How do the stories of others inspire my work as a Headteacher?

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How can the stories of others contribute more fully to our understanding of gifts and talents and our understanding of the ethical responsibility we have in helping others discover and develop their own gifts and talents? I will look at the stories of two people reflecting on their gifts and talents, and how they've made me think and feel, and inspired my work as a Head-teacher developing an inclusive school where all children are supported to discover and develop their gifts and talents and to contribute to our learning community.

In 1977 Virginia Wade finally became the Wimbledon Ladies Singles Champion. This was an accolade she had worked towards for many years. She had trained constantly, been completely focused on her goal, and totally committed to achieving it. There were years when she had come close, but hadn't given up. Her two-fold achievement reflected very importantly both her attitude, and in her ability. She was able to treat the times she lost as stepping stones to take her forward, rather than setbacks and hindrances. As she finally received the title she said:

'In this the 100th year of Wimbledon, in the year of the Queen's jubilee………….Thank you for believing in me, for caring and for waitin.g.' TV Interview June 2007

This is just one snapshot in the story of one person which influences my understanding of the importance of developing an inclusive approach to enabling a learning environment where all learners are enabled to develop their talents.

The two stories which have been a catalyst for me to develop a clearly thought out response in which I can articulate my values in developing my particular response to emerging government policy concerning the identification of gifted and talented children have come from the stories of Alan Rayner and Moira Laidlaw which I have included as appendices. I have instinctively felt wary of the idea of gift identification of learners and have been privileged to have the opportunity to think, talk and read in a variety of contexts to explore what concerns me, to be able to find a way of articulating or showing what I've found, and to begin to frame a constructive response in the form of the way I work with the learners I have responsibility towards in the school I have the responsibility for leading.

In this paper I engage with government policy documents on making provision for the gifts and talents of individual pupils as well as literature on gifted and talented education. I integrate insights from government policy on personalised learning and show how I form living standards of judgement from the clarification of my values-based enquiry as I seek to enhance the quality of the educational influences of pupils in their own learning.

Thank you for believing in me, for caring and for waiting

Understanding the meanings of Gifted and Talented

The Department for Children, Schools and Families Standards Site, gives the following meanings of gifted and talented:

Gifted and talented children are those who have one or more abilities developed to a level significantly ahead of their year group (or with the potential to develop these abilities).

In England the term 'gifted' refers to those pupils who are capable of excelling in academic subjects such as English or History. 'Talented' refers to those pupils who may excel in areas requiring visio-spatial skills or practical abilities, such as in games and PE, drama, or art.

Some gifted and talented pupils may be intellectually able but also appear on the Special Educational Needs (SEN) register for behavioural, literacy or physical difficulties. Provision for gifted and talented pupils can act to counteract disadvantage. Direct intervention is particularly critical for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to enable them to make full use of their abilities and to raise their aspirations accordingly. (DfES 2006)

In my inclusional meanings of gifts and talents I see all children as having talents that it is my educational responsibility to recognise and support in their development (Huxtable and Whitehead, 2007). I work with Hymer's notion of gift creation (Hymer, 2007) in the idea that through the expression and development of our talents we can generate gifts for each other and our communities.

After more than 20 years in Primary education, I firmly believe in the premise that all children and all people are talented, or have the capacity to be talented. It has been said that all children are gifted, some just haven't unwrapped their present yet. I find this a powerful and profound statement about the limitless possibilities each one of us possess. It is our responsibility as educators to create educational relationships and provide educational environments where all learners can develop their talents, and find out what they are. We may be there to see the talents emerge, or as Barry Hymer describes, talking of the 35 years of research by Carol Dweck, we may well be working with someone who is an incrementalist " *Incrementalists have deep roots and a slow bloom – but they flower brightly.'*

Dweck's work is shaped around the existence of two frameworks for understanding intelligence and achievement – a theory of fixed intelligence (what she terms an 'entity theory'), or a theory of malleable intelligence (what she terms an 'incremental theory'). People subscribing to an entity theory of intelligence – and roughly half of us do – believe that their intelligence is a fixed trait that resides within us, and which can't be changed. If we hold such a theory, we are susceptible to helpless reactions to setbacks, we will seek out relatively simple tasks that validate our intelligence in performance terms, and avoid tasks that are challenging – but which can lead to new learning. Many high-achievers – especially girls – come to hold an entity theory of intelligence, and in the long-term, it serves them poorly. I held this theory too, throughout my school years, and it kept me from my studies: having been labelled 'bright' and 'intelligent' in school and at home throughout my early childhood, I came to believe that these affirmations reflected some deep virtue within me. I wasn't going to put this judgment on the line

when things got tough – as they usually do at secondary school – by working hard at things I found difficult – trigonometry, physics, Afrikaans, and then possibly still 'failing'. Much better to devote my time to things I found easier and did well at – chess, table tennis or playing the clown, then blame my scholastic disasters on my extra-curricular dalliances, whilst still preserving an illusion of 'intelligence'.

People subscribing to an incremental theory, on the other hand, believe intelligence to be something that can be cultivated through effort, experience and learning from that effort and experience. They do not mind 'failure' or 'exposure' in learning situations, because these aren't a reflection of any innate fixed ability, rather an indication that something changeable needs to be changed – e.g. strategies or effort invested. Over time, they become better, more successful learners. It's one of the reasons why there is such a weak correlation between performance in school and achievement in life. Ask Richard Branson, Kelly Holmes, Robbie Williams or Jamie Oliver or any of the C-streamers in your own school who've gone on to amaze you with their achievements as adults. Incrementalists have deep roots and a slow bloom – but they flower brightly. (Hymer, 2006)

I am currently working with the understanding that all people have talents which it is our responsibility as educators to create an educational environment where those talents can be nurtured and grown. As those talents emerge, we may also have the ethical responsibility of helping the learner to be able to use them to give back to the community as gifts to enrich and build up the community.

<u>Creating a growing environment</u>

The importance of creating a reflective space for learning in the classroom

I am thinking of an art gallery, as I experienced it, and as a metaphor for a reflective space for learning in the classroom as a physically peaceful and restful space full of inspiration. It is all the more peaceful because it contrasts with the noise and business of the city centre. When I'm there I feel it reflects the need in me as a learner to find a reflective space to access what I really think and feel in the busyness of my mind. I need the space to know what I think, and that for me is when learning occurs. All the input has happened from a bombardment of sources, and my mind is now able to make connections in some kind of free fall, like the connections on a mind map. I understand now, that for me learning occurs when I have space in my head to assimilate ideas. I have also been able to identify this in the primary school learners I have worked with for 20 years, and it raises the question for me about creating the need for reflective space in educational relationships and in communities of learners.

The importance of creating communities of learners

 For me as a learner, learning goes beyond the acquisition of knowledge or skills, there needs to be a response involved. Watching live music, rather than listening to a recording of the music marks something of the difference between an individual learning from a textbook or the internet, and the shaping of the learning in discussion with another person. It requires an educational relationship. The learning engages more readily, and goes deeper, when an emotional response is also required. The opportunity to process my

reflections on my learning experiences such as I experience with the Masters group at the university, brings the learning to life. In embracing the value of wanting to co-create a learning space within the classroom, I recognise it is not something that can be communicated in words alone, but rather in the living out of that belief or value and the evidence presented needs to communicate those qualities.

So I really appreciate the fact that I currently belong to three regular communities of learners. I am part of the learning community of Swainswick School, and in particular the class which I co-teach. I am part of the Master group of learners, and I'm also part of an educational community of Headteachers who meet regularly to reflect on how we can live our educational values more fully within the educational contexts and external constraints we are face with.

I am aware that I am a part of all three communities even when I'm not present with the people who form the communities, and all hold supportive yet challenging accountability for me. The communities become linked in my learning, as I learn and develop my ideas about the nature of educational relationships through observation and reflection in one context, and generalise those understandings to the other contexts. So maybe this is one learning community with three different centres.

Martin Buber expresses this phenomena in these words:

'Because this human being exists; therefore he must be really there, really facing the child, not merely there in spirit. He may not let himself be represented by a phantom: the

death of the phantom would be a catastrophe for the child's pristine soul. He need possess none of the perfections which the child may dream he possesses; but he must be really there. In order to be and to remain truly present to the child he must have gathered the child's presence into his own store as one of the bearers of his communion with the world, one of the focuses of his responsibilities for the world. Of course he cannot be continually concerned with the child, either in thought or in deed, not ought he to be. But if he has really gathered the child into his life then that subterranean dialogic, that steady potential presence of the one to the other is established and endures. Then there is really between them, there is mutuality." (p. 126)

"But however intense the mutuality of giving and taking with which he is bound to his pupil, inclusion cannot be mutual in this case. He experiences the pupil's being educated, but he pupils cannot experience the educating of the educator. The educator stands at both ends of the common situation, the pupil only at one end. In the moment when the pupil is able to throw himself across and experience from over there, the educative relation would be burst asunder, or change into friendship.'(p. 128)

Through this account I will offer multi media narratives as forms of evidence that are consistent with the relational values I hold in my educational relationships and communities of learners and which form my living educational standards by which I judge my practice and seek to improve it.

Using a visual narrative to explain how I nurture educational relationships

I readily listen to the ideas of others, and am energized by working hard to understand

what another might mean, by either spoken or written word, and this engagement shapes my thinking and my way of being which is recognized by others. The following clip illustrates the strength of the educational relationships which lie at the heart of our Tuesday Masters group. I feel the visual image captures the life-affirming energy and engaged flow of ideas which Jack, in his tutoring, engenders by the quality of the educational relationships he facilitates as he leads this particular community of learners.

The two minute video-clip is at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qu_YSX7SlI0

"I also feel this quality of receptive responsiveness as I watched the 2 minute video-clip of the educational relationship between Louise and me as we explore possibilities for Louise's writings. (Whitehead, 2007)

I am stressing the importance of the visual medium of video in communicating the meanings of the expression of the flow of embodied values and energy in educational relationship, because it permits a reader to see the relationally dynamic awareness being shown by the participants. These include those whose humour can be experienced as the

cards with text move over the camera – a dynamic relationship only known to Jack and me after the session! The humour flows with the pleasure of our being together and does not violate the respect we feel for each other. I have checked the validity of using 'we' here with Jack and he agrees with my interpretation. This validity check is important in strengthening the validity of my accounts and I ask others to help me to strengthen the validity of my accounts with the help of Habermas' (1976) four criteria:

"The speaker must choose a comprehensible expression so that speaker and hearer can understand one another. The speaker must have the intention of communicating a true proposition (or a propositional content, the existential presuppositions of which are satisfied) so that the hearer can share the knowledge of the speaker. The speaker must want to express his intentions truthfully so that the hearer can believe the utterance of the speaker (can trust him). Finally, the speaker must choose an utterance that is right so that the hearer can accept the utterance and speaker and hearer can agree with on another in the utterance with respect to a recognized normative background. Moreover, communicative action can continue undisturbed only as long as participants suppose that the validity claims they reciprocally raise are justified. (Habermas, 1976, pp.2-3)

Hence I ask my peers to help by working on ways to strengthen the comprehensibility of my writing, my use of evidence to justify my assertions, the clarity of my explication of the normative assumptions/values that I use in the explanation for my learning and the authenticity of my account in seeking to live as fully as I can the values and understanding that constitute my educational responsibility. These include my values of respect and integrity. (in conversation with Jack Whitehead 16th July 2007)

How do I open a respectful space for others to learn with me with integrity?

Human beings seek recognition of their own worth, or of the people, things, or principles that they invest with worth. The desire for recognition, and the accompanying emotions of anger, shame and pride, are parts of the human personality critical to political life. According to Hegel, they are what drives the whole historical process. (Fukuyama, 1992, p. xvii)

As an educator I have the responsibility and privilege on a daily basis to communicate and affirm a child's intrinsic value to them. It's no good just believing it ourselves, or in telling children that they are special regardless of what they can or can't do which is going to make any difference to them. It needs to be in the way I live and learn alongside them. A crucial aspect of this is in the time I have for others, and my willingness to spend time in listening to them, and in really hearing what they say.

As a significant adult the verbal and non-verbal responses I make in our discussions with children both individually and in various size groups, are incredibly important and rewarding.

Although as an educator, I often control the classroom agenda, I am willing to share the learning agenda with others because I believe that true engagement in learning is more likely to flourish. The more I am able to show the areas I need support in, the balance of power changes. It is my need that helps to leave space for others to lead the learning. It is not absolving me from my responsibility. If as a leader of learning I am always self sufficient, I leave no room for others to lead the learning. I deny others the opportunity to learn what they are capable of.

I am privileged to be part of those experiences when learners verbalise their understandings, and try to develop their understanding. My responses both verbal and non verbal need to affirm these sometimes tentative thoughts. As I listen to these responses, they provide windows or insights into the mind of the learner and the way they are thinking which then provides for a co-creative learning space. Listening to others share their insights and understanding provides the opportunity for me to make explicit aspects of the learning process as it makes learning visible.

I believe that people only learn about their intrinsic value from the responses of others, so for many learners, or for many aspects of learning, it is only in relationship with others that we formulate what we really understand. Learning is never developed in a vacuum, although knowledge can be acquired in a solitary state.

Our responses to others in many different situations show clearly and consistently to an objective observer how we view them with a sense of our own and their integrity. Children are often more aware of this than we are as adults. They know what it feels like. They can all too readily be conditioned to believe certain limitations about themselves, just from the responses they ate given. So we can inadvertently create real barriers to learning.

However the power is in our hands to ensure the children receive the positive messages of self worth and ability to learn. As we know children will learn from what we do, not from

what we say. There is nothing as strong as example hence I seek to show myself living

my values and understandings as fully as I can.

The negative aspects of labelling people as Gifted

Alan Rayner- BA and PhD degrees in Natural Sciences at King's College, Cambridge,

currently a Reader in Biology at the University of Bath, England, tells his story in his

account ' My Achilles Heel, testimony of a 'gifted' Child'. In his account he shows very

clearly some of the negative impacts of being identified as gifted with the weight of

expectation which that label that has put on him throughout his life. He has spent a great

deal of his adult life trying to find freedom. Reading his story provides me with a clear

warning as an educator that I must learn to take care with any labelling I offer to children

whether on paper or in my attitude. How many of us as we read his account find some

resonance in our own experience, whatever the expectations we ourselves were given.

 In truth, through reading Alan's story (Appendix 2) I have learned that I need to be very

careful about the messages I give however inadvertently to children about themselves,

this is an area in which I must learn to exercise more fully my educational responsibility.

The opening paragraph of Alan's very honest story shows clearly what it can feel like to

grow up with this terrible weight of responsibility which was put upon him by the people

around him.

'*From an early age, I was brought up with the expectation that I ought to be faultless,*

both morally and intellectually. Never mind that this was an unrealistic and ultimately

meaningless aspiration for any human being, my duty as a genetically and culturally

privileged offspring of the British Empire was to try as hard as I could to achieve it. If I failed, the suffering for myself, my family and others in my neighbourhood would be great. That was the message I received from all around me as I endeavoured to work my passage through to adulthood and beyond.' (Rayner, Appendix 2, p. 27)

Barry Hymer also outlines other concerns he has about labelling a given percentage of children as gifted, both in terms of individual damage, and as a reinforcement of an entity structure of education.

'Models which hold as one of their "non-negotiables" the requirement for schools to identify a 5-10% G&T population in each year group are inevitably going to have to align themselves with an entity theory of intelligence, and help propagate the pervasive and damaging beliefs about giftedness that still abound in our society – the belief, for example, that "effortless achievement" denotes high intelligence, whereas hard work can only compensate for a lack of "innate intelligence". So too do implicit (and often explicit) nudges in the direction of naming and proclaiming the members of a G&T register: reconcile that if you can with Dweck's warning that being labelled 'gifted' can be the kiss of death to the learning dispositions and achievements of many students; or the tendency to smile on setting and acceleration/fast-tracking:'(Hymer, 2006)

On the other hand, what damage does the practice of gift identification do to the motivation and self esteem of those who are not identified as being gifted, and are not provided with the opportunities of the identified few? It surely has a similar impact on the

learners, as it serves to reinforce a fixed entity view of learning, and is very limiting. It also engenders negative feelings and can be the cause of disaffection towards formal education which can sometimes last for years. A local authority advisor recently wrote:

'As part of the personalizing learning debate the Secondary National Strategy (SNS) is quite rightly focusing on the needs of what they refer to as 'gifted and talented pupils'. Throughout the documentation, the SNS refers to gifted and talented pupils in terms of what schools and LAs need to do in order to meet the needs of this group of learners. The requirement of schools to identify their ten percent gifted and talented register also adds weight to the notion that in each school there exists a group of pupils who are somehow different and identifiable as having attributes that the majority of young people don't have. When challenged to consider this rather narrow view of gifts and talents, Local Authority strategy managers from across the South-West were minded to consider a somewhat wider definition which focused on the gifts and talents (whether developed or latent) that young people have regardless of their names being on a list. Producing a list could, without necessarily being intentional, create an exclusive group of those who need and deserve special provision and opportunities. Developing gifts and talents, although far less neat and tidy in relation to data collection and inspection, would seem to be a far more inclusive approach. How do any of us know what gifts and talents young people have? It would seem eminently more sensible and educationally sound to provide opportunities for all pupils to discover and develop their gifts and talents rather than make provision for the chosen few. I wonder to this day if I might have had a talent for

driving a Formula 1 racing car, but how would I or anybody have ever known - such

opportunities were restricted to very exclusive groups!'(Wotton, 2007)

<u>Being an educational Bridge Builder</u>

The second story which has created a profound challenge to me in my thinking about how

to enable all learners to be able to work to create their own gifts is the story Moira

Laidlaw- Life Long Professor at Ningxia Teachers University in China, tells of using her

gifts of being and loving to enable her brother Alistair in his life (Appendix 1).

I find the story Moira tells very moving in its own right as it reflects the power of love to

bring about a powerful enabling, and for the way in which Moira is able to identify with

certainty the power of her gifts and talents.

It also provides for me a framework of values I can relate to as an educator, and values

which I seek to uphold in the context of the school in which I work.

Her story challenges me to open my mind further about the nature of gifts and talents and

the educational responsibility I hold, not for others, but to others.

I find resonance with the opening of Moira's story:

'*I start from the premise that every human being is gifted and talented. That is not a*

wishy-washy liberal wishful-thinking, but my increasingly-honed awareness and

observation of the nature of being human.' (Appendix One, p. 20)

Moira's account of the way she recognized the need to reach Alistair, challenges me to

more fully find as an educator a way of reaching others where they are which will

recognize, value and affirm them as people of intrinsic worth with unique gifts and talents.

'No one, it seemed to me in my adolescent certainty, spent any time trying to join him, trying to reach him.

So, and here's where my own insights come in. I started a regimen of love with him. It was purposive. It wasn't a gushing of feeling that I had to expiate. Rather it was a mature insight into the nature and purpose of love itself. I channeled my love into reaching my brother in ways which didn't violate his super-sensitive sense of space and boundaries. I sat with him hour after hour after hour listening to his music with him, not trying to get him to be outward about it, not trying to get him to do anything. I just wanted to become part of his world so that he could show me what it was like' (Appendix 1, p. 21)

Although Moira is describing her understandings here in a specific context, I am also challenged as to how I can more fully understand her desire 'to become part of his world so that he could show me what it was like' as a model for the educational relationships I am engaged in.

One of the most crucial messages which Moira's story models for me is the idea of educational bridge building. Once she had spent a great deal of time with purposeful loving intent sharing the space where Alistair was, so she could know what it was like without making the assumptions which other experts were making, she worked intuitively to enable the building of tailor made bridges from both sides of the chasm. This part of the process involved both Alistair and Moira. I am challenged to understand more of the

nature of the collaborative activity which needs to take place to enable this to happen more fully. It also provokes me to question the wisdom of producing an exhaustive list of possible gifts and talents which learners can be matched against. There are no limits to the list of talents which will bring richness to the lives of individuals and when they choose to give them, to others around them. If we begin to label and list we miss something, we build in hindrances to people using their gifts.

Moira's story carries a great deal of wealth for me as an educator because it helps me give voice to understandings I haven't been able to articulate for myself, and it also endorses many of the values I hold to be important in education. Additionally, and without belittling the story of the two lives in any way, it provides me with a model or metaphor that I can explore as I try to help all learners recognize and develop their diversity of gifts and talents. I believe I share this understanding with Moira as she writes:

'This story has the power of myth to me. It exists both as a true story and as a source of personal epistemology and ontology. I am because he is. He is because I am. This reality has infused itself into everything I have ever done in the name of education and in the service of humanity. The lessons I learnt, the processes I underwent with Alastair were the blueprint, the real thing, not the shadows of Plato's cave.' (Laidlaw, 2007, Appendix One, p. 24)

So how have the stories of others contributed more fully to my understanding of gifts and talents and my understanding of the ethical responsibility I have in

helping others discover and develop their own gifts and talents?

 As I have shown here the stories of others, in particular the stories of Alan Rayner and

Moira Laidlaw, have inspired and provoked me to find ways of understanding and

articulating an inclusive approach towards helping all learners create talents, and then be

able to gift them to others. I have achieved greater clarity as a Headteacher concerning

the need to develop an educational community which is inclusive, where children receive

incremental messages about their learning in an educationally responsible way in an

environment which is rich in opportunities for talent creation rather than identification,

With the emphasis on love of learning rather than love of achievement.

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'Gifted and talented'

Moira Laidlaw 8th Jan 07

I start from the premise that every human being is gifted and talented. That is not a wishy-washy liberal wishful-thinking, but my increasingly-honed awareness and observation of the nature of being human. My brother is a case in point. Unable to talk until the age of five (labels like autistic, psychotic, morbidly withdrawn were ricocheted around like a spray gun, sticking onto every interaction in his vulnerable little life), my brother lived in a different reality. He was a genius. So far off the scale of gifted and talented that the words became meaningless. He occupied a reality in which music lived, as corporeally as the objects psychologists presented him with to measure his intelligence. How do I know? Well, that's where my gifts and talents came in.

Alastair is eleven years younger than me. An unwanted third child, and a boy to boot – my father wanted girls who could wait on him, and my mother didn't want another child at all: she was in her forties and life taxed her – my brother did actually begin to speak at the age of five months. He almost immediately gave it up, though (as a way of communicating that didn't communicate what he wanted as far as I could see). Retreated (emerged?) into another land in which the language was music, the landscape was audible, and his journey somewhere ineffable and yet substantive and fulfilling to him. Yes, of course, there was something awry about him. He wasn't happy. This registered itself in what appeared to be autistic routines, rocking backwards and forwards listening to music for hours, tantrums of terrifying proportions if his routines were disturbed. He built a fortress of music around him, drew up the ramparts, and lived inside, safe, untouchable and untouched.

I wanted to touch him. At the age of thirteen and fourteen, I would come home from school and straight up to his room, where he'd be listening to Bach and Mozart, Richard Strauss sometimes. Don Juan, the tone-poem, was his favourite. He'd listen to it over and over again, working a record-player that no one had ever shown him how to use, sitting on the floor, vulnerable, alone, abandoned it seemed, rocking his little life away. I would stand in the doorway of his bedroom, his prison cell, and watch him. I could feel his abilities oozing through the silence. Everyone would talk about him as a misfit, as a weirdo. Best thing for him would be to go into a home where specialists could give him the proper care and attention, they would say. My mother started to say it. My father was ashamed of his 'retarded' son and didn't want the neighbours to know how he spent his days. When people came to visit, Alastair was just 'upstairs'. He'd be down later. Of course he never arrived.

People tinkered with my brother all the time. This test here. That test there. No one, it seemed to me in my adolescent certainty, spent any time trying to join him, trying to reach him. A battery of tests and the best doctors doesn't equal cure. Love equals cure. And what was 'the cure' anyway? Everyone was assuming that he was dysfunctional and that word described the whole of who he was. I knew, from such an early age, that this wasn't fair. This wasn't fully human. Alastair was far more than the sum of his apparently dysfunctional parts. He had this phenomenal gift. I saw and heard evidence of it everyday. He would listen to a Mozart symphony, for example, say the fortieth, that bastion of hope against life's despair, and then sing it through, all twenty minutes of it, note by note in perfect timing and pitch. I once played him a Schubert symphony and after this first hearing, he sang it through afterwards, note for note. I'd never heard

anything like it. He would sit under the keyboard of my piano as I picked out complex Bach fugues, and would sing the dominant voice, emphasizing how it ought to sound. My brother was a genius.

So, and here's where my own insights come in. I started a regimen of love with him. It was purposive. It wasn't a gushing of feeling that I had to expiate. Rather it was a mature insight into the nature and purpose of love itself. I channeled my love into reaching my brother in ways which didn't violate his super-sensitive sense of space and boundaries. I sat with him hour after hour after hour listening to his music with him, not trying to get him to be outward about it, not trying to get him to do anything. I just wanted to become part of his world so that he could show me what it was like. Alastair's world was truly beautiful, graced by serenity and multi-dimensional realities. He eschewed physical contact, but gradually, through the months and two years of this 'programme' he began to allow me to sit with my arm around him, and would occasionally stop rocking during this contact. I would sometimes chat to him now, not expecting answers, not expecting anything, just showing him that I loved him unconditionally. His fortress was beginning to crumble, but I was acutely aware (and again I see this awareness as my gift and talent) that with the dissolution of his fortress, erected from his life's blood and sense of reality, he would have to have something else to replace it with otherwise he would knock down the walls to be with me, and might face a new reality that would destroy him. I didn't know how I knew this, I just knew it. It made every action I performed with him seem acute to me. I was trying to build a bridge. This bridge, however, had to be one he was also building. This mutual effort would result in something durable, that would withstand him climbing out of his exile. I therefore mustn't help him to reject everything from his

world, but help him to bring those things with him. His musical talent, his gentleness, his innocence, his brilliant, enquiring mind, indeed his personhood - all those were strengths he would need in the world of others too. So I set about making his world *our* world. For several months I set up possibilities for him to listen to music in my bedroom not just in his. I had my piano moved from the downstairs study up to my room on the first floor. I had stacks of story-books in both rooms.

What struck me at the time was how certain I was, even at the ages of thirteen to fifteen of the rightness of what I was doing. I KNEW I was right. This wasn't arrogance, but a different kind of knowledge from the ones being used around me all the time. It was a knowledge borne of love, out of love, for the sake of love. I don't mean I always felt this love as an emotion. Sometimes, like any teenager, I was selfish and wanted my own way and got impatient. I failed my own insights. However, generally, this period of my life was to ground my future almost entirely. After such an experience, I could never again wholly commit myself to other people's knowledge or scientific rigour not precipitated by personal experience, and mediated through love. I felt I was right passionately. I experienced the nuances of changes in Alastair's behaviour on a daily basis. One day, for example, after listening together to Vivaldi's Four Seasons, I clapped at the end. He joined in. It was a moment of pure revelation to me. And I caught him, surreptitiously, looking at me out of the corner of his eye. I purposely didn't grab the occasion, for fwear of frightening him off in his foray into unknown territory, but smiled gently and turned away with a beating heart. The next day, he looked at me for a couple of seconds and then *he* turned away smiling.

The greatest breakthrough came one evening when I was reading him our accustomed

bed-time story. He was five years and one month old. I was telling him a fairy-story and my custom was to tell the story and ask questions, which I would answer myself or just leave. Anyway, I asked him, 'Who's married to the king?'

'Queen!' he exclaimed, as if he'd been talking forever.

'Who?'

'The Queen!' he tried again, gently. He was looking at me now, his eyes wide and trusting and enquiring. He'd finished making his side of the bridge at last and had joined it onto mine. There was no flaw in the joining. We were brother and sister in the same reality. I could *feel* it. He was home.

When we talk about that time, Alastair tells me that my presence was felt as hope and happiness in his lonely world. He doesn't remember much about the earlier months, but he remembers the later ones and the awakening during the story-time. He remembers my presence more than anything that happens. This only confirms my sense that the process and the outcome of his development were mitigated through love.

This story has the power of myth to me. It exists both as a true story and as a source of personal epistemology and ontology. I am because he is. He is because I am. This reality has infused itself into everything I have ever done in the name of education and in the service of humanity. The lessons I learnt, the processes I underwent with Alastair were the blueprint, the real thing, not the shadows of Plato's cave.

If I am talented and/or gifted, the quality, which is a kind of empathy I suppose, first came alive through its encouragement of my brother's emergence into the world, and my own emergence into my own humanity. It is this humanity I try to bring with me and through me into education. It underlies my passion for fairness, for empowerment, for

people to speak for themselves about those things, which concern them. It explains my deep sense of discomfort when I see people shackled to their own sense of disempowerment, and when I see the people who would shackle them.

Today, my brother is happily married, with a full-time job, living on the east coast of England. He is 41 years old.

My Achilles Heel

Testimony of a 'Gifted' Child

By Alan Rayner

From an early age, I was brought up with the expectation that I *ought* to be faultless, both morally and intellectually. Never mind that this was an unrealistic and ultimately meaningless aspiration for any human being, my duty as a genetically and culturally privileged offspring of the British Empire was to try as hard as I could to achieve it. If I failed, the suffering for myself, my family and others in my neighbourhood would be great. That was the message I received from all around me as I endeavoured to work my passage through to adulthood and beyond.

The problem was, my childhood got in the way of this aspiration. There always seemed to be something *wrong with me*, whether it was one of the many ailments that confined me to bed for days and sometimes weeks at a time, my thumb-sucking, temper, jealousy, impishness, hungriness, loneliness, slow-wittedness, naivety, obesity, weak bladder, yearning for affection or whatever. Pained, punished and humiliated on account of these inadequacies I needed desperately to grow beyond them, the sooner the better.

I had to become a scrupulously honest and dutiful paragon of virtue who always put others' interests and welfare before his own needs, whilst paradoxically being supremely competitive when it came to any kind of performance deemed to be important by those in my vicinity. After a slow and faltering start, I began to succeed.

I gained entrance to my father's famous old school, Latymer Upper, in London. I soon found myself in the top 'A1' stream for those elite pupils singled out as the most academically gifted, where teachers told us we were 'the cream' and that anything less than top marks was failure. Every exam began to acquire 'life or death' significance. The penalty for failure would be demotion to a lower stream, loss of the

camaraderie of my peer group and a humiliating sense of return to the base indignity of my childhood.

I took my 'O' level ('Ordinary Level General Certificate of Education') exams a year early. I didn't do quite as well as expected, however, especially in physics, a subject in which my self-confidence had been undermined by a bullying teacher, and chemistry, because I had made the silly mistake of muddling up 'anions' and 'cations' in the stress of the practical exam. Once in the sixth form, however, I really did begin to excel in both these sciences as well as in my favourite subject, biology, where I benefited greatly - but was also said to have an 'unfair advantage' - from my father's influence as a professional botanist and mycologist.

Two months into my second year in the sixth form, my father suffered a heart attack and I had to change schools and 'A' level subjects, dropping physics and splitting biology into botany and zoology. My father claimed dolefully from what might have been his death bed (but wasn't) that his illness would stop me getting the grades I needed to follow his footsteps to King's College, Cambridge, an ambition he had long cultivated in me. I was determined to prove him wrong and give him something to live for by preventing his disappointment. I succeeded. Not only did I get the requisite 'A' grades in 'A' levels and distinctions in 'S' levels, but I also gained a Bedford Scholarship into King's and was told that my performance in botany was the best anyone could remember.

I studied at Cambridge for six years, gaining a triple first (i.e. a first class exam mark at the end of each of the three years of undergraduate study) bachelor's degree in Natural Sciences, followed by a PhD in fungal ecology. After a brief period of employment as a research demonstrator at Exeter University, I moved to Bath University as a lecturer and within 7 years had accrued sufficient academic recognition to be promoted directly to a Readership when only 35 years old.

By the time I became President of the British Mycological Society at the age of 48, I had published six books and over 120 scientific papers. My academic colleagues, however, did not generally see this as good enough reason for further promotion or

but was producing findings that challenged orthodox schools of thought concerning the fundamental nature of evolutionary creativity and the legitimacy of scientific method. It was becoming neither publishable nor fundable through channels acceptable to the mainstream. Feeling unsupported and unvalued, I felt ever-present tensions and anxieties grow within me to overwhelming proportions. Long-withheld self-destructive and self-reclaiming processes took over my life. After 6 months 'sick leave', I somehow managed to return to work, and set about radically changing the course of my teaching and research so as to include artistic and philosophical themes relevant to what I perceive as a global social, environmental and psychological crisis.

All along, despite what might have been outward appearances, all was not well and had never been well for me. I had never got over my feeling from childhood that there was something fundamentally *wrong with me*, some *gap* in my make-up, which, when exposed, would prove both catastrophic and profoundly humiliating. My experiences of school and university education, with its many cruelties, iniquities, absurdities and pretences, did nothing to alleviate and much to reinforce this feeling. I never felt more than temporary relief as the result of any of my academic 'successes'. All that these served to do was cover up and delay recognition of my underlying deep inadequacy, until the next fearful 'test' came along that could finally show me to be the dreadful fraud I really was. Neither was this sense of fraudulence confined to my academic performance. My personal life of loving and caring for others also felt like a dangerous charade. I felt filled with the potential to bring about terrible harm to others through some oversight, brainstorm, incompetence or need to protect my own interests when these were threatened.

I endured an endless round of desperately seeking reassurance that I was, after all, the person I was cracked up to be, that I really did have exceptional talents, I really had made important discoveries and I really hadn't brought about any terrible harm to anyone. Every now and then I would begin to feel reassured, but the ensuing elation would end only in the bitter disappointment of realizing that I hadn't really developed or been recognized to 'my full potential'. More often I would find some actual evidence of a self-interested action, oversight or silly mistake that would compound my doubts, only to induce feverish efforts to prove to myself that these weren't really

I would make great efforts and go to extraordinary lengths to avoid situations in which I could be exposed to evidence of my fallibility and the despair and panic this would invoke. But this avoidance only strengthened my feeling of pretence and insecurity, and inhibited me from participating in any potentially humiliating learning experience. Moreover it didn't stop tormenting thoughts and recollections from striking me like arrows from the blue, sometimes triggered by the most seemingly innocuous experiences or comments made by others. All in all, I was well and truly haunted by the fear that terrible confirmation of my irredeemable inadequacy would ambush me as soon as I let my guard slip or allowed myself to take credit for any accomplishment.

Yet at the same time I had the feeling of being possessed by an exceptionally inspiring, creative, knowledgeable, perceptive and empathic spirit, capable of seeing through the obstructions that everywhere block our human understanding and enjoyment of the flow of nature. This feeling would fill my heart with enormous enthusiasm and joy in sharing my experience and learning whenever I could just let go of my fears and not be painfully reminded of them. If only I could find a way to bring this feeling more widely into the world, I dreamt its influence would be transformational and profoundly healing. But with this dream came also a burdensome feeling of messianic responsibility. This both distracted me from my family and led me to become increasingly frustrated by my inability to communicate in a non-esoteric way across the *gap* between my rarefied academic experience and a wider public. My supposed academic giftedness was a real dead weight and obstacle, excluding me from my human neighbourhood that I so wanted to contribute to and belong within.

How is it that I can combine such feelings of exceptional fallibility and prowess? Surely these feelings are mutually contradictory? Or do they in some strange way derive from the same root? Perhaps their presence together is telling us *all* something about what it really means to be gifted, each in our own exceptional way, as different but not isolated individuals pooled together in the common space of our natural human and non-human neighbourhood. By the same token it may teach us something

comparisons and singling out what we judge to be 'best' whilst alienating 'the rest' in a futile parody of the grotesque and evolutionarily unsustainable idea of 'natural selection'. For the notion of 'survival of the fittest' is a prescription for a concrete Cyberworld of rigidly defined structure and powerful machines dedicated to fixed objectives, not a fluid dynamic, evolutionarily creative, ever-transforming world of the living, loving and dying. It is a diabolical prescription for the concrete cancer of all kinds of totalitarianism, alluded to by Darwin and embraced by Hitler as 'the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life'.

My quest to understand and hopefully heal the seeming contradiction within myself began with the supposition, in line with much modern thinking, that my childhood perception was correct: there is indeed something fundamentally *wrong with me*. But I had great difficulty identifying what this something was. Few people would take me seriously, pointing to my seeming successes, saying how important these were for my career, and thereby making it all the more difficult for me to own up to my fearfully childish insecurity. Others perhaps took me too seriously, reinforcing my grounds for doubt and thereby perhaps contributing to my eventual collapse of faith, withdrawal and renewal. Though they helped me profoundly in some ways to deepen my insights, never did any doctor or psychotherapist I consulted, over many years, identify my trouble in other than such vague terms as 'stress', 'anxiety' or 'fragile self-esteem'.

It wasn't until I was 54 years old that prompted by some family members I bought and read a book about 'obsessive compulsive disorder' ('OCD'). It was no less than a source of revelation, much though I disliked the label for this condition ('openly creative disorder' seems more apt), along with the idea that it is 'something wrong' with individuals that can be 'controlled' by anti-empathy drugs (serotonin reuptake inhibitors) and behavioural therapy. The 'case studies' described were all uncannily familiar to me and when I took the 'diagnostic test' in the book, I scored fifty points above the average (80 points) for those receiving treatment for OCD.

Here, laid bare, were all the fearful thoughts that would have me indulge in endless, physically exhausting, mind-sapping, deeply embarrassing cycles of compulsive checking, rumination, avoidance and reassurance-seeking. At the heart of these

could all too easily be translated into believing in the high likelihood of bringing about catastrophe, agony and humiliation. Not much fun, really. I sought, and eventually received help, by way of 'cognitive behavioural therapy' (CBT), which provided me with some useful coping techniques and insights into my underlying fears and 'core beliefs', as well as much needed recognition of what I was actually contending with. But it would not and could not remove the source of my uncertainty and vulnerability. Nor did the generally held 'genetic explanation' of OCD as the result of a *deficiency* in brain chemistry help me to understand how my educational experience and cultural circumstances had contributed to the severity of my fears of catastrophic failure. Above all, the core belief of the treatment industry (though not my personal therapist) appeared to be that OCD was *my problem*, something *wrong with me*, which *I* had to control. In other words, *I* am held responsible for my excessive sense of personal responsibility and its attendant anxieties in an uncertain world and adversarial culture.

Even more recently, my wife, Marion, brought home a book she had come across by Petruska Clarkson, entitled 'The Achilles Syndrome - Overcoming the Secret Fear of Failure'. Reading it proved if anything to be even more of a revelation than my encounter with the book on OCD. I had already vaguely heard about and related my experience to what has been called 'Impostor Syndrome', but Clarkson's book went to my mind further and deeper in identifying a psychological 'archetype', epitomized by the myth of Achilles. If ever a character combined exceptional prowess with exceptional vulnerability arising from a *gap* in his upbringing, here is the one. Moreover, this character was not only a great warrior (and worrier), but also expressed enormous creativity, compassion and healing power, notwithstanding his early and tragic demise.

Here are seven characteristics of the 'Achilles Syndrome', as described by Clarkson:

1. A mismatch between externally assessed competence or qualification and internally experienced competence or capability, leading to feelings of 'I am a fraud'.
2. Inappropriate anxiety or panic in anticipation of doing the relevant task.

3. Inappropriate strain or exhaustion after the task.

4. Relief instead of satisfaction on completion of a task.
5. Inability to carry over any sense of achievement to the next situation.
6. A recurrent conscious or unconscious fear of being found out, and of shame and humiliation.
7. A longing to tell others about the discomfort but the fear of being called weak or unstable. This sense of a taboo adds to the strain, loneliness and discomfort.

In identifying the origin of this syndrome, Clarkson has no hesitation in pointing to over-expectant forms of upbringing and education in a competitive culture, which neglect basic lessons and human needs for love and respect in the quest for fast-tracked superiority. The result is what she calls 'pseudocompetence' - apparently advanced skill built on fragile foundations: in another word, 'bullshit'. This tallies strongly with my own educational experience both as learner and teacher. How many times as a learner was I told not to concern myself with elementary questions in order to 'get on'. How many times did I actually take short cuts that left huge gaps in my knowledge and understanding? How many times as a teacher have I found myself expected to encourage learners to do the same?

There is no doubt in my mind that there is enormous room for doubt in our competition-based educational establishment, which promulgates pseudocompetence. The more sensitive amongst us are aware of our pseudocompetence and can suffer from Achilles Syndrome. The less sensitive assume positions of authority, which they protect with the utmost zeal against any deep form of enquiry that might undermine their fragile foundations. And so the façade sustains itself, cloning students in its own image.

Both OCD and Achilles Syndrome appear typically to be described, explicitly or implicitly, as unrelated 'problems' that need to be overcome by the individuals concerned. In accordance with conventional rationalistic thinking, which regards individual identity as a definable product of internal genetic and external environmental influences ('nature' and 'nurture', respectively), the one is seen primarily as a consequence of brain chemistry, the other as the output of inapt and inept educational practice and/or upbringing. A hard line is drawn between inner

the existence of such discrete boundaries and much evidence to the contrary, implicit in relativity, quantum mechanics and non-linear theory.

I think it is just this kind of objective rationality, however, which creates the divisive cultural context that makes the sense of vulnerability underlying both OCD and Achilles Syndrome seem like *something wrong with individuals*, rather than a source of creative *solution* for global crisis. For there is no doubt in my mind that the root of this crisis lies in our human propensity to try to remove doubt from our minds by imposing unrealistic definitions of 'is or is not' upon the fluid dynamic evolutionary geometry of nature. We embed such definition deep within our philosophical, mathematical, scientific, linguistic, educational and governmental foundations. We strive to be complete and perfect individuals who will be preserved (if not pickled!) in the struggle for life, whilst not appreciating that any form of completion rings the death knell for evolutionary creativity. We render ourselves mentally into discrete subjects and objects capable only of transactional, competitive or co-operative interaction rather than being lovingly receptive and responsive inclusions of one and another. We don't recognise that evolutionary perfection can only be a property of *all* in dynamic relationship, not *one* in isolation, and so try to live out our lives as paradoxical singularities, alienated from our natural neighbourhood.

In these terms the gaps in our individual make up are *not* the problem. The *pretence* that these gaps can be eliminated or covered up is what makes us pseudocompetent. We cannot breathe or move or love or live without gaps in our bodily boundaries. These boundaries are necessarily *incomplete*, distinct and dynamic, not discrete and fixed. As William Wordsworth said, in challenge to Erasmus Darwin, Charles Darwin's grandfather, 'in nature everything is distinct, yet nothing defined into absolute, independent singleness'. There is therefore very good intellectual reason for feeling compassionately that what we might deem in a perfectionist framework to be a flaw in human nature, our vulnerability and proneness to 'error', which comes through the inclusion of immaterial space in our make-up, is actually vital. It is the source of our creative spirit. It is an aspect of our nature that enables us to love and feel love and so work co-creatively in dynamic relational neighbourhood, celebrating and respecting rather than decrying our diversity of competencies and appearances.

Perhaps this is why my personal response to my Achilles Heel has been to develop, with the help of a few like-minded companions, a form of awareness, which we call 'inclusionality'. This form of awareness does not replace but utterly transforms objective rationality into a far deeper and more encompassing appreciation of *all form as flow-form, a dynamic inclusion, not an occupier of space, which cannot be defined completely in an unfrozen world*.

With this awareness, the brute force of 'natural selection' or 'external creator' is transformed into the receptive-responsive immanence of 'natural inclusion'. The brute 'to be or not to be' objective logic of the 'excluded middle' is transformed into the fluid dynamic 'to be and not to be' logic of the 'included middle'. The brutal, possessive sovereignty of the individual, 'I alone', self is transformed into the complex identity of 'self as neighbourhood' with both local (particular) and non-local (everywhere) aspects. The brutal occupation and fractionation of territory is transformed into natural 'pooled togetherness'. The brutal exploitation of other by one is transformed into sustainable attunement of one with other. The brutally imposed 'box' of three-dimensional geometry - with space and time abstracted - is transformed into an infinite, dynamically nested, 'holey communion'.

Maybe Achilles Heel is Achilles Heal, our naturally creative solution, a gap that opens the possibility of agape. You might say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the Only One.