IDENTITY: THE GIFTED CHILD’S MAJOR PROBLEM

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Fantasy, whether written by young children or by mature and gifted story tellers, frequently distills the truth more powerfully than our most sophisticated researchers and our fastest and most complex computers. Lloyd Alexander (1967) in his fantasy, Taran Wanderer, has accomplished just such a feat regarding the problem of the gifted child’s search for his identity. In this delightful fantasy, Taran, the hero, goes forth to come to grips with a merciless opponent, the truth about himself, and to reshape “his life out of his own inner resources.”

The dreadful importance of finding one’s identity is reflected in a speech Taran made when King Smoit offered to make Taran his son and turn his kingdom over to him. Lloyd Alexander reports Taran’s speech as follows:

“It is in my heart to learn the truth about myself. I will not stop short of it. Were I to do so, who I am would forever be unknown and through all my life I would feel a part of me lacking” (p. 85).

King Smoit was sad and regretful but even he recognized the truth that Taran spoke. After a moment he clapped Taran heartily on the back and cried:

“My breath, blood, and beard! You’ve a will to chase the wild goose, will-o’-the wisp, or whatever it may be; and I’ll say no more to keep you from it. Seek it out, lad! Whether or not you find it, come back and Cadiffor will welcome you. But hasten…” (p. 85).

The real sadness is felt by those of us who are aware of the enormous loss of human resources among gifted children who never find the courage even to set out on the search for their identity, who are mercilessly deterred by parents and teachers from setting out on the search, or who lose their way and stop short of the truth about their identity. It is impossible to estimate the extent of this loss of resources. Herbert Otto (1966) in his book, Explorations in Human Potentialities, estimates that the healthy person operates at only about 10 or 15 percent of his potential. It would perhaps be conservative to estimate that the gifted person who stops short in the search for his identity operates at only about one to five percent of his potential.

Lloyd Alexander’s Taran gives one picture of the gifted child struggling with the decision as to whether to set out on the search for his identity. The orchards were white with fragrant blossoms. The newly planted fields were light as green mist. These sights and scents gave Taran no joy. His
world was empty. He carried out his tasks of weeding, cultivating, and tending the white pig as carefully as ever, but he went about his tasks distractedly. His supervisor tried to help him “snap out” of this state by offering to teach him “the high secrets of planting turnips, raising cabbage, or whatever Taran might want to know.” Taran wanted to know who he was and he knew that his supervisor could not tell him.

Three basic response patterns seem to characterize the ways by which gifted children resolve the search for their identity — conformity, rebellion, and creative individuality. In addition, there are those who stop short in the search. At best, they become “self-made men” miserable and lacking in identity. More frequently, however, they become delinquent, alcoholic, or drug addicts; commit suicide; or go insane. Messer (1970) explains that the self-made man lacks a feeling of identity and sense of self-worth because he has not had the experience of identifying with parents, peers, and social acquaintances. A child’s first identity is as a physical self. As an infant he is completely dependent upon some maternal figure. From this complete dependence he gradually develops an identity as a person who can do things for himself. The child who has inadequate mothering and fathering generally has trouble envisioning himself as a worthwhile person. As a consequence, he often attempts to make up for his feeling of worthlessness by constantly “proving” his importance.

I would like to examine these patterns as they are illustrated by the stories of a group of gifted young people to whom I administered the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (1966) in 1959. They were then enrolled in grades 7 through 12 in a private, midwestern high school. Now these young people are between the ages of 25 and 30 and have already compiled an amazing record of creative achievement. The 1971 follow-up data tell an exciting story, fully as exciting as the story of Taran Wanderer. They have indeed done a great deal of wandering and most of the more creative ones are still wandering. In fact, the more creative ones differ from their less creative classmates in that they have attended a larger number of different colleges, have held a larger number of different kinds of jobs, more frequently have studied or worked in foreign countries, and more frequently intend moving into new fields even now.

I have selected a few of the stories of these young people as they stand in 1971 to illustrate the different patterns of searching for identity.

WINIFRED

First, let us examine the story of Winifred who was in the ninth grade in 1959. She has now returned to college after attending two other colleges, two music schools in Germany, two music schools in France, and one music school in the United States; working as a cellist in a variety of jobs in opera, churches, and recording studios; and being treated in a psychiatric hospital. The only creative achievements she lists is a large number of unpublished poems, songs, and compositions. She describes her most creative achievements as follows:

1. Attempting to get some control of my mind and emotions by using
my intellect (strength of mind, will, trying to conquer despair, anger, etc.)

2. Starting to write again (recently) after much suppression (including some of my high school teachers); also writing some short musical compositions.

3. Coming out — through my effort (and others) being able to open my mouth again which was clamped somewhere in grade school — the time at which I first experienced depression or mental illness, if you like.

In response to the question, "If you had the necessary talent, training, and opportunity, what sort of work would you most like to do in the future?" she wrote:

"Because of my past I would like very much to be a psychiatrist. But my ambition in music (performance in the past and preferring composition at this point) are equally high."

Here we have a young woman who apparently tried to conform — keep her mouth clamped shut — but she could not. Now, after a great deal of wandering in search of herself in Germany, France, Colorado, Indiana, and Minnesota, she feels that at last she is about to break out of the cocoon that seemed to form back in grade school. She may now be close to a solution of that problem Thomas Mann described as follows:

"There is at bottom only one problem in the world, and this is its name. How does one break through? How does one get into the open? How does one burst the cocoon and become a butterfly?"

— Thomas Mann, _Doktor Faustus_

We cannot say for sure whether Winifred will now be able to break through and become a butterfly. She feels, however, that she has "come out" and this is a good sign!

MAX

Max was in the ninth grade in 1959 and is at present a merchant seaman. He completed four quarters of college work and then dropped out and has since worked in a machine factory, as a janitor, as a farm worker, as an astrologer, and as a merchant seaman. In response to the question about fellowships and awards he wrote:

"None. I graduated from high school late, and only after some ingratiating behavior and ass-kissing." He now prides himself on working as little as possible and checked no creative achievements. He explained that he has "attempted to resist the overwhelming tides of bull that sweep over America daily and has tried to maintain a human identity in spite of educators, politicians, cops, businessmen, soldiers, and other zombies."

He rates his three most creative achievements since high school
graduation as follows:

1. Fantasies while masturbating
2. Lies told to cops to stay out of jail
3. My mental problems which deferred me from the army.

In response to the questions about his aspirations, he wrote:

"I would like to be a savage."

Concerning the question asking him if he would like to receive a copy of the report of the study, he wrote:

"No, you keep your dreams; I'll keep mine. I would be interested in what sort of creative career my test scores predicted for me. I never liked any of my classmates, save two or three. The rest impressed me as being well-socialized robots whose achievements will always be the result of good programming instead of creative ability."

Max is a wanderer but it is not clear how seriously he has become in the search for his identity. His responses give us the feeling that he has given up hope and may continue to use his creativity mainly to "live on the outside and still get by."

LANE

Lane was in the tenth grade in 1959 and expects to be granted the Ph.D. degree in sociology at a major university with high prestige in June 1971. He did his undergraduate work at another of the most prestigious universities in the United States. His wife is a student in Chinese History. Throughout his undergraduate years he held scholarships and during his graduate work he has also been supported by fellowships and teaching assistantships. Following his completion of the M.A. degree he was employed in a third major prestigious university in the Division of Human Ecology and in a fourth such university in a research program on Technology and Society. He has published a book, wrote another book-length work not yet published, published articles in professional journals, received a research grant, presented scholarly papers at professional meetings, and has been a frequent initiator of ideas for modifying policies and practices in the organizations in which he has worked.

He described his three most creative achievements as follows:

1. I successfully organized a peace movement as an undergraduate (1964-66) which culminated in the takeover of four university buildings, the ouster of a reactionary president of the university, and the removal of the selective service commission from the campus. In addition, the permanent groundwork for an effective peace movement at my college was laid. (Code that one!)

2. I helped organize the peace movement at ________ in the early years

3. I am now organizing junior faculty and graduate students into a
   Student Union.

In response to the question about future aspirations, he wrote one
word, "Organize!"

If this young "boat rocker" and "organizing genius" succeeds in getting
his Ph.D. in June, 1971, after engaging in so much revolutionary activity,
we can credit him with another unusual creative achievement.

I might add that although Lane had one of the highest creativity scores
in his class, his Lorge-Thorndike Intelligence test total IQ was only 111
(Verbal, 120; Performance, 101). Most of his achievement test scores,
however, were in the upper one percent on national norms.

Although Lane is something of a rebel, he apparently has enough sense
of identity to be free to conform or nonconform in terms of what he sees
as right, just, aesthetic, or humane. He is able to protest without sacrificing
traditional kinds of achievements and professional growth. In Thomas
Mann's terms, he has certainly broken through - whether as a butterfly,
some might dispute.

MERRY

Merry was in the ninth grade in 1959 at which time she attained high
creativity scores, a Stanford-Binet IQ of 116, a Lorge-Thorndike Verbal IQ
of 132, and scores on the Iowa Tests of Educational Development
averaging in the upper five percent on national norms. She lists her present
occupation as "gypsy, collecting unemployment." While still in high
school, she took four university courses including a graduate course in
anthropology because she was bored and restless in her high school
courses. She was offered scholarships in three of the country's most
prestigious colleges and chose one on the West Coast.

Merry reports that she has worked in a varied and unusual array of jobs
to earn money for college and to tide herself over in "hard times." These
have included jobs as: public relations representative, legal secretary, mail
sorter, office manager, leather and suede work, rock music, promoting a
concert, baby sitter, congressional campaign office worker, cashier, dope
dealer, commune cook, book store carpenter, and general mother. Mostly,
however, she has made films. At the time she completed the follow-up
questionnaire, she was on her way to Central America to make a film. She
has completed one year of graduate work in history and indicates that she
may return to pursue a degree in humanities in the fall of 1971.

She checked creative achievements in the areas of publication of poetry
and art work, unpublished writings including a book, several scientific
papers, original dances, founding a business organization, awards for
leadership, creative advertising, and creative educational materials. She
commented that "graduate school and related recognition is not creative
but rewards toil and persistence. I’ve gotten recognition for academic type achievements but they don’t make me feel at all creative.” She reports that she writes a great deal and does a variety of art and craft work, mostly for self-expression. She rates her three most creative achievements as follows:

1. One for sure was making a short (20 minute) 16 mm. black and white film on a grant. I am leaving for Central America in two weeks and plan to film mushroom ceremonies in color. I love to work in film and photography but am often limited by money.

2. I am very pleased with a lot of my designs and their execution for clothes in leather and suede, as well as with my macramé.

3. I helped found a color organ company and a Whole Earth Bookstore — the latter of which is presently thriving and a nice asset to the community.

As her future aspiration she would like to teach in some sort of free school and work in film or photo journalism.

This young woman has wandered about as much as Taran Wanderer and one feels that she may be getting close to the resolution of her identity problem.

BETH

Beth was senior in 1959 at which time she was identified as multiple gifted — highest creativity score of the girls in her class, IQ’s on both the Lorge-Thorndike and Stanford-Binet, 134; and most of her achievement test scores at the 99th percentile on national norms. She completed both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees at top rated universities and has now completed the course work for the Ph.D. at her under-graduate university.

Her creative achievements have been in the field of writing. In addition to publishing her own little magazine, she has published several poems and stories, directed and produced numerous plays, created numerous original dances and choreography, created and produced numerous radio and television programs, and received several literary awards or prizes for creative writing.

She rates her three most creative achievements as follows:

1. Writing a series of scripts for “Star Trek” and the results thereof (writing and editing a souvenir newsletter for the show, rewriting my scripts as Star Trek short stories and rewriting some of them as straight science fiction which I am at present trying to sell to the professional magazines.

2. Getting two of my poems accepted by the Saturday Review after five years of submitting poems there and elsewhere — some of them have been accepted by other magazines.
3. A paper on the Gothic novel done for an independent reading course I set up for myself because I had heard that the Gothics influenced 19th Century literature and I want to do my dissertation on 19th century fantasy. This is, so far, the only academic paper I have done of any real worth.

Regarding her future aspirations, she writes as follows:

"Write science fiction, children's fantasy, detective stories (not poetry -- there is no conceivable way of getting money out of it, except occasional grants late in one's career. I write poetry because I have to and I 'work at' it but don't consider it 'work'. And not television scripts because working for 'Star Trek' made me aware of the fact that a writer in TV has no creative control. I don't seriously expect ever to earn my living writing, but I do expect to supplement what I will earn as a teacher by writing."

From reading Beth's comments one gets the feeling that for some time she has been pretty close to finding her identity. Her difficulty is that she is dissatisfied with the outlets for genuinely creative work. With a reasonably secure income from another source, teaching, she thinks she can "buy" enough freedom to write the things she wants to write and must write. Meanwhile, she will grade undergraduate papers until she can complete her dissertation on 19th century fantasy. Perhaps she will find out who she is through her own writing of science fiction and children's fantasy.

MIKE

Mike was in the tenth grade in 1959 and his scores on the creativity test were the highest in his class. His Lorge-Thorndike IQ was 145 and his Stanford-Binet IQ was 162. His scores on the Iowa Tests of Educational Development were at the 99th percentile on national norms. He was known in the school as a behavior problem and was not graduated from high school. He completed his B.A. at the University of Chicago in about two and one-half years, however, and attended a music school in New York City for one year.

Since 1965 Mike has been employed full time as professional musician, mainly on piano and organ, but also on guitar, bass, and accordion. In addition, he has worked as an arranger and producer of records.

Mike has written a great deal in a variety of areas and has published songs, poems, musical compositions, and cartoons. He has had a few exhibitions of his art and photography. He has also done some illustrating. He has produced a book of cartoons and drawings that has not yet been published. Some of his musical compositions have won awards and he has appeared on about 25 record albums with well-known artists. He sculpts, makes jewelry, experiments in films, and makes collages.

Mike rates his three most creative achievements as follows:
1. My family (beautiful wife, beautiful baby)

2. My style as a musician (principally as a pianist) and my body of work as a composer (including songs, instrumental pieces and tape compositions)

3. My professional competence as an accompanyist, recording session player, band player, arranger, producer, etc.

Regarding his future aspirations, Mike writes:

I would like to improve and succeed as a singer, sell records under my own name, get into lucrative areas like movie and TV music — in short, to succeed in my chosen field. And I want to get my music to the people.

The indications are that this multi-talented young man began early to search for his identity, even if at the expense of earning a reputation as a behavior problem. His identity had to be achieved in the face of the fact that his father is nationally known in a field of interest quite removed from the arts and that his parents and teachers wanted him to achieve along conventional lines in music. Had Mike rebelled early he may never have been able to attain the creative individuality that he has.

SOME COMMON THREADS

I shall have to reflect much more on these and the other 200 or so cases in this study before I can discern all of the common threads and patterns that emerge. One thing seems sure. A period of wandering seems necessary. There has to be freedom to wander, to experiment, to risk, to find out what is possible, to discover one's limits, and to decide what "fits." Repeatedly, these young people, like Alexander's Taran Wanderer, have excelled in tasks but have still said, "This is not me!"

Also reflected in the lives of these young people is the dynamic and creative paradox Lloyd Alexander (1970) describes as a duality of the unique and the universal. On one hand, each is different, altogether unique, yet each is like everyone else. In some way each has been searching for this dual identity. Each seems to be aware that he is at the same time unique and like everyone else. It has taken Winifred a long time to assert her right to her uniqueness and Max is still having trouble accepting his human identity in spite of his protestations to the contrary. Lane, Merry and Mike have been struggling all along with this duality. They seem to go back and forth between their uniqueness and their universality. Beth seems to struggle with this duality largely through her fantasies for children and her science fiction.

Although Blacks, Indians, Chicanos, and other strongly identified ethnic groups are represented in this study, ethnic identity introduces a third element into this paradox. Blacks clearly want to retain their blackness and at the same time be recognized as humans and as individuals. Indians want to remain Indians and Chicanos want to remain Chicanos and...
simultaneously be treated as humans and as individuals.

POSITIVE ACTION

Although only the gifted child himself can search for and discover his identity, like Taran Wanderer, at times he needs someone to accompany and support him and someone whom he can consult. I would be remiss if I did not mention some of the obvious kinds of positive action we can take to help gifted children in this important and difficult encounter. The task is especially difficult for gifted children because so many of our dominant cultural assumptions suppress the emergence of true identities among them. They are taught that “the good child is a modest child” and consequently they must hide any ability or urge that causes them to excel. They are taught that “man is innately evil” so they have to deny their basic humanness as well as their uniqueness or else feel unworthy and guilt-ridden. We need to replace these and other cultural assumptions that hinder the emergence of healthy strong identities with ideas that fit better what we know about human nature as well as human individuality.

We must recognize the very great importance of the early years of a child’s life and teach children almost from birth about their individuality, including their giftedness. This can be done in an almost infinite number of ways — through books (fantasy, biography, autobiography) in which the heroes and heroines encounter the truth about themselves; through creative writing, creative movement, creative dramatics and other open-ended methods of learning, and through talking with children about the creativeness of their creative productions. Anything that hinders children in their relentless search for the truth is generally harmful and anything that facilitates it is potentially beneficial. The most haunting and most precious of these truths is the truth about one’s identity.

REFERENCES