

# Underachievement in Exceptionally Gifted Adolescents and Young Adults:

## A Psychiatrist's View

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A group of exceptionally gifted adolescents between the ages of 14 and 25 were each treated in individual psychotherapy over the course of a number of years. They were referred for symptoms of anxiety, depression, self-destructive behavior, and underachievement. Each phase of their gifted development was accompanied by particular anxieties and conflicts. In adolescence they developed a powerful personal vision, a sense of destiny, and a charismatic personality. Their inability to resolve conflicts about these particular gifted traits led to their most dramatic forms of underachievement and self-destructive behavior.

In 34 years of psychiatric practice, no clinical problems have been more intriguing to me than underachievement and self-destructive behavior in exceptionally gifted adolescents and young adults. Early in my career as an associate clinical professor in Tufts University School of Medicine's Department of Psychiatry, I was stimulated by the challenge of establishing a community-based mental health service (Morrison, Shore, & Grobman, 1973), organizing and running a psychiatric clinic in a municipal court, and developing and supervising the extensive clinical work in a group psychotherapy training program (Grobman, 1978, 1980, 1981). Later, as a senior staff psychiatrist at Lenox Hill Hospital, I had the opportunity to learn about and treat patients whose depression and anxiety were caused by cardiac surgery (Collins & Grobman, 1983). In addition to these activities, I have always maintained a private practice. It has been in this setting that I have encountered the 15 exceptionally gifted adolescents and young adults who are the subjects of this paper.

Writing about the clinical problems I encountered and the patients I treated has always served several purposes. It helped me organize my thinking, helped me learn

what others thought in the fields of community psychiatry, group psychotherapy, and consultation/liaison psychiatry, and it allowed me to share ideas I considered to be useful. This paper, about the psychodynamics of underachievement and self-destructive behavior in exceptionally gifted adolescents and young adults, is written in the same spirit.

This report is not based on a research study. As with my other publications, it is a report of my accumulated clinical experience. These young people had unique sets of exceptional gifts and unique ways of expressing them. Yet, when they explored their developmental histories and motivations for underachievement and self-destructive behavior, several patterns emerged. My hope is that this description and analysis of the difficulties these young people encountered will add an important dimension to the general description of what we know about gifted underachievement.

As Coleman and Cross (2000) stated:

In our view universal developmental theory is unlikely to yield significantly deeper understand-

ing of giftedness than it already has. Our knowledge has been relatively static in that area for decades. We use the term static not in the sense that useful research is not going on, but rather that what is studied are finer and finer delineation of aspects of development that have yielded small dividends. (p. 208)

In the same article they also said:

To understand social-emotional development, we need to understand more closely the personal experience of persons who are gifted. The pressures, joys, worries, conflicts and satisfactions of the experience of being a person who is gifted in various settings can become known as we gather evidence from empirical studies, biographies, clinical stories, life stories, etc. The experience of development contains much of the evidence of what social-emotional development is for this group and for subgroups. (p. 208)

I believe this clinical report may supply some of the missing pieces to the puzzle of gifted underachievement and to what Coleman and Cross (2000) refer to as “the personal experience” of being gifted.

During the past 20 years, I have had the good fortune to work with many exceptionally gifted adolescents and young adults. I treated the adolescents using a combination of cognitive/behavioral, as well as psychodynamic psychotherapy and provided guidance for their parents.

Intimate and intense involvement in the lives of these gifted individuals and their parents gave me an unusual opportunity to make observations about many aspects of their giftedness. I learned how these individuals thought and felt about their gifts and discovered how their internal responses to these gifts affected their accomplishments and their relationships. I learned how their gifted traits developed in tandem with other aspects of their personality from childhood, latency, adolescence, and into young adulthood. My special role with these adolescents, young adults, and their parents also allowed me to develop an understanding of the conflicts and anxieties associated with their giftedness and to see how these differed from the conflicts and anxieties typically associated with “normal” growth and development.

For these particular gifted individuals, the powerful inner drive to explore and master felt like an obligatory force of nature. When they gave into their explosive drives and permitted themselves to gratify their special sensitivities, they felt possessed. But, this same excitement

and animation also made them feel peculiar and strange. From their earliest years through latency and into mid-adolescence, their powerful drives, special sensitivities, and precocious abilities were rarely a source of consistent self-esteem. Instead, their giftedness frequently led to anxiety and shame, and they tried to keep it a secret by denying or restricting it.

Their parents accepted their giftedness and encouraged its development. They were awed by their children’s precocious accomplishments but were equally dismayed by their extremes of emotion and behavior. Because of their children’s self-destructive behavior, they frequently wondered whether giftedness was more of liability than an asset.

For some, the emotional pain associated with giftedness could only be relieved by stopping its growth or limiting its use. For others, it meant slowly drifting away from their giftedness in ways similar to the prodigies described by Feldman (1986). However, some chose to continue in psychotherapy beyond initial symptom relief. For these gifted adolescents, active efforts to resolve their deeper conflicts enabled them to feel much less shame and guilt and helped them control their self-destructive behavior.

## Background

The exceptionally gifted adolescents and young adults who are the basis of this clinical report were middle-class and between the ages of 14 and 26 years of age. Eight of these adolescents and young adults were male and seven were female. They were referred to me for symptoms of depression, anxiety, poor peer relations, and isolation, as well as intellectual and artistic accomplishment that fell well beneath their highly gifted potential. Some felt they were losing their minds. Some felt suicidal.

Many of these gifted individuals had reached extremely high levels of accomplishment but could not be consistent. Others never could achieve close to their full potential. All of these young people were highly gifted either in the fine and performing arts, science, literature, and music. Some were highly gifted in several areas. They were generally accepted and even admired by their peers, had families that accepted and supported their giftedness, and were in educational environments that, although not perfect, generally validated their individualistic nature and extraordinary accomplishments. None had learning disabilities, attentional disorders, or medical illnesses. Thus, the standard explanations for their gifted underachievement did not seem entirely adequate—a poor educational fit (Gross, 2002, 2004; Whitmore, 1980, 1986); peers who rejected

them; inadequate parents; environmental mismatches of various kinds; internal factors such as perfectionism, low self-esteem, self-regulatory problems, maladaptive strategies, social immaturity, or asynchronous development (Reis & McCoach, 2002); parents with serious psychopathology, or parents who neglected or misperceived their children's gifts (Gedo, 1972, 1979, 1996a, 1996b; Keiser, 1969; Newman, Dember, & Krug, 1973), or parents who were controlling or domineering (Conway & Siegelman, 2005; Slenczynska & Biancolli, 1957; Wiener, 1953).

What follows is a description of the gifted traits shared by this particular group of exceptional adolescents and young adults and a description of the evolution of these traits from childhood through latency, adolescence, and into young adulthood. The anxieties and conflicts that accompanied each stage of gifted development will be identified and discussed. Each of these young people were aware of their worries about acceptance by their peers, an educational system that was reasonable but did not meet all of their needs, and their difficulties with their parents. However, their conflicts and anxieties about their powerful internal drives, their uncanny abilities, and especially their secretly developing personal vision, sense of grand destiny, and charisma were largely out of their awareness. They came to light only after they began psychotherapy. It was these unconscious conflicts that led to their most dramatic forms of self-destructiveness and underachievement. Lastly, I will discuss the ways in which psychotherapy helped many of these exceptionally gifted people address their emotional needs.

### **What Was the Nature of Giftedness in This Group of Adolescents and Young Adults?**

#### **Powerful Drive to Explore, Master, and Express Themselves**

This drive felt like an inner compulsion from which they had no escape; it controlled and dominated them. These were not children pushed to excel by "stage parents." Rather, it was the parents who had difficulty keeping up with their children. This inner drive appeared to be part of their biological endowment (Greenacre, 1957) and not compensatory for minor defects (Niederland, 1967). It also went well beyond the high level of task commitment described by Renzulli (1978). Their intense hunger for drive satisfaction and stimulus gratification most closely

resembled the needs of the "profoundly gifted" described by Webb et al. (2005, p. 2).

For example, Camille Claudel (Rodin's assistant) had a specific obsession with sculpting. She pursued it in a single-minded way from an early age against tremendous parental opposition (Ayril-Clause, 2002). In the exceptionally gifted adolescents and young adults I worked with, this powerful drive was also apparent from a very early age, but was often expressed in strange ways. Intense preoccupations with the speed of clouds, for example, seemed like an odd obsession but was a precursor to scientific curiosity. The odd body movements and finger snapping rituals of one child seemed like the signs of a neurological illness to his parents. Later, his free body movements evolved into an uncanny gift for orchestral conducting.

#### **Special Sensitivities**

These sensitivities seemed strange and hard to explain. Parents often worried about an underlying medical disorder. One child's internal thermostat seemed abnormal—his tolerance for cold weather was extraordinary. Another child's sensitivity to certain fabrics frequently lead to early morning crises when it came time to dress for school. Yet another child's sensitivity to sound meant he complained bitterly when the family's piano was even slightly out of tune. In school, he panicked at the sound of the fire bell.

As these gifted children matured, their seemingly odd sensitivities found exceptional expression in music, dance, art, science, and writing. Were these extreme sensitivities similar to the inner kinesthetic experiences of motion and rhythm that inspired a group of composers interviewed by Nass (1984)?

#### **An Early Strongly Developed Sense of Self: The Need for Autonomy**

The need for autonomy developed early and remained an important part of their personality. These exceptional young people wanted control over all aspects of their personal life. They were frequently described as headstrong and oppositional. From the earliest years, they had an intense desire to do things on their own and in their own way, and they balked at interruptions or offers of help. One father recalled that his son was the only one in his grade-school class who refused to start his sentences at the margin. A mother reported an incident from her daughter's sixth year. When a piece of glass had to be removed from the child's foot, the girl was more concerned about being restrained and losing her "personal freedom" than about the anticipated pain from the procedure.

## Early, Idiosyncratic Aesthetic Sensibilities

At an early age, each of these exceptionally gifted children had a very personal sense of style, form, and beauty. As a grade schooler, one boy had already begun to combine artistic, musical, and literary elements in unusual ways. One of these personal projects was to develop a catalogue of musical notes according to their temperatures and colors. He had no interest in learning the standard rules of harmony and composition. Another young boy liked to collect languages and dialects—he compared and contrasted their sounds rather than their rules of speech or grammar. Combining the words of one language with the musicality of another seemed like sport and could produce hilarious results.

## Early Concerns With Ethics, Fairness, and Morality: Preoccupations With the Dilemmas of Human Existence

From an early age, these exceptionally gifted adolescents and young adults were concerned about what was right, wrong, or fair in relationships. They objected when they weren't treated fairly by their parents or friends. They were upset when their friends didn't treat each other fairly and they felt guilty when they didn't treat their friends fairly. They were acutely sensitive to the emotional pain of others. These ethical preoccupations could take on global proportions. One young child became focused on finding equitable solutions to international disputes. Although she felt too young to be thinking about these things, she couldn't shake off her preoccupation. Another 7-year-old girl's concern with the essence of life was expressed one summer on a family trip to the national parks. Sitting at the edge of Bryce Canyon, she burst into tears. When she calmed down, her parents learned that she felt regret for all those people who committed suicide. Had they been able to see the beauty and grandeur of this national treasure, she felt certain, they would have been inspired to stay alive.

## Oppositionalism

Defending the personal ownership and authenticity of their gifted endowment was important to each one of these exceptional adolescents and young adults. But, guarding their gifts often degenerated into plain stubbornness and became a liability rather than a strength. When they found themselves struggling beyond whatever their precious abilities could handle, they would often flounder rather than take advice or collaborate with others. This tendency could

easily lead to an unproductive waste of time, procrastination, and finally withdrawal.

## Perfectionism

Perfectionism was a positive attribute when it inspired efforts to be excellent. However, when their imagination outstripped even their precocious abilities, perfectionism often became a vehicle for self-punishment. They experienced mistakes as failures rather than opportunities to learn. Procrastination, avoidance, and withdrawal were often the result. It was not until late adolescence and young adulthood that both perfectionism and oppositionalism could be used more flexibly.

## Poor Frustration Tolerance and Self-Discipline

From a very young age, raw talent was all that these exceptional people required for high levels of accomplishment. Because they were used to almost instant gratification, their capacities for frustration tolerance and self-discipline were rarely well developed. In this way, their development was often asynchronous (Silverman, 2002).

Parallels to my clinical observations are present in the gifted literature. For example, the overexcitabilities are described by Dabrowski (1964) and Piechowski (1999). According to O'Connor (2002) "many in the gifted community believe Dabrowski's overexcitabilities . . . contribute to developmental potential [and] are a measure and indicator of giftedness" (p. 54). My clinical experience validates this belief. Although these traits were, at times, considered liabilities by parents, teachers, and the exceptionally gifted children themselves, these sensitivities or overexcitabilities were important building blocks in exceptional gifted development.

## How Did These Gifted Traits Develop and Evolve?

### The Integration of Drive, Aesthetics, and Intellect

In late latency, preadolescence, and adolescence, powerful internal drives, growing intellectual and aesthetic appreciation, as well as advancing precocious abilities began a slow process of integration. What might have been random, disconnected, or odd interests became recognizable but perhaps unconventional forms of art, music, science, or literature. For example, although one child's sensitivities to food and fabrics developed into a restricted



diet and a limited wardrobe, his parents discovered that he also had perfect pitch. He began to combine the sounds, musicality, and rhythm of one language with the vocabulary and sentence structure of another. Another child's small sketches became larger and more sophisticated, but he began to introduce images from the surgical textbooks that had obsessed him from an early age.

Passionate and single-minded, they began to put their own stamp on things. Even though they were inconsistent, their startling results were a clear indication that their sensitivities and capacities were well beyond their years.

### The Beginning of a Personal Vision and Sense of Destiny

As they approached adolescence, their remarkable achievements became more reliable and consistent. As others began to confirm their successes, these older latency-age children and preadolescents secretly began to believe that they were in fact gifted. By adolescence, what began as an inkling of a gifted identity was becoming a firm belief. As they slowly accepted their giftedness, these adolescents began to develop the elements of a personal vision, and one that included a vague sense of destiny. Random compliments like "You are as good of a painter as Rembrandt" or "You may be the next Simon Rattle" were now quietly taken seriously. They examined and analyzed the pathways of those who arrived at similar destinies, read biographies of the great men and women in their fields, and devoured DVDs and videos of interviews and performances. These larger than life figures became heroes for identification.

### Charisma and Grandiosity Are Added to a Personal Vision and Sense of Destiny

The extra energy of normal adolescence moved the integration of drive, sensitivity, and precocious ability at a more rapid pace. Normal adolescent development also allowed self-discipline and frustration tolerance to slowly advance. Now their accomplishments became even more remarkable and their confidence began to soar. The parents of one exceptionally gifted young adolescent recalled his elation one day when he charged out of school announcing that he had had the best day of his life. Apparently he had reached a new level in his study of music theory. He always had an affinity for large orchestral works. The more theory he learned, the more capable he felt of understanding and analyzing these scores. He even began to form his own opinions of them.

Higher levels of accomplishment meant that the early elements of a personal vision could be fulfilled. Adolescent

energy infused their sense of confidence. Peers and teachers described them as charismatic and even as potential leaders. For example, one exceptionally gifted pianist dreamed of a career in conducting. Despite the unlikely possibility of success, his vision became more of a reality when, at age 16, he successfully conducted his high school orchestra in the plaza of the city's arts center.

Corresponding to my clinical experiences, Wolson (1995) described what he called "healthy grandiosity" in several of his very talented patients. He proposed that this healthy grandiosity was a necessary personal characteristic that allowed very talented individuals to endure the inevitable hardships and disappointments on the path to the highest levels of achievement. His patients appeared to have managed their grandiosity with little difficulty. Conversely, Réne Fleming (2004) described the difficulty she had in developing a clear career path because she had no strong well-defined vision early in her professional life.

My own clinical experience with gifted adolescents and young adults revealed that grandiosity developed in a complex and conflictual way. By midadolescence these exceptionally gifted young people began to embrace their giftedness and the possibility of a grand destiny that might await them. Their grandiose fantasies helped keep them focused and propelled them forward despite setbacks and failures. They were more likely to accept and even relish daunting challenges. However, grandiosity also had its negative side. At times they could become arrogant and contemptuous. Sometimes they used their giftedness in manipulative ways. They could be mercilessly critical of all those they deemed incompetent. In addition, in their immature minds grandiosity often meant invincibility, which led them to disregard their basic needs for sleep, food, and personal hygiene.

At first, their teachers and mentors were somewhat indulgent, explaining to worried parents that "big challenges need big egos." However, when more energy and effort went into criticizing others rather than into their own efforts for mastery, everyone became concerned. Gedo (1979) has pointed out how grandiose self-appraisals that are based on wishful thinking or the megalomania that results from severe childhood trauma can easily develop into pathological narcissism and destructive grandiosity.

Grandiosity in this group of exceptionally gifted adolescents and young adults was not based on childhood abuse, deprivation, or loss, but was grounded in their exceptional abilities and sensitivities. They had in fact accomplished outsized things and clearly had the potential for more. However, their arrogance, feelings of superiority, and invincibility seemed, at times, to go well beyond healthy grandiosity and bordered on the patho-

logical. Why then, with such promise and potential, did these exceptionally gifted children, adolescents, and young adults become underachievers and act self-destructively?

### **The Origins and Causes of Underachievement and Self-Destructive Behavior**

From their earliest years, these exceptionally gifted children did not have the discipline, frustration tolerance, or emotional maturity to make full use of their potential. As young children, they were accustomed to high levels of achievement with minimal effort. Even as they grew older, the focused, hard work required by more demanding situations never came naturally. It actually seemed astonishing to them that some of their less gifted peers actually enjoyed the struggle of a difficult challenge. Inadequate frustration tolerance and poor self-discipline both formed the backdrop for all other causes of underachievement.

Their early emotional development varied from immaturity to age appropriate. Although they were unusually sensitive, none were emotionally precocious. Regardless of their level of emotional maturity, they were rarely able to handle the complex emotional conflicts and anxieties that developed along with their gifted traits. Despite their precocious intellect, they resorted to various forms of disengagement and withdrawal to avoid the emotional pain of these conflicts.

What then were the conflicts and anxieties that accompanied the stages of gifted development? How were these conflicts and anxieties managed? Why did underachievement and self-destructive behavior occur? How did psychotherapy help gifted development get back on track?

#### **The Early Conflicts and Anxieties That Accompany Gifted Development**

*Periodic Feelings of Strangeness and Isolation.* In this group, the individuals' unique ways of perceiving the world, seeing relationships between superficially unrelated things, their very personal senses of beauty, and off-beat, quirky senses of humor all left them feeling socially isolated. It was hard to find soul mates even among their very smart peers. Others envied their "natural" abilities, but to them, "natural" felt bizarre. Empathy for the emotional pain of others and concern for the spiritual well-being of their peers made them feel peculiar.

*Feeling Controlled Rather Than Being in Control.* Additionally, they often felt taken over by a powerful

internal drive force. On the one hand it was fun to give into what seemed like endless curiosity or the demands of their extra sensitivities. On the other hand, it felt as if they were being ruled by forces beyond their control.

*Guilt.* Instead of feeling proud, effortless success made them feel guilty. It seemed unfair to be so well endowed compared to their siblings, peers, parents, and even teachers. Greenacre (1956) referred to a boyhood memory of Dr. Albert Schweitzer's: One day during a euphonium lesson he became overwhelmed with guilt when he realized that his natural abilities to transpose and improvise meant that he was more accomplished than his teacher.

However, as they got older these exceptionally gifted children often used their giftedness to extract special considerations from their teachers. They claimed to have special needs because of their quirky intelligence, or they tried to see how little effort was required to get the highest grades. Although they secretly took delight in these manipulations, they also felt guilty and ashamed of their behavior.

*Fears of Envy and Retaliation.* Generally, the peers of these individuals were supportive and encouraging. Some of course were jealous, but not in deliberately destructive ways. Although they were sensitive to being teased, these exceptionally gifted children and adolescents complained more about being placed on a pedestal. Rather than believing that others admired them, they worried that underneath awe was malicious envy. Sometimes this worry could border on paranoia. Although none of their peers complained of this, these gifted children were convinced that others were automatically hurt and diminished by their giftedness. In psychotherapy, the fear that giftedness was innately destructive was found to be a projection of their unconscious sadism.

*Feeling Like a Failure.* These highly gifted individuals also struggled with their own internal criticisms. Repeated frustrations in trying to perfectly reproduce what was in their mind's eye often made them feel like failures. Even precocious ability could not make up for lack of discipline, poor frustration tolerance, and little capacity to delay gratification. Rather than face their limitations when they attempted to achieve something in the real world, they were often tempted to give up and withdraw into their own private world where there were no efforts and no failures. Success could simply be imagined.

*Irrational Fears of Defectiveness or Disability.* As they approached adolescence, a different type of anxiety emerged. This anxiety had less to do with pressures for acceptance, conformity, or internal and external demands for excellence, and focused more on worries about the basic structure of their gifted endowments. In addition

to feeling like failures when their best efforts fell short of perfectionistic goals, they began to worry that particular aspects of their gifted endowments had developed flaws. Just as they were beginning to develop more confidence, believe in their personal power, and accept their charisma, they began to fear that they were developing a disability in the strongest area of their endowment. No one else agreed with or found objective evidence for their concerns. But, despite assurances, they held onto these anxieties in an almost irrational way. They rejected offers of emotional support or remediation, preferring to remain angry and pessimistic. What began as a worry in latency became an almost delusional conviction in midadolescence.

As adolescence progressed, these contradictory aspects of gifted development—confidence, power, and charisma on one hand and fears of developing disabilities on the other—evolved in tandem. It was only in late adolescence and young adulthood that either extreme began to modulate. For example, one gifted trumpet player began to suspect that his upper register was beginning to crack. He became convinced that his embouchure was slowly weakening and would soon not be strong enough to support what everyone else felt were his unusually clear and vibrant high notes. During his first summer in music camp, he insisted on giving away the solos that came with his first chair position. By midadolescence, his worry had become an unshakable belief. Band leaders, teachers, and fellow students all disagreed with him and attempted to reality-test his fears. But, he could not be talked out of them.

Another preadolescent began to worry that he was having small memory slips. To compensate, he forced himself to listen more carefully to conversations. By midadolescence, he had become a gifted actor—easily capable of memorizing his lines. But, he had also convinced himself that, when it came to social situations, he simply could not remember people's names. He became gripped with anxiety that the "hard wiring" of his brain was unraveling and that he was developing a serious neurological disability. He felt that becoming a social outcast was inevitable.

A circumscribed obsession could mushroom into a pervasive feeling of inadequacy and lead to depression. One preadolescent, an exceptionally gifted writer, slowly became convinced that he was losing his critical edge. He reduced his writing time feeling it was a "waste." He withdrew from his friends. Refusals to make even small accommodations of dress and hairstyle made his social isolation a self-fulfilling prophecy. Subsequently, he became depressed.

### **How Did the Conflicts and Anxieties of Adolescence Lead to Underachievement and Self-Destructive Behavior in These Exceptionally Gifted Individuals?**

By midadolescence, sexual/social maturation and the pressures for independence brought an increased intensity to the developmental process. New conflicts and anxieties added to the lingering ones from earlier years. The unfolding of gifted traits in adolescence also brought another set of intense dynamics, conflicts, and anxieties to the normal developmental process.

At times, each developmental force with its own pressures for mastery and opportunities for failure seemed to operate separately and could dominate. At different times, several developmental forces could operate together and produce a confused and tumultuous picture quite different from the apparently smooth development described by Bloom (1985) in his retrospective study of very talented adults, or the virtually untroubled development of a musical prodigy followed by Feldman (1986).

By midadolescence, these exceptionally gifted young people had begun to seriously and consistently undermine their gifted development. Each limited how he or she used his or her potential strengths and began to act in other very self-destructive ways. These patterns of underachievement and destructiveness went well beyond the withdrawal, distractibility, procrastination, and sudden loss of interest that were characteristic of their younger years.

#### **Normal Developmental Forces Interact With Gifted Development**

*Social/Sexual Development.* The feeling of urgency that all adolescents experience in their need for peer acceptance and in their desire to establish sexual identity and competence cannot be underestimated. In this area, no child wants to be left behind and these exceptionally gifted adolescents were no exception. Norbert Wiener (1953) was forced to postpone interpersonal and sexual intimacy in favor of the single-minded development of his scientific and mathematical giftedness. He described the excruciating emotional struggle in establishing an intimate personal and sexual relationship with a woman in his later years.

However, much as they might have liked to side step the tasks of gifted development, their gifted character still caused conflicts. Wanting to achieve their social and sexual goals often conflicted with their strict moral and ethical standards. Using their exceptional personal power and charisma to gain sexual and social advantage was tempting but felt unfair. Giving into the biological urges of sexuality

often felt irresistible but also seemed to disregard the needs of others.

*Struggles With Dependence and Independence.* For these exceptionally gifted adolescents, a powerful internal drive, ongoing oppositionalism, and an artificially prolonged but necessary dependence on parents and teachers conflicted with their struggles for independence. Their impressive accomplishments, grandiosity, and charisma convinced them that they had good common sense and could make excellent personal and professional judgments. They fought against parental controls and objected to more advanced instruction from teachers and mentors. However, their repeated immature and impulsive behavior frequently left them on the verge of disaster. Parents and teachers had to frequently intervene to protect them from themselves. These contradictory pressures for independence on the one hand and the reality of their dependency on parents and teachers on the other caused tremendous conflict. A good cooperative relationship with parents and teachers could quickly change into one that felt like hostile dependency.

### The Special Dynamics of Exceptional Gifted Development in Adolescence: The Effects of Personal Power and Charisma

By midadolescence, advancing neurological maturity enhanced precocious abilities and increased intellectual and aesthetic sensitivity and judgment. Hormonal changes turbo-charged an already powerful endowed drive. Writing became more insightful, artwork became more complex, and performances took on that special “on the edge of your seat quality.” The urge for deeper exploration became more appealing. More focused personal exploration might have reawakened earlier fears of isolation, guilt, and fears of envy, but it also was helping them arrive closer to their personal vision and destiny. At times they withdrew, hoping to avoid these anxieties. But, they could not stay away for long. Closing in on their personal vision, more personal power, and more charisma was too seductive.

In adolescence, however, personal power, confidence, and charisma was a mixed blessing. Intellectual or artistic breakthroughs could feel enormously exciting but they could also be confusing and frightening. Giovacchini (1960) reported these same fears in accomplished adult scientists. Succeeding could also yield unexpected results. Were these gifted adolescents ready to be the objects of awe and admiration? Were they ready to be the objects of sexual desire? Were they ready to be leaders? Could they restrain themselves from using their exceptional giftedness in hurtful manipulative ways?

One gifted college freshman was overwhelmed by the aftermath of her theatrical success. Even though she was not an acting major, she landed the lead in that semester’s show. On opening night she was reviewed as a stand-out. Shortly thereafter, a handsome upperclassman pursued her with declarations of love. Initially, she was swept off her feet by the power of this experience. After several weeks, however, she began to doubt her capacity to respond emotionally and sexually. (Similarly, Miles Davis [1989], the gifted trumpet player, was only a high school graduate on the road with a famous band when one of the lead singers approached him sexually. He also reported feeling flattered, as well as inadequate.) She ended the relationship abruptly. Men continued to pursue her, however, and she slowly gained confidence. Now, she found herself dreaming up schemes to make all men on campus fall in love with her. Although she enjoyed these romantic fantasies, she was also appalled at her willingness to be deceitful and cunning. She began to hate herself and have serious doubts about her moral character.

The same conflicted feelings of grandiosity and self-loathing were experienced by an exceptionally gifted adolescent writer who, as he became more accomplished, began to elaborate sadistic fantasies of revenge. He relished the idea of punishing all those who mocked him in grade school. Having always thought of himself as a gentle, caring person, he was aghast that his increasing confidence as a writer led to these aggressive feelings.

### Efforts at Conflict Resolution in Adolescence

Despite their growth in intellect and conceptual abilities, these exceptionally gifted adolescents were only dimly aware of the nature and content of their conflicts and anxieties. They were quite aware, however, of the great emotional discomfort that these conflicts and anxieties caused. Because they were unable to tolerate even the smallest bit of emotional discomfort—they could not live with anxiety, struggle with anxiety, or attempt to understand anxiety—they simply tried to eliminate it.

In order to accomplish this, they resorted to primitive psychological mechanisms of defense. Avoidance, withdrawal, sudden loss of interest, and procrastination were similar to the anxiety-avoidance methods used when they were younger. Projecting blame onto others, arrogance, provocative behavior, and deliberately inflicting pain and injury on themselves, however, took maladaptive conflict resolution to another level.

All of these methods were quite self-destructive, and had the effect of seriously disrupting high levels of achievement and further gifted development. Jacobson (1959) has



discussed how certain exceptional people unconsciously arrange for their own self-punishment.

*Arrogant Attitudes and Provocative Behavior.* Unlike the compensatory narcissistic behavior of children who were exposed to abuse or trauma (Gedo, 1996b) the provocative, arrogant behavior of these exceptionally gifted adolescents had other origins: In their immature, minds healthy grandiosity, personal vision, and charisma could lead to entitlement and contempt. A part of their grandiosity no longer seemed healthy. Instead of providing inspiration, it had become a defense against fantasized flaws in their gifted endowment and was now, in addition, a rebellion against the prolonged dependency on parents and teachers.

Rudeness, disrespectfulness, entitled arrogant attitudes, and provocative behavior were all very self-destructive. They seemed like open invitations for censure and punishment. Unchecked, they had the potential for destroying all of the support and admiration these exceptionally gifted young people had earned in their earlier years.

The most common expression of their provocative behavior was in the negativistic use of their intelligence. Those perceived to be incompetent, including parents, were the most frequent targets of their merciless criticism. However, contempt could also be directed at their teachers and mentors, all of whom had been consistently helpful and supportive. These gifted adolescents would seize on one of their teacher's small flaws and magnify it into a global imperfection.

Because those who came in contact with these exceptionally gifted adolescents deeply cared for them and valued their gifts, parents were often given an opportunity to intervene and forestall disasters. Managing the problem of provocative adolescents and soothing exasperated teachers was a source of ongoing tension and disagreement between parents; how much should these adolescents be rescued from the consequences of their self-destructive behavior? On one hand, perhaps preventing disasters would allow gifted growth to continue. As they got older, perhaps the process of normal maturation would bring more responsible behavior. Conversely, parents worried about accountability. Should their children be punished and forced to "pay the price and suffer now?" Would pain, deprivation, and humiliation "teach them a lesson" and help them "snap out of it"? Or, would it simply feed their masochism and confirm their convictions of inadequacy?

*Acts of Physical Self-Destructiveness.* In order to manage their conflicts and anxieties, some of these exceptionally gifted adolescents deliberately inflicted pain and injury on themselves. They engaged in random acts of self-mutilation. For example, one gifted adolescent began to cut

himself after winning a national science award. Another adolescent caused continuous infections under his thumbnail just when his reputation as a gifted instrumentalist began to soar. They overworked or neglected their bodies so that injuries began to occur and peak performances were not possible. They dangerously neglected their nutrition or personal hygiene. One gifted singer refused to brush her teeth, even though her dentist repeatedly warned by her that the enamel on her teeth was starting to deteriorate. They could become immobilized by psychosomatic illnesses that had no physical basis.

Passive or active self-destruction took place in a semi-fugue state of denial. They remained only dimly aware of their behavior even after having it repeatedly brought to their attention. On those rare occasions that they could accept responsibility for their self-destructive behavior, this acknowledgement was not accompanied by a capacity to stop it. Instead, they flagellated themselves, insisting that this irrational behavior was further evidence of their stupidity and inadequacy. Preoccupations with pain and injury, the compulsion to cause them, the apparent helplessness to stop them, and visits to doctors and therapists were all distractions that eroded the single-minded dedication necessary for the highest levels of achievement.

Besides limiting higher levels of achievement, self-inflicted pain and injury also served to expiate the guilt that these exceptionally gifted adolescents felt for having unfair advantages over their peers. Flaunting self-destructive behavior guaranteed them pity from their peers: a welcome relief from admiration and awe. Destructive acts could cause physical handicaps that "evened up the score" and brought these exceptionally gifted adolescents in line with their less gifted peers. Mastering subconsciously created obstacles was difficult but apparently more gratifying than effortless success that never led to a deep sense of self-esteem. When asked if he derived self-esteem from his dancing, one dancer replied,

Dancing has always been just a part of me. I really don't have to work at it, it just happens. It's a natural aspect of my being, like drinking a glass of water or breathing. Should I be getting self-esteem from breathing?

Ambivalence about separating from their parents was another reason these exceptionally gifted adolescents acted self-destructively. Recognizing that their self-destructive acts were also requests for control, parents had to occasionally force their children to withdraw from commitments that might stretch them too thin or limit them from accepting opportunities that might cause too much anxiety.

ety. These confrontations often led to blazing battles that enraged adolescents and left their parents feeling emotionally drained.

Rather than resolve conflict and reduce anxiety, arrogant, provocative, and self-destructive behavior made matters worse. These exceptionally gifted adolescents became depressed, more anxious, and even suicidal. Some worried they were losing their minds.

## The Role of Psychotherapy

### Setting the Stage

All of these exceptionally gifted adolescents and young adults were referred for psychotherapy in a state of crisis. They and their parents were frightened, angry, and desperate for interventions that would provide quick relief. Frequent and extended sessions were arranged. In a short period of time, developmental, family, social, educational, and medical histories were obtained. The initial assessment included a detailed developmental history of each person's giftedness. What were their gifted traits? How had they evolved? How had they failed to evolve?

### Arriving at a Formulation

An understanding of the dynamics of underachievement, self-destructive behavior, and other serious symptoms evolved after an exploration of their conflicts with family, friends, and school. Conflicts about their internal sense of giftedness were explored in great detail.

### Establishing a Working Alliance: Initial Interventions

At first, these exceptionally gifted adolescents and young adults were quite open about their problems with family, school, and friends. Simply talking about them with a supportive, experienced therapist brought some early relief. When suggestions for managing some of these more obvious conflicts worked, the intensity of their anxiety diminished and they began to feel more hopeful and trusting.

Reduced anxiety also meant that their increasing capacity for self-discipline and frustration tolerance, as well as their precocious intellect, could all be used to help understand the causes of their conflicts and anxieties. Slowly and reluctantly they began to accept that anxiety and conflict were not signs of an inadequate or weak constitution but

were normal aspects of all growth and development. As they began to tolerate some degree of emotional discomfort, they could face rather than avoid their conflicts.

### Deeper Explorations

Gradually, they came to understand that their need to avoid the emotional distress that was a part of any psychological conflict was at the root of their psychological symptoms and their compulsion to act out destructively. Avoidance and denial had forced them to restrict their accomplishments and propelled them into acts of self-destruction.

A milestone in therapy came when they finally could admit that they had lost control of themselves and needed help with problems they couldn't solve. Depending on others had never been easy, so when they could rely on the therapist and therapist without feeling humiliated, it set the stage for a deeper type of work.

Becoming less defensive and less suspicious allowed them to place more trust in the therapist. Little by little they could absorb advice, guidance, and insight without feeling invaded or controlled.

Over time, they realized that their most conflicted feelings about being gifted were not about their struggles with family, friends, or school. Their deepest, most intense conflicts and anxieties arose as they became more powerful, felt more independent, had grand visions, and allowed themselves to feel charismatic. They were deeply ambivalent about this phase of their gifted development.

On the one hand, they were thrilled by fantasies of controlling situations and people and of being superior and independent. On the other hand, they felt a deep sense of shame and fear. They hated their competitive and ambitious desires for control and domination. They hated themselves for feeling superior to their friends, parents, teachers, and mentors. What happened to that sensitive person who wanted to "belong" and was concerned about everyone's spiritual well-being? They also knew that deep down inside they were not ready for true independence and still needed to rely on others.

For those who continued in psychotherapy, a deeper examination of both sides of their conflicts became possible. Could they feel powerful and strong and yet be sensitive? Could they compete without needing to completely dominate? Could they become leaders and inspire rather than control? Could they work toward independence without being reckless? Could they engage in a mutual process without feeling compromised? More discussion and collaboration, admitting when they needed help, and actually taking it allowed them to exercise more control over their

conflicts and anxieties about their gifted drives and sensitivities. Finding a more comfortable place for giftedness within themselves became more possible. Giftedness did not have to dominate them or others in negative destructive ways. They began to feel less shame and guilt. Their developing adolescent abilities and special sensitivities began to feel like a more natural part of themselves instead of bizarre freakish qualities that had become undesirable personality traits. Their powerful internal drive began to feel less dangerous and less destructive. More gifted endowment could be used with less conflict (Corbin, 1974), less restriction, and less self-destruction.

### Summary and Conclusions

Psychotherapeutic work with this group of exceptionally gifted adolescents and young adults revealed how their gifted traits evolved along with a corresponding set of conflicts and anxieties. Because they had supportive and appropriately involved parents, generally admiring peers, and a reasonable educational environment, the usual social, parental, and educational conflicts were less intense. They did, of course, worry about their capacity to manage the increasing demands that came with each level of success. They were equally concerned about how advanced development might preclude them from important age-appropriate experiences. However, their most troublesome conflicts and anxieties arose not from fears of ostracism, fears of failure, or lost opportunities, but from fear that giftedness had distorted and twisted them as human beings. Would their developing power, grand ambitions, and charisma turn them into self-involved narcissistic destructive people?

Because these deeper conflicts were largely out of their awareness, they could not grapple with them effectively. Instead, to escape from their anxieties, they resorted to primitive psychological methods of denial, avoidance, provocative behavior, and projection of blame onto others. The usual result was depression and anxiety, as well as self-destructive behavior and underachievement.

After psychotherapy provided some initial relief from symptoms of anxiety and depression, the process evolved into a model for other collaborative relationships. Although they were initially suspicious and resisted this—fearing their giftedness might be invaded or compromised—they began to rely on the therapist for education, insight, and guidance. With more trust in the therapist and the therapeutic process, they could begin to express and experience the emotions they previously had to deny or repress. Now, instead of avoiding these confusing feelings, they could be

used to enhance intellectual and creative discovery. As they became less defensive, self-observation and introspection became possible, and their more troublesome conflicts could now reach conscious awareness and be examined in a useful way. They could make more use of their excellent intellect and self-destructiveness and underachievement became less necessary. Integration of giftedness with the other more “normal” aspects of their personality slowly began to occur.

Although this is a clinical report that describes psychotherapeutic work with a group of exceptionally gifted adolescents and young adults, I believe it adds to our knowledge of the nature of giftedness and provides some of the missing pieces to the puzzle of gifted underachievement. My hope is that educators, counselors, parents, and clinicians will find these insights useful in their work with these wonderful young people.

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