtaking vistas and exotic mysteries, the ways are just as likely to subject the traveler to treacherous footing and deep, dark passages, as well as long stretches of monotonous scenery. Perhaps it is this dramatic combination of contrasts that can make it difficult even for the well-intentioned among us to grasp the fullness of the description offered by The Columbus Group.

Certainly, phenomena such as excellent academic performance, high SAT scores, precocious talent, charisma, stellar leadership ability, and Nobel Peace Prizes are noticed easily enough, but if they are indicators of giftedness at all, they are only the tip of the proverbial iceberg!

As with any decent iceberg analogy worth its salt (pun intended, and also see *Ancient Romans*), we must first visualize the natural phenomenon. Most of the berg lies below the water's surface; only a bit of its icy brilliance is visible to those who gaze upon it. Looking at that aspect, we may be so dazzled by the reflected glare of sky on ice that we forget about or ignore the presence of the underwater bulk that we cannot readily see -- the hidden mass that moves through the cold sea with great groans and shudders. Likewise, the most fundamental aspects of giftedness go unrecognized and/or unaddressed. Martha Morelock (1992) elaborates: "...*the contemporary tendency*

*to define giftedness as behaviors, achievement, products or school placement, **external** to the individual, necessarily misses the essence of giftedness – how it alters the meaning of life experience for the gifted individual.”*

The salinity of the ocean affects all properties of the water: its taste, its odor, its color and texture, the sizzling sound of its breaking waves, and even the forms of life that are able to thrive within it. Similarly, giftedness is a pervasive quality in the makeup of a person, an *inner* experience affecting all aspects of one’s life.

A gifted person may perceive the world in unusual ways, and perceive it simultaneously from multiple perspectives. He may be uncommonly sensitive and intensely aware of his own and others’ feelings. She may feel driven, impelled by her need to develop and express her abilities or interests. He may be inexorably drawn to a search for meaning, truth, and his highest self. She may have an acute awareness of the duality of her outwardly-focused thoughts and actions, even as she is immersed in her intense inner world of thoughts and ideas. This experience of multidimensional focus, in which inner experiences may be perceived as a current or stream flowing beneath the events of everyday life, like a continuous text annotation, is not uncommon for gifted individuals.

Some research has found that gifted children often possess a significantly broader and deeper awareness of moral issues and a more advanced level of moral judgment than their non-gifted age peers; they may be very concerned with moral, ethical, and existential matters (Janos and Robinson, 1985). These traits alone can cause a child to feel – or to be treated as if – s/he is outside the boundaries of accepted childhood experience.

The intensity of perceptions and emotions such as those often found in highly-gifted and profoundly-gifted individuals may lead such a person to conclude that s/he is an “alien,” or somehow “crazy.” Unfortunately, this belief may also be held – seriously or half in jest – by significant others in the person’s life.

*Why don't they want to play with me?*

How does 3-year-old Julio interpret the behavior of his nursery school classmates, who would rather throw fistfuls of sand from the sandbox at him and at each other, rather than build a sand city with him? Perhaps he concludes, as he stands alone by the play yard fence, *Nobody likes me*. Lacking ready access to true peers, gifted children may experience feelings of profound loneliness (Gottfried, Gottfried, Bathurst & Guerin, 1994).

*Am I the only one who thinks about this stuff? Why can't I just stop thinking?!*

How does 12-year-old Kate cope with – or even name – the existential fears and depression that threaten to overwhelm her, when she has never heard of anyone else who has experienced the kinds of thoughts and feelings that worry her? *There must be something wrong with me. I must be going crazy*. Possessing an acute awareness of their small and fragile lives against the vastness of the universe, some gifted people, especially children, may become fearful, anxious, or depressed.

*They said I was gifted when I was in school, but they must have made a mistake; I haven't done anything special with my life.*

How can 36-year-old Serena discover and embrace the significance of her “ordinary” life, when she is measuring it against the myth of fame or celebrity as “proof” of giftedness? *I feel like such a fraud!* Internalizing others’ (and their own) very high expectations, the gifted may be at risk for developing unhealthy (neurotic) perfectionism (Gottfried, et.al., 1994).

Gifted children – and gifted adults – may be more vulnerable than their age-peers to certain types of emotional injury (Zigler & Farber, 1985). Julio, Kate and Serena are experiencing emotional pain because they are not aware of or do not understand the implications of giftedness in their lives. Even if they have been told that they are gifted, much of their experience does not fit the definitions or descriptions of giftedness that they have absorbed from the larger society. A logical conclusion, then, is that the problems – the faults – lie entirely with themselves.

What messages might be internalized about giftedness in our culture? *Truly gifted people naturally work really hard to develop their talents, and nothing can stop them! ... If you're gifted, you must be a*

genius. ... Oh, we don't make distinctions like that in our school; **all** of our children are gifted! ... If she's so gifted, how come no one's ever heard of her? ... 'Gifted' is an elitist concept; having special classes in school for those kids isn't fair to the others ... You're just showing off. ... **Everybody's** gifted in **something!** ... Gifted kids are weird. ... You're **too** [sensitive, analytical, indecisive, independent, stubborn, serious, cautious, fanciful, persnickety...etc.] The lessons are myriad.

### **Part III: Are we there yet?**

What can we do to help smooth out some of the roughest byways that the gifted encounter on their life journeys? To prevent, mitigate, or even remediate emotional injuries such as those described above, we must first recognize and understand the unique affective needs of the gifted and then address and meet them as best we can.



Prevention of unnecessary injury is the most desirable action, though mitigation of distress is more likely to be called for. As caring and concerned adults, we can assist in these efforts if we learn more about the emotional needs of the gifted children in our lives by: 1) conversing -- as an empathic, active listener -- with the child; 2) reading good books about gifted children -- not necessarily about children as *students*, but as **children**; 3) attending lectures and presentations about giftedness and emotional well-being; 4) consulting with other adults who are well-informed about the emotional development of gifted children; 5) participating in parent groups that address common concerns about raising gifted kids.

The next step is to take the information and translate it into action. The well-informed can often be of great help simply by passing on to others what they have learned about the nature of giftedness and about its impact on personal development and interpersonal relationships. Such interchanges can occur at home, at school, or in the community. They may take place informally

and spontaneously, or within the context of structured activities such as discussion groups for children, adolescents, and/or parents.

Remediation of emotional distress caused by years of internalizing negative messages is something that gifted adults may undertake for themselves within the context of reading and hearing good information (see the end of this article for suggested reading and informational resources), meeting with intellectual peers in structured or guided discussion, and/or a course of psychotherapy with a therapist who is knowledgeable about giftedness.

Discovering the “big picture” of giftedness – viewing a larger map that shows a wide range of possible routes -- can provide a sense of immense relief to those who have come to doubt themselves or misinterpret their own thoughts and feelings as “wrong” or “crazy” because they have too often been misjudged, not comprehended, or rejected outright.

By helping gifted people of any age to understand why they are the way they are, we are simply acknowledging what they know already – that they **are** different – and assuring them that they are OKAY to be that way. When we assist others to learn how to recognize the particular assets and limitations within their own “different-ness,” we are strengthening and healing their spirits. By facilitating this growth and healing, we help them continue on the journey that will enrich their lives, as well as our own, and those of so many others who will be touched someday, in some way, by such a person.

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