Gifted Grownups

The Mixed Blessings of Extraordinary Potential

Marylou Kelly Streznewski

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For
Grasshopper
and
for my sister, too late.
Preface

If you think that gifted children are a misunderstood minority in American society, try looking up “gifted adult” in a good library; but do so only if you enjoy watching librarians twirl. I have written, as far as I can tell, the only book by and about gifted grownups that is intended for a general audience. It includes the children, but the focus is on you, the adult. How you read it will depend on who you are.

If you already know that being gifted is your special blessing/burden in life, or if you have wondered about the strange reactions other people have to things that seem perfectly ordinary to you, you may laugh a lot in the coming pages—recognition laughter. Hopefully, if you see yourself in the mirror of these interviews, you will find practical help in negotiating the maze of this world.

This book is also designed for people who are reacting to, and interacting with, gifted people in their daily lives, either personally or on the job: the construction worker whose girlfriend scares him when she uses big words; the parent with a high school education who is trying to raise a child with a 160 IQ and jokes that the genes must have come from the milkman; the employer who wonders why that bright young worker just quit; the sincere teacher who doesn’t understand that the “pest” in her classroom may be desperately trying to tell her something.

Gifted Grownups began with me, as an outspoken advocate for a gifted program in our senior high school. I was a mature woman, mother of four bright adolescents, a writer, an educator with years of...
experience behind me, and I was frustrated. I could not get others to see what was obvious to me: that some of the students in my advanced placement English class needed special help. Year after year, a significant number of them arrived in my class at the end of a long road fogged with what they called boredom. They complained of inability to concentrate, lack of motivation, feelings of failure, and were obviously wasting a great deal of talent. The decision to write about this problem was made when I realized that many of these young people were managing to achieve reasonable enough grades to keep their parents and other teachers happily unaware that anything could be wrong. Was the damage and waste I saw a temporary phenomenon of adolescence? Would my talented charges “bloom” in college the way all the adults assumed they would?

Specific research on the gifted has concentrated almost exclusively on educational development and how parents and teachers can help children in schools. What could gifted adults tell me about the world that awaited my gifted students? The complexities of adult life in the twenty-first century would certainly stimulate, but would it nurture them? Would society have the benefit of their many abilities?

I began to look around me, asking about what happens when smart kids grow up to be gifted adults. Within a two-week period I had, literally, the same conversation with three very bright people who described lack of stimulation in their work and feelings of isolation and loneliness because, “There is no one to talk to—no one reads the same weird books I do!” Common enough problems to hear from gifted kids, but the ages of these three were 17, 55, and 79! Any book about gifted people could not stop at high school graduation. A smart kid becomes a gifted grownup.

The Questions

The research problem I set myself was based on the following questions: (1) If I were to speak to a broad cross-section of gifted adults, would they say the same things I had been hearing from my
students? (2) If I were to choose those adults according to the informal criteria my own observations had developed for spotting gifted students in the classroom—speed, sensitivity, complexity and sophistication of thought, energy, and humor—would I turn up high IQs, people who were in fact smart kids grown up? (3) If their problems as students remained the same when they became adults, what did that imply about society’s understanding of how it is possible to waste one of our most precious resources? (4) What could be done to change things? To answer these questions, I decided to take the academic knowledge of experts in the fields of human learning and gifted studies and interweave it with the experiences of those I interviewed. Thus, the major portion of this book presents the voices of real people talking about their lives.

The Interviews

In all, I interviewed one hundred gifted grownups from 18 to 90. They were diversified by sex, family background, education, occupation, geographic location, ethnic origin, social class, and race. The first forty were selected by my perception of the personal characteristics I had used to spot gifted students over the years. These were such qualities as mental speed, sophistication of thought processes, sensitivity, drive, and sense of humor. My purpose was to educate the public about ways in which they could tentatively identify gifted persons (including themselves). If my thesis were correct, that such informal identification by friends, parents, lovers, teachers, and employers is both possible and necessary, then statistical measures such as IQ would not be helpful in choosing the interviewees.

Some of the remaining sixty people were recommended by professionals who knew about the project. The interviews for Chapter 8 were arranged by criminal justice professionals. Many came from the interview subjects themselves, who passed me on to a college roommate, a colleague’s husband, or the landlord’s niece. Some contacts were made by mentioning the book on a computer network.
The volunteers were given a set of index cards that contained statements from gifted students, quotes from the literature, and my own observations and questions. These cards covered topics such as self-image, family life, education, jobs, dating, marriages, metaphysical experiences, and obligations to society. The gifted grownups were asked to respond only to those cards that interested them; thus, threatening questions were avoided. Some responded to over one hundred cards (the set contained 104); others only to ten. However, almost all of them talked for a two- to three-hour period.

What emerged from the hundreds of hours in which these grown-up smart kids talked about their lives? I found people who had indeed been part of gifted programs, or who had operated like gifted children—in both positive and negative ways. In all cases, they had some sense of themselves as “different” at an early age. Where IQs were known, they fell in the range appropriate for giftedness. What they reported was consistent with what the research on children says about the problems and pleasures of being smarter than 95% of the population. They revealed that the process of managing a high-powered brain/mind can create difficulties in school, work, and society, and can make finding friends and partners a challenge. However seeing the complex relationships between things and always questing for more stimulation, more information can make for a rich and rewarding life.

The interviewees also made statements that validated my original observation that the problems and pleasures of being gifted do not change, only the context in which they are experienced as one grows older. They confirmed my suspicion that a great many talented people are being underutilized, or even wasted by society. The happy and successful gifted people in this study are proof that such waste can be prevented.

An unexpected bonus for those interviewed was a fresh perspective on their own lives. Many expressed amazement that the cards contained statements that they themselves had made. Others were relieved to find that feelings that had caused worry and unhappiness were explainable in terms of giftedness. That a large number of subjects made negative statements about certain aspects of their lives did not lead
them to the conclusion that being highly intelligent is somehow undesirable. Most seemed to agree with the designation “mixed blessing.”

Although a number of those interviewed could be termed successful, you will not find here any conversations with famous people. For too long society has believed that if you aren't president of General Motors, you aren't gifted. If the estimates of the researchers are correct, and between 3% and 5% of the population is gifted, then we are talking about several million people. What the interviews revealed was that a gifted person of multiple talents may not be as fortunate as a multitalented Bill Bradley (Rhodes scholar, basketball star, senator, author). He or she may be struggling through a series of false starts into careers and college majors, trying desperately to find the one that clicks.

Many of those I interviewed never made it as far as college: They gave up on school because the lower grades were never challenging, they couldn’t afford college, or they didn’t consider college an option. Lee Iaccoca is proof that all of the brains in this society are not concentrated in the middle class. Some of the smartest kids had learned to hate school so much that they could not tolerate its confinement in any form. The lucky ones found something that suited them better and constructed a life with their own talents. Some of the unlucky ones were interviewed in jail.

Implications for Society

Based on what the gifted grownups told me, some of my students would be very successful in using their gifts. They would go off to major universities and emerge four years later to make outstanding contributions to American corporate, artistic, or academic society. However, the interviews also documented that there are large numbers of frustrated gifted adults, who can be located by a person who knows what to look for, and who do not find outlets for their potential. We don’t pay enough attention to trying to teach people who are highly intelligent how to cope with their lives in the adult world. Far
too many of them find their drive and creativity thwarted by persons or establishments who regard them as either silly or threatening.

The implications of what these grown-up smart kids tell us about themselves are threefold. First, it is obvious that many gifted people lack even basic knowledge about their own nature. Counterproductive actions, which waste their gifts in personal relations and employment, can limit the personal happiness they may attain and blunt their possible contributions to the progress of society. Knowledge of how and why gifted persons function as they do can lead to greater utilization of their gifts for the benefit of all.

Second, a gifted person must not be studied as an isolated instance, but as a member of a family, a student in school, a worker within some larger setting, a participator in human relationships, and a citizen in a society.

The need for change is the third implication of what these valuable individuals can tell us. We cannot afford to waste our human resources. We need to forget the stereotypes and learn the true nature of gifted persons. While improving our schools’ ability to nurture feisty minds, we must understand that multitalented people may require many years to discover what they really want to do, and even then will require stimulation and change. Recognition of the special nature of what these citizens have to offer can improve the lives of all workers, of bright women, and of gifted older adults.

While calling attention to the problem of underutilization of gifted people in American society, this book hopes to be a consciousness-raising statement that encourages discussion and dialogue in those areas of society where solutions need to be worked out over many years. Not only families and schools, but government, industry, universities, and the helping professions must be part of this process. If you are a gifted person, think of yourself as a catalyst, one with valuable special properties for the creation of the future.

Marylou Kelly Strezewski
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PART ONE

THE GIFTED

GROWNUPS
Chapter One

What Makes You Gifted?

They told me I was smart, and I cried. I wanted to be sexy, or glamorous!

Alison, 54

I go through life wanting to say to people, “What’s the matter, are you a turtle, can’t you do that faster?”

Nina, 17

I learned the whole job in six weeks, and now I’m bored. I guess I’ll have to go back to school.

Jean, 38

I’ll give anything a try!

Lewis, 68

Who are the gifted? There are millions of them, and they look much like everyone else. Can one spot gifted people just by looking?

Bernice is wearing a deep red knitted dress, and large, dramatic jewelry; her pepper-and-salt hair is carefully styled. She stands with an acquaintance in the lobby of a Philadelphia hotel. A group of football-playing behemoths trundles by and she giggles delightedly, “I can’t wait to get home and tell my husband I saw the Eagles!”

Ian has long hair, a beard, and is wearing a paint-stained shirt, fatigues, and work boots. Leaning back in his chair, he raises a bottle of beer and begins a conversation.
Joel walks down the hall of his former high school. A skinny kid, his loose-jointed, bent-kneed stride and his slightly drooping shoulders don’t indicate energy. His jaw is slack, lips slightly parted, eyes seem vacant.

Faith has natural flaxen hair, cut in the latest fashion. She’s wearing big dangling earrings, a gold choker, a plaid shirt, and jeans. She leans over to the boy next to her and whispers in his ear. They giggle for most of a class.

Jonathan has a beard and glasses; he’s a little bit skinny. He has a heavy-looking backpack as he rides his bike across a college campus at 3 A.M. The computer center is less crowded in the middle of the night, so that is when he works.

If you discount appearances and watch what they do, it is easier to spot them. Bernice is in that hotel lobby because she is making a presentation at a conference. She has a Ph.D., a husband and family, and she heads a department in a major university. Ian begins that conversation about ballet. He’s dressed that way because he is the director of construction projects. He likes his job because he can design the work himself, and he needs new things to design all the time. Joel’s eyes look vacant because he hates his glasses and he doesn’t have his contacts in at the moment. His skinny body belies his wicked tennis game. He thinks a lot, partly about his summer job representing his father’s company on the East Coast. At 19, he is a student at a major university and is in that hallway because he has come back to visit some former teachers. One of Faith’s fascinations in life is clothes. She designs outfits for herself each day and can create any style she desires. She is an accomplished musician, an award-winning writer, a merit scholar, and Harvard, Yale, Brown, Princeton, and Swarthmore all wanted her wide blue-eyed smile to grace their campuses last year. The kid she is giggling with is one of the top sixty young scientists in a large eastern state. At least Jonathan looks the part; he is an honors scholar at his university, and his appearance fits the stereotype. He is expected to graduate in four years with both undergraduate and graduate degrees.

What do all these people have in common? They have a large capability for seeing patterns, a restless drive to enlarge their world and
to know, know, know. I met Bernice, Ian, Joel, Faith, and Jonathan in the course of conducting my long-term study of the gifted. They are helpful in understanding what happens to the “smart kids” in our society when they grow up.

That segment of the population that can be classified as gifted constitutes between 3% and 5% of the population, depending on who is asked. Some would describe a person who has a finely tuned and biologically advanced perception system and a mind that works considerably faster than 95% of the population. Others would say that the gifted are those whose IQ, if measured correctly, would be over 130. One study, conducted over a fifty-year period, claimed that they are healthier than the average person. That study concluded that, given the proper environment in which to grow, they will be taller and stronger, live longer, get divorced less, and have happier marriages than most people. They are also supposed to be more community-minded, more athletic, more notable, and richer than average.

The trouble with that fifty-year study, done by psychologist Lewis Terman of Stanford University, is that it was based on a selection of people who were already rather successful in the California schools of the 1920s, so it naturally reflected some very accomplished individuals. We will discuss Terman’s work in more detail later. Other researchers have reinforced his findings, but Terman was probably the first to dispel, with hard facts, the notion that highly intelligent people are weak, sickly misanthropes of doubtful mental stability. Terman provided a valid explanation for the Hillary Clintons, the Christa McAuliffes. His work makes sense, not only of their amazing multiple accomplishments, but also of their joy in living life on a seemingly different plane.

As Different as Snowflakes

In spite of the volumes of research that exist on characteristics of the gifted, they do not appear in any kind of standard form, any more than any other segment of the human race does. Truly, they are as
different as snowflakes. Based on my observations in the classroom and the general population, I concluded some years ago that the gifted can be grouped into three rough categories. It was a surprise to come upon the same categories in a documented study by psychologist Elizabeth Drews. I called them, informally, strivers, superstars, and independents. Remembering these categories can help to explain some of the confusion that surrounds impressions of the gifted. It can also prevent some of the snap judgments that are made at the mere mention of the word “gifted.” From the previous section, we might categorize Joel as a striver, Jonathan and Ian as independents; Bernice and Faith are certainly superstars.

**Strivers**

In the first category are what have been called the “high-testing teacher-pleasers.” When I was in college, they were known as “grinds.” They work tremendously hard at school or their job. At the behest of corporate, parental, or academic authority, they will meet almost superhuman requirements. Their peers in school or the workplace do not have much influence on them. They have high test scores most of the time; high grades, and high accomplishments. They like structure and direction. One will rarely find creative contributions to science and art here, but certainly the endless taking of pains to do things right. They are often those adults who consider their jobs as their lives.

At 35, Daphne is one of only a handful of female corporate general counsels in the nation. She grew up in a quiet professional household in an unspectacular Washington, D.C., neighborhood. She remembers her then-traditional mother teaching her skills such as cooking, while her brother learned what were considered “masculine” skills, sharing gardening and repair chores with his father. “But the intellectual was never neglected,” she recalls. “My mother loved word-play. We are the only family I know of who kept a dictionary in the kitchen!”

A brilliant college and law school student, Daphne now works long days, evenings, and weekends. I interviewed her on a Saturday
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afternoon in a deserted conference room. It was midsummer. Her high salary has purchased a beach house, which she has too little time to enjoy. Marriage? Daphne smiles and says, “I’m told I terrify men. But then I’m told I terrify everyone. It never occurs to me to try to hide my intelligence.” She is “married” to her job and seems quite content to be so.

**Superstars**

Another broad group encompasses what could be called superstars. They are the one-third who make the rest of us look bad—people expect all gifted people to be like this. They live up to the image created by the famous Terman studies of people who are taller, healthier, handsomer, wealthier, happier, and nicer than most people—because they are! They work hard, but play hard too. Concern for social relationships makes them popular with classmates, coworkers, employees; they often take their values from the concerns of the peer realm. Their high marks and high accomplishments seem to meld into the whole picture of their overall zest for life. They are often the scholar-athletes who seem to have it all. Whatever field they enter, they can be found in the same place: at or near the top.

In contrast to Daphne is Lauren. She too was a brilliant law student and is now occupying a position with a prestigious Wall Street law firm. She too is 35. She looks 25. “Both my parents were Navy. My mother got her degree in music education on the G.I. Bill. A great role model, she taught me that learning is fun. Even in law school, I took random courses in things like languages and painting.”

I interviewed Lauren over drinks in a quiet bar. She seemed equally interested in discussing her prospects for a partnership, backpacking, shopping at Bloomingdale’s, and how much she enjoys the theater in New York. “Marriage? Oh, there are plenty of men to marry, I’m just not interested in being tied down right now. I have a lot of men friends, good buddies, and notwithstanding that I come from Virginia, having a date is not the ultimate—there are other influences!”
So far, we have two groups of people who are a delight to those around them, either because they are fun or because they always have the work finished. What happened to the obnoxious, irritating, know-everything types? They are next, but take a second look before locking them into a negative stereotype. They are often the least understood but the most accomplished.

This third category Elizabeth Drews calls the “creative intellectuals.” To coworkers, fellow students, parents, bosses, and teachers—in fact, to anyone who represents authority—they are more likely to be termed a pain in the neck. They work hard, often brilliantly, at what interests them. They may ignore the rest, regardless of the consequences. Their locus of control comes from deep in their inner value system. They are seldom popular, or leaders, and usually they don’t want to be. In a classroom they often ask, as Drews says, “below the surface, or, depending on how they feel about the teacher, below the belt questions.” They have a zany sense of humor.

They tend not to fit into the neat little slots of our corporate society; consequently, their careers may have a very irregular development indeed. But from their ranks come scientists rather than engineers, inventors rather than manufacturers, artists rather than competent performers. They may drive you absolutely crazy if you fail to understand their way of relating to the world. Having one in the family, as either child or spouse, will guarantee that no one will be bored!

Mark’s well-built muscular body says “football,” as does his athletic walk. The clothes say “Jock” right down to the Docksiders. The handsome face makes girls sigh, “He’s so quiet.” Mark uses his well-developed arm muscles for tennis, golf, karate, bowling, sailing (none of it on a school team) and lugging around thick physics books.

“Even when I was little, I knew I was hurting my parents, but I could do my sister’s third-grade math homework in my head. I simply refused to do my first-grade homework for ‘those people’ (teachers) who couldn’t understand that I already knew it. From kindergarten on, my teachers couldn’t stand me, and they let me know it. I must
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have driven them crazy with questions! I just assumed that school was supposed to be a miserable place.

“In eighth-grade math I’d daydream and really not know what was going on, so I’d make up my own way to do a problem as I walked up to the board. The teacher would announce sarcastically (because my crazy methods sometimes worked), ‘Mark will now show us how to do this problem.’ That year I tested off the scale in math achievements. I also failed math. If anybody bothered me, I hit them. I think I expressed myself physically because no one would let me express myself intellectually.”

Mark did not go to a big-name school; his grades were barely passing in some courses. The minor college that accepted him provided no challenge. Yet, he could discuss Einstein, Mozart, and T. S. Eliot with the aplomb of a college professor. (After a decade of struggle, he is presently a Ph.D. candidate in astrophysics.)

Here we also find candidates for a fourth category, one we don’t like to think about. Those who drop out of organized society do so in a variety of ways. There is the 155 IQ who is washing dishes and going nowhere. And always, because this is the way it is with people who have fast and feisty minds, there is the 155 IQ who is washing dishes because it frees his mind to concentrate on becoming a professional chess player. Some of those who drop out become stock clerks; some become criminals; some commit suicide. In a later chapter, we will discuss how one arrives at the ultimate waste of the best and the brightest.

Gifted Behaviors

Is it possible for an ordinary observer to come to a tentative conclusion about gifted people? Yes. There are specific ways in which they behave, both as adults and as children. The first people interviewed for this book were selected by using a list of indicators that are very useful for spotting gifted people almost anywhere. This list could be
compressed into traits like energy, curiosity, speed, concentration, sensitivity, sophistication of thinking, persistence, humor, and something about their eyes. Don’t laugh. The last item showed up in interview after interview in response to the question of how to spot another gifted grownup. It was often prefaced by “I know this sounds odd, but . . .”

Might you be one of them? Think back into your own childhood as well as your present life for clues. If the following descriptions do not fit you, perhaps there is a person in your life, either at home or at work, who irritates, delights, puzzles, or otherwise intrigues you. You may be looking at a gifted grownup. It could be your boss or the lowest-ranking shipping clerk; a friend, an in-law, your spouse, or your own child. If it turns out that you find these descriptions fitting your child, look again at yourself. Those genes had to come from somewhere! Is giftedness something you inherit? Partly, but more about that later. Let us look more closely at how one can identify the gifted by their behavior.

Curiosity and Energy

Linda P. Moore, in a wonderfully wise and funny book called Does This Mean My Kid’s a Genius?, asks if there is anyone around in your life who is “more energetic, more inquisitive, quicker than most and a bit of a mystery.” For example, an ordinary child comes upon a colony of ants. She may ask questions and will probably accept the answers of an adult willing to give them, watch the ants with fascination for a while, and go on to something else. The smart kid will probably watch for a longer time; she will certainly ask more questions, especially those beginning with “Why?” or “What if?” A 7-year-old may ask questions that the adult can’t answer. If the adult is wise, this will lead to a trip to the library for a book on ants, because the questions may go on for days! And don’t look now, but there may be an ant farm in the future.

Or look at the college student who cuts his finger, seriously, and has never had a wound of any consequence before. The cut and the stitches will be examined, speculated about, and checked daily with a
magnifying glass. It may be only a cut finger to anyone else, but to a gifted person it’s a whole new area to be curious and learn about.

Some people might regard finding a huge dead sea turtle on the beach as horrible; this particular 50-year-old regarded it as interesting. Careful visual observation was done, along with lots of speculation as to why it was so far north. Did it come ashore to lay eggs or to die, and do the barnacles on its body indicate age? She took pictures. She got a book on sea turtles from the library and sent the author a note and a picture because she thought it might interest him.

Discovering new philosophical concepts is always fun for an active mind. A retired executive in her seventies encountered Thoreau’s *Walden* in a used book store. “How could I have missed this wonderful man?” she demanded. Then she went about cleverly integrating his ideas into all kinds of conversations and situations, having a delightful time for days. Fortunately, she has an understanding family.

Besides energy and curiosity, it seems, about everything, many researchers agree that gifted grownups seem to be able to retain large amounts of information and to concentrate for long periods of time. Trying to get the attention of a completely absorbed gifted person can be a challenge. Whether it’s a 10-year-old studying the stats on her favorite team or a 40-year-old lost in a laboratory experiment, they can be very good at actually shutting out the world around them.

Margo reports, “When my mathematician husband is bored at parties, he sits quietly in a corner and does equations in his head. Only I know that he is no longer in the room. I can tell by his eyes and the contented look on his face.”

*Speed*

Seeing relationships and patterns, putting very complex ideas together, and doing it faster than others are special talents of the gifted. I remember a 6-year-old who would sit, feet swinging, putting together the pieces of an adult-level jigsaw puzzle almost as fast as her little fingers could pick them up, all the while singing “The Kookaburra Song” over and over.
In work situations, it is easy to spot the gifted adult when a new project or a new piece of equipment is introduced or a new problem arises. It may be regarded by fellow workers as marvelous or maddening, but the gifted person is the one who grasps the idea immediately or can already operate the equipment while everyone else is still stumbling around—like the secretary who comments “They sent me to school for three days to learn how to use the word processor. I understood it all on the first day. On the third day, I found a flaw in the program. I wrote the software company a letter; I thought they’d want to know.”

Dorothy Sisk of the University of South Florida points out some additional elements of the behavior of gifted grownups. They have a strong tendency to be nonconformist and to think independently. They may have a reputation among peers for having wild and silly ideas or ideas that are off the beaten track. However, a prominent trait is a considerable sensitivity to both emotions and problems.

*Sensitivity*

Researchers have consistently reported that highly intelligent people exhibit unusually high ideals and values. Gifted people often report being criticized for overreacting to beauty in nature or art, to frightening or horrifying news events, or to moral wrongs in society.

Very young smart kids often worry about evil or world peace before they actually have enough vocabulary to discuss it. One woman who works with underachievers of all ages describes the long series of talks that can be necessary to find out what is troubling such a child. In these long talks, she feeds them, little by little, the vocabulary they need to tell her what is bothering them.

Sometimes, a gifted person finds that the demands of a moral imperative outweigh all practical considerations. A high school student is offended by the principle behind a classroom regulation and, in spite of any efforts by the teacher or other authority figures, chooses to be punished rather than conform. Later on, this sensitivity to moral considerations can lead to dramatic changes in lifestyle or dramatic resignations from jobs.
In the past, this heightened sensitivity was associated with mental illness. We carry the image of the mad genius in our minds as well as in our late-night movies, despite the fact that research has shown the rate of psychopathology to be about the same for the eminent as it is for the general population.

**Heightened Perception**

A different and more helpful explanation for the supersensitivity observed in many highly intelligent people was developed by the late Polish psychiatrist and psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski, whose brilliant work is slowly becoming known in America. His work has shown that they have, in fact, more highly developed perception systems in all areas. For this phenomenon, Dabrowski coined the term “overexcitability” (OE), and divided these OE’s into five areas of functioning:

1. Psychomotor OE—includes physical movement and the seemingly endless energy that characterizes many of the gifted.
2. Sensual OE—includes an extra measure of delight in the use of all the senses and greater sensitivity to touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight.
3. Intellectual OE—the quality most noticed, and a good example of confusing the part with the whole. Most people associate high intelligence with the probing questions, the insatiable curiosity, the endless learning seen in gifted people of all ages.
4. Imaginational OE—can be seen in the free play of imagination, in daydreaming, and in the important skill of visualizing.
5. Emotional OE—can manifest itself in anxieties or joys, with extreme highs and extreme lows, both characteristic of those of high intelligence.

American psychologist Michael Peichowski declares that the heightened development of these perception channels can cause conflict and tension in gifted persons, but that it also intensifies, even
enriches, that person’s mental and emotional development. Thus, this heightened sensitivity and the problems it sometimes engenders are not to be considered neuroses to be cured, but rather stages through which the gifted person must be helped to pass as he or she realizes increasing potential as a human being.

Heightened sensitivity sometimes manifests itself in what appears to be very insensitive behavior. As the reader will observe in subsequent chapters, life as a gifted person can teach you, very forcefully, to protect yourself at all times. Consider how the overexcitability described in the previous paragraphs might be received by classmates, teachers, fellow workers, bosses, or even in-laws, and the need for protection becomes understandable.

Sophistication and Humor

Joseph Renzulli and T. Hartman are two educators who have developed a scale for rating students’ behavior to spot gifted children in schools. Again, selected items may call up an image of someone you know or remind you of how it is in your own life. They look for kids who “see more” in a story or film, ones who “read a lot” and are “easily bored with routine tasks.”

People who perceive humor in situations that do not appear humorous to others may be more attuned to the incongruities in life. Many of the gifted I interviewed use this perception to find or create humor. Even young gifted children can be found indulging in the making of sophisticated puns; by high school age, they are often adept at triple puns. Some studies report that humor seemed to be the chief element setting creative gifted people apart from others. I once watched two highly gifted teenagers exchange jokes at the beach by writing equations in the sand. One interviewee defined gifted as “people who laugh at the same things I do.”

With all these advantages, how could gifted people have any problems? How could they possibly expect any special treatment? How could they dare request any special understanding of or compassion for their unique needs? And, really, shouldn’t they expect to be resented?
Being Different

Human nature being what it is, being different can cause some type of problems. Being healthy is no crime, but being taller and stronger than your age-mates in elementary school does not always make you popular; sometimes, it just makes you a good target or an irresistible challenge. The interviews confirmed that gifted people work faster, question more persistently, make more connections, think more deeply, annoy more people, and have greater highs and lows than the average person. The interviews also revealed that they carry around a great deal of hidden anger about the way they are treated. Their happier marriages may be the result of a long and painful struggle to find someone compatible enough to be able to marry. Being rich or notable is often the result of an energy level that drives the individual, whether he or she likes it or not. There is no single gifted type, and the misunderstanding of that fact is one of the biggest burdens a gifted adult has to carry.

A New and Expanding Definition

At this point, the reader may feel that we have not definitively answered the question of who the gifted are and how we can distinguish them from the general population. Do we really know? Paul Torrance of the University of Georgia explains that we are dealing with an expanded definition and developing the research to justify it. For instance, we now know that whatever else it may be, IQ is not the full measure of giftedness.

The IQ test and the concept of identifying as gifted anyone whose IQ is above a certain number—even the concept of intelligence itself—have undergone many changes in the twentieth century. Few of those changes have reached the general public. Many educators continue to view intelligence in a very narrow way. Yet, reducing the whole spectrum of what is now known about human intelligence to a single round number has great potential for damaging lives.
At the end of a pleasant interview, Nina, a frustrated high school senior, says, “It was so refreshing not to be asked about numbers! I liked being able to talk about other things. I could tell you my IQ, but I am not my numbers—my SATs and all that stuff. There is more to me than that!” The IQ, in spite of almost a century of research, is often the sole criterion used to designate gifted children in our schools.

Many children and adults reject, even fear, being labeled gifted. Psychologist Mary Racamora says that the emphasis on IQ (fearing that you are your numbers?) may be part of the cause. Once it is explained that giftedness involves a broad personality profile, she says, many of her clients lose their resistance and are willing to accept this identification.

If you have been a victim of the tyranny of the IQ, these pages are for you. If up to now you have sincerely believed that people are their numbers, perhaps we can change your mind about those you interact with, perhaps even about yourself. It is true that the differences between gifted persons and the rest of the population can be, to some degree, measured by certain kinds of tests of certain kinds of performance. The excessive use of qualifiers in the previous statement is deliberate. We now proceed to open the Pandora’s box of tests and measurements, chief among them the IQ test.

*The Origins of Testing*

“Intelligence is a concept created by Western culture that stresses its important values,” according to Joseph Khatena in *Readings in Gifted and Talented Education*. He explains that, in our culture, we test intelligence by evaluating how quickly people can solve relatively unimportant problems without making errors. In another culture, according to Khatena, intelligence might be measured by seeing how well people can solve important problems, allowing for errors, and with no time limit. When an IQ test is administered, whether to an individual or a group, what is being tested? The debate over what is being measured continues to the present, with one
additional concept gaining wider acceptance: Intelligence, whatever it is, is not the whole scope of giftedness.

One of the earliest ideas about intelligence—and, unfortunately, one of the hardest to discredit—has been the concept of fixed intelligence: You are born with it. Either you have it or you don’t. It never changes. You can never lose it. Thus the educational cliché, “Gifted kids can take care of themselves.” With this concept still firmly entrenched in the public mind, it is easy to see how many of the resentments experienced by gifted people arise. If each of us is born with a certain unalterable capacity, then it follows logically that (a) people might resent those who did well in the genetic lottery; (b) parents of highly intelligent children could smugly assume future success for their offspring; (c) intelligence would manifest itself, by itself, no matter what the schools did or did not do; and (d) taxpayers would resent paying for programs to help people who are automatically assured of the best of life’s goodies anyway. That is not the way the reality works.

**Alfred Binet**

Although the actual term “intelligence quotient” was coined in 1912 by William Stern (who later decried the pernicious influence of his invention), the story begins with French psychologist Alfred Binet. Around the turn of the century, Binet was asked by the French government to develop a test that would sort out the slower children as they entered school so that they could be helped. What Binet actually did was develop a series of real-world tasks involving verbal analogies, abstractions, problem solving, and causal relationships at the levels on which children of various ages were known to be able to operate. Based on the task a particular child could do, he or she was assigned a “mental age.”

The intelligence quotient (IQ) expresses the relationship between mental age and chronological age. If your IQ is 100, it means that your mental age and your chronological age are just about the same. “Normal” range is usually conceived to be 1 standard deviation (15
points) on either side of the central figure. From these two points, “average” intelligence begins to shade into above average and below average. At about 130, so the wisdom goes, one begins to enter the category of what is currently called gifted. Shading downward toward 70, mental retardation appears. Roughly, that is the concept underlying the IQ test.

Binet’s test gave us the first straightforward method for identifying those with high ability in certain areas. It is worth noting that Binet himself did not put much faith in the tests, because they were subject to error, and he himself did not believe in the concept of fixed intelligence. How ironic that, based on the test that bears his name, so many others have continued to do so!

**Terman and the Termites**

In 1916, Binet’s tests were revised by Lewis Terman, working at Stanford University, for use with American children. Thus, they came to be known as the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, and the testing industry was born!

Terman wanted to study gifted children. He didn’t believe in the stereotype of the skinny, sickly, semi-crazy prodigy or the then conventional wisdom of “early ripe, early rot.” He designed one of the most ambitious longitudinal studies ever done; it is still being completed. Starting in 1921, when Terman received a large grant from the Commonwealth Fund of New York City, a team of researchers fanned out over California to find suitable subjects. They chose 1,528 subjects, based on the new Stanford-Binet test. Terman and his associates measured every conceivable facet of their lives, from the size of their heads to the number of books in their homes. They collected extensive anecdotal records on each subject from parents and teachers.

In discussing his subjects, whom he called “high-testing children,” Terman noted that he found them to be “appreciably superior in physique, health, social adjustment; markedly superior in moral attitudes . . . vastly superior in school subjects . . . 2 grades, sometimes 3
or 4 [above average].” As the “Termites” moved through various stages of life, new studies were done. Ninety-eight percent of Terman’s “geniuses” have continued to cooperate with the study. The result is a mountain of data, only now being completely assessed via computerization, and five volumes, *Genetic Studies of Genius*, which are considered classics in psychological research.

Although their names have never been revealed, they are an impressive group of people. They have published numerous books and articles, including fiction and nonfiction. They hold 150 patents. Seventy-eight are Ph.D.s; 48 are physicians; 85 are lawyers; 74 are involved in university teaching; 47 are listed in American Men of Science. However, though 150 are engineers doing applied research, only 51 have done basic research. The study has not produced any Nobel Prize winners, no major poets, artists, or musicians. In spite of many criticisms which have been leveled at both Terman’s professional behavior and his work in recent years, Terman dispelled forever the myth of the freaky genius and showed us that the “Terman gifted” were healthier, stronger, handsomer, smarter, more educated, more civic-minded, more physically active in later years, more happily married—just about more everything! Terman’s subjects seem to fit the category of superstars, described earlier.

**The Age of Tests**

By the 1930s and ’40s, we believed we could measure almost anything. The masses of men who had to be processed through the Armed Forces in World War II provided a testing ground for a wide variety of human traits. During those decades, the idea of the Terman gifted held sway among most educators, and a whole series of erroneous concepts became firmly entrenched in the public mind. Some of them are still there.

IQ tests were good predictors of school achievement. They gave a nice, definite number with which to work; even if there were doubts about the accuracy of the score, a second test could always be given.
Notice, though, that the continued success of this idea depends on the two concepts mentioned earlier: that IQ never changes and that an IQ test really measures giftedness in all its aspects. As researchers worked within these assumptions, they began to find evidence that neither concept was necessarily true. Initially, the data that piled up were either denigrated or ignored. Then work by major researchers began to change the way intelligence was viewed.

The 1950s and Beyond

Piaget, a Swiss psychologist who initially gathered data by watching his own children, viewed intelligence as the ability to make adaptive and integrative choices. As the growing child's world is enlarged, he interacts with and comes to understand ever more sophisticated data and makes choices about responses. Although this growth is continuous, it takes place in recognizable stages. According to Piaget, a child's mental activity is dominated first by overt actions (0–2 years), then perceptions (2–7), then intellectual operations (7–11), and finally by theoretical or abstract thinking (11–15). Thus, “development” became a legitimate word to use in connection with intelligence.

Later, in the United States, J. P. Guilford’s study of the nature of intelligence produced the Structure of Intellect concept (SOI), which postulates a series of intelligences. He defines intelligence as “a collection of abilities for processing information of different kinds in various ways.” He was able to show that there are cognitive processes that conventional tests did not measure, such as problem solving and divergent thinking.

Educators Jacob Getzels and Philip Jackson studied 500 adolescents and discovered that those designated creative and those designated high-IQ had the same academic achievement—even though they tested as much as 23 points apart on an IQ test. They concluded that a single number was too restrictive, that it could blind us to other forms of excellence, especially creativity.

Paul Torrance, author of *Education and Creativity*, has moved this idea forward with his work in developing methods of assessing creativity. He agrees that if we establish a single measure of giftedness,
we will eliminate many extremely gifted individuals who have different areas of ability.

Educator Benjamin Bloom contributed a taxonomy of levels of the thinking process which is widely used in the development of curriculum today. His studies revealed that only 80% of the IQ is developed by age 6, doing further damage to the idea of a fixed and unchanging IQ. Other research documented the growth in IQ as lifelong, as long as proper stimulation takes place.

Perhaps the most exhaustive work in widening our concept of intelligence has been done by Harvard’s Howard Gardner, who has postulated a series of seven “intelligences.” Spatial intelligence involves the ability to operate upon what we perceive in the visual world, and is seen in artists, sculptors, and architects, for example. In actors, dancers, and athletes, we see the flowering of bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, which is the ability to use one’s body in skilled ways both for goal-directed and expressive purposes. Grouped with these two as object-related, we find logical-mathematical intelligence, which is first shown in the forming of relationships among objects and develops into the forming of abstract relations among patterns of actions. Gardner groups linguistic and musical intelligences in a category called object-free. Linguistic intelligence involves the ability to both make and experience language, as exemplified in poets. Musical intelligence involves sensitivity to musical tones and phrases as well as the ability to know how these fit together in patterns and forms, as seen in composers and performers. Finally, Gardner presents two personal intelligences, internal and external. The former involves the ability to access one’s own inner feeling life. We see this in the wise elder who can use this inner knowledge to help the community. Political and religious leaders manifest the external intelligence which allows them to deal skillfully with others by sensing their needs and desires. It is obvious that these abilities could not be assessed by a simple IQ test.

So we can see that, in contrast to the original idea of equating high IQ with giftedness, contemporary psychologists and educators are saying what sensitive parents and teachers have always known. Barbara Clark of the University of California calls reliance on the IQ as a sole criterion for giftedness “unnecessarily damaging.” She adds,
“Unfortunately many people, including too many educators, believe that the IQ score gives an accurate representation of a person’s capacity. It does not.”

As new concepts of intelligence develop, the challenge to measure them increases. In comparison to the task of measuring a quality as elusive as creativity, the IQ test seems a relatively simple instrument. Educator Paul Torrance concludes, “We do not know the end of the complexity of the human mind and personality . . . it is high time we began developing the strategies, methods and materials that have built into them an acceptance of this complexity.” Nina was right: You are not your numbers.

Signs of Giftedness

Since the whole point of this book is to encourage greater recognition of the gifted grownups among us, how might you go about trying to spot the gifted adults in your world? Try the following checklist.

You might be looking at a gifted adult if you encounter a person who:

• Does things faster than anyone else. “I saw the whole concept in ten minutes—it took the company president two weeks!”
• Has more energy. “I hit the floor running every morning—it drives my husband crazy!”
• Has an endless curiosity for new things. “My husband bought me a telescope for my birthday. Now I have a whole new field to explore!”
• Uses up jobs. “I learned the whole job in six weeks and now I’m bored. I guess I’ll have to go back to school; I need more training before they will allow me to do the interesting things.”
• Is sensitive both to beauty and to pain. “I can’t watch the news; the pain is too much for me.”
• Has genuine empathy and sensitive perception. “People seem to know that I am a good person to talk to, even when they first meet me; I should have been a psychiatrist.”
What Makes You Gifted? 23

• Is not afraid to be regarded as an oddball or a weird person. “Existence is filled with opportunities... departing from tradition may invite stress but [I am] willing to accept a certain amount of stress in the belief that a new order will be created.”

• Is playful. “You are led through your lifetime by the inner learning creature, the playful spiritual being who is your real self.” (One suspects that Jonathan Livingston Seagull, as well as Richard Bach, is a gifted being.)

• Has a very highly developed moral sense. “When I believe that something is wrong, I must oppose it, no matter what.”

• Has more insight and intuition than others. “Some people might want to call it psychic. To me, it’s just what I do, and it is perfectly natural.”

• Expresses a feeling of being out of sync with the rest of the world. “Sometimes I think I must have come from another planet!”

• Sees patterns and analogies and can do abstract thinking.

• May not have scored above 130 on an IQ test. May have scored above 130 on an IQ test.

• Just seems more complicated than other people. This complex human being may be at once “more naive and more knowledgeable, being at home equally to primitive symbolism and rigorous logic. He or she is both more primitive and more cultured, more destructive and more constructive, occasionally crazier, and yet adamantly saner than the average person.”

That was a rather elaborate portrait. Did you recognize anyone? Perhaps yourself?

In this chapter, we have shown how to identify gifted grownups by observing the differences in their behavior. We have also considered the origins of some of the long-held beliefs that have limited our perceptions of gifted people. Now that there is some general agreement among psychologists and educators about the ways gifted persons are different from the general population, it is disheartening to discover so much lack of understanding in the general public, and in gifted people themselves. I often hear people say, “I know someone who acts that way, but she isn’t gifted.” Look again. If the person consistently
exhibits gifted behavior, no matter how unlikely it may seem, give serious consideration to revising your estimate of that person’s capability (especially if you are looking in the mirror). If that person is your student, your employee, or your child, look many times. You may be very surprised at what begins to dawn on you.

One more important concept should be noted. It is essential to remember that gifted persons are found at all levels of society. It is true that larger concentrations of gifted persons can be found where income is above average, but that is mostly because that is where giftedness has had the best chance to be recognized and to flourish. In different geographic areas, in a wide variety of occupations, at all ages and economic levels, I discovered gifted people. In the inner cities, in small towns, on isolated farms, in Native American and other culturally diverse communities, among our newest immigrants, among our disabled adults—the drive, the speed, the sophistication, the sensitivity can be found by anyone who knows how to look. Once we are armed with knowledge about the characteristics of gifted people, it would seem to be a simple task to recognize them, deal with their needs, and allow their gifts to enrich their lives and ours. We will spend the remainder of this book demonstrating that it is not simple at all.