

# Experiencing in a Higher Key

## Dabrowski's Theory of and for the Gifted

BY MICHAEL M. PIECHOWSKI

**D**abrowski (1902–1980), a Polish psychiatrist and psychologist, studied the mental health of intellectually and artistically gifted youths. He took the intensity of their emotions, their sensitivity and tendency toward emotional extremes, as part and parcel of their psycho-physical makeup. In their intensified manner of experiencing, feeling, thinking, and imagining, he perceived a potential for further growth (Dabrowski, 1967, 1972). He saw inner forces at work generating overstimulation, conflict, and pain, but also a search for a way out of the pain, strife, and disharmony. Dabrowski's life mission was to save and protect those who are tuned to the pain of the world and who see its dangerous trends, are not heeded, and those who being open to higher realities are poorly adapted to living in this world and thus at risk.

Dabrowski lived through both world wars. During World War II, putting his life in danger, he helped Jews to hide from the Nazis. He suffered Nazi imprisonment. After the war the Communists put him in prison for two years because he spoke for individual self-determination and against subjugation by the state. His theory grew out of his own encounter with death, suffering, and injustice and his desire to understand the meaning of human existence. As a teenager during World War I, he witnessed acts of self-sacrifice in the midst of incomprehensible inhumanity and puzzled how both could exist in the same world. From early youth Dabrowski was repelled by the cruelty, duplicity, superficiality, and absence of reflection he saw in those around him. He went on a quest for enduring, universal values and for individuals who lived them. He found inspiration in Socrates, Gandhi, and Kierkegaard, and in the great saints. He found, too, that they went through agonies not unlike his own.

In his clinical practice, he began to see artists, writers, actors, and people whose inner conflicts were spiritual in nature. In the past, and even still today, those whose emotional richness, creative vision, and

spiritual striving bring to them experiences of unusual nature, are easily labeled as abnormal, immature, neurotic, or even delusional and psychotic. We are still for the most part chained to the narrow view which limits reality to everyday reality and ignores the extraordinary potentials of the human mind and the verifiable intuitions of the heart. There is room for hope, however, as out of humanistic psychology grew transpersonal psychology, and with the advent of emotional intelligence we have made the further step toward spiritual intelligence (Emmons, 1999; Noble, 2000; Piechowski, 2002).

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Dabrowski was developing his theory over many years. In its initial cast he laid two concepts at its foundation: developmental potential and multilevelness. The first describes the endowment and the properties of the system that enables us to feel and experience things: the nervous system. The second introduces the notion that human emotions, motivations, values, strivings, and behaviors have to be looked through a prism of levels. Dabrowski described five such levels. The theory as a whole is too complex to be quickly summarized; other sources may be consulted for a fuller description (Dabrowski, 1970; Hague, 1976, 1986; Nelson, 1989; Marsh and Colangelo, 1983; Piechowski, 1975, 1991, 2002; Silverman, 1993).

### Developmental Potential

Dabrowski's concept of developmental potential includes talents, specific abilities,

and intelligence, plus five primary components of psychic life: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional overexcitabilities (see Table 1).

Table 1. Developmental Potential

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|---|
| 1. Talents and Abilities  |
| 2. Intensity and Sensitivity Overexcitability (OE)<br>(Original Equipment)<br>P Psychomotor<br>T Intellectual<br>E Emotional<br>S Sensual<br>M Imaginal |
| 3. Capacity for Inner Transformation  |

Conceived broadly as five dimensions of psychic life, these components have many possible expressions:

**psychomotor (P)**—movement, restlessness, drivenness, and augmented capacity for being active and energetic;  
**sensual (S)**—enhanced refinement and aliveness of sensual experience;  
**intellectual (T)**—avidity for knowledge, discovery, questioning, love of ideas and theoretical analysis, search for truth;  
**imaginal (M)**—vividness of imagery, richness of association, facility for dreams, fantasies and inventions, endowing toys and other objects with personality (animism), liking for the unusual; and  
**emotional (E)**—great depth and intensity of emotional life expressed in a wide range of feelings, compassion, responsibility, self-examination.

Without some degree of intensity in these areas, talent is mere technical facility lacking heart and fire. To varying degrees, these five dimensions give talent its power of invention and expression (Piechowski, 1979, 1986, 1999). They may be thought of as modes of experiencing or as channels through which flow the color tones, textures, insights, visions, currents, and energies of experience. These channels can be wide open, narrow, or barely present. They indicate a more alert, more easily, and more



strongly excitable nervous system. To emphasize the above normal, higher pitch of felt experiences, Dabrowski called them “overexcitabilities.” They ring loud and clear in gifted children. Kurcinka (1991) had the felicity of calling them *spirited*—“children who are more intense, sensitive, perceptive, persistent, energetic.” Although she did not use the term “gifted” and “overexcitability,” her eminently practical book clearly is about both.

It is unfortunate that the stronger these overexcitabilities are, the less peers and teachers welcome them, unless they, too, are gifted. Children who exhibit strong overexcitabilities are often made to feel embarrassed and guilty for being “different.” Criticized and teased for what they cannot help, they begin to believe there is something wrong with them. Sometimes they learn to disguise their intensity, sometimes they seek refuge in imaginary worlds of their own creation, sometimes they try to “normalize” it and as a result suffer depression or ill-defined anxiety. These reactions are the consequences of being forced to deny their own potential.

The many expressions of overexcitability listed in Table 2 are easily observed. They fall into two basic categories: the natural expression of a given intensity and sensitivity and the way emotional tension may be funneled through them. When gifted children are asked which expressions apply to them they readily give examples of corresponding behaviors and feelings. Cindy A. Strickland (2001) at the University of Virginia developed a wonderfully detailed unit for gifted middle and high school students, “Living and Learning with Dabrowski’s Overexcitabilities,” for the exploration, understanding and acceptance of these often unsettling traits. She quotes Pearl Buck who said:

The truly creative mind in any field is no more than this: A human creature born abnormally, inhumanly sensitive. To him...a touch is a blow. A sound is a noise. Misfortune is tragedy. A joy is an ecstasy. A friend is a lover. A lover is god. And failure is death.

Because this manner of experiencing is often viewed as overreacting, it is treated as something to be cured “for the good” of the child. It is true that a high level of intensity and sensitivity creates problems for many people who don’t know how to respond and how to help the child with it. It must be remembered that the problem is often even more acute for the young person. A student of mine once wrote:

I am a “deviant.” I am often considered “wild,” “crazy,” “out of control,” “masochistic,” “abnormal,” “radical,” “irrational,” “a baby”...or simply too sensitive, too emotional, or too uptight. “Mellow out,”...they say, to which I can only respond, “If I only could...” At birth I was crucified with this mind that has caused me considerable pain, and frustration with teachers, coaches, peers, my family, but most of all with myself.” (Piechowski, 1989, p. 99)

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**Table 2 Forms and Expressions of Overexcitability**

**PSYCHOMOTOR**

**Surplus of energy**

rapid speech, marked excitation, intense physical activity (e.g., fast games and sports), pressure for action, (e.g., organizing), marked competitiveness

**Psychomotor expression of emotional tension**

compulsive talking and chattering, impulsive actions, nervous habits (tics, nail biting), workaholism, acting out

**SENSUAL**

**Enhanced sensory and aesthetic pleasure**

seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, hearing; delight in beautiful objects, sounds of words, music, form, color, balance

**Sensual expression of emotional tension**

overeating, self-pampering, buying sprees, wanting to be in the limelight

**INTELLECTUAL**

**Intensified activity of the mind**

thirst for knowledge, curiosity, concentration, capacity for sustained intellectual effort, avid reading; keen observation, detailed visual recall, detailed planning

**Penchant for probing questions and problem solving**

search for truth and understanding; forming new concepts; tenacity in problem-solving

**Reflective thought**

thinking about thinking, love of theory and analysis, preoccupation with logic, moral thinking, introspection (but without self-judgment), conceptual and intuitive integration; independence of thought (sometimes very critical)

**IMAGINATIONAL**

**Free play of the imagination**

frequent use of image and metaphor, facility for invention and fantasy, facility for detailed visualization, poetic and dramatic perception, animistic and magical thinking

**Capacity for living in a world of fantasy**

predilection for magic and fairy tales, creation of private worlds, imaginary companions; dramatization

**Spontaneous imagery as an expression of emotional tension**

animistic imagery, mixing truth and fiction, elaborate dreams, illusions

**Low tolerance of boredom**

need for novelty

**EMOTIONAL**

**Feelings and emotions intensified**

positive feelings, negative feelings, extremes of emotion, complex emotions and feelings, identification with others' feelings, awareness of a whole range of feelings

**Strong somatic expressions**

tense stomach, sinking heart, blushing, flushing, pounding heart, sweaty palms

**Strong affective expressions**

inhibition (timidity, shyness); enthusiasm, ecstasy, euphoria, pride; strong affective memory; shame; feelings of unreality, fears and anxieties, feelings of guilt, concern with death, depressive and suicidal moods

**Capacity for strong attachments, deep relationships**

strong emotional ties and attachments to persons, living things, places; attachments to animals; difficulty adjusting to new environments; compassion, responsiveness to others, sensitivity in relationships; loneliness;

**Well differentiated feelings toward self**

inner dialogue and self-judgment

*Source: Piechowski (1999)*

What helps is first of all to accept and acknowledge that this is the natural way of experiencing for the child. Some allowances and adaptations go a long way as was done in a preschool class which was open to the free expression of the children's overexcitabilities (Tucker and Hafenstein, 1997). A restless child endowed with a high level of energy focuses attention best when free to move around and use his or her hands. An emotionally sensitive child may at times be overwhelmed by great tension and stress, and holding the hand, or even only the finger, of an understanding adult, may be enough to provide relief. A warm bath and rubbing the child's back are also effective methods of soothing to restore balance. In some children emotional and sensory sensitivity are so high that noise, bright lights, unpleasant smells or tastes may be extremely upsetting. One then needs to take the child out of the noxious environment (shopping malls can be unnerving in the extreme) or remove the offensive stimulus. Because this is how the child's nervous system reacts it is critical to not demand that the child "get over it."

Lind (2000) and Kurcinka (1991) offer strategies to help children and parents to cope with these intensities in an understanding and accepting way. Parents and teachers must show con-

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siderable patience to see that this "overreacting" comes from the child's sensitivity and need for his or her own order of things to be preserved. That children need order and predictable routines is well known. To a sensitive and intense child who may be dis-equilibrated, often by his own emotions and vivid imagery, a departure from routine (for instance, in the way a story is told), may be extremely upsetting because the need for reliable markers of consistency and support is all the greater. Without doubt, the strongest support, is the parent's loving patience and acceptance.

New situations are best handled with advance preparation. When the nature of the occasion, the people involved, and the general flow of the event are explained to children, it removes the uncertainty that usually is the source of stress and difficulty for the children. However, one should not expect too much from a sensitive child and if he or she reaches a point of wanting to leave, it is best to leave within a short time.

In the aftermath of 9-11, children are particularly affected by the general feeling of insecurity and the anxieties that adults cannot hide. But even a mention of the tragedy itself can evoke an overwhelming reaction. A 12-year old friend of mine, two months after the event, suffers nausea and has difficulty breathing whenever anyone begins to talk about what happened. In children the initial reaction is often hidden, only to emerge weeks or months later in nightmares, slipping in school work, or listlessness and withdrawal. Tolan's *Pride of the Peacock* depicts what happens to an emotionally gifted teenager, who despite her

supportive family, feels entirely alone with the crushing realization of the threat to the survival of the human race. Thousands of children are feeling this way today.

The degree of emotional intensity is a stable individual characteristic and quite independent of what actually evoked the emotion. Emotional intensity, or its lack in unemotional people, is a characteristic of temperament observable early in life (Larsen & Diener, 1987).

Emotionally intense individuals can also be very sensitive to the feelings of others, to others being hurt, to injustice, but also to criticism and pain. If an emotionally sensitive child grows up with too much criticism and ridicule, the child will begin to seek self-protection in emotional withdrawal, and perhaps create an inner shield. The price for such withdrawal and denied feeling is high: loss of emotional vitality, lack of enjoyment of one's successes and achievements, and lack of the sense of who one is, in short, a process of emotional deadening (Miller, 1981, 1983).

A child with vivid imagination will often be upset by images seen on television, scary movies, stories in the news, or sensational gossip. Some children cannot get the disturbing images out of their minds. One then tries to suggest that more positive pictures be put in place in their mind so that the bad images be put in files and locked away. Many gifted children have a hard time stopping their thinking to go to sleep. It is worth discussing with them their methods of slowing down and quieting their mind. It is also very useful to introduce them early to effective methods of relaxation. Some gifted children know some form of meditation which brings them to a peaceful and joyful state (Piechowski, 2000). Young children benefit from five-minute meditations which progressively can be extended to 20 minutes (Murdock, 1978, 1988).

It is a common mistake to take something exceptional as being abnormal. What looks abnormal, and creates difficulties for the individual, mental health professionals tend to see as something to be cured. But as Tolan astutely observed, "some of the very greatest gifts bring an inevitable downside which you cannot 'cure' without curing the gift at the same time" (in Strickland, 2001, p. 22). One of the most common misjudgments is to label as hyperactive a child full of energy and vitality.

Developmental potential includes also the capacity for inner transformation. This

has to do with the ability to consciously engage in the work of personal growth to become a better person. It also has to do with the realization of all that one can become, in other words, self-actualization. It is this kind of personal growth that Dabrowski called multilevel because of the tension between what one is and the inner ideal of what one can become. The direction is from down low to up high within oneself, or, one could say, from one's current self to one's higher self.

#### **Multilevelness**

In human life there is joy and sadness, anger and compassion, aggression and cooperation, love and hate, despair and hope, fear and courage, attachment and loneliness, death and rebirth. If we take manifestations of joy we could see for instance this kind: joy from winning a football game, feeling superior, defeating an opponent, succeeding by cunning, feeling of power when cleverly manipulating others. But to many people such joys would be offensive because of total lack of consideration for others. A different kind of joy is the joy that the name of a loved one brings, the joy of overcoming one's bad habits, the joy of self-discovery, the joy of a creative moment and inspiration, the joy of being able to help another. In the first case, the experiences of joy are egocentric, self-serving, self-protecting, and power-seeking. In the second case, they arise from love and empathy toward others, and from positive changes in oneself, and from expansive feelings of a higher order. The first case represents joy on a low emotional level, the second case represent joy on a high emotional level. This comparison can be extended to all emotions and behaviors. Emotional level means here inner growth rather than the usual maturation through the life span. It is quite possible for a young person to operate on a higher emotional level than a so-called mature adult.

Dabrowski refined the distinction of levels to five, which space does not permit going into. It is enough to keep in mind that the idea of levels comes from the experience of higher and lower in oneself. Failing a person in time of need is something lower, something we are ashamed of and feel guilty about. Helping a person without any expectation of reward or even token gratitude is something higher in ourselves, and all the purer if no one knows about it. The yardstick here is the nature of our intentions and motives.

Standing by one's beliefs and ideals is a common experience for gifted teens. Here is an example picked from responses to the Overexcitability Questionnaire (Piechowski, 1979).

The responses, two years apart, are from a boy confronted with asking himself, "Who am I?" When he was 15 he wrote: "I feel that I am a person who is on the earth that is destined to use his abilities and talents to his fullest. This is simply what I think I really am." This is a typical, though erroneous, egocentric view of self-actualization as *self-fulfillment*. At 17 he recognized a moral conflict between getting ahead and being considerate of others:

The answer to this question has changed over the past few years. A few years ago I was a person who wanted things for himself. Now I am trying to change that person to a person who wants to contribute to others and the world not just himself. Obtaining this type of person in this world is not that easy. The one thing that is a roadblock is competition. Not necessarily losing to other people, but beating them. How can I compete to get into medical school when a doctor is supposed to build people's confidence and restore their sense of security? The process is self-defeating.

This young man's moral conflict is an inner conflict. He discovered a contradiction between competing in order to win, which meant defeating others in the process, reducing them to no more than obstructions on the way to victory, and caring for others which is relating to them as persons no less valuable and worthy of consideration than ourselves. The stance he took Dabrowski called positive maladjustment because as an adjustment to higher values it rejects compromise with lower ones.

Observing the people around them and the way things work in the world, gifted youngsters reflect, evaluate, and question. Selfishness, stuck-upness, phoniness, pushing ahead of others offend them. Seeing the easy contentment of the "normal" others, their uncomplicated view of life, and easy camaraderie, they question their own "differentness" and suffer a malaise whose source isn't always clear in the beginning. The dissatisfaction with the world and with themselves become a source of inner tur-

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moil. Also seeing what is wrong and how it could be corrected but being powerless to do it, can lead to depression (Jackson, 1998). There are gifted children who feel it is their responsibility to save the world (Roeper, 1995). They might do well to heed the Peaceful Warrior that to be effective one needs the right leverage at the right time (Millman, 1984, 1991).

Dabrowski's theory describes the process of inner growth in which the guiding principle is to be true to oneself. In the search for self-knowledge the process entails inner struggles, doubts, even despair about one's emotional and spiritual handicaps, and yet always picking up again the task of gaining more understanding of others, ridding oneself of prejudices, and becoming more self-determined in the light of an inner ideal. Self-knowledge, as Eleanor Roosevelt observed, is not easily won:

You must try to understand truthfully what makes you do things or feel things. Until you have been able to face the truth about yourself you cannot be really understanding in regard to what happens to other people. But it takes courage to face yourself and to acknowledge what motivates you in the things you do.

This self-knowledge develops slowly. You cannot attain it all at once simply by stopping to take stock of your personal assets and liabilities. In a way, one is checked by all that *protective veiling* one hangs over the real motives so that it is difficult to get at the truth. But if you keep trying honestly and courageously, even when the knowledge makes you wince, even when it shocks you and you rebel against it, it is apt to come in flashes of sudden insight. (Roosevelt, 1960, pp. 63-64, emphasis added)

Because this process is not unlike dismantling an inner personality structure and replacing it with a better one with more light in its moral core, Dabrowski called it *positive disintegration*. One can get a better understanding of this type of inner growth from the study of cases than from a dry theoretical description. The lives of Eleanor Roosevelt, Ety Hillesum, self-actualizing people (Brennan & Piechowski,

1991; Grant, 1996; Piechowski, 1990, 1992), or gifted adolescents (Jackson, 1998, Peterson, 1997, Peterson & Rischar, 2000) illustrate the process in enough detail for thoughtful young persons to see how it may apply to them.

Inner growth of this nature, once it starts, does not stop. The inner forces at work push for new challenges and development of clarity of purpose, and with this of the will to take the necessary steps. Much attention is given to setting goals, but it is knowing what one must do at every step to get there, that secures reaching the goal. Just visualizing the achievement of the goal is not sufficient (Taylor, Pham, Rivkin, & Armor, 1998). We can be of great assistance to young people when we help them to know in concrete detail the steps toward their goals. Then the great energy of youthful idealism can become a positive force in the world. Techniques fostering personal growth are simple and accessible to practice (Ferrucci, 1982, Murdock, 1988, Wilson, 1994). ■

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**MICHAEL M. PIECHOWSKI**, is a Senior Fellow of the Institute for Educational Advancement and Professor Emeritus of Education and Psychology, Northland College, Ashland, WI. Co-author of *Theory of Levels of Emotional Development* (2 vols.) with Kazimierz Dabrowski, he has written extensively on the developmental potential and emotional development of the gifted. Study of emotional giftedness, in particular of resilient survivors of childhood abuse, led him to spiritual giftedness, his major focus at the present.

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