

The Primary Importance of the Inner Experience of Giftedness

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ABSTRACT: Based on my autoethnographic work, this paper illuminates the consequences of allowing a focus on achievement to overshadow the importance of the inner experience of giftedness. Growing up identified as a gifted child, but lacking an awareness of what it means to be gifted, created great inner conflict as I struggled with feeling too different and out of sync from the norm. As an adult, I have found that Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration provides a framework for understanding the power of multilevel development. Lacking guidance to help me understand that these differences were indicators of strong developmental potential—and not mental illness—led to two decades of inappropriate treatment. To ignore or deny the inner experience is an injustice to gifted individuals of all ages.

This article is based on what I have learned from a lifelong search for understanding about who I am and where I belong in this world as a gifted individual. It feels like both an introduction and a homecoming, as I feel in some ways late to the party, in terms of studying giftedness, and someone who has been here all along, if only in spirit. Growing up identified as a gifted child and participating in gifted programming, there was no discussion about what it means to be gifted beyond achievement in academics. Moving into young adulthood, with no guidance to help me understand my intensity or existential struggles, I began a long journey through the mental health system. Although many labels were offered, the ones I accepted and internalized were bipolar disorder, panic disorder, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Nearly four years ago, I first learned of the existence of the phenomenon known as twice-exceptionality (2e), or the co-existence of giftedness and at least one disability, in Silverman's (2009) paper "The Two-Edged Sword of Compensation: How the Gifted Cope with Learning Disabilities." Discovering 2e, at the age of 39, felt illuminating and empowering, and I viewed it as the answer to the question I had asked myself since the age of twelve—what is *wrong* with me? Why was I so different from the other gifted kids? Driven to learn more, I discovered a body of literature concerning 2e and

found that I knew very little about the construct of giftedness outside of my experiences.

At first, when learning about how giftedness is conceptualized within the field of gifted education, I assumed a highly inclusive definition of giftedness would be positive, perhaps a way to improve the identification of twice-exceptional children, those possessing both advanced cognitive abilities and co-occurring disabilities. Although the initial intention of this paper was to discuss the construct of 2e, it has become clear that there is little value in championing the need for awareness of 2e if the construct of giftedness is lost to defining giftedness through a talent development focus (Tolan & Piechowski, 2013).

Presently, as I survey the path ahead, as a newcomer to the world of gifted education, I am increasingly alarmed by the focus on achievement and talent development as essential to defining giftedness. Particularly troubling is the position that eminence “ought to be the chief goal of gifted education” (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011, p. 4). Subotnik et al. are not the first to tie giftedness to talent and achievement (Gagné, 2007; Renzulli, 1999; Sternberg, Jarvin, & Grigorenko, 2011), but their monograph has been embraced by large advocacy groups such as the National Association for Gifted Children.

Regarding the need to address the emotional differences of gifted children, Subotnik et al. make only a brief reference followed by the statement that they have found inadequate evidence to support the view that giftedness is a qualitatively different experience from the norm. As for gifted adults, if one is not an “eminent producer,” they should not expect to consider themselves worthy of the gifted label following high school (Subotnik et al., p. 23). That a large body of literature exists related to the population known as gifted adults calls such a view into question (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009; Fiedler, 2016; Grobman, 2009; Jacobsen, 1999a, 1999b; Lewis & Kitano, 1992; Lovecky, 1986, 1990; Miller, Silverman, & Falk, 1994; Perrone-McGovern., 2011; Prober, 2008; Rocamora, 1992; Roeper, 1991, 1999; Ruf, 1999; Tolan, 1995, 1999).

Dismissing the unique social and emotional needs of gifted children or adults by denying the existence of their inner realities is not progress. When the goal of gifted education is to prepare children for a future of achievement and eminence, the natural consequence is to leave another generation of children unprepared to move forward in their adult development.

Defining Constructs

Until working on an autoethnography about my perceived 2e experiences in 2014, I would have been hard-pressed to come up with even one example of a theory of giftedness unrelated to Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (MI). When I first approached learning about 2e, I began with theories of intelligence,

and a search for theories of intelligence delivers different results than a search for theories of giftedness. Already familiar with MI, I read Gardner's (2011) *Frames of Mind* and wondered about my own MI profile from Gardner's perspective. I searched for literature about what he describes as the personal intelligences, and discovered Piechowski's (1997) "Emotional Giftedness: The Measure of Intrapersonal Intelligence."

In Piechowski's work, I found answers about aspects of myself that I had been unable to articulate, knowing that I had always experienced a great deal of emotional intensity and sensitivity. Suddenly I realized that there was a whole body of literature that I had been unaware of, but because of the speed with which I work, I did not allow myself time to reflect on what I had learned about myself and moved directly to the references to find more answers. Recognizing Linda Silverman's (1994) name, I moved forward and found much to relate to in her description of asynchronous development.

Perhaps due to my background in social work, I found the most striking feature of asynchronous development to be its application across diverse groups and recognition that gifted children do not grow up in a vacuum but have parents, teachers, and other critical adults in their lives. This definition addressed gifted individuals as whole persons, sharing the common experience of being different and misunderstood no matter their backgrounds. Giftedness as defined by the Columbus Group in 1991 made sense:

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. (Silverman, 1997, p. 39)

Silverman's (1997) work was packed with ideas that would take time to process. Even the first line, in which she states that "to be gifted is to be vulnerable" caused me to take a moment and consider how well I know that to be accurate (p. 37). From that point, I felt a lessened need to examine definitions, as this was the one that captured the essence of *being* gifted.

The Experience of Giftedness

To say that I have faced challenges is a gross understatement. The breadth of experiences that I can claim is wide—achievements, traumatic events, addiction, extensive mislabeling, and misdiagnosis in mental health treatment. While discovering the construct of 2e helped me identify aspects of myself that had been puzzling, on its

own 2e remained inadequate for explaining my history. A true understanding required an appropriate conceptual lens. To make meaning from my experiences, it was necessary to look for answers in unexpected places and to challenge long-standing beliefs.

My life is best understood using a lens based on the work of those who have brought an understanding to the world about the vulnerability of the gifted and the importance of acknowledging and supporting the qualitatively different experience of being gifted. These include, but are not limited to: Cross & Cross, 2015; Daniels & Piechowski, 2009; Delisle & Galbraith, 2002; Gross, 1998; Hollingworth, 1926; Jackson & Moyle, 2009; Kline & Meckstroth, 1985; Lovecky, 1990; Maxwell, 1998; Morelock, 1992, 1996; Neville, Piechowski, & Tolan, 2013; Peterson, 1997; Piechowski, 1979, 1986, 1989, 1997, 2003, 2009, 2014; Probst & Piechowski, 2012; Roedell, 1984; Roeper, 1982, 1991; Silverman, 1994, 1995, 1997, 1998; Sisk, 2005; Tolan, 1989; and Tucker & Hafenstein, 1997.

There is a significant volume of information available about my life, ranging from childhood drawings to entire books, but the most recent project I've undertaken is the previously mentioned autoethnography, a meaning-making effort that has profoundly changed my life (Wells, 2014, 2015). As a part of that process, I attempted to share my experiences as a person who identifies as 2e in a way that could reach a wide audience of individuals who might relate to my story, knowing that I was presenting my work to groups of academics who were potentially gifted and learning-disabled. After the second presentation, I knew I was much closer to discovering my purpose in life.

During my childhood, the field of gifted education was blossoming when Piechowski (1979) introduced the work of Polish theorist Kazimierz Dąbrowski, a psychiatrist and psychologist, in a book called *New Voices in Counseling the Gifted*. Piechowski advanced the concept of developmental potential (DP) as a model addressing the underlying dimensions of giftedness.

As a central concept in Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration, DP is made up of special talents and intelligence, psychic overexcitability (OE), and the capacity for inner transformation (Jackson, Moyle, & Piechowski, 2009). Conceptualized as forms or dimensions of mental functioning, the OEs are innate aspects of an individual which lead to heightened sensitivity or excitability in one or more dimensions of psychic life and are observable in gifted and talented individuals (Piechowski, 1979; Piechowski & Cunningham, 1985).

All five psychic overexcitabilities: psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual, and emotional, have been present and active all my life, experienced as countless variations of enthusiasm, vivid imagination, emotional intensity, heightened sensual capacity, and a love of learning for its own sake (Piechowski & Miller, 1995). Born in 1973, I grew up in Milford, Connecticut living with my

natural parents, possessing a great deal of developmental potential. Verbal precocity was my special talent, and my development was marked by asynchrony—reaching some developmental milestones more rapidly than usual, and reaching others later than expected (Silverman, 1997). For example, despite demonstrating high verbal ability, I sometimes appeared immature for my age due to behavioral issues. At school, I displayed an aggressiveness not usually seen in girls, a difference which I always assumed was evidence of dysfunction. From a more positive perspective, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) and Maslow (1970) have described a similar resistance to rigid gender roles as characteristics of creative and self-actualizing individuals.

When multiple OEs combined during the months leading up to college in 1991, a book resulted, released under my maiden name, Chris Campbell (1993), just days following my twentieth birthday. *No Guarantees* described a battle to overcome drug and alcohol addiction that did not occur entirely in the real world but was laced with imaginal memories best explained through the phenomenon of worldplay, or the creation of imaginary worlds in childhood (Piechowski, 2014; Root-Bernstein, 2014). The book exists because, during adolescence, I began the deliberate work of inner transformation during a period of intense introspection and self-development. Piechowski's (2009, p. 191) model of multilevel introspective emotional growth helps shed light on some of the themes from my adolescence using eight components, including:

(1) awareness of growing and changing, (2) awareness of feelings, interest in others and empathy toward them, (3) occasional feelings of unreality, (4) inner dialogue, (5) self-examination, (6) self-judgment, (7) searching, problem-finding, asking existential questions, and (8) awareness of one's real self.

That fall, I was finally beginning to thrive as I learned to trust in my way of learning and interacting with the world. During the first quarter that year, there are as many positive comments on my report card as there were in the two years prior combined. I was class treasurer and club president of Students Against Drugs, which I created with my best friends during the previous school year to prevent substance abuse. Aware that public schools in my city had a curriculum in place for students struggling with drug and alcohol issues, it rankled me that my school did not, and I began to put pressure on the private school I attended to implement a similar program.

A great deal of conflict ensued when I was unable to remain calm during meetings with administrators. Still, for the first time in high school I was doing well academically, even excelling in multiple classes. The comments on my report card were dramatically different and, for once, none of my teachers expressed concern that I

was “not working to my potential.” During the autoethnography, I made sense of these memories in relation to ADHD, assuming that such a lack of emotional regulation was related to cognitive dysfunction. Conceptualized through Dąbrowski’s theory, it is more accurately understood as a consequence of multilevel development. With emotional OE as my dominant mode of functioning, my genuine desire to create positive change at school was often overshadowed by behaviors I had not yet learned to control.

In adolescence, I lacked authoritative assistance as there was no one to help me understand the complexities inherent in the inner experience of giftedness. If I had understood that my learning style is vastly different from the norm, and that it is fueled by my individual combination of OEs, I could have approached my academic work more effectively (Silverman, 1998). Instead, I was tormented by the paradox of easily understanding the complex but not the simple, and I berated myself for being unable to memorize facts and formulas. My mind was often a source of both frustration and concern. The description of “dual processing” in Gross (2009) helps make sense of some of the issues I faced in adolescence, such as the times when my ability to process more than one problem simultaneously was mistaken for partial seizures. Until I learned that not all people process information in the way that I do, in my early 40s, I assumed this testing for seizures must have been related to ADHD.

Aware that I needed to gain greater control over my emotions, I undertook a program of change. As the above events occurred, I began seeing a new therapist who was struck by the intensity of my anger. When I described the issues I was having with losing control at school, he suggested this was a topic worthy of further examination. That evening, I went to a bookstore in New Haven and purchased a self-help book on anger that suggested keeping an anger journal, rating one’s levels of anger throughout the day and noting the triggers of anger.

During that term, I had enjoyed writing a journal for my religion class, and decided to begin writing as a way of better understanding my anger issue. Soon, goals related to anger switched to goals about other areas of my life which I wanted to improve. It is interesting to note that while I described other people’s perceptions of me as angry, there is very little anger evident in the journal entries themselves. Few people were aware of what I was really like, and the sincere entries written in the journal for religion class provided that teacher a window into my inner experience.

Unfortunately, the journal was too little, too late, to save me at school. After making some very poor decisions, I was asked to withdraw from school, three months into the year. During the incident that led to this departure, I lied repeatedly to adults and denied any involvement. In fact, I had lied to myself in my own journal about the incident. My religion teacher finally confronted me, and I found myself unable to lie to her. For the first time in years, I cried at school, the feeling of shame and guilt so overpowering that I

wanted to die. Although I had to leave the school, the administrators and teachers showed great empathy for me, knowing that things were more complicated than they appeared.

Leaving my beloved school was a painful experience. At times, it felt nearly unbearable, and I learned that writing was an excellent tool for coping, facilitating an awareness of the ways in which I was changing and growing:

I wish I could understand myself better. Part of me is happy, and wants to be successful, and do what I want to do. Then again, there is the side of me that is angry and hurt, and wanting something more out of life than I seem to be getting (or earning). The part that is worst is the side of me I can't see at all. I think it's harder to be me than people give me credit for—just because I always have a smile on my face doesn't mean I'm happy. The only way I can come to grips with my feelings is to write, so I am going to keep writing in these notebooks until my pens run out. (Journal entry, January 1990, age 16).

In the above entry, I describe the “happy-go-lucky façade,” which Silverman (1997) discussed in her article about asynchronous development, caused by the dissonance one feels when they struggle with inner doubt and conflict but are unable to express themselves authentically in the world. In my case, inner doubt was complicated by the existence of an imaginal world, which also was a component in the way that I learn experientially, through highly personal meaning-making efforts. Hutchens and Morelock (2012) describe this as a type of whole-brain thinking that allows for the perception of multiple layers of meaning in which one “experiences the world in all its interconnectedness” (p. 234).

If I can uphold strength in character, I will be able to achieve my dreams—I may not know them all yet, but that is okay, because I am happy to admit that my life is far from over. My wish is not to help just one person—I want to help everyone, and to at least touch the soul of all those I meet. If I am sincere, and I know that I am, I will make the best of this year. Even if I can't be in the place I wish to be—I am a better person every day. I will not allow myself to go back to the person I was, I am truly happier this way. It was worth spending the last year and a half working to achieve the peace of mind that I have today. I have given credit to those deserving it—certainly I was not alone on this venture. (Journal entry, January 1990, age 16)

Writing helped me rebound, and two months after switching schools I was involved in new extracurricular activities which captured my heart. My journal entries are awash with thoughts about

how I was growing and changing, particularly once I began volunteering at Yale-New Haven Hospital in a program for students hoping to pursue careers in medicine. I was deeply affected by the death of a boy on the adolescent unit where I spent my time:

I think an important lesson I have learned is not to be self-centered. I am more conscious of other people's problems instead of blindly focusing on my own. Life is not always fair, but I am sure God must have a purpose for everything. Otherwise twelve-year-old boys wouldn't suffer and painfully die from diseases like leukemia—only four months after being diagnosed. If nothing else I learned from him that I cannot take one thing in my life for granted. (Journal entry, March 1990, age 16)

This was a period of intense emotional growth, and in *No Guarantees*, I summarized my hospital experience briefly, and from a Dąbrowskian perspective, this excerpt is rich with evidence of developmental potential:

At first, psychiatry and neurology were what interested me most, but that changed. Cancer patients interested me more. I sought to learn as much about oncology as I could. I often went in to talk to the oncology patients, and I read their charts at every opportunity. The nurses taught me as much as they could about chemotherapy and other cancer treatments, and about the disease in general. I worked on a project dealing with acute leukemia. It fascinated me to the point of not wanting to learn about anything else. I wanted to spend all of my free time at the hospital. I was reading about oncology constantly. I ignored my schoolwork and concentrated on hematology and oncology. The hospital was a place where I found something in myself that I had always known existed. I wanted to help people. I felt a great need to be there, to be involved in the healing process. (Campbell, 1993, p. 80)

In the above excerpt, one can see the presence of psychomotor OE, as I described a high level of energy, a drivenness, and a capacity for being energetic. Intellectual OE is clear from the desire to learn about oncology on a deep level, to a point which interfered with the work I was supposed to be doing at school. Emotional OE is present in the empathy I felt toward the people I met at the hospital, and my desire to heal them. There is also evidence of entelechy, a concept Lovecky (1986) has used to describe the feeling that one is propelled forward by a mission in life, or a guiding principle.

It seems worth noting that my academic achievement ended as abruptly as it began that year. My cumulative high school GPA was

2.25. Yet my academic self-concept was strong, and I dismissed the concerns expressed at school about my mediocre performance:

They're afraid I'm going to spend the rest of my life doing half-baked work and not using my intelligence. Well, I beg to differ with them—I have both purpose and direction in my life. That I have achieved practically on my own. Granted, with some help lately. I have every intention of utilizing my summer well, working on projects, working at the Yale Comprehensive Cancer Center, and at my normal job. Someday I will be a physician—I don't think that I have no goals, and or that I do 'half-baked' work. (Journal entry, June 1990, age 17)

The difference between my self-concept and the others' perception of me was a recurring issue. Part of the problem was a lack of communication. If my guidance counselor had known about the volunteering, or my passion for oncology, he might have been less concerned. But he did not know, and neither did many other important adults in my life. Grant (1995) has addressed this issue of mistaking underachievement for unrealized potential, which is a consequence of moving away from respecting the growth of the spirit. Within this framework, one can see that the power of an inner drive allowed me to create my own opportunities for learning in ways that were meaningful and powerful. At the hospital, I presented as my authentic self, and the people with whom I worked affirmed my belief that I could become a physician someday. At school, I was becoming someone else as a way to endure the process of establishing myself in a new place, with new people.

Feeling Misunderstood

Over thirty years ago, Kline and Meckstroth (1985) described the need for awareness of gradients in abilities among the highly and exceptionally gifted. They wrote that with great variation in abilities, measured in standard deviations from the norm, there is an increased potential for misunderstanding. My personal experiences affirm the belief that asynchrony does not disappear in adulthood but continues throughout the lifespan, manifesting in different ways. One conclusion from my work is that a major obstacle in my ability to realize my potential was feeling misunderstood, which stemmed from *being* misunderstood (Wells, 2015).

In fact, there are numerous examples of what feeling misunderstood looked like following high school, particularly once I began to seek treatment for what I assumed to be mental illness (Wells, 2014). Unfortunately, since I lacked awareness of the essential aspects of giftedness, a cycle from childhood continued into adulthood, and it did not occur to me that simply feeling too different

from normal was not evidence that I was mentally ill (Piechowski, 1997). This knowledge might have made a world of difference when I sought help, at age 19, for symptoms of internal conflict manifesting in existential depression and anxiety, only to be misdiagnosed with bipolar disorder.

A primary motivation for undertaking the autoethnography was that I found so little in the literature that I could relate to—I kept hoping to find articles about people like me. As mentioned earlier, there is a large body of literature on gifted adults but not about gifted adults who have also been categorized—at times—as “chronically mentally ill” or addicted to drugs. The spark of recognition, the awareness that one is not alone, is a benefit of telling stories that reveal vulnerabilities. A critical issue to address is the phenomenon of feeling misunderstood, including a lack of understanding of one’s self as well as a perceived lack of understanding by others.

Condon (2008) conducted a concept analysis of the phenomenon of feeling misunderstood and found that three characteristics present in people who feel misunderstood: disquietude, discordant perceptions, and an increased cognizance of emotions. At age 20, I acknowledged feeling misunderstood:

I think that one of the biggest problems I have is that other people misunderstand me. Since others are socialized in ways that I don't conform, their perceptions of me are almost always wrong. (Journal entry, January 1994, age 20)

Reflecting on what I wrote as a young adult, this phenomenon was amplified because I did not understand myself. One month following the above entry, I was struggling with depression and anxiety:

Who am I, anyway? When I look in the mirror I don't even know who I am anymore. Not that I ever really did. I remember when I was younger, I would stop and start thinking about who I was, and I'd realize that I felt like I was in a movie and everyone else's life was real but I wasn't. I didn't really exist. I don't know how that must have been, but I recall it was scary. Like a bad dream that never ended. I put on a pretty good act. I seem like a pretty together person. But I'm not. (Journal entry, February 1994, age 20)

By the time I was 23 years old, I was being encouraged to embrace the (mis)diagnosis of bipolar disorder, and part of the acceptance, for me, was to share the information with people I had known since childhood or adolescence. When this news—that I had a severe mental illness—was not immediately embraced, it created conflict and fueled the lingering uncertainty I kept hoping to overcome.

It's funny how you look at the world after you have a nervous breakdown (or two), because then it's basically before and after, and the shit in between. For example, a hospitalization or something. I'm a lot different now, mentally, than I was before. More laid back, which in retrospect is something to be thankful for. Now I just accept the fact that I am mentally ill. Even though the words still leave me feeling like a failure. I've seen signs that say things like, "Mental illness is a no-fault disease," and shit like that, but it's not really true. Being bipolar makes me, separates me—to society. (Journal entry, April 1996, age 23)

Family and friends expressed confidence in my ability to overcome, using my strong will, and it felt infuriating. The most frequent remark, noted in my journal on many occasions, was that my family and friends believed that I was overmedicated. A review of my medical records, and the increased frequency of the phrases *go to sleep* and *take a nap* in my journals reflects that this was an accurate perception. For years, I took unnecessary medication, inadvertently placing obstacles in the path of my development. This issue is one I plan to explore further, including the appropriateness of the ADHD diagnosis that I was given at age 24 but did not treat until I was 40 years old. Differentiating overexcitability from dysfunction, such as ADHD, is complex, but it *is* possible, and undoubtedly an area worthy of investigation (Probst & Piechowski, 2012).

Fulfilling My Mission

That this article was written suggests that I managed to achieve a state of relative wellness, despite facing a significant amount of adversity well into my twenties. How did such changes occur? The question of how I made the critical changes in my life, allowing me to pull away from the dark world of addiction and illness in which I once lived, has been the *big* question. It is an inevitable aspect of any discussion with strangers about my life story, and it is only recently that I have had an answer.

The answer is both simple and complex—I realized that I could change if I wanted to, and had reached a point in which I desperately *wanted* a better life, so I created such a life for myself by seizing opportunity. When I was offered the chance to move to a different city, I undertook deliberate work to identify the positive aspects of myself and leave behind my role as mentally ill and disabled.

From developing an imaginal world in childhood, my ability to visualize alternate realities was well-established at age 26, as I had maintained the world into adulthood. Hypnotherapy sessions the previous year had taught me to enhance this ability and focus it in a more purposeful manner, to create change. Using the imaginal world, I first pictured what it would look like to live a different life. This

manner of rehearsal seems to have been a key to successfully moving from chronic mental illness and addiction to crack cocaine, first, to someone able to work at a regular job, and eventually, able to return to school and pursue the fulfillment of my mission in life.

I just read a book about the juvenile court system here in Los Angeles and I wish I could help kids who are trapped in the system. First, I need to stabilize both at home and at work. Jason is my priority over work, but work makes Jason feel secure, which means it's crucial I stay at this job, or at least get another job lined up before I leave. Then I want to go to school and work on my degree. I need to major in sociology and perhaps get my master's degree in social work. But that is in the future. It's important that I stay in the present.
(Journal entry, August 2001, age 28)

Similar to gradients of abilities, there are gradients of emotional development. As confidence in my development increased, I was able to turn away from allowing others to define who I was and where I was going. Following the autoethnography, in 2015, I found that I did not relate to the concept of “recovery” from mental illness when the concept is defined as a return to a previously experienced state of functioning or health (Whitwell, 1999). I knew that such a belief would be false and not characteristic of my lived experiences. This is yet another way that I’ve found answers in Dąbrowski’s theory. The wellness that I’ve achieved is not a recovery from mental illness but a different, higher level of functioning and development.

Uncovering the constructs that I study, in my personal history, I continue to be aware of self-stigma. It's a special kind of torture to spend your days revealing stigma. Discovering trauma that your brain had protected you from, reading the biased language of mental health records, realizing the magnitude of being an outlier. For example, each time I have to troubleshoot a major computer issue, I realize that I'm good at it because I see multiple solutions. There's always one more thing to try. Some new way to get around the obstacle, a better fix. It's part of who I am—when faced with a problem, I can persevere because I see so many possible answers. I don't give up easily. This was seen as a negative trait in treatment. Every barrier was surmountable if I kept trying...but when my goal was at odds with another person's? It was a sickness. A character flaw. (Journal entry, August 2015, age 42)

Finally, in my forties, it was time to fully reject mental illness as part of my identity, and truly examine what had happened in my life, no matter how painful. In order to fulfill my purpose and destiny, I

had to trust myself, and my intuition, and accept a degree of otherness that, for much of my life, had felt too lonely to comprehend.

A Call-to-Action

Critics of the position I am taking, that the inner experience is of critical importance, might argue that my case is not representative of the population of individuals who are gifted. However, enormous volumes of data, such as personal journals and medical records, exist but never become part of the academic world because of the deeply private nature of such information. This type of data is often not shared among close friends, let alone in settings such as journals or conference presentations. Fortunately, it does happen, and there are examples of the phenomenon I am about to describe, which is the experience of knowing that other people have related to my story so deeply that it moves them to tears (Tolan, 2012).

Since the release of *No Guarantees* and more recently, my autoethnography, I have received numerous messages from people who have related so much with my story that they felt compelled to seek me out to share their new self-awareness. This is one of several messages that I received, which are strikingly similar, in the months after I presented the second part of “Too Smart for Your Own Good: The Paradoxical Experience of Twice-Exceptionality (2e)” (Wells, 2015):

I just watched your conference presentation, and to be honest, I'm crying because I'm so glad there's someone out there who shares my experiences. I'm a 26-year-old woman with bipolar and ADHD (both diagnosed when I was 22), and I am intellectually gifted, but I didn't even know 2e was a thing until today. I really identify with what you said about being told during childhood that you could do anything because of your giftedness, only to be unable to reach it because of disability. (Allie, personal communication, February 12, 2015)

Although many people with allegiance to an achievement-oriented construct of giftedness will be unmoved by this paper, I am undeterred by the enormity of the task before me. Many others have paved the way for me to help bring awareness to the importance of the inner experience of giftedness, and there are great numbers of parents who will hear my words and take heart. Ultimately, parents deserve a place in any conversation about giftedness, not only because of their children's potentials for eminence, but also because they may be gifted and able to understand their children in a way few others can. These parents feel tired, defeated, disrespected, and unsupported by their schools and, by extension, the field of gifted education.

The inner experience of giftedness exists and can be observed using Dąbrowski's work as a framework for understanding (Jackson et al., 2009; Piechowski, 1989, 2014). Through my work I hope to contribute by increasing awareness of the inner experience of giftedness as a way of helping others feel less misunderstood. Part of my process of self-acceptance is a willingness to share my experiences in full, as an example of what it is like to grow up without cognizance of essential aspects of oneself as an outlier. It is unsurprising that no adults possessed the tools to help me understand the nature of giftedness when I was growing up, in the 1980s, with such little public awareness about giftedness. However, this is a different age, and it is unacceptable to leave the emotional development of gifted children out of the picture.

Examining the literature in the field of gifted education indicates such a stance is well-founded as there is no shortage of research concerning the social and emotional issues faced by gifted children and adolescents. Thus, ignoring this aspect of the experience of giftedness is not simply misguided but the cause of harm. As long as the inner experience is not addressed by educators, researchers, and clinicians, the misunderstanding of gifted individuals, and the potential for misdiagnosis, will continue.

Concluding Thoughts

No adults possessed the tools to help me understand the nature of giftedness when I was growing up, in the 1980s, with such little public awareness about giftedness. However, there is no shortage of research concerning the social and emotional issues faced by gifted individuals of all ages. With that in mind, the following points summarize areas in need of further consideration and study.

1. An individual who does not understand what it means to be gifted is lacking the foundation for authentic expression. As self-awareness increases, knowledge of the existence of the inner experience of giftedness can be viewed as protection from the incorrect conclusion that one's differences from the norm must be pathological. There is a need for true guidance of gifted children and adults in this area, perhaps through mentoring relationships.

2. Eminence as the goal of gifted education is dehumanizing and creates a system in which children are reduced to commodities. Instead, the goal should be developing personal growth, from which the realization of talent is a natural outcome. The construct of asynchronous development honors the inner experience as an integral component of giftedness, recognizes levels of giftedness, and allows for an understanding which transcends culturally bound conceptions of achievement.

3. Respecting cognitive styles, and the emotional reality of imaginal experiences, is of critical importance. Attempting to discourage or shut down an individual's unique experiential channels is to cut off one's way of understanding, creating meaning, and

copied in both the internal and external worlds. The result is a disruption in one's learning and creativity, an obstacle in one's drive for internal consistency, and the cause of significant emotional distress.

4. Gifted individuals and parents of gifted children must understand that accepting a mental health diagnosis can lead to grave consequences, such as inappropriate treatment, discrimination, and worst of all, self-stigma. Dąbrowski's theory of positive disintegration is an alternative framework, a way to avoid pathologizing the expression of multilevel development. As long as the inner experience is not addressed by educators, researchers, and clinicians, the misunderstanding of gifted individuals, and the potential for misdiagnosis, will continue. Ignoring the inner experience of giftedness is not simply misguided but the cause of harm.

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