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Life after gifted education: A reflection on what ‘giftedness’ means

Perhaps the biggest personal crisis facing many of us today is a crisis of meaning. In the words of Pablo Neruda, “Whom can I ask what I came to make happen in this world?” [1] We must recognize what is in our best interest and the interests of those we love; but desire is a commodity in our world: the desire to achieve one’s goals can be turned towards the achievement of someone else’s goals instead. We are continually being persuaded to do what *others* wants us to do, which is often in *their* best interest. Teachers want us to do one thing, parents another, friends something else. How do we decide who to listen to and who to resist? And how much more difficult is it to make the right choices when you do not have a clear idea of what your goals are? Often many of us find ourselves pursuing what we do not want, and wanting what we do not pursue! We struggle with this problem as adults – but it is more difficult for children, who have not yet laid the cornerstones of their personalities, who are designing and redesigning the structure of what they will become.

The *search* for meaning, for one’s own voice, is what giftedness is for me. Whether one succeeds or fails in their search, personal accomplishment and fulfillment begin with an innate desire to find one’s own way. That way may agree with others’ conceptions of successful personhood or it may be a radical departure from them; but it is in every case one’s own. Giftedness is about passion for things, and it is often about struggle to find what’s important. Giftedness is as likely to lead to low scholastic achievement as to high achievement. Which ideas should be resisted, and which embraced? The answer to this question must be determined within the context of the child’s life goals. Almost invariably, there is a tension that develops between conflicting representations of what choices should be made—and a nagging, open question of what standard should form the anchor-point for one’s decisions. The gifted child forms her or his *own* life goals, and so may be especially vulnerable to this tension.

Of course, exceptional ability is a gift, too. Talent in a particular area of human endeavor is precious, and it is often under-recognized and under-developed. But it is often over-developed as well, when the development of expertise exceeds the intrinsic motivation to practice. Like day and night, talent and motivation complement each other to form achievements that are beneficial to others and fulfilling to the achiever.

The second half of the giftedness equation, intrinsic self-motivation, is less well understood—because it's hard to quantify, and because people think that all kinds of desire are equal. We can desire to impress others, to avoid pain, to create a great work of art, to provide for those we love. All of those lead to action and accomplishment, and are worthy kinds of motivation. But there is no guarantee that actions done from the basis of those kinds of motivation will lead to personal fulfillment, and no guarantee that they are self-sustaining after the proximate goal is reached. However, there is another kind of motivation that is both personally fulfilling and sustainable, all the time. It is wanting to do or learn about something because you love doing it, because you love the practice. It will keep you up all night wondering, working, and learning, even though there's no foreseeable gain in it for you. That kind of love is the 'night' of giftedness, because you can't create it, you may not know it's there, and no one can compete with it. Self-motivation and intrinsic love are the manifestations of that inner struggle between conflicting values successfully resolved.

Both expertise and intrinsic love for something are gifts in their own right, but they are not gifts in the sense that they are innate and unchangeable, given to some and not to others. They are developed (or lost) by the right kind of desire and the right kind of practice. The extent to which talent is innate is frankly unknown, and some researchers have questioned whether innate talent exists at all [2]. The gift that leads to intrinsic motivation and the extensive practice that it implies is the part of us that searches for what's important to us, what's worth doing.

An example of intrinsic love for something has been provided for me by my brother, whom I greatly admire. He has been a dedicated rock climber for almost ten years. People climb for many reasons – many of them involving *being* something. Being strong, being adventurous, being a good rock climber. My brother has always climbed because he loved *doing* it, climbing on cliffs, enjoying sunshine

and the peace and challenge of remote wilderness. For years he climbed all the time, and his technical skills improved commensurate with the vast amount of time he spent having fun, doing what he loved. Many of his friends started at the same time, but stopped climbing when their sense of progress waned or when their personal development seemed to plateau. My brother kept going because it wasn't work for him. He got the physical conditioning and the technical ability for free.

It may be very important for the long-term development of ability to focus on building *interest*. Intrinsic interest makes dedication and hard work easy, and it is difficult to accomplish anything substantial without these qualities, no matter how talented one is. As Einstein once wrote, "I know quite certainly that I myself have no special talent. Curiosity, obsession, and dogged endurance, combined with self-criticism, have brought me to my ideas. Especially strong thinking powers I do not have, or only to a modest degree. Many have far more of those than I without producing anything surprising" [3].

More to the point, it is impossible to accomplish something of great value to oneself—to become 'self-actualized'—without perseverance and dedication. We can find fulfillment in what we do to the degree that we are devoted to doing it. I believe that this is a very difficult lesson for many talented people to learn.

A lesson in this comes from an old TV show. The show was called the Quiz Kids. The Quiz Kids were America's smartest, handpicked child prodigies, who appeared on the show to answer questions. What happened to them? As a 1982 [4] article entitled "Whatever Happened to the Quiz Kids?" describes, most of them went on to lead relatively ordinary lives, often to their own disappointment and to the disappointment of those who wanted to see them accomplish more. Did the Quiz Kids fall short in intelligence or in achievement motivation? I don't think so. I think their disappointment reflects their high achievement motivation. Probably, they were encouraged, pushed, to accomplish—but not to be guided by what made them feel fulfilled.

It may be easier in the long run to accomplish things if you become absorbed in doing them, stop focusing on the goal, and develop a love for the work that will sustain you along the long way. Of the Quiz Kids discussed in the article, the ones who found intellectual fulfillment later in life seem to be the ones that found what *they* were really interested in and practiced it with dedication. Those who were less

successful had trouble sustaining interest in any one thing long enough to become expert in it and find a lasting sense of personal accomplishment [5].

For some people, everything in school comes easily, and they don't value their scholastic accomplishments as much as others who work very hard for them. So there is no love for what they have accomplished, and there is no fulfillment in their achievement. They may not have the opportunity to develop dedication and learn to deal with failure. My experience in school was like this. My schoolwork wasn't difficult, and I was able to avoid situations where I came face-to-face with my limitations. Developing the commitment to tackle the things that are tough for me, to face the edge of my ability squarely and improve at what I'm not good at, is a challenge.

Another challenge particular to bright students is that they often have *too* many choices. The natural difficulty that all young people have committing to a career path or to the long practice involved in mastering something is augmented by having many options. Developing dedication is particularly important for young people who can do anything, but who may find it easier to jump from thing to thing, picking up fields of study easily and dropping them just as easily.

The difficult question in education is not how we can best teach smart kids skills, although that is important, but how we can teach dedication and other qualities important for private-world and public-world success. It is how we can take care of children's selves, so that they grow up appreciating the learning opportunities around them, trusting their own interests, and valuing their own abilities. If self-motivation is impossible to create in someone else, then why write about it? Should we focus only on developing abilities? Self-motivation may be impossible to create in another person, but it can be nourished. Here are four ways, things I wish I did more as a teacher. I believe these principles create a kind of soil—loose, not densely packed, with room for air and water—in which a child's motivation can grow.

Trust. Anais Nin wrote, “We are like sculptors, constantly carving out of others the image we long for, need, love, or desire. Often against reality, against their benefit, and always, in the end, a disappointment because it does not fit them” [6]. I believe that in each child is a plan for who that person is and what they're supposed to be doing here. Children are not written upon; they unfold. They have an

intrinsic idea of what ‘success’ will ultimately constitute for them. When I was growing up, my parents acted as though they believed that the plan of my life was unfolding within me, rather than being imposed by them. I am very grateful that they did. At some level, they trusted that I knew best what I wanted, and what was good for me, or at least that I would learn. They did their best to provide me with options for classes, sports, activities, and travel. They encouraged me and discussed what I did with me; but they never prevented me from trying something, and they never forced me into things. They let me take gymnastics when I was twelve, and they let me quit when I realized I was out of place.

There are two things that came out of that approach that I think are really good. For one, I started to learn how to make choices for myself. Learning how to choose, I believe, is the most important thing that children are *not* taught in school. In fact, we are systematically taught not to choose things for ourselves, but to follow instructions. Most of us, by the time we get into our twenties, don’t know how to figure out what we want anymore—what we want to do for our careers, what we want to learn, what we think is important. Rules and cooperation are important; but many children are not led to believe they are responsible for their actions. That is, they may not realize that a) they have some control over their outer situations and their inner attitudes, and that control can be exercised to realize their own goals, and b) often if they don’t do something for themselves, no one else is going to do it for them. The sense of self-efficacy fostered by trust may be important for developing a personal interest, for coming to love something and do it of one’s own volition. I know a number of people who got into Ph.D. programs without really knowing why they were there. This is generally a painful place to be without a personal reason for going through what you are going through; but with intrinsic love for your subject, it can flow with seemingly little effort.

The second reason trust is a good policy to adopt is that internal mechanisms within all of us resist the breaking down of will that accompanies constant conformity to rules. The part of us that decides what we value is, as many teachers know, weatherproofed against demands from outside authority. But other times it is remarkably open to suggestion, when demands are framed as advantageous options rather than rules. This is a secret that advertisers know: desire can be induced, or seduced, but never forced. And yet, children are expected to learn to resist the seductive advances of media and peers, in

many cases, and open themselves to what is demanded of them in school. These expectations are set within the context of each child's effort to learn what well-being is for him or her. If an authority imposes expectations on a child that run contrary to that intrinsic goal, the child will naturally resist the outside pressure, and forcing conformation to expectations to the detriment of the child's internal goal naturally leads to resentment.

Hannah Arendt expressed this idea beautifully in general terms in her book, On Violence [7]. Violence, she says, is the use of force or threat of force to command obedience. Authority is the opposite: It is natural leadership that people will follow willingly, and it can only be achieved when it is given freely. Once a government uses violence to control its people, true authority is quickly eroded. Although the book was written with politics in mind, I think it applies to all kinds of power relationships. Children deal with real, deep issues, and it's harder than it seems to adults through the rose-colored glasses of retrospect. They deserve respect and understanding, and if they have it, they may choose to give their educators authority.

Providing options, giving kids the trust and respect to make their own decisions and fail in them sometimes, is tantamount to seduction. As much as possible, provide opportunities, and let children choose for themselves, as we would like to be given the option to choose in our lives.

We as educators might think that extra enrichment or special classes might be something that every bright child would love to have. My enrichment classes in elementary school were wonderful. We put together creative projects, learned about psychology, and discussed educational theory. Those classes in fourth grade got me excited about what has become my career: We learned about dendritic branching, brain damage, and intelligence testing. I have vivid memories of those lessons today. But not everyone I know had a positive experience with their "gifted" classes.

One friend, E., was identified as being highly gifted and taken out of the classroom for special enrichment classes. Unfortunately, no one ever asked her if she wanted to go. She liked what was happening in class and was embarrassed to have to leave for a "special" program. Above all, at that point in her life she didn't want to be singled out. The gifted classes set her apart from other kids—they

thought she believed she was superior—at a time when she so much wanted to be like everyone else. Her special treatment even garnered resentment from some teachers.

Another friend, B., was similarly identified and put into a special accelerated program. At twenty-seven she is bitter about her experience. She felt like her would-be mentors were using her, without regard for what she wanted—which was not to be loaded down with extra work to live up to someone else's idea of success.

You could look at these two stories as examples of kids who didn't understand the potential value of gifted education. But I see them in a different light. I see them as people learning how to choose their own paths. Although this is less comfortable for everyone, their resentment shows that they were learning to have their own ideas. They were developing intellectual autonomy. On the ladders of intellectual innovation, social reform, and artistic accomplishment, we are most valuable when we have our own ideas about things—so I consider these two cases success stories. Now they are both in Ph.D. programs, still having their own ideas.

Developing intellectual autonomy is critical for academic success and for finding personal fulfillment in intellectual pursuits. That autonomy can be fostered by not trying too hard—by presenting options without trying to control the outcome, and by deferring some of the responsibility and some of the credit for learning to the learners.

Be an example. Everyone's favorite teacher was an example of someone who had a love for something. Mentors are hard to come by, and they're the best thing that can happen to a child's education. My first mentor was Robert Partridge, my clarinet teacher when I was in elementary school. He was my mentor not so much because he was excellent at what he did—he had taught at Julliard—but because he so obviously loved helping his students progress. Because he taught me to breathe by putting stacks of books on my stomach. I remember this so well because it was a spontaneous act, not a rehearsed teaching method: He saw what I needed to learn, and thought of a way to convey his message. My high school calculus teacher was a mentor to me because he cared about how well his students learned. He stayed after class, and he always said, "If you don't like school, quit. Get a job, and then you'll come back really wanting to learn." My music teacher in college was a mentor to me because I saw how dedicated she was

to her work as a professional musician and as a teacher, how hard she worked and how much she demanded of herself and expected of others. She was also my mentor because she was gracious. For years she was (and maybe still is) the leader of our small college orchestra, which tested her professional patience twice a week. One day in particular, the orchestra filtered in ten minutes late for the start of lunchtime practice. Our professor—who had played with Stravinsky, and who knew every note of her pieces before the first rehearsal—at first started to get understandably frustrated. Then her expression changed; she just smiled and said, “Let’s play.”

Each of my mentors was an important part of my life not because they had ability, but because they exemplified qualities that I valued. Love, caring, creativity, hard work, dedication, graciousness, and interest in me. They all worked so hard, not only for themselves, but to give back to others through their accomplishments and through their teaching. Their excellence lies in their ability to find the rhythm of the outer and the inner—to find balance, and even synergy, between personal development and the development of relationships with others.

Encourage enjoyment. Real intellectual success is more like a marathon than a footrace. It takes years—maybe ten years of continuous, smart practice—to develop mastery in almost anything, whether it be Aikido, biochemistry, or poetry. So it matters immensely whether your motivation will sustain you through all the practice required. The shakuhachi, a Japanese bamboo flute, is a good example. It is very difficult to even make a sound—one experienced player told me it took him a year, although I think he was exaggerating—and it takes at least ten years of play before one is any good. My information source on the shakuhachi, a teacher and master player named Masayuki Koga, gave the best advice to his struggling class. Don’t try to make a sound, he said. Focus on your enjoyment of playing the shakuhachi. If you enjoy it, you’ll keep playing.

Educators and parents can help children realize their potential talents by encouraging them to work very hard developing a good approach to practice. George Leonard [8] wrote an excellent book about practice. During his fifteen years as an Aikido instructor, he recognized that most of the people who stayed with it and got their black belts were not the best students to begin with. Many people who were immediately good soon lost interest in the practice. Likewise, some of my brother’s climbing

friends who eventually stopped may have had the potential to be better technical climbers than my brother; but that potential was never realized.

According to some researchers, even spontaneous flashes of insight may be the result of long preparation [9]. An illustrative example is Otto Loewi's discovery of the first neurotransmitter, acetylcholine, in the frog's heart. He and other scientists had been working for some time on understanding how the transmission from nerves to muscles is accomplished. The idea for the critical experiment came to him in a dream—which he wrote down during the night and later couldn't read. As he wrote, "That Sunday was the most desperate day in my whole scientific life" [10]. When he awoke at 3 a.m. the next night having dreamed the same idea again, he immediately went to his lab and performed the experiment, and by 5 a.m., he had demonstrated that nervous impulses are transmitted through chemical signals. Loewi's discovery is a classic case of a 'brilliant flash of insight'—but it is also a clear demonstration that personal investment and substantial preparatory work are usually prerequisites for such sudden illuminations.

Enjoyment frees us to have creative ideas, to broaden the focus of our attention and see things in new ways [11]. It also encourages the intensive labor that lies behind many significant ideas. And, most importantly, it gives a meaning to work and learning experiences beyond what their end result will ultimately be. The work itself has intrinsic value, and that enriches life as well as enhancing performance.

During those times when I'm enjoying what I have to do very little, when a class gets tedious or when I'm doing repetitive, detailed computer work, I think of myself as a hunter. I'm hunting for enjoyment and for value in what I'm doing, looking for what the situation has to offer and how it can help me develop qualities that I admire. I think it's important for kids to be hunters in school. Then they have the responsibility for what they catch.

Give good advice. The best things I learned in my 'gifted and talented' classes were about what intelligence is. Most of my memories are filled with discussions and lessons about what intelligence might be and what it isn't. Through these lessons, I related myself to the world. Where do I fit in? What do I want my image to be based on? What can I expect from life? These lessons had several pieces of advice that were particularly important for me and possibly for others. One, I was told that success isn't

handed to you on a silver platter, even if success in school comes easily. It's true, and I think for many people having to work, and sometimes failing at things, is a shock. It might be so much of a shock that people won't try to do things of which they're not sure of their success, and a lot of unfulfilled, "always-wanted-to" dreams come from here. Two, I was told that loving what you do is more important than being perfect, and I think I'm happier for it.

So the main message I wanted to convey here is this: outstanding ability is only a small part of giftedness. A major, often overlooked part is interest, which carries one deep into understanding and sustains one over great distance, which nourishes the self and provides meaning and personal fulfillment. I believe that growing interest is about *letting* rather than making, and that we can let it grow in ourselves by looking for enjoyment, appreciating the best aspects of whatever task is in front of us, and working to share what we believe in by practicing it and letting others decide whether they value it too. When we practice this attitude, we are doing ourselves a favor. Practicing this point of view, like anything else, makes it easier to keep doing it with time.

Self-motivation, the development of personal meaning in life that will be an unending wellspring of desire, is a quality of the heart. And it is by qualities of the heart that it may be developed. Trust is one, and the dedication as educators to being the best example we can is another. You can teach knowledge with words, but ultimately, I think we teach motivation with its own medium, action. This is what I promise to try to do: Balance personal commitment with lightness in my relations with others, and trust that others are best as they make themselves, not as I make them (but that they sometimes need my help.)

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