"A Bird Who Can Soar": Overexcitabilities in the Gifted

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What is Normal?

That gifted children are highly stimulated by what's going on around them, and by what moves them from within their being, has been stressed by Annemarie Roeper (1995, 2007). Because they can be so greatly stimulated, and because they perceive and process things differently, gifted children are often misunderstood. What is normal to them is not perceived as normal by others. Their excitement is viewed as excessive, their high energy as hyperactivity, their persistence as nagging, their questioning as undermining authority, their imagination as not paying attention, their persistence as being disruptive, their strong emotions and sensitivity as immaturity, their creativity and self-directedness as oppositional disorder. The more gifted they are the farther they stand out from the norm.

It is unfortunate that something exceptional, something that is outside the norm is often looked upon as being abnormal. Since abnormal means "bad," consequently normal means "good." We forget that these notions come from a statistical convention, which is neutral and therefore cannot tell what in fact is good and what is bad. We need to remember that long time ago psychology as the science of mind was a branch of philosophy. When psychology became an experimental science it began to rely on statistical methods.

In statistics what is average is used as the norm. The average has a defined range that includes the majority of cases. Now, let's look at average income. It is "normal" because that's what the majority of people earn but who considers it a good income? For most people it is insufficient. It is an example of

something that is normal and yet people feel that it is not good, or not good enough. What we value as good income is above the norm, that is above the average. For great many jobs average intelligence is inadequate even though it is "normal." The lesson from these examples is that in considering life situations, statistical norms are a poor guide to what is good.

Biology offers the correct model of what is normal. A normal living organism is one that functions well, that is, one that is in good health. We can put it like this:

Statistical norm: normal = average

Life science norm: normal = well functioning or healthy

Good health is above average, and unquestionably it is better. If the majority of people had a defective heart it would be "normal" statistically but not biologically because we know that only a healthy well-functioning heart is normal. Taking it one step further, an organism that is well developed through training, is better even than the one that is well-functioning—it is optimal.

Abraham Maslow was one psychologist who understood the biological norm. He set out to find people in robust psychological health because he realized that the average represents a stunted norm. He sought out men and women who were examples of robust psychological health and studied them. They were persons in the process of realizing their potential. Abraham Maslow called them self-actualizing (Maslow, 1970). They are not self-centered but rather have a mission in life that serves the larger good, they respect all persons, they have sense of kinship with all human beings, they have an existential sense of humor and detest laughing at the expense of others.

A Different Quality of Experiencing

Intensity refers to the quality of experience of feeling vibrantly alive. Emotionally intense people say things like "[I am] Flooded by unexpected waves of joy," feeling "incredibly alive—every cell, muscle, etc., feels stimulated. I have incredible energy then and hardly need any rest," "Sometimes I feel so happy that I want to laugh and cry or be silent and shout, all at the same time," "Even the greatest pain that I have felt has been ecstatic and full of life" (Piechowski, 1991, p. 289).

How intensely we experience things depends on the spikes of electric excitation that run through our nervous system. Consequently, how intensely one experiences things depends on how much of the current a person's nerves can carry. We find in the gifted an intensity that creates a distinctly different *quality of experience*. Not just more than average or "normal" but *distinctly* more alive and alert. Reacting to experience is quick and strong. Heightened intensity of experiencing goes together with an increased sensitivity to the surrounding world and to other persons' emotional energy fields. The perception of how everything feels, and how it is understood, differs in essence, depth, and complexity. For highly excitable people this is the natural and normal way of being.

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 that can be noticed early in life (Larsen & Diener, 1987).

Sensitivity is a way of noticing and responding to fine nuances of feeling and emotion as well as to error and gaps in knowledge, to qualities of imagination, and to refined sensory experience. These kinds of sensitivity should be clearly distinguished from the negative kind of sensitivity in people who are easily offended or upset. While intensity easily stands out, there are many kinds of sensitivity extending all the way to anomalous experiences that are not always accepted as real, such as for instance sensitivity to changes in weather, excessive stimulation from light, sounds, other person's moods and energy fields, etc., even though they are normal to persons having such sensitivities (Aron, 1997; Jawer, 2009).

Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902-1980)

The concept of heightened excitability, or *overexcitability*, was introduced by Kazimierz Dabrowski, a Polish psychiatrist and psychologist who was interested in the psychological makeup of intellectually and artistically gifted youths. He noted that their emotions were often intense, and that their sensitivities extended to many areas of perception and experiencing. In their intensified manner of experiencing, feeling, thinking, and imagining, he perceived a potential for further growth (Dabrowski, 1964, 1967). He saw emotional forces at work that generated overstimulation, conflict within oneself, maladjustment,

even pain, but that also pushed for seeking a way out of the pain, inner strife, and disharmony. These symptoms are often regarded as neurotic but he saw in them seeds of emotional growth (Dabrowski, 1972).

Dabrowski lived through both world wars. During World War II, putting his life in danger, he used his Institute of Mental Hygiene near Warsaw to hide "patients, war orphans—Jews and non-Jews, priests, Polish soldiers, and members of the resistance" (Battaglia, 2002). He was imprisoned by the Nazis but released thanks to the efforts of his wife. After the war he was imprisoned again, this time by the Communists, and for two whole years, because he spoke for individual self-determination and against subjugation by the state. Dabrowski's life mission was to save and protect those who feel the pain of the world and who see its dangerous trends. Such youths may be open to higher realities but poorly adapted to living in the harsh reality of this world.

His theory of personality development through positive disintegration grew out of his own encounters with death, suffering, and injustice and his desire to understand the meaning of human existence. During World War I, as a teenager, 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 society. He sought to identify enduring, universal values and the individuals who lived them. He found inspiration in Socrates, Christ, Gandhi, Kierkegaard, Albert Schweitzer, Father Kolbe and Janusz Korczak, to name a few. He knew that they went through agonies not unlike his own. In his clinical practice, he saw artists, writers, actors, that is people endowed with emotional intensity and sensitivity, and also people whose inner conflicts were of spiritual nature.

His theory is complex. Two concepts lie at its foundation: developmental potential and multilevelness. The first concept defines the potential for development through positive disintegration. The second concept introduces the notion that human emotions, motivations, values, strivings, and behaviors are best analyzed through a prism of levels. Dabrowski described five such

levels. The theory is much too elaborate to be quickly summarized here; other sources offer a fuller description (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009; Mendaglio, 2008; Piechowski, 2003; Silverman, 1993).

Developmental Potential

Dabrowski's concept of developmental potential includes (a) talents, specific abilities, and intelligence; (b) intensity and sensitivity represented by five components of psychic life: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginational, and emotional overexcitabilities, and (c) the capacity for inner transformation that refers to the process of deliberate inner work of developing one's moral character toward an inner ideal (see Table 1).

Table 1

Developmental Potential

1. Talents and Abilities

2. Intensity and Sensitivity: Overexcitability (OE)

   P Psychomotor
   S Sensual
   T Intellectual
   M Imaginational
   E Emotional

3. Capacity for Inner Transformation

Excitability is what the nervous system does. Just as we differ from other people in build, hair and skin color, so we differ in how excitable we are. Overexcitability characterizes people habitually capable of intense and sustained stimulation. Conceived broadly as five dimensions of psychic life, or channels for processing information and experience, individual overexcitabilities take many possible expressions as shown in Table 2.

Psychomotor (P)—the heightened energy of a person that may find expression in speaking rapidly, outward gesture of excitement, intense athletic activity, physical work and strong

competitiveness. In other words, drivenness, restlessness and the need to discharge the excess of energy through action. For example, one student described a personal reservoir of energy: "I get filled with energy when I need that energy. And, of course, I release it by doing the thing that got me excited in the first place" (Piechowski, 2006, p. 40).

Sensual (S)—the heightened responsiveness to sensory stimulation that makes sensory experience rich, alive, and refined, such as taking delight in beauty, textures (e.g. fur, silk, dough, marble), musical sounds and voices, or tastes and aromas. As one adolescent said, "I seem to notice more smells than a lot of other people. I love dark, musty smells and earthy smells, herbs and things like that. I love the smell of clean air in spring and tree blossoms and things and the smell of clean bodies, esp. hair" (ibid., p. 48). Sensual and emotional overexcitability often combine together, making the experience richer and more meaningful.

Table 2

FORMS AND EXPRESSIONS OF OVEREXCITABILITY
From Piechowski (1999) revised

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, and sex
delight in beautiful objects, sounds of words, music,
form, color, balance
Sensual expression of emotional tension
overeating, self-pampering, sex as pacifier and escape
buying sprees, desire 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
Passion for probing questions and solving problems
search for truth and understanding; forming new concepts;

tenacity in problem-solving;
passion for precision

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 (often 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

Intellectual (T)—the heightened activity of a mind easily stimulated by questions, theories, quest for truth, that hungers for knowledge, discovery, and new problems to solve. When emotional and mental energies meet, the mind supplies the intellectual power of concentration while emotional energy drives the interest and the passion in pursuing them. "I read stories deeper,

read into questions, find catchy puns or mistakes of words in people's writings, etc. If something has no meaning I try to give it some. If it means something I wonder why. When given a topic to write about, for example, I usually have a completely different approach to the same topic than does the rest of the class" (ibid., p. 54).

Imaginational (M)—the heightened vividness of imagery, capacity for remote association, distant analogies, unusual metaphors, rich and detailed dreams, fantasies and inventions, the ability to visualize anything at will, endowing objects with personality (toys, cars, or swords), liking for the unusual and seeking novelty. Imagination enables the creative inspiration, invention, and discovery of new possibilities. Boredom is anathema, the need for novelty is absolute. "Once in a while I try to hypnotize my plants. And I even tried to put a rock in a trance, but I think that day I was desperate for something to do" (ibid., p. 81).

Emotional (E)—the heightened intensity of emotional life manifests itself in a tremendously wide range of feelings experienced very deeply—compassion, responsibility, self-examination and self-judgment; fears and anxieties; deep attachments to people objects, and places. Emotional intensity becomes evident early and tends to stay with a person for life; it is also quite independent of what actually evoked an intense emotional response. "Sometimes after talking to someone, being alone watching the animals at sunrise, I feel as if I should conquer the world, do anything and everything. I feel like I am a bird who can soar with … just me, the wind, and the sun" (ibid., p. 134)

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 an instructional unit, "Living and Learning with Dabrowski's Overexcitabilities," for gifted middle and high school students, to aid the exploration, understanding and acceptance of these often unsettling traits. She quoted the American novelist 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 over-reacting, in the eyes of some people even as pathological behavior, 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 child who has not yet developed ways of coping with his or her own overexcitabilities. 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, 2006, p. 26)

Is it possible to imagine a talent of any magnitude that would not be nourished by these overexcitabilities? Without them wouldn't it be just a skill, a technical facility, even if a refined one, but not a true talent that has heart and fire? People endowed with talent have a higher level of energy, tend to be more sensually alive, imaginative, curious and inquisitive, and more emotional. These characteristics of "men of genius" were already noted by Francis Galton (1874).

Overexcitability Tests

In the work with his patients , Dabrowski used as one of his diagnostic tools the standard neurological exam and adapted it to assess overexcitabilities and developmental level (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). For many years, my colleagues and I have used an open-ended Overexcitability Questionnaire. More recently an inventory of 50 items, the OEQ II, has been developed and used in cross-cultural studies. Similar overexcitability profiles of gifted students were found in Taiwan, Mexico, Spain, Turkey, and the US A (Falk, Yakmaci-Guzel, Chang, Pardo, & Chavez-Eakle, 2008).

These results established the cross-cultural validity of the concept of overexcitability. In a comparison of Korean and American gifted students, the similarities were limited to intellectual overexcitability (Piirto, Montgomery, & May, 2008). Thanks to the ease of administration, the OEQII facilitated research on profiles of overexcitability and gender (Bouchet & Falk, 2001), creative adults (Chavez, 2004), sexual orientation (Treat, 2008), and families (Daniels, 2009, Tieso, 2007).

Sorting Out Overexcitability and Pathology

It is a common mistake to take something exceptional as being abnormal The whole thrust of Dabrowski's effort in developing his theory was to help distinguish that which is truly pathological and requires treatment, from clear signs of developmental potential. Unfortunately so many years later the tendency to pathologize and try to correct the expressions of overexcitability with medication or discipline, is still very much with us. It plagues many gifted children attending public schools. For instance, one of the most common misjudgments is to label as hyperactive a child full of energy and vitality. A truly hyperactive AD/HD child cannot control it, but an energetic child can and becomes focused when engaged in something interesting.

Barbara Probst (2007) aptly delineated the difference between semblance of pathology and a child's overexcitability:

> Heightened sensitivity to sound, light, touch, texture or smell can also be viewed in two ways: as difficulty (the excessive sensitivity associated with Sensory Integration Dysfunction) or as the capacity of esthetic appreciation. In a supportive context, a child with sensual overexcitability, may find a life of passion and artistic engagement. In an environment lacking sufficient stimulation, or, conversely, with *too much* competing stimulation, the same child may become anxious irritable, withdrawn, or even explosive. The mismatch between temperament and environment is the source of the difficulty—not an inherent defect in the child.

In regard to excitable imagination, Probst pointed out that, looked at without understanding, free flowing creativity, inventing improbable or bizarre stories, converting the everyday into fantastic images or daydreaming seem to indicate attention deficit or even a delusional disorder. But preference for the unusual and absurd is a likely indicator of talent characteristic of poets, artists, dramatists, film makers or inventors. While true delusional disorder requires treatment, creative talent pushes for expression and deserves to be supported and appreciated. Preferring their own peculiar interpretations to those of others, or to those that are officially approved, is another sign of an original mind. When such creative pressures are denied means of expression, the child, or an adult, is likely to become angry, irritable or depressed.

Intellectual overexcitability is typical of gifted children yet it, too, may be perceived in a negative light. Children with "an insatiable appetite for questioning, discovery, finding answers, and solving puzzles" may seem annoying or arrogant. With their sure knowledge and tendency to correct others they are easily misperceived as defying authority or disregarding social context. Often they are expected to be always correct and are derided when they make a mistake. Since what passionately interests them may seem odd or incomprehensible to others, they are often labeled with Asperger's Syndrome (Probst, 2007). Getting to know an intensely intellectual child one may be surprised by the deep sensitivity and understanding of their environment (Jackson & Moyle, 2009).

The intense emotional highs and lows of a gifted child are often seen as evidence of immaturity or they are blamed on the parents for how they raise their child. Some would even go as far as seeing in it a serious mood disorder such as bipolar (Probst, 2007). The greater responsiveness to stimuli (either from the environment or the thoughts and memories of the child) that comes with emotional overexcitability has to be understood and accepted as coming from a deeper and more intense processing of knowledge and experiences.

Thus, what looks abnormal, and creates difficulties for the individual, mental health professionals still tend to see as something to be treated and cured. Stephanie S. Tolan, the gifted author of numerous novels for young people, reflected on her own experience:

> When I was a teenager and read about manic-depressive disorder, I announced that finally I knew what was wrong with me. Of course, I was told that all teenagers are manic-depressive to a modest extent, but I knew I was connecting with something more than that—and it has followed me ever since—both the pain and the joy of the world are often too much to handle. A good therapist finally pointed out to me that I wouldn't give up being able to write my novels so I should quit trying to drive out of myself the very qualities that made me able to write them. "Easy for her to say," I thought. She didn't have to live with being crazy. Imagine my joy at having this craziness referred to as "channels of information flow" and "modes of experiencing"! (Tolan, personal communication)

Adapting to and Accommodating Overexcitabilities

Intensities and sensitivities need to be accepted as the child's natural way of experiencing. In a preschool class in Denver a free expression of the children's overexcitabilities was allowed (Tucker and Hafenstein, 1997). Children endowed with high level of energy instead of being forced to sit still in their seat, and become progressively restless, were allowed to move around and use their hands. With their excess of energy having an outlet, they were able to focus well and learn.

Emotionally sensitive children are easily overwhelmed by crowded, noisy places (shopping malls can be quite unnerving), or new situations like school, or attending some long drawn out event. These kinds of situations are best handled with advance preparation. Explaining to children the nature of the occasion, the people involved, and the general flow of the event, removes the uncertainty that usually is the source of anxiety and stress for these children. Holding for a few moments the hand of an understanding adult, often is enough to provide relief. A warm bath and rubbing the child's back are

also effective ways of soothing to restore emotional equilibrium. In some children emotional and sensory sensitivity are so high that noise, overpowering smells or tastes, or very bright lights, may be extremely upsetting. One then needs to take the child out of the noxious environment 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."

Daniels and Meckstroth (2009) and Kurcinka (1991) offer strategies to help children and parents cope with intensities and sensitivities in an understanding and accepting way. Parents and teachers need considerable patience knowing that this "over-reacting" 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. A sensitive and intense child may often be disequilibrated by his own emotions and vivid imagery. A departure from routine (for instance, in the way a story is told), may be extremely upsetting. For such a child the need for reliable markers of consistency and support is great. Without doubt, the strongest support, is the loving patience and acceptance given by the parent.

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 seek self-protection in emotional withdrawal, and may even create an inner shield. The price is high for such withdrawal: 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 mind. What often works is to suggest to the child to replace the disturbing image in their mind with a more positive picture that counteracts the bad one, or to put the bad images into a strong file cabinet and lock them away.

Many gifted children have a hard time stopping their thinking in order to go to sleep. It is worth discussing with them methods of slowing down and quieting their mind. They may have their own ways of achieving it. It is very useful to introduce them to effective methods of relaxation. Some gifted children know a form of meditation that leads them to a peaceful and joyful state (Piechowski, 2000). Young children benefit from 5-minute meditations, and if so desired, this can be progressively extended to 20 minutes (Murdock, 1978, 1988).

Positive Disintegration, Multilevel Development

Dabrowski's concept of developmental potential includes also the capacity for inner transformation. This is where Dabrowski's theory addresses development differently from the familiar stages of childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age, each with its specific life tasks. Inner transformation is about the process of personal growth that has to do with the conscious and deliberate work of developing one's character toward becoming a being imbued with universal human values of respect for others as unique persons, equality, compassion, service (direct or indirect), nondiscrimination, enduring relationships; it is also a search for one's own an inner ideal. Awakening to the possibility of such an ideal is the first phase of growth through positive disintegration.

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 feeling superior, succeeding by cunning, feeling of power when cleverly manipulating others. To many people this kind of joy would be unacceptable and offensive because of complete 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, 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. It is quite possible for a young person to operate on a higher emotional level than a so-called mature adult—mature in years but not necessarily in the level of emotional development (Roeper, 1982).

Dabrowski refined the distinction of levels to five, which space does not permit to go into. Suffice it to say 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.

Positive Maladjustment

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, 2006). 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." He expresses a typical, though profoundly mistaken, view of self-actualization as *self*-fulfillment. It is mistaken because self-fulfillment is rather egocentric and self-serving, the opposite of how Maslow defined it (Maslow, 1970). At 17, this young man recognized the moral conflict between getting ahead and being considerate of others:

> 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.

His moral conflict is of inner nature and it is about caring. 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 meant 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 of empathy and caring it rejects compromise with lower values of gain by defeating others.

Observing the people around them, and the way things work in the world, gifted youngsters reflect, evaluate, and question (Roeper, 1995). Selfishness, stuckupness, 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. The dissatisfaction with the world and with themselves become a source of inner turmoil. Also seeing what is wrong and how it could be corrected but being powerless to do it, can lead to depression (Jackson, 1998). Some gifted children 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).

Self-Knowledge and Inner Transformation

Dabrowski's theory describes a 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]

Eleanor Roosevelt was a self-actualizing person. She did not become one overnight but through deliberate effort to overcome her fears, to emancipate herself and others, and to be of service to to thers. In the end she served all people when she directed the work towaqrd the Declaration of Human Rights. In Dabrowski's theory she represents a high level of development.

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 lives than from a dry theoretical description (that's why I have omitted it). The lives of Eleanor Roosevelt, Paul Robeson, Simone Weil, Etty Hillesum, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dag Hammarskjöld, Peace Pilgrim, self-actualizing people (Brennan & Piechowski, 1991; Grant, 1996; Piechowski, 1990, 1992, 2009), or gifted adolescents (Jackson, 1998, Jackson & Moyle, 2009; Jackson, Moyle, & Piechowski, 2009; Peterson, 1997, Peterson & Rischar, 2000) illustrate the process in enough detail for thoughtful young persons to see how it may resonate with them.

Once it starts, inner growth of this nature 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 (Piechowski, 2006, chapter 20). Although much attention is given to setting goals, 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 (Delisle & Delisle, 1996; Ferrucci, 1982; Fugitt, 1983; Lickona, 1991; Murdock, 1988).

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