

Out of Sync:

Essays on Giftedness

Stephanie S. Tolan

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Author's Note

As 2015 drew to a close, I received a newsletter from a rare charter school for the highly gifted that included a letter of gratitude from the parents of a recent graduate. He had found in that school peers, friends, and a “place where, for the first time in his life, he *fit*,” they wrote. After six years of defensive teachers, inappropriate curriculum, and a refusal to acknowledge—let alone meet—his out-of-the-norm educational needs in public school, their son had blossomed in an environment specifically designed for “off the charts” kids.

The description of this child's experience in “regular school” was entirely familiar to me. It could have been written 37 years ago, the year my son began kindergarten. After visiting his “good public Montessori school” to do a Poets-in-the-Schools program with fourth graders, I asked my son's teacher why the fourth graders in that school didn't seem to be able to do anything (other than cursive writing) that my kindergarten son was already doing. “*Don't you know about your son?*” she asked.

She went on to tell me that in her 30 years of teaching, she had never encountered a student like him. “This school really has nothing to offer him,” she said apologetically. She advised me to get him tested and then look for a school that could handle his needs.

When I followed her advice and got him tested, I was astounded to discover that, in one very important way, the answer to her question about knowing my son had been a resounding *no*. My husband and I had thought only that he was pretty bright! Finding out about him and about the son

of my closest friend, who really *was* fully “off the charts,” changed the direction of my life. That story was recounted in the “Open Letter” chapter in *Guiding the Gifted Child* and is the first essay here.

For more than 30 years now, I’ve written and spoken about the difficulties this rare population of kids and their families face in a world that doesn’t recognize their differences or—if it does—offers little to help them accept and cope with, let alone take joy in, those differences. It can still be difficult for such a child to think or believe, “It’s okay to be *me*.”

In this volume I’ve collected many of the articles I’ve written about the gifted and highly gifted precisely because (in spite of the enormous changes in the world: *computers, internet, wi-fi, social media, the legalization of home schooling, the invention of charter schools, and the veritable explosion of information—and arguments—about the gifted*) as that 2015 letter made clear, children and families still face the same basic challenges.

My journey these three decades has taken me from “only a parent” with almost nobody to talk to, focused mostly on what seemed to be horrible injustices to a couple of kids I cared about deeply, to a so-called expert on the needs of individuals at “the right tail of the bell curve.” I say “so-called” expert because no matter how much experience any of us has, the extreme variation between individuals guarantees that there is no way to know *all there is to know*. And as we learn more about the brain and begin to investigate consciousness, we continually find ourselves confronting a great deal not only that we *don’t* know but that we thought we knew that turns out *not to be so*.

When I wake up every morning and look in the mirror as I brush my teeth, I am ever more aware of being an

elder. A grandmother. A crone. But there's another term for what I have become that I like rather better: "wise woman." The path I have taken since that kindergarten teacher's question altered my life has been one of constantly changing experience. Wisdom can be defined, I believe, as the interaction of intelligence and experience. It certainly goes beyond acquiring information.

This world is changing at a fast pace. As we age we can deal with that change by holding onto core beliefs, old certainties, and the patterns and structure that formed our earliest learning, or we can accept change as a (sometimes demanding) teacher and open ourselves to new possibilities. I have done my best to make the latter choice.

Each of the pieces I have chosen to include in this book represents my learning and my thinking as it was at the time I wrote it. When my son was a child and I was faced with the challenge of trying to get him (and other kids like him) the education I deeply believed was essential to his well-being, I was a bit of a firebrand. I wanted parents of gifted kids to "storm the barricades" and somehow *force* the changes we needed. In the keynote I delivered at the first Hollingworth Conference for the Highly Gifted in 1987, I challenged parents to consider what they would do if the government took over the feeding of their children at the age of five or six and then fed them nothing but potato chips. "You wouldn't sit back and let them do it. You'd *sue!*" I told them. The response to that talk was a standing ovation. And yet no matter how many outraged parents have stormed the barricades over the years since, that letter I mentioned shows how little has been accomplished overall.

In the early days my focus was primarily on schooling and the importance of these children finding friends—I used to say that what families needed was a "gifted kid rent-a-friend." When I discovered the work of Dabrowski

and realized that it was not just schooling that created psychological and emotional issues for them, I expanded my concerns. Later, as my own life journey took me into new realms, I began to see that the *spiritual* needs of this population were also vitally important. My focus became the “whole child,” the “whole person.”

For many readers the second piece in this collection, “Is It a Cheetah?,” will be an old friend. It is the one thing I’ve written that—because of its metaphorical nature—provides a way to lessen the aura of elitism around individualizing education for highly gifted kids. No matter what changes in the American educational system, the cheetah piece continues to be useful and, I am told, persuasive.

The order of the other pieces is chronological, partly to show the trajectory of my experiential journey and partly related to the progress of the gifted individual through the educational system and through life—from preschool and elementary school through adolescence and into adulthood.

When my son was in high school, I told some colleagues that I was probably going to quit working for the gifted when he graduated. “I’ll be done with the subject of the gifted then and will just focus on my fiction writing,” I declared.

“Fat chance!” Linda Silverman said. She was right. It was just about then that I discovered for the first time that I myself had been a highly gifted child. How that information had eluded me for so long I don’t fully understand (I had always assumed that the genetic component of my son’s giftedness came from my husband), but the realization was something of a personal earthquake. I understood my passion about the needs of this population because I wasn’t just a mother defending her son. Many experiences in my life suddenly became clear to me. And I understood that the issues to be faced as a highly gifted individual do *not* end

with one's time in school. Everything in life is processed through one's mind—one's consciousness—so one never gets over not fitting in at the center of the bell curve. I wrote a few pieces about gifted adults. It's worth noting that it was *after* my son finished high school that the Columbus Group and the definition of asynchronous development came into being. I'm glad I stuck around in the gifted world.

I've written a short introduction to each piece as a kind of travelogue about my personal journey—where I was and why I wrote it. Wherever you are on your own journey, I hope you'll remember that whatever brought you to this subject, unusual intelligence isn't something you outgrow. We go on living off the charts. Wherever you and your children fall on the bell curve, you are who you are, and *it's okay to be you*.