

Gifted Development Center

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The Universal Experience of Being Out-of-Sync

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Introduction

It is often asserted that giftedness is culturally determined. That statement is true when giftedness is equated with recognized achievement in adulthood. However, when giftedness is defined as asynchronous development, it is not limited by ethnic, gender, age, socio-economic, geographical or political boundaries, nor is it dependent upon recognition. In all cultures, there are children who progress through the intellectual milestones at a more rapid rate than their peers. The brighter they are, the more uneven their development is likely to be--intellectually, physically, socially, and emotionally. They are also likely to be out-of-sync with their agemates and with age-related cultural norms. Certain intellectual and personality characteristics accompany asynchrony: sensitivity, intensity, curiosity, perceptiveness, complexity, reflectiveness, and perfectionism. These characteristics are lifelong and differentiate the experience of gifted individuals from birth to maturity.

While others look upon the gifted as being advantaged in a race for personal gain, the experience of being different in cultures that value sameness, coupled with acute awareness of the pain and suffering in the world, make the gifted feel distinctly disadvantaged. Gifted children don't see themselves as winners of the competition, but bearers of the burden to make this a better world for all. They only actualize their potential when they discover a unique role for themselves which requires their particular gifts.

The concept of giftedness, as it has been described in Western culture for over a century, is problematic. Perennially equated with "elitism," the concept has come under vigorous attack in the United States during the school reform movement of the 90s. Zealots have claimed that the notion is culturally biased (even racist), related to socio-economic opportunity, and a social construction to maintain hierarchical power relations (George, 1992; Margolin, 1993, 1994; Sapon-Shevin, 1994). It is difficult to argue with these opponents when giftedness is defined as high achievement in school or the potential for recognized accomplishment in adult life. The fact is that achievement is very much a function of opportunity (Hollingworth, 1926), and greater opportunities for success are available to those who have greater financial resources. Achievement, particularly recognized

individual achievement, is culturally determined (Silverman, in press). In some cultures, individuals shun individual recognition; instead, they value moral courage or collective prosperity for generations to come, and use their gifts for the good of the group.

Another way of understanding giftedness is to see it as developmental advancement. In every culture, there are children who develop at a faster pace from early childhood on, are inquisitive to a greater degree than their agemates, generalize concepts earlier than their peers, demonstrate advanced verbal or spatial capacities at an early age, have superb memories, grasp abstract concepts, love to learn, have a sophisticated sense of humor, prefer complexity, are extraordinarily insightful, have a passion for justice, are profoundly aware, and experience life with great intensity. While these traits may or may not propel the individual to world renown, they appear to correlate with moral sensitivity in childhood and ethical development in adult life (Silverman, 1994). Their sensitivity, intensity, awareness, and moral courage set these individuals apart from others throughout the lifespan. In some societies these characteristics are applauded while in others they are punished.

The relationship between developmental advancement and moral judgment was recognized by all of the early leaders in the study of intelligence and giftedness, such as Binet (1909), Terman (1925), Hollingworth (1926), Piaget (1932), and Wechsler (1950), as well as by Plato and Confucius. History reveals that societies that counted on this relationship for the selection of their leaders were exceptionally stable. The best illustration of this is the strength of the Chinese Empire, dating from the Han dynasty until the fall of the Manchu dynasty in 1912 (DuBois, 1970; Laycock, 1979; Reischauer & Fairbank, 1958). In fact, the first recorded attempt to differentiate individuals with extraordinary skills and abilities was here in China in the 2nd century B.C.E. Candidates aspiring for government offices were required to take proficiency examinations in a broad range of disciplines, such as poetry, music, calligraphy, arithmetic, horsemanship, knowledge of Confucian writings, and the rites and ceremonies of public and private life (DuBois, 1970; Laycock, 1979). The aims of this early civil service program were to promote literacy, classical scholarship, respect for proper rules of conduct, and ethical behavior on the part of government officials. The selection of scholars to serve as political leaders is cited as "a major reason for the extraordinary strength and stability of the Chinese Empire since T'ang times" (Reischauer & Fairbank, 1958, p. 166).

For 2,000 years, the Chinese recognized early verbal ability as a sign of potential for leadership (Laycock, 1979). Verbal ability has remained a potent indicator of giftedness, but it does not predict fame. Instead, it correlates with the complexity of one's thought processes, early awareness and moral concern, and heightened intensity. These are the principal qualities of the gifted experience that render these individuals vulnerable. It is this vulnerability, rather than their potential for fame or even for leadership, which requires us to recognize and nurture the gifted when they are very young.

A Case Study

"Jennie," a pseudonym given by Martha Morelock (1992a) in a wonderful case study, is a good example of this kind of advanced development. I want to tell you about Jennie, because her plight stimulated the development of a new conception of giftedness. When she was 4 1/2, Jennie went through a period of inner turmoil that was so alarming that her mother sought assistance from a number of experts all over the United States who had worked with highly gifted children.

Jennie had been complaining that her preschool was boring. One day she was uncharacteristically quiet while riding home from school. When they reached the house, she announced to her mother that she was not going back to school; they had nothing to teach her there. She went upstairs, turned on the television set, then the record player, then she took out a third grade math book and began to do the problems, and she initiated a conversation with her mother--all at the same time. Her mother guessed that she was trying to make up for not getting enough stimulation at school. That night, Jennie had the first tantrum in her life. She beat her mother with both fists and cried herself to sleep. Her mother attributed the tantrum to the intensity of her frustration with a school program that was not sufficiently complex to meet her daughter's needs.

When Jennie awakened the next morning, it seemed as though everything took on a new and different meaning to her. For three weeks, she kept asking where everything had come from and how long they had had such things as the refrigerator, the computer, the desk, etc. Then she began asking about the universe and how life began. She seemed to be "going back to the very beginnings... she wanted to know about...*how the ocean was created*" (p. 25). One night while bathing Jennie, her mother realized what Jennie was really trying to find out: "Gee, Jennie, when you were asking about the computer and how long we've had this and how long we've had that, you meant how long have they been here *on earth*." (p. 25) "Yes, Mommy," Jennie replied tearfully. At night Jennie would lie awake trying to understand how knowledge is passed on from generation to generation, and then she began to ask about God and death. She asked her mother if God loves everyone. Her mother replied,

"Of course, Jennie. He loves everybody."

"Well, where do the *bad* people go? Don't *they* go to Heaven?" If God *loves* everybody, then *all* people would go to Heaven... (p. 26)

And she'd lay at night with tears in her eyes and not wanting to cry, cause she was so self-controlled, knowing that *she* could die at any time. Cause she knew her own mortality... You'd say to her "Oh you're gonna be fine, of course." "You're gonna live and I'm gonna be a Nana and..." And she'd say, "Well, nobody knows for sure what's gonna happen, Mom. Nobody knows for sure. You can get in an accident and nobody knows really when they're gonna die. It's nice if everybody lives to be old, but that's not always what happens, cause children die sometimes." (pp. 26-27)

After this three-week period of continuous crying and questioning, Jennie demonstrated what her psychologist termed a "cognitive leap" in her abilities (p. 17). She went from second grade readers

to books like *Little House on the Prairie* and *Charlotte's Web*. She was given a second intelligence test after the episode and her IQ had jumped almost two standard deviations in 10 months, from the 140s to the 170s. The psychologist attributed Jennie's emotional turmoil in part to the speed with which this cognitive leap had taken place. In her case study, Martha Morelock (1992a) described what happened to Jennie as follows:

As Jennie grappled with the sudden onslaught of increased abstract capacity, she was forced to deal with the emotional repercussions of her own thought. Thus, in Jennie's mind at the age of four, God could not possibly be a loving God if he would refuse Heaven to anyone. And the terrible realization of her own mortality could not be softened by her mother's reassurances because "Nobody knows for sure; *children* die sometimes." In spite of her impressive capacity for abstract thought, Jennie *was* only four. Her emotional needs, like those of other four-year-olds, included a trust in the strength and reliability of her parents and in the predictability of a secure world. However, her advanced cognitive capacities...left her emotionally defenseless in the face of her own reason. (pp. 37-38)

Now Jennie is ten years old. The event that occurred when she was 4 1/2 has not repeated itself, but Jennie becomes withdrawn and frustrated whenever her school program is insufficiently challenging. She skipped two grades in school and wanted to skip a third one, but the school officials were worried about her ability to fit in. She is currently being homeschooled so that she can pursue her interests in psychology, mental disorders, child development, algebra, science, writing, logic and deductive reasoning, the 1800s, novels, theater, clarinet, and grammar and punctuation (these last two "out of necessity"). Her mother describes how Jennie's mind craves intellectual stimulation:

I really think Jennie's natural state of brain function works on a different level and that's why she can't feel satisfied with lower level, less complex school material... Jennie told me she does logic problems when she needs a break from all the schoolwork because she finds it relaxing and it "rests her brain." How could she feel it rests her brain when most people would have to stretch their thinking skills while solving multiple step deductive reasoning problems; hence, the name "brain teasers." But to Jennie, she finds a natural sense of relaxation and a rest from the lower level brain function that her schoolwork forces her to use. It is too hard for Jennie *not* to work on material that is too hard... It is imperative that Jennie have the opportunity to work on thought provoking material because her emotional stability depends on it. ("Jennie's" mother, personal communication, April 24, 1995)

Jennie's experience is profound and important. It challenges the superficial assumptions we have about giftedness being a school-based phenomenon related to high grades or the development of talents in all children. Accounts such as this one underscore the need for a definition of giftedness that takes into account the "unusual mental processing that constitutes giftedness" (Tolan, 1994, p. 137) and the complex moral and emotional life of the gifted child.

Giftedness as Asynchrony

This alternative way of perceiving giftedness has been captured by the Columbus Group in the following 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. (The Columbus Group, 1991)

The Columbus Group definition made its debut in an article entitled, "Giftedness: The View from Within" (Morelock, 1992b), in January, 1992, the 500th anniversary of Columbus' legendary voyage to demonstrate to the Western world that the earth is round, rather than flat. The achievement perspective seemed like "Flatland" to the group of practitioners, parents and theorists who gathered to construct this new vision. We felt that the depth of inner experience of the gifted individual had been lost in the emphasis on products, talents, and success in adult life.

Achievement is just the tip of the iceberg; a vast, uncharted territory lies beneath the surface. Several members of the Columbus Group presented at the last World Council Conference in Toronto and were delighted to discover in the preliminary brochure on this conference in Hong Kong that the last sentence of our new conception had been adopted as a theme for this week's event. We knew that parents and practitioners in the United States, Canada and Australia had resonated to asynchronous development, but it was a wonderful surprise to learn that we were heard as far away as Hong Kong.

The giftedness-as-asynchrony position is international in origin, influenced by the clinical work of Kazimierz Dabrowski (1964; 1972) and Jean Charles Terrassier (1985), the theoretical and empirical work of Alfred Binet (1909), and the developmental theory of Vygotsky (1962). *Asynchrony* literally means out-of-sync, and gifted children are out-of-sync both internally and externally. Terrassier (1985) pointed this out explicitly in his description of the "dyssynchrony" of French gifted children with whom he had worked clinically. Internal asynchrony is due to differences in rates of physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and skill development in the gifted child. Uneven development is mirrored in external adjustment difficulties since the gifted person often feels different from, or out of place with, others. External asynchrony, then, is the lack of fit of the gifted child with other same-aged children and with the age-related expectations of the culture. In these respects, dyssynchrony and asynchrony are synonymous. But asynchrony is a more encompassing concept, with additional facets, and instead of describing some gifted children, it becomes a basis for understanding *all* gifted children.

Uneven development is a universal characteristic of giftedness. Gifted children, in any cultural milieu, have greater discrepancies among various facets of their development than average children (Silverman, 1993a; 1994). The clearest example of this unevenness is the rate at which mental development outstrips physical development. Binet constructed the *mental age* as a means of capturing the degree to which a child's mental abilities differ from those of other children his or her

chronological age (Binet & Simon, 1908). The concept of mental age has proved enormously helpful in our understanding of retardation. We recognize the inherent difficulties of having a 17-year-old body with a 9-year-old mind. However, we still do not understand that it is equally problematic to have a 17-year-old mind trapped in the body of a 9 year old. This type of asynchrony doesn't arouse much sympathy.

A child's mental age predicts the amount of knowledge he or she has mastered, the rate at which the child learns, sophistication of play, age of true peers, maturity of the child's sense of humor, ethical judgment, and awareness of the world. In contrast, chronological age predicts the child's height, physical coordination, handwriting speed, emotional needs, and social skills. The greater the degree to which cognitive development outstrips physical development, the more "out-of-sync" the child feels internally, in social relations, and in relation to the school curriculum.

The intelligence quotient, originally named the "mental quotient" by William Stern (1910), is simply the ratio of mental age to chronological age multiplied by 100. Like Stern, he never claimed that the IQ test could measure the totality of intelligence. Binet viewed intelligence as a rich, complex, multifaceted gestalt--a myriad of dynamically interrelated abilities. Emotion and personality also played critical roles in his conception of intellectual ability. He believed that intelligence was highly influenced by the environment, and that it could be improved through appropriate instruction. From Binet's developmental perspective, intelligence is a continuously evolving process, not a static amount of raw material which stays the same throughout life. Yet, intelligence testing is viewed today as a method of rigidly determining the limits of one's abilities--quite different from Binet's intent. Consistent with Binet's philosophy, the IQ should be seen as a *minimal estimate of asynchrony*--the extent to which cognitive development (mental age) diverges from physical development (chronological age).

Miraca Gross (1993), another of our keynote speakers, provides a graphic illustration of how the ratio between mental age and chronological age indicates varying degrees of asynchronous development. A child with an IQ of 135 has a nine-year-old body and a 12-year-old mind, while the extraordinarily gifted child, with an IQ of 170, has a 15-year-old mind. Asynchrony also increases with age. At 6 years old, the child with an IQ of 135 had a mental age of 8, and at 12, the same child will be mentally 16. The child with an IQ score of 170 was four years advanced mentally at the age of 6, and at the age of 12, this child will be eight years older mentally than physically. So asynchrony cannot be thought of as static; it is dynamic, constantly changing.

The situation becomes even more complicated when it is understood that psychologically the child is an *amalgam* of many developmental ages (Tolan, 1989) and may appear to be different ages in different situations:

In terms of development chronological age may be the least relevant piece of information to consider. Kate, with an IQ score of 170, may be six, but she has a "mental age" of ten and a half.... Unfortunately, Kate, like every highly gifted child, is an amalgam of many developmental ages. She may be six while riding a bike, thirteen while playing the piano or chess, nine while debating

rules, eight while choosing hobbies and books, five (or three) when asked to sit still. How can such a child be expected to fit into a classroom designed around norms for six year olds? (p. 7)

This was published three years before the new definition came out. Another precursor was a letter Kathi Kearney (1992) received from a parent:

At 14 [Max] can display a ferocious insistence for justice with the passions and tenacity of a 3-year-old...this gets confusing! We were told that at age 9 he displayed "cognitive reasoning skills way beyond his years." I wish he came with a blinking sign on his forehead to let me know just who I am dealing with: the 3-year-old, the 14-year-old, or the 25-year-old.

Last summer an ill-placed golf ball landed in the bedroom of a house adjoining a picturesque lighthouse. (Remind me to ask how this boy could ignore the physics of playing golf in a densely populated suburban neighborhood.) ...I heard myself asking Max, again and again, "What were you thinking?"

That's the thing--they think when you least expect them to, and go blank at the most inopportune times. My guess is that it's the tension of being caught between all those ages I just mentioned. But I don't think my theory would be supported in a textbook, even though I live by it every day in order to give some organized definition to what's going on. (Estes, 1992, cited in Kearney, 1992, pp. 1, 8).

There is still another form of asynchrony that needs to be mentioned: the condition of dual exceptionality. The most asynchronous child is one who is both highly gifted and learning disabled. A remarkable number of gifted children have either recognized or undetected learning disabilities, such as auditory processing weaknesses (Silverman, 1979), writing disabilities (Silverman, 1991), visual perception difficulties, spatial disorientation, dyslexia, and attentional deficits (Lovecky, 1991). Marked discrepancies between strengths and weaknesses continue into adult life.

One aspect of the Columbus Group definition that we still have not addressed is heightened intensity. Cognitive complexity gives rise to emotional depth and intensity. Thus, the gifted not only *think* differently from their peers, they also *feel* differently. This intensity may be experienced through various channels. Dabrowski and Piechowski (1977) identified five channels of heightened experience or "overexcitabilities": psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual, and emotional. Correlations of these "overexcitabilities" with giftedness have been established in several studies (See Silverman, 1993b, for a summary.) Individuals endowed with greater capacity for vivid imagery, intellectual curiosity, compassion and empathy are more likely to experience anguish when faced with knowledge of the cruelty in the world. These overexcitabilities create the foundation for moral choices, even in children.

The new Walt Disney movie, "Pocahontas," which is very popular right now in the U.S., is about a young Indian maiden who threw herself on a settler's body to keep him from being killed by her tribe. Few realize that the real Pocahontas was only eleven years old. Hollywood turned the incident into a love story, but the real story is one of profound moral courage of a gifted child. We

have dozens of morally advanced gifted children in our case files at the Gifted Development Center (Silverman, 1994). Perhaps none of them will grow up to be a world class leader, but *all* of them have something to teach us right now with their immense capacity to care. These beautiful, sensitive children abhor violence; some even articulate in their own words that violence is never justifiable. The most painful part of their lives is coping with the insensitivity and injustice of the world.

The marriage of cognitive complexity and emotional intensity, and the enhanced awareness and moral sensitivity born of that marriage, render gifted individuals vulnerable. When advanced cognition brings information into awareness for which the child or adult is emotionally unprepared, vulnerability is the natural result. But we must be careful not to equate emotional fragility with immaturity. Dabrowski (1979/1994) found morally and emotionally advanced adults gentle, delicate, nonaggressive, likely to withdraw rather than retaliate, "heroic" in their sensitivity. Most of world's treasures are delicate and need to be handled with care, like fine china, crystal, paintings. All delicacy is at risk in crude and aggressive environments. As the organizers of this conference acknowledged, it is the *vulnerability* of the gifted that requires special provisions.

Complexity, intensity, and heightened awareness are lifelong attributes of the gifted. These qualities often result in extraordinary conscience, a need to make the gift of life mean something in the overall pattern of existence. Lost potential to be an artist or a great scientist or statesman is surely harmful to the individual and to society, but loss of courage to take a stand against injustice causes much deeper suffering in these sensitive souls.

The asynchrony that besets the gifted is both a blessing and a curse. If we view giftedness only within a competitive framework, then the most gifted among us are certainly the most cursed, because they cannot fit into society as it currently is, nor can they succeed by its standards. They are likely to be seen as defective in today's world; they lack the competitive drive to win and they cannot comfortably "play the game" at school or work, ignoring the power plays and moral infractions. Advanced, asynchronous development is not an advantage in a race toward personal gain. It does not give the individual an edge in the competition. Rather, the cognitive and personality traits that comprise giftedness are disadvantages in a society in which those differences are not valued.

We need to see beyond the narrow lens of competitiveness to grasp the deeper significance of giftedness. When we look at the gifted from a global perspective, it is clear that the development of each person's gifts benefits all of society. Every human being has a unique contribution to make to the whole. Kirkegaard has been quoted as saying that we all come into this world with "sealed orders" and we each must discover what those orders are and follow them (Tolan, 1995). Everyone's orders are different. What is the point of competing if we all have a different role to play? Gifted individuals come equipped with the exact combination of unusual strengths and weaknesses--the perfect asynchrony--to fulfill their own secret orders. We, too, who have been called to help these children develop, have been given very sacred orders of our own. We know that some of the children in our care have come to lead us to a more humane, harmonious existence. We who cherish gifted children have been entrusted with guiding and guarding the

future of our planet. With our help, these children's gifts will become blessings to themselves and to the Universe.

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Ways You Can Help Keep Gifted Education Alive

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