

Finding the Gems in the Rough: the mission to identify and serve the unknowing gifted

By Sara Harrier

Over the decades, education and resources for gifted youth have made significant contributions to the education and mental health fields. Many thinkers have shed light on not just the intellectual differences of the gifted, but on the unique personality traits and social-emotional needs of this population.

And it's been hugely liberating and beneficial to many youth, who with enough support, are empowered to achieve greatness in their lives and the world.

However, we know that **giftedness doesn't go away as we reach adulthood**. And the emotional complexities that accompany increased sensitivity and awareness are nearly impossible to detangle from the continued need for intellectual engagement and creativity as we enter higher education and the workforce.

Dr. Mary-Elaine Jacobsen, bless her, worked to bring the discussion of adult giftedness into mainstream literature. In 1999, she published "[The Gifted Adult: A Revolutionary Guide for Liberating Everyday Genius](#)." I imagine that for many who could identify with the word "gifted" and so bought the book, the read was life-changing. (It was for me).

Many gifted adults, regardless of whether they participated in gifted education in their youth, still don't identify as gifted in adulthood.

Their awareness of their own difference either fades away or becomes repressed, with possibly devastating implications.

Experts in the field identify mental health challenges that may be associated with giftedness and high intelligence, including symptoms of depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, etc.

While mental health diagnoses can sometimes be accurate (after all, dual diagnoses and twice-exceptionality are very real things), for gifted individuals, there may be another root problem.

Gifted individuals are doing their best to cope in a world that doesn't get what they're going through.

High intelligence and perceptivity means that there's an incredible amount of stimulation and internal processing. Without accurate self-understanding and support, a complex interplay of boredom, overstimulation and seemingly excessive internal processing can look a lot like mental illness; gifted adults risk being stuck in misdiagnosis.

The clear need for recognition of giftedness points to the problem of identification of gifted adults. One issue is with the word itself; **adults just don't associate themselves with "giftedness"**.

They were either never identified, assumed they "grew out of it," or are so focused on their own gifted children that they don't feel they can focus the giftedness spotlight on themselves.

Some thinkers argue that we can change the term to something that's more relatable for adults. Yet even when we use words like "smart", "intelligent" or "bright", we run into problems, including stigma in the name of egalitarianism, imposter syndrome (particularly for women), and gross oversimplification. The words don't even come close to capturing the gamut of characteristics that come with giftedness.

High intelligence is only a piece of the giftedness puzzle.

Polish psychologist Kazimierz Dąbrowski (1902-1980) described "exemplar" individuals who had finely-tuned nervous systems that resulted in five over-excitabilities — emotional, imaginal, intellectual, psychomotor, and sensual.

Dabrowski also conceptualized growth among these individuals as occurring through a series of broad-reaching transformations known as positive disintegrations. His description of developmental drive more closely resembles a gifted personality style than any specific cognitive ability.

Dabrowski's metaphors of developmental steps partner well with the concurrent philosophical work of Joseph Campbell (1904-1987), American thinker and writer known for his comparative analyses of ancient mythologies and religions.

Campbell famously described "the hero's journey," a ubiquitous story of the man or woman who in spite of incredible obstacles and suffering, goes out and achieves great deeds on behalf of their people, or society as a whole.

It turns out that Dabrowski points to a potential real-world manifestation of a deeply powerful metaphor; at the risk of overstating my case, **there's a lot at stake if we don't identify and support the figurative heroes and heroines of our world.**

And to try and reach unidentified gifted adults by talking only about intelligence runs the risk of missing out on an incredible population of adults with huge developmental potential (if only it is harnessed).

So, given how important it is to increase awareness of giftedness and the difficulty of identification of the "unknowing gifted", what do we do?

The fundamental issue of gifted personality is critical to the identification of these people. It's important to know all the traits of adult giftedness, so that professionals can use that language (instead of "giftedness") to market their books, articles, and services.

So that the unknowing gifted can read the cover of a book or the copy of a website, exhale a sigh of relief, and think, "Wow, for the first time, someone gets me."

And once identified, **gifted individuals need to sit through a momentary period of heightened self-exploration as they work through the role of their intensities in their life path.** They must stop repressing their exceptionality in service to an understandable but tragic sense of egalitarianism, so that they can do whatever it is that they've been holding back.

Mary-Elaine Jacobsen claimed that there were 20 million unidentified gifted adults in the United States when she published her book in 1999, nearly 10% of American adults at the time. Updated to today's numbers in 2013, that's approximately 31 million adults.

Just imagine what would happen if a critical mass of about 30 million brilliant and driven adults were able to release the shackles of misdiagnosis and loneliness, own their gifts, and set loose on starting their own world-changing revolutions.

Just imagine.

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Sara Harrier, MSW, is a coach and communication expert who works with gifted adults to help them reach greater self-understanding and self-liberation. While she loves working with all gifted adults, her primary mission is to reach unknowing gifted women, so that they can harness their strengths and revolutionize the world. You can read more at her website. She welcomes any suggestions you've got for reaching this population.

- See more at: <http://highability.org>