



Discovering the gifted ex-child

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Abstract

Most of the attention given to the gifted over the years has been devoted to gifted children, a population identified by unusual mental processing that sets them apart from the norms. Gifted adults, however, are recognized in our society solely by their achievements. The innate qualities of mind that are found in gifted children do not disappear as the children grow up. The unusual developmental trajectory of the gifted creates an extraordinary experience of life for the individual at any age, whether or not that individual is able to achieve in ways society recognizes and values. The achievement orientation that has always existed for adults and is now taking over the field of gifted education, makes it difficult for the gifted to understand the qualities of mind that make them different. Such an understanding is essential to honoring the self.

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The first act of honoring the self is the assertion of consciousness: the choice to think, to be aware, to send the searchlight of consciousness outward toward the world and inward toward our own being. To default on this effort is to default on the self at the most basic level. To honor the self is to be willing to think independently, to live by our own mind, and to have the courage of our own perceptions and judgments (Brandon, 1983).

The experience of the gifted adult is the experience of an unusual consciousness, an extraordinary mind whose perceptions and judgments may be different enough to require an extraordinary courage. Large numbers of gifted adults, aware not only of their mental capacities but of the degree to which those capacities set them apart, understand this.

For many, however, a complete honoring of the self must begin with discovering what sort of consciousness, what sort of mind they possess. That their own perceptions and judgments are unusual may have been obvious since childhood, but they may have spent their lives assuming that this difference was a deficit, a fault, even a defect of character or a sign of mental illness (Lovecky, 1986; Alvarado, 1989). Thinking independently may seem foolhardy or antisocial.

Who am I? is a question they may need to ask themselves all over again because the answers devised in childhood and adolescence were inaccurate or incomplete (Silverman & Keamey, 1989; Tolan, 1992; Wallach, 1994).

Where Have the Gifted Children Gone?

Since the 1920's thousands of books and articles have been written about gifted children, (see for example, BurksJensen, & Telman, 1930; Can-oil, 1940; DeHaan & Havighurst, 1957; Gross, 1992; Hirt, 1922; Hollingworth, 1926; Piirto, 1994; Stedman, 1924; Terman, 1925; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982; Witty & Jenkins, 1935; Zorbaugh & Boardman, 1936). Organizations of educators, parents and others have been formed to protect, preserve and develop their potential. (Hall & Skinner, 1980; Krueger, 1978). Factions have argued about definitions and terms, about whether it is nature or nurture or both that creates unusual intelligence, whether gifted children need or deserve special programs and educational resources (Burks et al., 1930; Galton, 1869; Margolin, 1994; Renzulli, 1978; Sapon-Shevin, 1987; Sternberg & Davidson, 1986; Witty, 1951; Yoder, 1894).

Meanwhile, generations of gifted children have come and gone, moving through and beyond the educational institutions where they have or have not been identified, have or have not been appropriately served.

These gifted children have disappeared into the vast territory of adulthood. Have they disappeared in the same way prodigies do? No matter how powerful the adult talent of a grownup child prodigy, he is no longer a *prodigy*, because the term is linked not solely to ability, but also to age. The adult, even if continuing to excel in his earlier domain, is forever an *ex-prodigy*. Does the gifted child, grown up, similarly become an *ex-gifted child*? Having left childhood and school behind, has she also left behind the differences that were recognized in the "gifted" label? Or could she more accurately be described as a *gifted ex-child*?

What is Giftedness?

If giftedness is merely an artifact of rapid progress through normal developmental stages, it could be destined to fade when others catch up or even move beyond. If, on the other hand, it is a quality of mind that creates a genuinely unusual developmental trajectory, it would be a stable attribute, remaining with the individual throughout life whether outwardly evident or not.

Not everyone perceives giftedness in the same way. Some see it as the achievement of something out of the ordinary, essentially external (Gardner, 1993; OERI 1993; Tannenbaum, 1983). Others see it as an internal set of out-of-the-ordinary mental processes that may or may not lead to achievement (Columbus Group, 1991; Hollingworth, 1942, 1937; Shurkin, 1992). Traditionally, our culture's perception has depended to some extent on the age of the individual under consideration.

Because childhood is inevitably and biologically a developmental period, giftedness in childhood traditionally has been seen in terms of unusual, measurable qualities of the developing mind. We recognize that it is something internal to the child that we are labeling. IQ tests were created to assess a child's innate capacity to reason and to learn, and to the extent that they achieved that goal, they have been useful in locating children whose extraordinary potential requires unusual educational methods. The phenomenon of the "underachieving gifted child" obviously depends on our recognition that a child has unusual potential which is not showing itself in equally unusual achievement.

In looking at adults, however, the focus changes. We recognize the existence of gifted adults, of course. They are the people who achieve spectacularly. And for those achievements we expect them to be rewarded with a Nobel prize, great fame, wealth, or eminence in their own field. We may know that some gifted adults are unlucky enough not to achieve the rewards their ideas or their products deserve (there are many examples, like Van Gogh, of people whose achievements went unrecognized during their lifetimes) but it is nevertheless the achievements or products that are the basis for our recognition of giftedness in adults. This focus is essentially external. Though we acknowledge that there must be some unusual mental capacity (an internal reality) that allows a Stephen Hawking to work out ideas that affect the field of physics, if we did not have those ideas (the external evidence), we would not recognize Hawking as a gifted adult.

There is no readily accepted concept of "underachieving gifted adult" because the number of adults who have test scores or other standardized means of showing unusual mental processing other than through products, is relatively small.

To society, then, the changing definition of giftedness from childhood to adulthood would make it appear that of the many gifted children who have been identified only a few have gone on to become gifted adults (Shurkin, 1992; Subotnik, 1993). The change in criteria from different internal processing to unusual external production was recognized by a frustrated Sophie, one of the female subjects in Lewis Terman's famous longitudinal study of gifted individuals while the study was in progress. She wrote to Ter-man, "You assessed youngsters on the basis of learning ability and personality, but you assess adults by a more worldly measure of financial standing and recognition by a public which has never shown any great ability in distinguishing between knaves and fools and good public servants" (Shurkin, p. 269).

To confound the issue further, it would also appear that there are gifted adults who seem to have sprung into the world full-grown, never having been identified or perceived as gifted when they were children (e.g. Darwin, Edison, Einstein). It is no wonder that there is some controversy and confusion on the subject for our culture in general and for individuals as well.

Giftedness as Developmental Difference

Recently a definition of childhood giftedness as "asynchronous development" (Columbus Group, 1991) was advanced to look at giftedness from a phenomenological viewpoint, considering what it is like from the inside. Throughout childhood asynchronous individuals reach noticeable and clearly defined developmental milestones and acquire various skills earlier than other children. But the difference is not mere precocity, not just "getting there sooner." The child who deals with abstract concepts early brings those concepts to bear on all later experience. This different, more complex way of processing experience creates essentially different experience. The result is that the differences, far from shrinking as the child develops, are likely to grow larger. A child whose cognitive development is within the normal rather than the gifted range will not "catch up" with the gifted child any more than a younger sibling will catch up in age with an older sibling. The developmental trajectory diverges early and does not come back to norms.

"Asynchronous development" may not be as relevant in adulthood, because adult development is not as time dependent. It stretches over a far larger time span and is not so closely tied to physiological development. It is not necessarily a steady, upward progression which all adults experience at different rates, but far more than in childhood is a matter of personal growth and choice. We expect adults to be able to use abstract reasoning; we are not as likely to notice one whose reasoning takes him into complex realms where most other adults could not follow, as we are to notice a child who uses abstract reasoning long before other children can. If an adult decided to learn every single written human language, she would not likely be thought of as learning them earlier than other adults, as few other adults would choose to pursue this goal at all.

In adulthood we might refer to "differentiated development," rather than asynchronous development, as the direction any individual chooses for his or her continued growth is likely to be idiosyncratic. This makes the difference between the gifted adult mind and others harder to recognize, harder to measure. However, the reality of giftedness remains a different experience

of life, whether or not the individual is able to use that different experience to drive continued growth and learning, or to create products or perform in ways that the larger culture recognizes and rewards.

Childhood Characteristics

Some of the cognitive characteristics of gifted children that are differences in kind rather than in precocious acquisition are: extraordinary quantity of information; unusual retentiveness; advanced comprehension; unusually varied interests; curiosity; unusual capacity for processing information; accelerated pace of thought processes; comprehensive synthesis; heightened capacity for seeing unusual and diverse relationships; ability to generate original ideas and solutions; evaluation of self and others; persistent, goal-directed behavior (dark, 1988). These characteristics not only persist into adulthood, but interact through time to create a geometric progression of significant differences from the norm (Wallach, 1994; Roeper, 1991).

In addition to these cognitive characteristics, many researchers have found in gifted children heightened emotional sensitivity and intensity (Morelock, 1992), (a characteristic that is likely to go underground in adulthood, especially in males) (Kline & Meckstroth, 1985; Roeper, 1991), a keen sense of humor (that may be gentle or hostile, sophisticated or bizarre) (Webb, Meckstroth & Tolan, 1982), an early and heightened concern for justice and morality (Roeper, 1991) and the desire to make certain that actions are consistent with values (Hollingworth, 1942).

Socially, gifted children may have difficulty placing themselves with chronological peers, as their interests are likely to be different. In addition, their emotional sensitivity and intensity may make social interactions, particularly in settings where emotions are distrusted, devalued or directly censured, especially complicated (Kline & Meckstroth, 1985). Where their abilities cause jealousy in others there may be a powerful incentive to hide or disguise those abilities in order to "get along" more successfully. Sometimes this effort becomes powerful and longterm denial of their differences. This is particularly true for girls during adolescence (Kerr, 1985; Noble, 1989; Silverman, 1993).

Effects in Adulthood

All of these characteristics, continuing into adulthood, create a different experience of life for the gifted adult, just as they do for the gifted child, whether or not the individual is achieving and being recognized as gifted, whether or not the individual understands and accepts his differences, (Lovecky, 1986). Sometimes the different life experience is a positive, but not always. Sometimes it is painful or even destructive (Alvarado, 1989).

The cognitive differences can lead to high levels of career success in many fields. These are the specific abilities that so often produce the recognized gifted adult, the ground-breaking physicist, the great philosopher, the peacemaking diplomat, the successful entrepreneur. But for the adult whose life circumstances do not readily provide an arena for the positive use of these abilities, the result may be a feeling of frustration, lack of fulfillment, a nagging sense of being tied down, imprisoned, thwarted (Roeper, 1991; Smith, 1992).

The middle management employee who has the ability to see and devise solutions to various company problems may be seriously frustrated in his job because a boss who lacks that ability does not allow the expression, much less the implementation of those solutions.

The suburban housewife, who has raised several children and worked as a volunteer for innumerable civic associations, may find herself restless, bored and frustrated when the children have left home. Social activities do not fill the void, nor does the sort of routine job she may be tempted to pursue to get herself out of the house.

The worker stuck in a dead end, menial job because she lacked the opportunity for an education appropriate to her unusual cognitive abilities, has no way to use those abilities in her intellectually undemanding work.

None of these individuals may fully understand the reasons for their dissatisfactions. They may not see a way or even a need to give themselves an outlet for their abilities, because they do not recognize the source of the problem. Having bought into society's achievement-bound definition of giftedness, they are unlikely to think of themselves as gifted adults. Few adults today were identified as gifted in childhood and they may never have understood their own differences from the norm. Because it is hard to be different, those who were identified may have protected themselves with denial.

The gifted frequently take their own capacities for granted, believing that it is people with different abilities who are the really bright ones (Alvarado, 1989; Tolan, 1992). Not understanding the source of their frustration or ways to alleviate it, they may opt to relieve the pain through the use of alcohol, drugs, food or other addictive substances or behaviors. Or they may simply hunker down and live their lives in survival mode.

Even when the individual is able to use her gifts to achieve undeniable career success, she may feel and appear seriously out of step. Barbra Streisand, for instance, whose abilities are not only obvious and far from norms but also wide-ranging, is criticized for perfectionism, for demanding too much from those she works with. Her well-known discomfort with public performance may come in part from the seemingly paradoxical self-esteem problems that often come with extraordinary gifts.

Emotional Intensity

Though adults, having had years of experience dealing with a culture in which emotionality is largely unaccepted, are usually more able than gifted children to control the expression of their emotional sensitivity and intensity, they must still deal in some way with the experience of that emotion. In some fields, such as the arts, the unusual emotionality of the gifted can be safely expressed and is, in fact, a powerful asset that can lead to success and achievement (Piechowski & Cunningham, 1985; Piechowski & Silverman, 1985). In most fields, however, emotions are suspect and expressing them may be disallowed. Many men, having been trained to do so throughout childhood, manage to suppress their emotionality and suffer the psychological repercussion of that suppression. Women, used to greater freedom of emotional expression in childhood, may find the suppression necessary to moving ahead along a chosen career path difficult.

Moral Issues

The gifted adult's moral sensitivity and concern for justice can lead him or her to a life of service, performance and/or achievement in diplomacy, the law, medicine, philanthropy and other fields. However, it can also lead to depression and other psychological difficulties, as the state of civilization and the condition of the planet can seem overwhelming to one with unusual clarity of thought and depth of perception combined with strong empathy and moral concern (Roeper, 1991). In addition, such a person may find the ethical corner-cutting, deception, outright dishonesty, and competition of the workplace intolerable (Hollingworth, 1937).

"A university professor who questions the basic assumptions of her domain, is morally outraged by competition and the pecking order in her department, and cannot express her ideas without becoming emotional, will be considered an unprofessional fringe element" (Wallach, 1994). Neither she nor her colleagues is likely to perceive her work-related problems as stemming from her giftedness.

Social Realities

Socially, the experience of gifted adults can be diverse. Those who have chosen a career path that puts them into contact with other gifted adults may regularly experience the joy and excitement of the intellectual synergy that occurs in such a group. In person or on computer networks these people build on each other's ideas, moving with great, exhilarating leaps through complex intellectual realms. There can be a sense of almost magical connection as the ideas flow from one to another, seeming to take on a life of their own. When unusually capable minds are working together there is a powerful sense of community and belonging.

For others, or for these people outside the work place or off the networks, social interaction can be both problematic and difficult to understand. A gifted adult may find herself in the workplace and/or outside associating with many individuals who do not share the complexity and depth of her perceptions. She may find it difficult to share important aspects of herself with others. She may have to weigh her words, simplify her conceptions, hold herself back in conversation. This experience is both tiring and frustrating.

Particularly if she does not understand or accept her giftedness, she (and others) may interpret her difficulty as social ineptitude. Even if she is able to match her interactions to her companions' level of interest or understanding, she may leave a social event feeling isolated, "weird," dissatisfied, unhappy. Others may clearly enjoy activities that the gifted adult finds stultifying and repetitious or prefer entertainment that lacks the depth and intellectual nourishment she craves. The hunger for intellectual companionship is felt even when it is not recognized or understood. Lacking companions with similar interests, the gifted adult may withdraw from interaction with others and resign herself to a solitary life.

Honoring the Self

There are many individual profiles of adult giftedness, some that neatly fit our cultural expectations, many more that do not. The experience of giftedness in adulthood is more likely to be problematic and painful when the individual denies or does not

understand his own giftedness. Not understanding, he feels alienated, not only from others, but from himself. Not understanding, he does not know how to solve the problems, heal the wounds, fulfill or even cope with the powerful internal drive (Rubin, 1990).

Our relentless focus on achievement rather than the unusual mental processing that constitutes giftedness makes the necessary recognition and understanding difficult if not impossible for many. It is critical both for the individual gifted adult and for the society that may be able to benefit from abilities not yet fully utilized, that we expand our perceptions and continue to pay attention to the gifted when they have left the educational community and taken their place in the adult world.

We must also look carefully at the perception of giftedness in the field of education, for it is in childhood that the gifted individual begins to form that critical sense of self, his initial understanding of his own mental processing, his own mind. Many in gifted education now view giftedness even in childhood as definable by achievement rather than potential (Dunn, Dunn & Treffinger, 1992). "The gifted person is the one who gives gifts to society," one of the major voices in the field has said, following that statement with the assertion that "I create giftedness" by offering students a carefully chosen set of opportunities and resources (Renzulli, 1989). The new focus on "talent" rather than "giftedness," though it recognizes an internal reality (a talent that one individual has while another does not), in actuality expands the achievement/product orientation. A talent is a specific, limited ability, rather than a broadly based way of mental processing. Talent development leads relentlessly to performance in a "domain" rather than to the support, reinforcement and enhancement of mind, consciousness, awareness, judgment.

The field of education now seems to be moving to a largely external, achievement-based measure of giftedness even for children, giving precedence to products over mental processes. As it does this, it devalues the individual and sets the scene for more children (who may not be able to fit their mental gifts to the schools' narrow range of achievements) to enter adulthood unaware of or denying the needs of their unusual minds. Gifted children do not disappear when they graduate from high school or finish college or graduate degrees. They become gifted adults. If they enter adulthood blind to their unusual mental capabilities, they may go through their lives fragmented, frustrated, unfulfilled and alienated from their innermost beings. What is different about the gifted individual is his or her mind. Not understanding that mind makes it virtually impossible to honor the self.

It is apparent that the 'self'...is our mind — our mind and its characteristic manner of operation (Brandon, 1983).

Mind makes us human; mind makes us individuals. From childhood through adulthood, to be themselves, to value and honor themselves and lead fulfilled lives, gifted adults must understand and come to terms with their own — unusual — minds.

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