

Philosophical Practice as Coping Facilitator for the Gifted

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Some people are particularly intense. They were born that way – intense, complex, and driven. They seem to have extra energy. Extra curiosity. They can take an interest in just about anything, it seems, submerging themselves completely in what they're into at the moment. From an early age, they surprise their parents and teachers with their strange questions; questions that lack singular answers. With their quirky sense of humor. Their precocious conscience. Their empathy – they seem to know, instinctively, what other people are feeling. They're different. They can be

...exhausting, demanding, and perplexing enigmas. They often amaze, delight and confound the adults who know, love and teach them. (Daniels and Meckstroth, 2009)

Yet very few parents, teachers, counsellors, psychologists, or physicians receive any special training in supporting their “highly charged

emotional and intellectual needs” (ibid.). And so, as they grow, they continue to surprise – now sometimes with their asynchronous lack of judgement. They’re told, “For someone so bright, you have no common sense at all,” meaning that they should have known better. Judgement lags behind intellect; “the brighter the child, the greater the gap” (Webb, 2011). Or they become impulsive, argumentative worriers who fail to complete tasks and can’t stand interruptions; they have “difficulty with transitions” (Webb et al, 2012). And many are highly sensitive, taking everything to heart. Bright, but not necessarily street-wise. Gifted, but perhaps secretly wishing they could give their gift back: a vivid imagination can also bring catastrophic thinking and nightmares. These people are treading a fine line between under- and overstimulation, and they’re overloaded a lot of the time. Overloaded and anxious. Or depressed. Many have been so let down by so many well-meaning therapists and counsellors who just didn’t get it. If being yourself ever felt safe, it doesn’t anymore. According to prevailing attitudes, however, the gifted should have a strong and stable sense of self-assurance.

But the case is exactly the opposite ... [W]henver they suddenly get the feeling they have failed to live up to some standard, then they are plagued by

anxiety or deep feelings of guilt and shame. (Alice Miller in Jacobsen¹, 1999)

Ethical demands are, of course, difficult to live up to. If your conscience is particularly energetic, the angst, shame and guilt will be of corresponding valor. And those who are highly empathic sense other people's feelings too. They can tell if their teacher finds them annoying. They can tell if their peers think they're "too much." They feel implicit blame, whether irrational and unwarranted, or rational and warranted. They may try to make amends, but end up making things worse. They're likely to feel at their wits' ends, and powerless. And they just can't let it go. "If I'm so smart, why am I so lonely? If I'm so smart, why am I so dumb?"² Not understanding the source of their frustration or ways to alleviate it, they may simply "hunker down and live their lives in survival mode" (Stephanie Tolan in Jacobsen, 1999).

Those whose intensity and complexity put them at risk of anxiety, depression, or life at survival mode should not be left to their own devices. No-one can automatically fend for themselves. We need to assist them as much as we assist everyone else, but in different ways. When this world is too much for you,

¹ I'll reference quotes within quotes where I found them.

² These are blog post titles from Paula Prober's blog *Your Rainforest Mind* (see reference list).

and you feel like you're too much for this world, too
– what is there to do?

Reconcile, strive for virtue, and pursue wisdom³.

1. Reconcile

Psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902-1980) noted that some people have a heightened ability to respond to stimuli in various areas, such as the intellect, imagination, or through their senses.

You have so much energy! I can't believe how much you do! Don't you ever slow down? Why are you always asking 'why'? Why do you always read so much into everything everyone says? Can't you just sit back and accept things as they are? You're analysing this to death! What's the story with your going on and on about flavours and textures and sights and smells? I don't see what the big deal is. I can't understand why you have to have the tags cut out of all of your clothes. You're always looking for other solutions to every problem and other ways of doing things. Why can't you just settle on one good answer and get on with it? What can't you accept that the first one you think of may well be 'good enough'? You're too sensitive! Why do you let all those things bother you? Why do you always take everything to

³ Wisdom, they say, is memory without the emotional charge. That is where you are headed.

heart? I thought you were going to outgrow this business of being so sensitive. (Fiedler, 2009)

Dabrowski called it ‘overexcitability⁴.’ His theory describes “the intensity that is part and parcel of the day-to-day experiences of gifted [children and] adults” (ibid.). These people tend to “be intense about everything to the point that they are labelled ‘excessive personalities’” (Carlstrom, 2011). Their intensity can cause them problems. With others, or with themselves. Difficulties often arise from the interaction of their characteristics with “the cultural settings, attitudes, and value-milieu within which they may find themselves” (Webb, 2014). They may start to think there’s something wrong with them, or that they’re doomed to alienation and loneliness.

They’re wrong.

But they are bound to be different: “advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm” (The Columbus Group in Daniels and Meckstroth, 2009). They need someone who knows what intensities are about. Someone who can help with mapping and navigation.

⁴ The exact translation from the Dabrowski’s Polish is ‘superstimulatability’ (Webb, 2014). Other possibilities include ‘superexcitability’ or ‘hyperexcitability.’

Dabrowski named this theory *Positive Disintegration*. Conflict and inner suffering, Dabrowski believed, are “necessary for advanced development ... for movement from ‘what is’ to ‘what ought to be’” (Lind, 2011). Before you can rise like a Phoenix from the flames, you’ll have to burn. For the excessively sensitive, smart, curious and creative, this will probably sting. More than a little, and more than once. But, as Jaspers put it, “[w]e all have to suffer, labor, be guilty, be subject to chance and die” (quoted in van Deurzen, 2002). And to some, these things matter a great deal. They can’t make them matter less – overexcitabilities frequent over-excitable frequencies. Yet they can’t always cope with life’s fervor, either. Or with being asked a million times why they still haven’t decided what to become ‘when they grow up,’ as they suspect their reply is something like, “marine biologist musician organic farmer poet yoga instructor former hula hoop champion” (Prober, 2017).

You might have changed your major in college several times or you were in college an extra several years or you didn’t go to college because you couldn’t choose just one. (Ibid.)

They might get anxious, stay anxious, and fall into what Nietzsche called “the experience of resentment, which consists of leading one’s life as if one has been deprived and treated unfairly” (van Deurzen, 2002).

Failing to reconcile one's overexcitabilities with facts of life can also lead to existential guilt; "the sensation of having fallen short in some way, or indeed having wronged someone (or oneself) by not doing what one is capable of doing" (ibid.). It becomes a kind of "movement away from a fundamental pain, a movement, which cannot succeed and therefore starts circling arounds itself" (Lindseth, 2002). Jacobsen (1999) also warns,

[g]uard against allowing your mind to get bogged down in circular worry patterns. When you let your curiosity turn against you, you are inviting unnecessary anxiety and depression into your life.

Move towards the pain, directly, instead. Take an interest: the capacity for taking an interest is a strong motivational factor, and the excessively smart and curious have a lot of it. Grieve – a while. Invite the presence of sadness in lieu of anxiety, for a change. For if we realize that there is sadness in our lives,

...that we feel depressed due to the grief over our ... condition – then that is something else. Then sadness, fear, shame, etc. become the foundation for amazement and deeper thoughts – for a sensitive self-reflection. (Lindseth, 2015)

For the particularly intense, sensitive self-reflection is particularly imperative. There is but one remedy for the conceited modern man, meant Kierkegaard;

“despair. It is only when he finds himself in the deepest extremity that he understands his true condition” (discussed in Heschel 1973, 2004). It sounds quite like Dabrowski’s positive disintegration theory, doesn’t it? It

[s]ounds good. Sounds like a reasonable plan: solve the identity puzzle, develop and grow, reach out, do something that matters, leave the world better than when we found it. Yet, as always, there’s a catch ...[O]ur characters ... must be earned, and often the hard way. All of the great works of religion and philosophy are replete with wilderness stories. They hero’s journey is predicated on suffering, enduring confusion and despair, facing deep-seated fears of being alone, and ultimately finding the way back home. (Jacobsen, 1999)

Know thyself – yes. But first, identify thyself. Understand thyself. Reveal and heal thyself, manage thyself. And liberate thyself. As Spinoza philosophized, “[i]n order to liberate ourselves ... we must achieve a love for reality itself – a love that he interprets as an intellectual appreciation of how everything is as it is” (in Amir, 2015). Highly sensitive, intense and complex individuals are well suited for such appreciation. Besides, an occasional inability to stick to one thing at a time may well be a

symptom of multipotentiality⁵. What looks like indecisiveness could hold such qualities as contextual thinking, translation between modes of thought, and idea synthesis.

...recognizing your magnificence is not the same as conceit or arrogance or self-centeredness or grandiosity. It's actually the opposite. It's finding that place within you that's all about love ... [for] your mistakes, your failures, your successes, your disabilities, your persnickiness, your idealism, your sensitivities, your intuitions, your overexcitabilities, your obsessions, your perfectionism, your loneliness, and your bad hair days⁶. (Prober, 2016)

And remember, “[y]ou can’t be exceptional without being exceptional” (Aron, 1999).

2. Strive for virtue

Many are well into their adulthood when they first realize that they’re really rather gifted; they have believed for the longest time that everybody thinks and feels the same way they do. Some stay unidentified. Others, whose parents or teachers

⁵ Emilie Wapnick hosts a ‘multipotentialite’ forum at *Puttylike*; “(adj.): Able to embody different identities and perform a variety of tasks gracefully” (see reference list).

⁶ Prober adds, “I know. I’m asking a lot.”

identified them as children suffer from impostor syndrome as adults; “it’s all a mistake. I’m not gifted.” Some engage in self-sabotage. Perhaps they all need a reminder from Marianne Williamson (1992),

We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people will not feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do.

And one from Lydia Amir (2002): “nothing benefits us more than another rational human being.” Sometimes it may feel necessary to withdraw and ‘shine’ alone, but every now and then we need to engage with the world⁷.

We may have the feelings of fear, courage, desire, anger, pity, and any pleasure or pain in general either more or less than we should, and in both cases this is not a good thing; but to have these feelings at the right times and for the right things and towards the right men and for the right purpose and in the right manner, this is the mean and the best, and it is

⁷ The ancient meaning of ‘idiot,’ apparently, was “someone who believes they can live only for themselves, who thinks they do best on their own” (Vernon, 2010).

precisely this which belongs to virtue. (Aristotle, 384-322 BCE, 1984)

To strive for virtue means to strive to build “a character with a disposition for relating to eternal principles, and transforming itself permanently by realising those principles for their own sake” (Fogh Kirkeby, 2002). To bit by bit watch “the walls of your ego recede, and your life become increasingly merged in the universal life” (Bertrand Russel in Amir, 2002), and to strive for the ability to assess that one course of action or one life-path is more meaningful than another (Zohar and Marshall in Gatto-Walden, 2009). To practice listening. To practice thinking:

A lucid view of the darkest situation is already, in itself, an act of optimism. Indeed, it implies that the situation is *thinkable*... (Jean-Paul Sartre in van Deurzen, 2002)

To practice reflection – to practice learning from mistakes:

Honor good intentions and expect error; separate maliciousness from mistake ... When you’ve said or done something mean-spirited that has insulted or harmed someone else, accept the regret, make amends, and use it as a catalyst for growth, resolving to do better next time. (Jacobsen, 1999)

To let “critical thinking be self-corrective thinking” (Lipman, 2003). To practice failing *better* – putting the focus back on learning. As Silverman (2009) put it: if it didn’t turn out the way you wanted it to, write a ‘WIMI⁸’ note; “Why I Missed It.” Playing back the situation, rewriting the script and adapting the direction appropriately. Praising effort rather than result, and creating balance by relating capacity and endeavor to success in equal measure as failure.

Just as scientists apply scientific method to the exploration of problematic situations so students should do the same if they are ever to learn to think for themselves. Instead, we ask them to study the end results of what the scientists have discovered; we neglect the process and fixate upon the product. /.../ Discoveries and inventions seldom just happen. (Lipman, 2003)⁹

To aim to improve the quality of your own thinking by careful, skilful analysis and revision. Being firm, but kind. Trying to overcome your innate egocentrism. Seeing those merciless, eleventh-hour

⁸ Linda Silverman also suggests, “Move your start time further from your deadline, and you’ll be surprised as how much better you feel about the outcome of your efforts.”

⁹ Peter Higgs, when asked what technological developments we would see emerging from the discovery of the *Higgs boson* replied, “I have no idea.”

conclusions you drew about the ways of the world in your youth for what they are.

Do not be afraid of the past. If people tell you that it is irrevocable, do not believe them. The past, the present and the future are but one moment in the sight of God, in whose sight we should try to live. Time and space, succession and extension, are merely accidental conditions of Thought. The Imagination can transcend them and move in a free sphere of ideal existences... (Wilde, 1895-97; 2002)

The term ‘experience,’ according to Barrientos-Rastrojo (2015), is etymologically linked to *danger*, *gate*, and *walk through*. A nice idea. A nice thought companion if, for instance, you decide to take an interest in the classic cardinal virtue, Courage¹⁰; “also termed fortitude, forbearance, strength, endurance, and the ability to confront fear, uncertainty, and intimidation” (Wikipedia, 2017). Such as may crop up when facing perfectionism, intellectualization and excessive rumination that is starting to resemble OCD. Or when the look of a peer prompts a re-evaluation of what can and can’t be influenced.

Since the river is forever changing, a riverboat pilot must develop an understanding of how different

¹⁰ Might be useful to look up *Temperence* at the same time.

forces and conditions interact to impact the river's course. (Johnson in Lipman et al, 1993)

In philosophical coaching with me, we'll work with all of this. Our lodestar, to begin with: "[t]ry to be a model of self-acceptance, of willingness to look foolish and to admit to being wrong" (Silverman, 2009).

3. Pursue wisdom

Pursue wisdom like your life depended on it, because it does. What is wisdom? Wisdom is the expression of healed hurt. Small hurts, and major ones. Wisdom belongs to no-one. It materializes in encounters. Philosophy, of course, means 'love of wisdom.' How do you pursue it? "One becomes a philosopher, not by virtue of intellectual gifts but by the exercise of will" (Nelson in Lipman et al, 1993). "Philosophizing ... is a form of empowerment – an instigation to (re) acquire self-determination over one's own life" (Niehaus, 2015).

In philosophical practice, I do not have a theory about human nature, or about how human beings function as such. I do not have a theory about the self either, or about the person, or about how the human

psyche is structured ... Instead ... I have the history of philosophy as a toolbox from which I can take theories, perspectives and ideas. (Holt, 2002)

In philosophical practice, we have dialogues. Inquisitive, Socratic, heuristic dialogues. And although some thoughts are difficult, it often feels better afterwards. “This is not only because something important was touched in the dialogue, but rather because one has entered a movement in which life forces have been set free” (Lindseth, 2002). “One feels livened up.” When the life forces call you, you must, of course, obey. “To preserve one’s commitment,” however, “with the intensity of its first ardour requires more than obedience” (Heschel, 1973; 2013). “Surprise, spiritual adventure, the search for new appreciation – all these are necessary ingredients...” (ibid.) In our gifted philosophical coaching, we’ll address every aspect of what you bring to our table. I am not afraid of the dark – not yours, not mine. We look to the ancient model of ‘care of the self,’ “interpreted perhaps less with a view to strict historical accuracy and more with a view to contemporary concerns ... [which] invites us to imagine a practice that seeks freedom in the aesthetics of living as a subject of power” (Jenkins, 2002). ‘The aesthetics of living as a subject of power.’ In practicing philosophy, we practice thinking creatively and responsively about the self and its relations. The ‘self’ is broad; the ‘ego’ is

narrow. We'll add a pinch of humor, perhaps. "The alchemy of humor is known to transform suffering into joy." (Amir, 2002) The alchemy of humorous wisdom pursuit just might have eudaimonia as a side effect.

The value of philosophy is partly in relation to thought and partly in relation to feeling, though its effects in these two ways are closely interconnected. On the theoretical side, it is a help in understanding the universe as a whole, in so far as this is possible. On the side of feeling, it is a help toward a just appreciation of the ends of human life. (Bertrand Russel in Amir, 2002)

Philosophy comprises both *logos* and *sophia*: the word, and the felt sense of the word. Insight, and embodied wisdom.

Choose your dwellings, like Harry Potter under the Sorting Hat. Nevermind occasional scorn by muggles:

If you plan to engage in philosophy, beware that you will be laughed at and ridiculed by people in general. You'll hear, "Well, well! Have we a real philosopher in town?" and, "What a pompous fop!" Do not attempt to reply in kind, but remain close to what you hold true, resting assured that God has put you in your place. And never forget that if you manage to stand it out, the very folks who laugh at you now will

one day admire you. Should you succumb, however, they shall laugh at you twice.¹¹

Critique, let's recall, "is not an enemy, but a helper we should thank for giving us the opportunity to reach insights that are better than the ones we had before" (Svare, 2008, my translation).

Remind yourself daily that apprehension and unknowns are intrinsic to progress. Learn to wear ambiguity like a comfortable old sweater. Try new things with less fear of appearing foolish, mindful that no matter how brilliant your action, someone will disapprove. Intelligently persist in your efforts, the way Albert Einstein did. When asked how he worked, Einstein replied, "How do I work? I grope." (Jacobsen, 1999)

Treat yourself with intellectual respect. Identify drops of experience and thinking. Write your philosophical autobiography. Watch the patterns emerge. Do everything you can to find out who you are, and why you're here. Entelechy, according to Wiktionary (2017): "A particular type of motivation, need for self-determination, and inner strength

¹¹ This is my own translation, freely from the Greek-Swedish translation by Anders Håkansson. Elizabeth Carter's translation is available at classics.mit.edu/Epictetus

directing life and growth to become all one is capable of being.” The oak is in the acorn. All it needs is soil, sun, water.

A philosophical coach’s job is to try “to make [you] recognize [your] own talents” (Svare, Holt and Herrestad, 2002). You might be able to fend for yourself, but “doing everything yourself is time-consuming, often unnecessary, and occasionally arrogant” (Jacobsen, 1999). Wisdom is best pursued together. In dialogue – carefully phrasing your thoughts in conversation – ‘saying it out loud’ can function as a guarantor against self-deception. Become a philosopher. Dare to shake things up.

Do we have the desire to set things straight, to alter the status quo and question established tradition, challenging current knowledge monopolies? (Persson, 2013)

Of course we do. We look for principles, values, and meaning. Cultivate our curiosity. Reflect, revise, rework. Continue, with grace and urgency. “Work is love made visible,” as Kahlil Gibran once wrote (1926; 1991). Let’s get to work.

Philosophy is what we need.

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