



## Authentic Character Development – Beyond Nature and Nurture

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### Setting the Context

Character is who you are when no one is looking.

J.C.WATTS

What should be considered in a discussion of character development for gifted students? Our ideas should be fully realized, embrace complexity, and not shy from controversial and subtle aspects. They should allow for a notion of self-actualization in the conceptions, and embrace the idea of character being a manifestation of an authentic personality. How might we expand the notion of character to include some interpretations that go beyond a traditional 'Nature versus Nurture' debate? Is it important that we consider the possibility of an unlike phenomenology in a gifted individual's experience that would enhance his development and differentiate it from others?

Theories that encourage us to expand our ideas about character are explored in this article. John Dewey's philosophy, emphasizing the role of intelligence in moral development; James Hillman's acorn metaphor, envisioning one's character as an invisible and individualized soul-image; and Kazimierz Dabrowski's theory, which posits the evolution of a wholly new personality structure, catalyzed by but going beyond the effects of genetic endowment and environment; will be discussed. Hillman (1996) explains the phenomenon of character as a 'calling'— a daimon (p. 6) or sort of guiding angel (for good or evil) with a destiny and purpose of its own—over which the environment has but marginal control. Dabrowski, the Polish psychiatrist whose life's work was the Theory of Positive Disintegration (1964, 1967, 1970, 1972, 1996) developed many of his ideas through his psychoanalytic practice and empirical study of gifted children. He attributed the growth of personality primarily to biological and environmental factors alone unless a person possessed characteristics that impelled him into another way of seeing, knowing, and being. If an individual possesses a particularly fertile inner psychic landscape, Dabrowski believed that such creative intensity would contribute to the emergence of a truly remarkable human being, developing beyond mere genetic endowment and environmental influences. Incumbent in his conception of growth of the personality was an advanced moral development based on high ethical values and compassionate action.

### Character – Reclaiming the Definition of the Term

Everyone has the obligation to ponder well his own specific traits of character.

He must also regulate them adequately and not wonder whether someone else's traits might suit him better.

The more definitely his own a man's character is, the better it fits him.

CICERO

What do we actually mean when we speak of character? Surely, the concept must include some discussion of collective core values, individual deeply-held beliefs, internal orientation, and external behavior.

The quote above shows us that even in Cicero's day there was a notion of both conscious intention and born destiny in the connotation of character. Each of us has a personal meaning for the word, but we cannot discuss any concept collectively without narrowing its scope with some precision. The American Heritage Dictionary (1996) has no fewer than 20 definitions for character. One definition is "moral and ethical strength." One is "reputation or public estimation." The first definition, however, is simply "features that distinguish one person ... from another." The word comes from Middle English meaning 'a distinctive mark or imprint on the soul.'

Character as an 'imprint on the soul' is the context from which this article begins. Focusing on inherent potential implied in the deep meaning of the word, this author wishes, first of all, to neutralize any pre-conceptions of proscribed morality and 'acceptable' goodness in its connotation. Character is rooted in the mystery of a unique individual--continually unfolding in real time and space. As such, and as a manifestation of being in the world, it is necessarily beyond our attempts to completely understand and control.

And yet, our deep desire as educators and parents is that goodness will come from our children's lives. We want what they do to have a positive effect on this corporeal world. But because of the deep attachment to core values, character pulls us into the emotional and spiritual domains. American philosopher John Dewey was all too aware of the difficulties this posed in attempting to include moral guidance in the educational curriculum. It is not a superficial issue, however, and he believed in the importance of trying.



Complexity seems to result in contradictions that educational systems in their practical and bureaucratic simplicity often avoid or outright deny. Strict and literal goal orientation and attempts to produce some sort of competent citizen often do not honor the integrity of the individual. Opposing philosophies of human potential clash daily in the public arena of education. But educators need to embrace this complexity. The discussion of character development needs to be complexified in order to truly touch the lives of our gifted students. Additional considerations and expanded contexts are called for in our approaches, because 'character' — as though we all agree with the prevailing interpretations — is being re-emphasized by our public policy makers.

It is useful to keep in mind that most spiritual traditions are in remarkable agreement about what constitutes the highest and most profound values possible in a human life. But it is questionable whether those traits and characteristics are being adequately translated by accepted public school curriculums on character. In practice, educators often suffer from a narrowness of perspective, a failure of creativity, a lack of tolerance, and a distrust of personal agency. When viewing (and inevitably judging) the character of others, acts are often interpreted in reference to the viewer's own self-interests. Because of the inability to expand perspectives, exemplary character is often not recognized; and admitting antagonistic variables involved in making truly ethical decisions is often uncomfortable. Doubts about individual power and conflicting beliefs about human nature make educators reluctant to trust the integrity of a child's authentic development.

## **Contemporary Character Education as Reactive Response**

The character of every act depends upon the circumstances in which it is done.

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, JR.

In response to current trends in education, and in contrast to a consideration of character that involves complexity and an individual destiny beyond our human control, policy makers are creating their own versions of character. Currently, there is a palpable sense of urgency in the political and educational community to confront the issues of school violence. Some believe that a neglect of core values has been a root cause of this violence, and have made a concerted effort to implement character education as an answer to the problem.

The Colorado State Legislature (2000) recently passed

"A Resolution Concerning Character Education." In this document, legislators encourage educators to "use their authority to participate in the moral formation of our youth" and work with parents to promote "moral literacy." The text of the resolution names anti-victimization, faith-based morality, common courtesy, civic responsibility, respect for property, and honesty as the goals for this promotion.

One program used by many American school districts is called Character Counts! (2005). It defines a curriculum that includes an emphasis on the "Six Pillars of Character": trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship. Its claimed 'research-based' success aims at reducing criminality, diminishing bullying, and decreasing dishonesty in the classroom. Its underlying objective, rooted in the history of American public education, appears also to be the improvement of a future workforce. A different character education curriculum, also in use, advocates for 'aggression replacement training.' While such focus might be useful and effective in a rehabilitative setting where behavioral approaches are successful, a deeper and more multi-leveled consideration of character is needed, especially with regard to gifted students. The programs being implemented are behaviorally oriented and simplistic in their quantitatively measurable objectives. Such approaches have severe limitations and marginal (if not negative) effects when applied to many gifted students (Dabrowski, undated; Jackson, personal correspondence; Moyle, clinical notes).

The Six Pillars are couched in external representations. For instance, the virtue of trustworthiness, rather than honesty, is advocated. The former is a reflection of how someone else can interpret another's character and the latter is an internally-driven value that is removed from the capricious nature of extrinsic judgment. There appears to be little room for discussion in these curriculums about who someone is versus what someone looks like and how he is experienced by others. There is little consideration of conflict potential, and little emphasis of intrinsic motivation—just an acceptance of the trait at face value, as though its manifestation in action would always be without debate.



## What's the Problem?

Thoughts lead on to purposes; purposes go forth in action; actions form habits; habits decide character; and character fixes our destiny.

TYRON EDWARDS

Why might differentiation or complexifying be important? If the 'Six Pillars' are noble goals for all individuals, why wouldn't they be appropriate for the gifted?

Modeling ethical behavior throughout the culture of a school in its daily activities is probably the method by which character is most effectively transferred. But if words, actions, and intentions are good enough, then missing in the discussion is the importance of personal congruency—an essential variable for gifted students. By relying on externally demonstrable events alone, there is a potential incongruency between the inner psychic world and the outer physical world. A potential disingenuous-ness is inherent in our attempts to impose simplistic character curriculums on students without a consideration of authentic motivation.

Where many gifted students are concerned, a focus on 'character' in a culture that both conspicuously as well as covertly violates the supposed traits of good character only serves to heighten feelings of disconnect and distrust. Without trust and respect, no character curriculum can be effective. As every good counselor knows, one of the most important variables in the therapeutic relationship is congruency—a kind of harmony between therapist's beliefs, attitudes, affect, theory, and behavior. In other words, the inner self and the outer manifestation must agree. For an acutely intuitive gifted student, an incongruent messenger will render the message meaningless, because the feeling of falseness will create distrust and worse, cynicism. It is very important to examine the assumptions, conceptualizations, methods, and implementations of such well-intentioned curriculums.

The Edwards quote above is used often in the context of today's character education. It exhibits a logical determinism that appears to be true. Two fallacies, however, lie in the very first phrase. Implied is an unquestioned virtuous orientation toward a preconceived goal. It is also implied that everyone agrees with the 'right' goals to which one might aspire. Thoughts may 'lead to purposes,' but the role of schools should be in teaching our children how to think, not what to think. In addition, the attempt to influence moral values or to essentially

preach—without an emotional connection or deep respect to the 'preacher'—is problematic at best.

As schools are structured ever more increasingly on a business model—where education is viewed as a commodity, where the pervasive focus is on the financial bottom line, and where numbers try to measure that which most everyone agrees is really immeasurable—this disconnect only serves to make character education more of a hypocrisy. The essential character traits most popular with American teachers today have more to do with success than they have to do with living a truly ethical life. For example, it is rare to find in the current literature the word 'compassion' on an educator's character trait list, and nowhere was found mention of the traits of gratitude, generosity, or humility.

Author and psychologist James Hillman might say that another fallacy lies in the conclusion of Edwards' quote. From Hillman's conceptualization, character is our destiny, formed before the person ever was — and is thus, to a certain extent, beyond the power of environmental (or personal) forces to wholly change.

Character traits seem to fall into two categories — the inner/individual and the external/social. Those mentioned most often reflect the role that rugged individualism, cordiality, public recognition, and success-orientation play in the American culture. Many are directly related to making a more compliant student rather than an exemplary moral being. The themes that focus on those traits that look admirable to others are: caring, cooperation, humanity, respect, and service. The more individually oriented ones seem to emphasize taking control of the environment: courage, goal-setting, patience, perseverance, responsibility, self-esteem, and (literally) control. It is worth mentioning that some of these traits reflect cultural rather than ethical values that would not necessarily be shared by other cultures or other spiritual traditions.

Perhaps the fundamental question is simply, can character be taught? Dewey certainly wrestled with this problem. Obviously the culture of a school can exemplify high moral values in its decisions and through the conduct of its individual members. But problems exist in the interpretation of behavior, the theoretical orientation of the 'goals' of good character, the selection of particular traits that depend on differences of individual perspective, and the evasion of what is actually involved in making a truly ethical and moral decision. These are crucial to examine. Far more important than the question of mere relativism is a consideration of intellectual complexity and psychological and philosophical orientation. The Polish psychiatrist Kasimierz Dabrowski understood that the idea of perspective was crucial in the





role of development and that it ultimately determined the personality of an individual. He made a careful distinction between what he called a 'Uni-level' and 'Multi-level' perspective, because it affects every aspect of a person's being and capacity to know. Interpreting and operationalizing moral values in the literal, rule-based, authority-driven cultures of schools are bound to simplify what, ultimately, spring from complex, multi-level, context-dependent, and unique situations. No one understands this better than the intellectually gifted, emotionally sensitive, and intuitively aware student.

Schools operate using a predominantly behavioral orientation, believing that by demanding a change in outward behavior, a lasting change is effected in its individuals. But evidence in clinical practice (Jackson, personal correspondence; Moyle, clinical notes) suggests that a behavioral paradigm is simplistic and inadequate when dealing with gifted individuals. Children in school are traditionally viewed as 'tabula rasa'—or 'blank slates' upon which educators can write at will. Not only is the child's experience assumed to be limited or essentially non-existent, there is even some evidence to suggest that teachers are annoyed when met with a student who exhibits entelechy (Hollingworth, 1997; Gross, 1993, 1998; Lovecky, 1998) or who already knows the material.

One of the biggest conflicts many gifted students face may be in the unspoken, invisible realm that schools do not normally acknowledge. Cobb's research (1993) suggests that children have experiences of profound interconnectedness in encounters with the natural world that endure throughout their lifetimes. She generalized her findings to a theory about the 'ecology of the imagination' for all children, but her study involved historical records of eminent individuals—suggesting that her theory may indeed be applicable particularly to gifted children. Implied in her work is the likelihood that an early numinous experience—where the child knows deep congruency in his body, heart, and mind—may predispose an individual toward seeking out or trying to recreate that kind of experience in his learning or his future work. This immersion in a feeling of profound interconnectedness that touches the emotional and imaginal aspects of the whole person, what Maslow (1968) called a 'peak experience,' and akin to what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) called the state of 'flow,' is rarely found or acknowledged in the academic setting. Denying these deep experiences, those experiences for which even adults have no words, can be profoundly disheartening and confusing for gifted children.

Moral values cannot be imposed on persons with high developmental potential (Mroz, 2002). Adults cannot manipulate the surface of the environment and coerce the emotionally sensitive and imaginatively intense

gifted child into believing that the world is some way other than what it is. Often, his perspicacity is too acute, his sense of consequence and interconnectedness too great, and his drive for integrity and justice too intense. It is virtually impossible for such children to disregard awareness of hypocrisy in their environment—both local and global. The gifted who are blessed—and cursed—with keen intuition can sense the Jungian 'shadow' (1983) in others even when not recognized by their own consciousnesses (Jackson, personal communication), and an adult not 'walking her talk' is experienced as a hypocritical violation of the essence of a character curriculum. A gifted child with high moral development cannot ignore the discrepancy in adults who speak of compassion and fairness while, say, ridiculing the marginalized homeless person on the street, or who emphasize academic honesty while, say, stealing copy paper from the storeroom. It is an issue more important and intrinsic to these children than mere exacting, albeit often annoying, perfectionism. Encountering a curriculum designed to build positive character traits — but that is taught by adults who, however well-meaning, may lack wisdom or who aren't congruent — creates deep unsettlement for many gifted students. What these children need is a more inclusive paradigm, what Kasimierz Dabrowski (1964) termed a 'multilevel perspective.' John Dewey called for an intellectual rigor that prepared students for encounters with the inevitable competing factors that are part and parcel of any moral choice.

### The Important Role of Intelligence in Character — John Dewey

It seems to be a lesson of history that the commonplace may be understood as a reduction of the exceptional, but the exceptional cannot be understood by amplifying the commonplace.

EDGAR WIND

American philosopher John Dewey (1901-1972) was particularly emphatic about the role of intelligence in moral actions and the cognitive complexity necessarily involved in making moral decisions. The ability to discriminate, he believed, is key to this process (1984). Dewey saw uncertainty and conflict as an integral part of true moral action, and pointed out that the conventional attitude recognizes only an antagonism between good and evil. Such a position does not acknowledge ethical uncertainty as an inherent part of any moral decision or virtuous deed, and he maintained that denying this truth is not a correct stance in many cases:

The more conscientious the agent is and the more care he expends on the moral quality



of his acts, the more he is aware of the complexity of this problem of discovering what is good (p. 279).

Dewey maintained that the role of education is to encourage the maturity of a child's impulses and desires by development and thought, and that intellectual control should be cultivated in the school by attending to adequate cognitive depth and rigor. He emphasized that the essence of the moral situation is an internal and intrinsic conflict because "it is characteristic of any situation properly called moral that one is ignorant of the end and of good consequences" (p. 280). To be able to "manage forces with no common denominator" (p. 280) was the essence of the moral dilemma in Dewey's mind.

But if the prevailing values in education dictate that all moral distinctions are given in advance, that virtue has only one source, that what is legitimate can be predetermined, and that right action is not debatable; then inculcation and behavioral control can be the only official attitude for 'character education' — because to oppose such uni-level interpretation is to be immoral. Thus, the multi-level thinker is caught in a sort of double-bind. Dewey believed that true moral decline rested with the inability to make delicate distinctions and with the blunting of the capacity of discrimination. He recognized the zealotry of the predominant moral philosophies advocating a unitary view — that, in advance, there is theoretically a 'correct' solution for every difficulty — had the effect of oversimplifying the moral life. He dreamed of a common moral philosophy that would truly recognize the "real predicaments of conduct" and would actually help individuals make a "juster estimate of each competing factor" (Dewey, 1984, p. 281) when confronted with moral decision-making.

If moral progress depends on cultivating these discriminating capacities, and if many gifted students are naturally endowed with facility in these capacities—but if the importance and development of these capacities are not recognized in our educational programming, then children—and perhaps gifted children especially—are hindered from authentic character development on the highest level.

### Personality as an Intentional Emergence — Dabrowski's Positive Disintegration Theory

Character is that which reveals moral purpose, exposing the class of things a man chooses or avoids.

ARISTOTLE

Polish psychiatrist Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902-1980) was strongly influenced by Dewey, especially with regard to his moral

writings. However, while Dabrowski agreed that intellectual intensity is an important constituent in exemplary ethical behavior, he believed that emotions are even more crucial to advanced development and high levels of character.

Dabrowski called his theory of personality development the Theory of Positive Disintegration (1964, 1967, 1970, 1972). It is a full-spectrum theory of human development, providing a hierarchical and multilevel model to describe differences in human behavior and functioning. He began with an intense curiosity about the profoundly different ways that individuals responded to one of the greatest horrors in human history: the Holocaust and the Nazi occupations. He proposed that personality is shaped by biological endowment and environmental effects alone—unless some other autonomous factor comes into play that causes the individual to imagine and construct a personality ideal (ibid.) beyond what exists.

His concept of personality incorporates the idea that someone possessed of great potential can envision a possibility toward which he strives—fueled by a notion of 'what ought to be' rather than settling for what merely already 'is.' Dabrowski's theory depends on a notion of movement in an authentic direction toward integration on a higher level. Although self-determined in nature, this 'personality' nevertheless adheres to a hierarchy of values, increasingly incorporating ethical goodness in one's actions that transcends conventions and traditions as interpreted by society. Because it describes a process that progressively frees the self from contextual and social constraint and increases differentiation from others as a self-actualized human being, it can be compared to Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development (Kohlberg, 1964; Muuss, 1996). Kohlberg, however, was concerned only with moral reasoning—not with action. Both men were greatly influenced by John Dewey (Rich & DeVitis, 1985; Dabrowski, 1970), and supported the idea of universal principals of justice and a common hierarchy of values; and both were concerned about the phenomenon of increased moral relativism in society.

Dabrowski's theory agrees with Erik Erikson's Theory of Identity Development (Erikson, 1950) in the idea that maturity is linked to a virtue of care and a feeling of responsibility to others. But to Dabrowski, higher development demands that actions be congruent with belief, and that striving for this congruence is the essence of higher personality development. Because character is demonstrated only in action (mere noble intention won't suffice) and belongs to and is owned by the person in a moment of circumstance, its ultimate motivation must come from within and is virtually unaffected by external variables at the highest levels.



Dabrowski did not use the term 'character' in his theory, but his concept of striving to attain an authentic self-chosen ideal personality, operating out of a necessity to serve higher values, certainly fits the description of 'doing the right thing' even when 'no one is looking.' He defined this ultimate attainment, this ideal personality, as "an individual standard against which one evaluates one's actual personality structure" (Dabrowski, 1970, p. 175). Dabrowski believed that growth of the personality is the principal aim of an individual, and is the result of human development, particularly advanced development (1967). He proposed that mental development — synonymous with growth of the personality — requires a breakdown or 'disintegration' of lower, more primitive psychological structures in order to form higher, more evolved and complex structures. In its natural course, development presents dynamic conflicts between what is more reactive or automatic (lower) versus what is more conscious or self-determined (higher) within the individual psyche. Dabrowski called these instincts the 'developmental potential' of the individual. They are comprised not only of instinctive, but other phenomenological capacities. One of the most unique aspects of his theory is the emphasis he placed on the role that emotions and imagination, as well as intelligence, play in human development. He viewed emotions as the controlling structure in the personality (1967) and the basis for an individual's hierarchization of values. The interplay of cognitive complexity, emotional responsiveness, imaginative intensity, and a personal value system to stimulate higher personality development is fundamental to Dabrowski's theory.

Perhaps it is simply authoritarian arrogance that imagines individual human character can be controlled. Dabrowski's theory embraces the idea of an intentional emergence for persons endowed with a certain drive, but he was very clear about the impetus of such an emergence. It comes from within the individual, not from external variables or controls.

## Character as an Embedded 'Calling' — Hillman's 'Acorn' Theory

A man's character is his guardian divinity.

HERACLITUS

American author and psychologist James Hillman, on the other hand, fully embraces the idea that character, this 'imprint on the soul,' comes from beyond. His theories evolve from transpersonal psychology and transcendent traditions that recognize an unseen dimension supporting the visible, physical world. Often called the Transpersonal Ground, it is defined as that

aspect of experience or being that incorporates and acknowledges the transcendent or invisible world (Asiglioli, 1975; Nelson, 1994). Hillman then easily incorporates notions of imagination, intuition, and spirituality in the definition of character. Character for Hillman is a 'calling' — a compelling and urgent drive, a spiritual energy or daimon that accompanies an individual into this plane of existence. Hillman, like Dewey, who considered most accepted moral philosophies as inadequate, argues that current theories in all disciplines aren't big enough for the fullness of a human life. He rails that our academic paradigms rarely account for the mystery at the core of each unique individual being.

Hillman's 'Acorn' theory evolved from "reading a life backwards" (1996, p. 7) in order to discover and reveal the original, early preformations of character in the young life of an individual. Such retrospection acknowledges, respects, and appreciates the "image in the acorn" (ibid.) that is embedded in all individuals from the moment of their birth. This notion of a fundamental essence in individuality, which can be compared to Dabrowski's developmental potential, is an ancient human idea that our modern world rarely acknowledges except in a religious context, separated from daily life. The daimon represents a potential, both metaphorical and actual, that is beyond human meddling and is not dependent on physical genetic material or societal influence. It embraces the mystery and the poetry in a lived life that allows for numinosity of grace, vagaries of circumstance, inborn endowment, and individual will to interdependently affect its unfolding. American culture "marginalizes the invisibles" (1996, p.184) says Hillman, and as such, creates dysfunction out of its own. He advocates for "reminding a child of (his) ... essential belonging to the call of the angels" (1996, p. 170)—not from a religious viewpoint, but from an uplifting and universal spiritual perspective.

Using metaphors to speak of the kinds of guidance and experiences needed to realize authentic character, Hillman is clear: "There is no right food and no wrong food; the food must only meet the appetite, and the appetite must find its kind of food" (1996, p. 160). If children, and perhaps gifted children most of all, are prevented from finding their own unique 'kind of food,' then their innate souls are being disrespected and their destinies compromised. The human poetic basis of mind (Hillman, 1975) simply needs nourishment, and if it is withheld — either out of ignorance or some more intentional motivation — then our children will starve. This is when the daimon becomes malevolent. It is more likely that a lack of mirrored imagination, and any withholding of character nourishment, is a cause of unacknowledged desperation — and perhaps results in more negative consequences in our schools than does a lack of character education in the curriculum.





## Intellectual Giftedness and Advanced Development

Character is higher than intellect...

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

It is important to note here that acute moral awareness is not a characteristic of all gifted individuals. Dabrowski, in particular, made a distinction between advanced developmental potential (which depends on exemplifying high human values) and intellectual giftedness (which can be skewed toward what he called "one-sided development") (Dabrowski, 1996a, p. 164) — although he suggested that developing a hierarchy of values and living a personality ideal does depend on a sufficiently high level of intelligence (Dabrowski, 1970; Mendaglio, 2003; Nixon, 2004). Interpretation of research by Hollingworth (1942) and Gross (1989) suggests that higher measured intelligence is correlated with a high level of moral development. However, it is probably more accurate that the latter depends on the former, not that high intelligence automatically means high moral development. Much of Dabrowski's work was inspired by his work with gifted children, and he devoted his life to discovering the etiology of profound character.

Following another person's script for living one's own life is just about the last thing to which a truly gifted child wants to succumb. While the Zen master Shunryo Suzuki (1998) taught that we exist for the sake of ourselves, and not something else; he also wrote that the best way to be oneself was by practicing the right way to live, rather than by trying to order things outside us. The notion that humans exist for a purpose is a deep spiritual belief that sustains the spirit, no matter what the religious tradition. Suzuki emphasized that the result (of our intentions) is not the point, but rather it is the effort to improve ourselves that is valuable, and that there is no end to such a practice.

All three of the thinkers mentioned previously recognize the crucial role that imagination plays in the healthy development of character. From emotion and imagination come passion and, with intelligence to shape it, the true variables that catapult a gifted child into leading an extraordinary life begin to be more truthfully and completely understood.

## Inner Experience vs. Outer Manifestation

Character is like a tree and reputation like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Realization of character happens in a moment, as a spontaneous response to an event in the world. Most of what is discussed in today's 'character curriculums' might be desirable traits, to be sure, but the discussion falls short of a recognition of the interrelated quality of character, personality, and the integral fabric of the individual. Terman's study of gifted children (1925) emphasized measurement of character traits, because that was a particular interest for him. He correlated these character traits with mental health, however, and his conclusion was that giftedness does not predispose an individual to mental ill-health. Allport (1932) was aware of the difficulty of measuring such qualities, and he knew that adequate tests of character must involve motivation and actual drives. He believed that character was only truly revealed in the vital issues of real life.

The majority of gifted individuals exhibit the personality characteristic of introversion (Silverman, 1993), which seem to make them especially aware of their inner feelings, their actions in the world (as well as the discrepancies between them), and the effects of their behavior on others. But one important developmental task for all children, wrote child psychologist Virginia Axline (1969), is the synchronization of internal being with the outer manifestation of this inner self. Axline wrote about the consequences of hindering this process:

...(So-called mechanisms) of maladjusted behavior such as daydreaming, withdrawal, compensation, ... rejection, and repression ... seem to be evidences of the inner self's attempt ... to approximate a full realization of (his personality or) .... self-concept ... When an individual reaches a barrier which makes it more difficult for him to achieve a complete realization of self, ... resistance, ... friction and tension (result). (However) the drive toward self-realization continues—he either satisfies) ... this inner drive by outwardly fighting to establish his self-concept in the world of reality, or ... he confine(s) it to his inner world where he can build it up with less struggle. The more it is turned inward, the more dangerous it becomes... Outward behavior ... (is) dependent upon the integration of all past and present experiences, conditions and relationships, but (it is) pointed toward the fulfillment of this inner drive... (p. 13-14)



It is crucial for gifted children wrestling with issues of high moral development to have adequate mirrors for their experiences. They need teachers who can help them give voice to their inner world and to work through the conflicts in their moral development, as opposed to conflating the variables and thus falsifying the true issues involved. It is part of their particular character 'food'. The gifted child can feel intense psychic disequilibrium when he realizes and understands that his experiences are not shared by others (Gross, 1998). As Adrienne Rich (1986) wrote, "when someone with ... authority ... describes the world and you is not in it, (it is) as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing." (p. 199)

### Positive Disintegration and Authentic Development

Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, ambition inspired, and success achieved.

HELEN KELLER

What happens when an individual is faced with an unbearable incongruity between his inner experience and the outer world? The disequilibrium that results must be resolved. Dabrowski would say that the typical individual adjusts to the environment — adapts to the prevailing structure and accepts its rules of conduct and knowledge. In contrast, according to his theory of positive disintegration, the atypical individual capable of advanced development is compelled in a different direction. His developmental trajectory will pass through a stage of personality "disintegration," during which the individual essentially dies to his old self and begins a process of constructing a new and uniquely authentic self. There is evidence to suggest (Jackson, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2004; Mroz, 2002) that this disintegration can happen — if it happens at all — at a very young age in gifted children. This struggle to transform, when an individual tries to deal with deep ontological issues and existential moral dilemmas, is usually seen as the conflicts of a mature adult. Erikson characterized the developmental task of old age as a conflict between integrity and despair. Kohlberg's final stage of moral development — the post-conventional stage — was one of an obligation to higher universal human principles, frequently in conflict with societal views. According to him this stage is attained by only 10% of adults and thus represents a growth event that most adults have not experienced and many cannot even conceptualize.

Dabrowski implied that it is a gifted individual's multilevel developmental potential that puts him most in conflict with his surrounding environment. He had a term for an individual's reaction against the injustices, oversimplifi-

cations, and unethical cultural practices of a unilevel society. He called it positive maladjustment. Hillman might say that the conflict is the daimon at work.

Neither of these theories have much in common with the tabula rasa notion. During his lifetime, Dabrowski railed against behavioral conceptualizations and mechanistic processes that dominated psychology and education (Dabrowski, undated) even in his time. However, he conceptualized his theory within the recognized rigors of his profession and his model includes the causal psychic mechanisms that interplay within an individual to initiate growth toward a fully realized and autonomous personality. He was particularly concerned about the treatment commonly encountered by children who exhibited high developmental potential. Literature is replete (Goertzel & Goertzel, 1962; Hollingworth, 1942; Hillman, 1996) with examples of the negative experiences suffered by eminent persons throughout history in their interactions with school. Even Terman (1925) showed through his psychological tests that children of superior ability were very likely to be misunderstood in this environment. More recently, Gross (1993, 1998) and Lovecky (1998), in their detailed studies of highly gifted children, offer poignant illustrations of such conflicts.

A gifted student with intellectual over-excitability brings to his experiences a probing-ness and intense curiosity, often taking the form of profound existential and epistemological questions. This deep phenomenological orientation in the lived experience can be problematic, especially when that experience is not reflected in the pedagogy of the school, or in the understanding of a teacher. Even if his awareness is not conscious or able to be articulated, such a student appears to require essential congruency between his developing epistemological framework and theories and facts being taught to him. Such fundamental questioning can shake the foundations of a teacher's certainty and make her uncomfortable in ways that even she does not understand. This conflict appears never to be so penetrating as when confronting issues in the ethical and emotional realm.

Einstein once said that a problem could never be solved at the level at which it was created. If the future of our world depends on imaginal leaps that take us beyond existing paradigms, then it might be ironic that we expect bureaucratic education systems to understand and accommodate the future geniuses of the Planet.





## **The Daimon and One's True Character**

Character is what you are in the dark.  
AMERICAN PROVERB

According to the integral theories discussed in this article, character (like truth) will 'out.' Character is not just about what another can witness or what can be recorded while the cameras are rolling for a photo opportunity. Ultimately, when contemporary educators in their practices, directives, and pedagogy focus on external characteristics, the innateness of individual character and the trust of personal responsibility is disrespected and denied.

There is a certain narcissism implied by the parent or the teacher who enforces her own visions for the future on a child, without regard to his innate personality, his intelligence, his entelechy, or his daimon. Moral didacticism can be harmful to a developing sense of moral interdependence (Kazemek, 1986). Adult guides must avoid becoming moral propagandists, and they must be psychologically aware to the difference between facilitating the fulfillment of a child's true calling, and enabling their own calling through the child. It is fallacious and arrogant — as Hillman points out — to believe that the essence of true character can be inculcated. Certainly, for the gifted, there is a grave inadequacy in orienting policies and processes from a behaviorist point of view, toward 'good' moral ends. There are other dangers in such narcissistic attitudes toward our children. Jackson (2004) suggests that adult narcissism is a primary cause of anxiety in the gifted. At the very least, both overt and covert displays of narcissism—even unconscious manifestations—appear to be discernable by the gifted with high developmental potential. As such these perceptions are experienced as deep incongruity and may cause confusion (or worse symptoms) in many gifted children (ibid).

Often gifted children react to narcissism — in any form — with some sort of rebellion. Hillman's research (1996) revealed that rebellious intolerance was typical of 'acorn' behavior. Positive maladjustment is what Dabrowski called this rebellion of an individual with high developmental potential against a negative, even though culturally accepted, status quo. He emphasized that it is imperative that a child with positive developmental potential be given an incremental independence in his growth, to foster the most harmonious and multi-sided development of his interests and abilities. By allowing such a child to develop autonomy, he begins to realize his own responsibility in developing his inner psychic milieu and to foster his own positive growth by identifying with his higher self (Dabrowski, 1996). Maxwell (1998) stressed the need for an awareness and acceptance of

expanded developmental theories for children exhibiting early self-efficacy, who may "feel a stronger urge to reshape their environment than to accommodate to it." (p. 187)

## **Finding True Peers and True Teachers**

We learn our virtues from our friends who love us; our faults from the enemy who hates us. We cannot easily discover our real character from a friend. He is a mirror, on which the warmth of our breath impedes the clearness of the reflection.

RICHTER

Communion, that deep resonance with another human being and that experience of being profoundly understood by another, appears to be key to ameliorating psychic disequilibrium in the gifted (Jackson, 1995, 1998, 2001). It gives our gifted children the character 'food' they need. Positive mirroring, radical respect, witnessed significance (Shorto, 1999), and the contact with true teachers — modeling the struggle to live in the world while maintaining one's integrity in the process, is essential for staving off depression. But adequate mirroring and true communion is problematic for many gifted individuals — especially for the exceptionally and profoundly gifted (Gross, 1998; Lovecky, 1998; Jackson, ibid).

Dabrowski emphasized the importance of true mentors. He wrote that it was vital to find teachers whose level of development surpassed one's own (1970), and that the need grew with age and experience. More recently, clinicians Jackson (ibid.) and Mroz (2000) have separately validated the crucial role that others play for an individual in his development toward a personality ideal.

A gifted child with a post-conventional level of moral development needs hope and resilience; and research on resilience has correlated having a meaningful adult relationship with the emergence of this trait. In order to maintain courage in the face of difficulty and sustain a belief that the struggle to 'do the right thing' is worthwhile, one needs models. But if only 10% of all adults, according to Kohlberg's own estimates, have reached this level, where are these children to find such a teacher, or such a mirror?

Referring to Richter's quote above, a teacher is neither a friend nor an enemy, although for the student she can take on the aspects of both. What a teacher can show the pupil is encouragement and a light for the way that every student must find for himself, modeling the true meaning of education as a 'leading forth.'



## **Connecting the Spiritual with the Material — ‘Growing Down’**

Talent develops in tranquility, character in the full current of human life.

JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

Necessary in the emphasis of true character education must be the notion of putting intention to work, of taking the higher values and actually implementing them in the world. Even though a lack of cultural ethos might be a catalyst for development, the individual of profound character must transform what may have begun as a reaction against the negative into a movement toward something positive.

The connection of the non-physical soul with the physical world is referred to in many ways in almost all spiritual traditions. The physical circumstances of a life are only part of its reality, only a portion of its truth. But a focus on only the spiritual as the highest form of character is also incomplete. According to the Platonic myth, the soul descends via four modes: the body, parents, place, and circumstance. Giving back to the world by means of gestures — transforming what these modes of being have bestowed — declares a full attachment to the world (Hillman, 1996). This ‘growing down’, according to Hillman, is the fulfillment of purpose to which each human being is born.

## **Fierce Stewardship is Called For**

Lukewarm won't do...

RUMI

A man has no more character than he can command in a time of crisis.

ANONYMOUS

If we learned any lesson from the Holocaust, it was what can happen when even good people are complicit, or when ego and intellectual brilliance create their own world without regard to high human values. Awareness must be cultivated to ensure that a mismatch or ‘maladjustment’ with the environment takes a positive, rather than a negative direction. A child who struggles with a ‘calling’ that is not reflected in the mainstream, whose daimon is thwarted, or who encounters other dissonances in his environment, can turn dangerously inward and become tangled with a strong ego that has little regard for others.

While external events might be a catalyst for development, the individual must begin to take control of his own development and create an action toward the positive, not simply react against the negative. What needs to

happen is a transformation, an empowerment, and a belief in being able to effect a change in the world. Violent behavior is an act of desperation — a student's reaction to feelings of helplessness and marginalization. It is crucial for our gifted students that they are not hindered in their development by the strict interpretations of a unitary moral philosophy, and that their already forged kernel in the acorn is somehow honored and encouraged to bloom in a non-destructive way.

Jackson (personal communication) advocates for “safe holding environments” for our gifted children who are experiencing accelerated development. Sometimes a slowing down of development until a child's experience gives him more tools for emergence is crucial. These safe environments must convey, first and foremost, respect for the purpose that each individual is born to, and give a nod to that metaphorical daimon within.

Hillman reminds us that a child will defend its daimon's dignity. “Even a frail child,” he writes, “(will) refuse to submit to what it feels is unfair and untrue, and (will) react savagely to abusive misperceptions” (1996, p. 27). An awareness of responsibility—not for society so much as for stewardship of one's own gifts for the purpose of helping to transform the world—might be a better focus for character education of the gifted. This would also bring an idea of ego strength and a sense of ego syntony, dissolution, and transcendence into the discussion of character.

## **Giving Gifted Children Wings as Expressions of Their Roots**

No matter how full a reservoir of maxims one may possess, and no matter how good one's sentiments may be, if one has not taken advantage of every concrete opportunity to act, one's character may remain entirely unaffected for the better. With mere good intentions, hell is proverbially paved.

WILLIAM JAMES

There is no shortage of good days. It is good lives that are hard to come by.

ANNIE DILLARD

Perhaps there has never been a more important time to consider the necessity for extraordinary individual character to break through the ramparts of a culture hell-bent on environmental devastation and moral duplicity, capable of mass destruction on a scale previously unknown in history.



Folsom (1998) emphasized that an understanding of the intertwined complexities between intellect and emotion is crucial for nurturing the mind and the moral character of gifted students. Many gifted are virtually impelled, continually, to try to integrate the intellectual with the emotional and moral spheres (Coelangelo, 1991), because as interdependent aspects of being, the sensitive gifted student sees them as being inseparable. Leroux (1986) maintained that a gifted student's intellectual energies required a task of education to be one of assisting in the growth toward higher developmental stages.

A complex living system is more than simply a sum of its parts. There is compelling reason not to deny the essential spiritual nature of character development. Lovecky (1998) notes that the few theories describing spiritual development, independent of a religious tradition, accept the interdependence of reason and compassion, which the moral literature does not. It must repeatedly be acknowledged that "anything around can nourish our souls by feeding the imagination" (Hillman, 1996, p. 153). Academicians, scientists, educators, and bureaucracies appear reluctant to acknowledge this connection with the 'invisible world which supports the visible world' (Campbell, 1991, p. 90) but it is an unseverable one. The great task of a life-sustaining culture, wrote Hillman (1996) is to keep the invisibles attached. Deep development of the personality on a high level with a clearly chosen hierarchy of values—one that can 'grow down' to meet the world and engage it with the spiritual realm—is what many traditions regard as the primary task of being in a human incarnation.

All three of the theories introduced in this article help us to conceive a wider spectrum of discourse for the purpose of an enlarged view of character education, which is essential for gifted students.

Advocating for expanded views and greater complexity in the consideration of character allows us to include the aspects of human manifestation that are embedded in mystery. Respecting and honoring — at the very least, acknowledging — character as an 'imprint on the soul' would help to validate some of the more numinous experiences of the morally developing gifted child and to contribute to his ethical growth. There is reason to believe that gifted children possess an abundance of 'equipment' for realizing this awareness, and this 'calling.' Giving them deep roots to hold steadfast and sublime wings to soar beyond even their imaginings should be a goal for gifted education. Indeed, it should be a goal for all education of our children.

As parents and educators, we know our children inherit our world, and the problems that we created will have to be solved at a level beyond our present conceptions. Deep development — of the personality and of character — requires full commitment. It is not for the faint of heart. We must prepare our gifted children for fierce engagement in the struggle toward realizing the potential of their unique souls. They must know and be supported in the awareness that, to accomplish it with greatness and fullness, they must be prepared to sacrifice much in the face of enormous challenges. In the process of becoming an ethical person, "you must burn yourself to ash" (Suzuki, 1998, p. 63). The sense of importance is missing from our discourse on character. Also missing is the sense of urgency, as if our lives depended on it—which they do. We must be able and willing to give children the courage and the blessing to, in the words of Clarissa Pinkola Estes (2000):

Climb to the top of the highest tree.

Step onto the branch that you fear will break under your weight.

Let it break...



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