Letters to Those Silently Suffering: Let’s Talk About It – Bringing Light to What Stigma Forces Us to Keep in the Dark.

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by Vanessa Sanford

“This post is intended to help parents and educators learn the impact of Stigma and how it effectively gets in the way of learning compassion and courage. Stigma silences our hurts. This letter educates us on how to protest against Stigma in hopes it may save a life—maybe the life of someone you love. Vanessa M. Sanford, LPC practices in Frisco, Texas, and specializes in multiple areas of counseling for children, teens, and adults.

Dear Stigma around Suicide Prevention and other Hard Conversations,

This is my Breakup Letter to You,

I know we have been together for a long time. As a matter of fact, you have been controlling lots of people. I have quieted my real feelings to keep you around. I guess I thought if you were running the show, I would be safe and hidden from pain. I am finally brave enough to call you out on hypnotizing us to only focus on our kids’ grades and achievements, or on being perfect with our bodies and décor. I want to provide a disclaimer about this breakup letter. It is going to be imperfect and messy and vulnerable. I have thought a long time about how to say this to you, but couldn’t find the perfect words. So here goes...

I am no longer willing to see pain and then run or hide or numb or ignore or cliché my way from it. I have come to realize I can do hard things. I want you to understand I can trust myself more than I trust what you require us to believe “but what will people think?” and “we can’t talk about that” and “that doesn’t happen to us.” I have come to realize your superficial pressures teach us all to lie. When someone says, “How are you?” We are taught to say, “I am fine, and you?” Well, Bless your little heart, Stigma. Your rules are what keeps us sick and silent and scared to tell the truth. You have taught me to glorify fear and to avoid risk, failure, pain, or struggles. You have taught me to stay in my comfort zone, not to trust courage, but hide from anything imperfect. You want me to only put my best Christmas-card-captured-
Well, I am sure you are criticizing this break-up letter, but I am continuing anyway

I am beyond mesmerized by those who defy you. We will never forget when 9/11 happened. We saw broken hearts show up with open arms and help, donate, pray, and be there openly for one another. It was so tragic and beautiful to see such love and connection. When hurricanes and earthquakes or any natural disasters happen, we all just put you away and do whatever we can to help our brothers and sisters. I am forever grateful you stay quiet during these times.

Please know I am so confused, Stigma. Why, why, why are you so quiet during natural disasters and terrorism, but so ferocious when they are contemplating suicide? Why must you create such pressure for us to interrupt and spray out “know better advice” all over someone desperately needing light into their darkness? Why do you confuse us into talking instead of bravely listening to understand and staying curious as to what they are feeling? Why do you dangle carrots of numbing and judgment and criticism all over so that we get distracted from having hard and awkward conversations about suicide and how to prevent it?

YOU just tell people to get over it, move on, deal with it, or suck it up. You tell them, “my story is harder than yours,” or “that won’t happen in our family,” etc. I no longer want to subscribe to your cult. I no longer want to participate in keeping people silent. I want to learn to be brave in discomfort instead of staying comfortable in resentment. I want people to know they are not alone in their loneliness. I want leaders and parents and teachers to understand we all are sick and tired of being scared.

What an insult it is, Stigma, that you have led me to believe I am not capable of these hard conversations. I urge you to stop leading companies, churches, classrooms, sports, dinner tables and bedtime routines. Shutting others pain down for us to stay comfortable is something I will never do. I will listen, even if I am scared and do not know what to say. Glennon Doyle says, “fear is love holding its breath. It’s our job not to convert fearful people but to love them.” Yes, Glennon, I agree. I have to unlearn how to fight fear with fear. I have to learn how to lovingly see fear and not join, but to also respect that I cannot force or pressure or blame others into letting go of it. I know there are lots of places and people who role-model this, like the Suicide Hotline Center and therapists, hospitals, and artists. Where truth and love and fear are spoken, and expressed imperfectly and messy, but not silenced. I am learning not to shut down in fear and to also respect how powerful fear is. Fear can keep us safe, but not by the standards you want us all to uphold. So Stigma, I now know your Full Name: Stigma-Comparison-Judgey-Avoider of Hard Things-Love-holding-its-breath.

I have been going behind your back for years planning my escape. I am officially ready to leave because I have found enough people not buying into your lies. I am so mad at you for betraying all those that died because they were silenced and felt alone. I was deceived by advertisements you promoted to buy your product. Stigma, I challenge you to look closer into how YOU have role-modeled what to do in struggle. Just in case you didn’t know, September is Suicide Prevention Month. That’s right, I am breaking up with you during this important month spreading awareness on suicide. I want to shout as loud as I can to those suffering in silence, “You matter, you deserve to be heard.” I have also learned when people feel suicidal, they really just want to kill their pain. They do not understand if they die, their pain actually doesn’t even die. It spreads to all those that love them. We don’t understand pain when we follow your lead. The options you have provided us are to run away and hide, get scared and big and loud, or please our way out of pain. You haven’t taught us to lean into pain, to get curious, and to be gentle and loving and non-judgmental. I am learning these things now that I am not with you anymore.

You know Stigma, I was watching this rap artist named Logic perform on the Video Music Awards.

He did not follow your rules. He stood up and spoke out. He even titled his song the Suicide Hotline Prevention Number, 1-800-273-8255. He sure did! I thought it was brilliant. You know what? People stood up and clapped and were inspired by his courage. People were so moved, the Suicide Hotline Center reported a 50% increase in calls since that performance! Can you believe that? He stood up and spoke out. He even titled his song the Suicide Hotline Prevention Number, 1-800-273-8255. He sure did! I thought it was brilliant. You know what? People stood up and clapped and were inspired by his courage. People were so moved, the Suicide Hotline Center reported a 50% increase in calls since that performance! Can you believe that? He said he would be grateful outwardly, but on the inside, would feel confused and wonder, "I didn't create this art to save people." He goes on to say, "What can happen if I took myself out of my comfort zone and made a whole album about everybody and everybody’s struggles including my own which is one I’ve never done. What if I silenced my own fear and I say, 'I'm scared talk about my race. I'm scared to talk about the state of this country but I'm going to do it anyway. I'm going to persevere. Man, how many lives can I really save then?'" So, now that I am breaking up with you, I have a lot of time on my hands. I may even become a rap artist, like Logic.
I also watched a Netflix series not too long ago called *13 Reasons Why*. It is about a girl in high school who commits suicide and leaves reasons why she did it. There was so much of you, Stigma, around this series. So much fear and concern from lots of professionals and parents that thought this series was dangerous and put ideas into kids heads about suicide. Dear Stigma, I will bravely admit that I liked that series. It goes against your rules of offering an emotionless, sterile, and easy way to talk about suicide. It goes against the story ending in a pretty bow with all struggles heroically returning us back into our comfort zones. It defied you. I liked that about it. It was messy and scary and too real and I watched some of the episodes in panic with my hands over my eyes. I cried and talked and thought about the characters as if I knew them. You know what else I liked about this series? Stigma, you were actually in the series! There were characters that kept silent and were just bystanders to pain. That is what you do best. Then, there was some starting to learn the importance of being Upstanders. They went against the silence and tried to speak up and do the right thing and not ignore someone in pain. What a lesson! I invited others to talk about this too, and we did not stay in silent judgment. We disagreed and shared fears and worries of how this will negatively impact or glorify suicide. I thought about what myths are already out there about suicide and if this series makes these narratives worse. I was aware many teens had seen it before their parents. We are all hungry for a safe place to tell truths like, "I am having a bad day and feel sad" instead of "I am fine."

Stigma, your rules have stood in the way of too many lives.

I read a book recently called *Braving the Wilderness, The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*, by Brené Brown. She is a researcher and storyteller, and I feel this book helped me break up with you, Stigma. She talks about the difference between fitting in and belonging. She says, "Even in the context of suffering – poverty, violence, human rights violations – not belonging in our families is still one of the most dangerous hurts. That’s because it has the power to break our heart, our spirit, and our sense of self-worth." Being able to detach from Stigma means I get to lean more into self-worth and true belonging. Brown goes on to say that based on her research, there are three outcomes when we feel broken...

1. You live in constant pain and seek relief by numbing it and/or inflicting it on others;
2. You deny your pain, and your denial ensures that you pass it on to those around you and down to your children; or
3. You find the courage to own the pain and develop a level of empathy and compassion for yourself and others that allows you to spot hurt in the world in a unique way." (Brown, 2017, p. 14)

Did you know suicide doesn't only destroy the lives of young teens? Sometimes even the obituaries in the newspaper do not tell the whole story of how a person really died. Many elders, treasures full of wisdom and cherished stories, take their lives. They painfully feel ignored and of no value. They kill themselves too.

I also watched [this TED talk](https://www.ted.com/talks/shane_koyczan) by Shane Koyczan.

He soulfully shares his story of being told messages he was unworthy and how this silenced his inherent right to feel love and belonging. His story is gut-wrenching and brave because he talks about learning his worth from within, and about letting go of what others think. It made me cry and think about all the people that are made fun of, laughed at, ignored, and shamed because they are different. Stigma, you make being different a bad thing.

I am not as sad as I thought I would be to break up with you. As a matter of fact, now that I think about it, songs, books, art, poetry and even rap have been defying you all along. I will try to be more creatively defiant when in fear. I have learned that the opposite of anxiety is not calm, it is self-trust. I would even add that the opposite of courage is self-betrayal. I feel free to believe in myself and believe in others without you by my side. I am aware you will still be around, and I am sure I will bump into you since we live so close to each other. When I see you, I will not say hello or ask how you are doing, out of self-respect. I might just give you a nod–or not. I will have to remind myself you are charming but dangerous. You are so good at lying to me and others, forcing us into silence. You focus on what others think. I choose to loudly treat myself and others with love and kindness.

Dear Stigma, please do not write back. This is like one of those emails that clearly states DO NOT REPLY.

Love when in Fear,

No longer Silent

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Dear Lives Lost to Suicide,

We miss you every day. We miss what you would have been like if you had received help, if you weren’t told to be quiet and hide your pain.
Dear Lives Contemplating Suicide,

We want to hear about your pain. YOU don't have to die. Tell a professional, parent, teacher, doctor or someone you trust. Keep telling until someone hears you. Write, draw, paint, cry, scream, sing, dance your way out of the silence and into the lit driveway of Love. Help is waiting for you! Listen to Logic's song and memorize the title and call it. Just be messy, imperfect, and vulnerable. Know asking for help is Brave and Right.

Dear Lives Afraid to Speak up about a Loved One Struggling,

Please remember, it is better to say something, even if it is imperfect, then to say nothing at all. Say something like, "I don't know what to say, but I love you and am so glad you told me. Let's find someone who can help." Stop saying, "They are just saying that for attention." Stop ignoring or gossiping or seeing someone struggle from afar and do nothing. Do something, anything. We all need to know we matter. Lead with Love not Fear.

Dear All Ready to Break up with Stigma Alongside Me,

I hope we start to learn that hiding behind Stigma hurts not only ourselves but others. What if we all realized that when we see someone struggling and make fun of them or ignore them or don't know what to say so we say nothing, that this is exactly what Stigma wants? It's not going to be easy but I found help in this quote I found in Brené’s book *Braving the Wilderness*, "Stop walking through the world looking for confirmation that you don’t belong. You will always find it because you've made that your mission. Stop scouring people’s faces for evidence that you’re not good enough. You will always find it because you've made that your goal. True belonging and self-worth are not goods; we don’t negotiate their value with the world. The truth about who we are lives in our hearts. Our call to courage is to protect our wild heart against constant evaluation, especially your own. No one belongs here more than you.” (Brown, 2017, P.158)

Professional Disclaimer: The artists mentioned in this article are not a replacement for professional help for those struggling with suicide or rape, but they are powerful artistic expressions defying Stigma's rules. Artists create expressions every day that are controversial. It is okay for people to not like them. Stigma loudly protests against messy and imperfect storytelling and we start blaming and fear-mongering. In regards to The Netflix series, *13 Reasons Why*, it is my professional opinion this is an eye-opener and it goes against what Stigma wants when it doesn't offer a positive ending. Suicide, in real life, isn't a positive ending. Listen to that uncomfortable feeling this series triggers and consider it a great starting point for others to recognize how they handle discomfort and pain: do we blame and shame, or increase our understanding and not silence ourselves from helping? Whether it is a helpful series or not, teenagers were glued to every episode quietly and secretly in their rooms. That tells me that this isn't something okay to talk openly about with parents. This also tells me kids are hungry to find some place to understand this more. It is messy but also brings light to such a dark topic. It is okay that professionals disagree on this. The hope is to disagree and seek understanding, not stay quiet because it could possibly offend someone. Suicide is pervasive and sad and confusing, and we need more parents getting comfortable in the uncomfortable so kids can trust their parents to get out of their rooms and into an open space and talk about this together. This post is not intended to substitute for professional help, and I encourage individuals considering suicide to reach out to a professional who understands (1-800-273-8255 / https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/).

Resources for Parents of Teens: www.granthaliburton.org

References


Shane Koyczan’s TED talk https://www.ted.com/talks/shane_koyczan_to_this_day_for_the_bullied_and_beautiful

Netflix Series, 13 Reasons Why

*please check out the extra episode explaining the reasons behind the series

"Come out, Come out, Whoever you Are" article by Glennon Doyle in October 2017 issue of O Magazine
For some children, the usual milestones and recommendations rarely seem to apply. Whether because of disability differences, gifted ability differences, or both, parents and educators gradually learn to expect the unexpected.

Because of these differences, children can also surprise adults with early worries about big-picture, life-and-death concepts. In some cases, this can be the first sign of high-ability needs. How do you cope with a two-year-old’s concerns about death, heaven, and an infinite universe? How can you handle a student so concerned with social justice that she argues with her peers, or an emotionally sensitive child who cannot sleep because of stress over homelessness and foreign wars?

When the usual parenting and teaching advice doesn’t help, consider checking out the below resources to help young children with mature worries.

*Living With Intensity*. Danels, Susan and Piechowski, Michael (2009). *Living with Intensity* explains Dabrowski’s theory of positive disintegration and the “Overexcitabilities” (types of emotional and physical intensity), and it offers perspectives from a number of professionals on coping with intensity in children and adults. Learning about theimaginational and emotional “overexcitabilities” may help parents better understand the thoughts and emotions behind a child’s concerns. Much of the book focuses on the gifted population,
However, anyone with a child or student experiencing extreme or advanced worries may find the coping strategies helpful.

**Searching for Meaning: Idealism, Bright Minds, Disillusionment, and Hope.** Webb, James T. (2013). Like *Living with Intensity*, psychologist James Webb’s book discusses giftedness, but it offers help for anyone struggling with discouragement over weighty questions. Webb tackles the subject of existential depression with compassionate, thoughtful perspective and a number of ways to cope. Though geared toward adults, several strategies can be used by parents and educators to support children, such as focusing on ways to live in the present moment, bibliotherapy, journaling, and helping children to feel they can make a difference through causes related to their concerns. (Parents and educators can help children get involved – check out Hoagies’ Blog Hop on Child Activists for ideas!)

**The Mama’s Boy Myth: Why Keeping Our Sons Close Makes them Stronger.** Lombardi, Kate Stone (2013). Mothers with sensitive sons can find both relief and validation in this well-researched book. Lombardi debunks stereotypes and misconceptions about close mother-son relationships and sensitive boys, and she shows how nurturing the emotional sensitivity of male children can actually benefit both the child and our society as a whole.

**Some of My Best Friends Are Books: Guiding Gifted Readers.** Third Edition. Halstead, Judith Wynn (2009). Books and workshops on parenting gifted children frequently recommend bibliotherapy as a technique for coping with life’s stresses, and it can help adults, as well. Halstead’s classic book offers a number of suggestions that can appeal to the interests, strengths, and struggles of gifted-identified readers. (For a few additional gifted bibliotherapy recommendations, check out the NuMinds Vodcast on this topic!)

**Your Rainforest Mind: A Guide to the Well-Being of Gifted Adults and Youth.** Prober, Paula (2016). This recent book by Paula Prober, a licensed professional counselor and former teacher, can support parents with all types of sensitivity in their families, including the emotional sensitivity associated with creative abilities. Prober’s Rainforest Mind metaphor reassures and validates readers as she guides them through strategies to both cope and reframe negative associations they may have formed about their sensitivity.

Though our first instinct is often to protect our children and students from pain, under Dabrowski’s theory, experiencing certain intensities can lead to the development of empathy and altruistic behavior. Stress about current events can also provide opportunities for discussions about essential topics, such as conversations about racial bias, equality, and the importance of truthfulness and peaceful problem-solving. Parents of young children with extreme worries may find it necessary to filter or restrict certain adult topics in news or fiction, however, even when a child is capable of grasping the concepts. The AAP has released recommendations on the impact of violent media and video games on children, and websites such as Kids in Mind, Common Sense Media and Compass Book Ratings can help screen adult content in films and books, which can be helpful for young children with high comprehension levels. In any discussion with children, but especially those involving life’s big questions, children will learn by example and appreciate an adult’s honesty with them.

For educators: parents and experts agree on the importance of understanding individual differences and diagnoses when helping children through difficult behavior. For example, classroom strategies which work for typically developing children could trigger panic instead of compliance in a child with certain disabilities. To work through behaviors influenced by big-picture worries, both parents and educators will want to start with a compassionate understanding of how a child may process his or her world differently.

**Counseling Notes**

As adults, we play an important role in helping children to learn from their pain. According to counselor Vanessa Sanford, "the way for kids to be wise, kind, resilient, and brave is to learn from pain and worries and struggle, not run from it. Kids need to see parents allow the compassionate space for kids to make meaning out of struggle and believe they are capable of hard things instead of fixing or protecting kids all the time." She explains that this “doesn’t mean we want kids to get hurt, but we do want to send a message, ‘I am here, I see you, I know this is scary, but you are brave and we can do this together.’”

How can adults create this space? Sanford explains, “courage must be a component... Courage to hold a safe space for kids to express their worries and not shut them down... Courage to not have the answer, but to just allow kids to explore their own way around worries. Courage to ask for help when an adult feels over their head with the struggles. Courage to believe the adult is capable of handling this and that the kid is too. Courage to practice empathy and compassion instead of just running to logic and cognitive space. When kids have grown up worries, they need to know the ones they are trusting with this are safe and allow enough space for emotion. Logic can return into the conversation once emotion is seen, valued, respected, and [it is] explained that we all feel messy and complicated feelings. Normalizing this for kids is so powerful and invites them to continue opening up about these worries,” she says.

According to Sanford, parents need the empowerment and encouragement to know “that they can do hard things. Their kids can do hard things. That if their kid has existential questions, the most important thing to consider is how brave and vulnerable the parent [must be] to role-model so the kid can feel safe, respected, valued and loved.” Though we cannot stay forever at their desks or bedsides, when our children and students struggle with their first existential questions, as adults, we can model empathy and provide those safe spaces for
them to process their feelings – which can help them for the rest of their lives.

Note: Some worries are too big for children, parents, and educators to handle on their own. If a child’s worries are interfering with his or her quality of life, or if adults see warning signs of mental illness, it is important to seek professional help, just as we would for physical injuries or illnesses. Parents may find it helpful to search for counselors and psychologists familiar with known conditions or diagnoses impacting their children.

For more help, this video from Dr. Brené Brown explains the benefits of empathy and the difference between empathy and sympathy.

Many thanks to Vanessa M. Sanford, LPC for her invaluable contributions, interview, and video link. Ms. Sanford practices in Frisco, Texas, and specializes in multiple areas of counseling for children, teens, and adults.

What strategies have you found successful in helping your child or students cope with existential stress? Let us know in the comments below.

The Fissure Blog is proud to participate in blog hops from Hoagies’ Gifted Education Page! For additional posts in the Philosophical / Spiritual Anxiety Blog Hop, please click on the below image (credit Pamela S. Ryan!).

4 Comments

3 “Messy” Tensions to Challenge Our Thinking on Learning and Productivity

Posted on February 23, 2017

by Ben Koch
There’s an unspoken truism most of us adults have internalized that goes something like this: “If only I were more organized with my time, more focused on my goals, and more disciplined with my tasks, I’d finally achieve X.” Around New Year’s each year, this guilt-infused mantra is the fuel for many a well-intentioned resolution involving elaborate new systems of organization and task management. In *Messy: The Power of Disorder to Transform Our Lives*, Tim Harford turns this assumption on its head. In his book, Hartford probes people, organizations and events which demonstrate how embracing disorder, uncertainty, and messiness can be the catalyst for amazing achievements and unforeseen breakthroughs.

Although geared toward leaders, innovators, and thinkers in the world-at-large, I found the book full of insights for parents, teachers and edupreneurs as we guide and nurture our students. Here I choose 3 binary tensions highlighted by Harford and connect them directly to issues relevant to our interactions with learners.

### Hyper-Focus vs. Distractibility

We often assume great successes are the result of sustained, laser-like focus on a problem. As Harford points out, however, “distractible brains can also be seen as brains that have an innate tendency to make ... useful random leaps” (p 17) which lead to creative or innovative breakthroughs. And there is research to back up a correlation between distractibility and higher creativity. Harford cites a Harvard study in which researchers measured the ability of students to filter out unwanted stimulus. The weak filter students scored higher on all kinds of creative measures (p 17).

What we infer from this study reaffirms my own observations regarding the "5 Gifted Profiles," as delineated by George Betts and Maureen Niehart (1988). “Type 2” profile students, The Creatives, are often perceived as uncouth, distracted, and associative thinkers with a lower threshold for sustained focus. Could it be they are simply selective consumers, choosing to follow the trail of deep, non-obvious connections being triggered by their learning environment? A Creative’s penchant to process the world holistically makes her more distractible, but indeed makes her predisposed to draw fantastic insights from apparently disparate information. Teachers: have you ever felt you've been suckered into a tangent by a Creative student making an elaborate observation, only to find that somehow, it winds right back to the topic, which is now afforded a new level of depth and complexity?

### Bonding Social Capital vs. Bridging Social Capital

When a group or team needs to accomplish a major task, it makes sense for them to bunker down, remove all infringements of the outside world, and one-pointedly push through, right? Maybe not. Harford highlights the distinction between “bonding social capital” and “bridging social capital.” On a team wired for bonding social capital, you seek to “Minimize disruptions, distractions, obstacles; identify what you have to do; focus your energies on doing it as effectively as possible” (p 39). So what could be missing? As it turns out, the sparks of inspiration that can come from interactions across groups and teams–known as bridging social capital–may be what allow the team to make the leap from good to great. Harford cites examples in the world of collaborative mathematicians and in the video game industry, where “a great computer game is like a great mathematics paper. It requires bridging: the clever combination of disparate ideas” (p 41).

The benefits of sparking exchanges outside of a student’s usual, closed, tight-knit group is one reason why my company, NuMinds Enrichment, designs all our programs as mixed-age learning experiences. I still remember our first summer camp several years ago when I walked into a classroom to find a 1st grader and 8th grader co-presenting on a project. Think the benefits go only one way? Think again. We find the older students are just as likely to benefit from the sparks generated by the “disparate ideas,” genuine curiosity, and the beginner’s mind exhibited by younger students.

### Careful Planning vs. Improvisation

When you need a project management certification to keep a grip on a child’s weekly schedule, you know we live in an an era of hyper-managed and overscheduled students. Parents feel compelled to leave nothing to chance, and this desire to control outcomes has crept into the classroom in the form of perfectionism and anxiety.

What if, by not occasionally relinquishing control, we are missing out on surprising creative results and rich, unforeseen experiences? Harford cites numerous extraordinary examples of history-making moments that were the result of moments of improvisation, from MLK’s “I Have a Dream” speech to the ground-breaking “Kind of Blue” album by Miles Davis.

But examples need not be extraordinary to be revealing. That very first week of NuMinds summer camp, we had planned an elaborate, musical, technology-infused series of morning assemblies. It was part of our morning “shock and awe” plan to get campers excited for a day of passion-based learning (it’s summer, after all, and they often need a little help). We rolled into the venue the weekend before to get set
up, and, major obstacles: no projector, malfunctioning microphone system, and no way to send music through the speakers. Plan B. Wait, there was no plan B! This situation forced us into an improvisational state of mind and, lo and behold, being forced to go low tech and intimate with our morning assemblies ended up defining the spirit of Camp Pursuit. Sure, we’ve got mics and flashy visuals now, but to this day, the “fireside chats,” puppet shows, and acoustic sing-alongs we developed that first week—because a messy situation forced our hand—are integral pieces of the Camp Pursuit experience.

Harford cites three clear benefits of an improvisational approach to managing a project (p 98):

1. Speed
2. Economy
3. Flexibility

In other words, when compared to meticulous and calculated planning, embracing or even seeking a little messiness will not only drive improvisation but can take less time, cost less, and by its very nature will be more responsive to uncertainties.

But, let’s face it: millions of students in the U.S. and around the world, including refugees whose lives have been torn asunder by world conflicts, don’t have the luxury of worrying about over-planned and scripted lives. For them, improvisation isn’t an experiment, it’s survival. Perhaps there is much we can learn from their resilience about coping with a disordered world.

It’s hard to imagine a “messier” situation than poverty, but we can take heart that even in circumstances like this, curiosity, persistence and incredible improvisation can propel education. If we can appreciate and learn from this Indian school under a freeway, perhaps we can all find ways to improvise heartfelt teaching and learning, even when the promise and principle of our public education system seems under assault. Not to excuse that students or teachers or our very own public schools should ever be asked to perform miracles with lack of resources, funding, and support, but the innovative resilience we develop while continuing the fight for fairness, justice, and equity will only increase our effectiveness as we move closer to those ideals.

Harford highlights many more tensions we can utilize to explore our notions of learning and productivity, including groupthink vs. cognitive diversity, hard vs. soft spaces, the paradox of automation, “neats vs. scruffs,” and organized play vs. informal play. In an era of uncertainty and flux, if we can reconsider our ingrained assumptions and attachments to order, structure and predictability, we may find “messiness” a valuable impulse.

Sources


https://u.osu.edu/pressuretobeperfect/truth-about-perfectionism/

https://thefissureblog.com/2015/08/01/gifted-101-the-6-gifted-profiles/
In June, filmmaker Ken Burns delivered a powerful commencement address at Stanford University. Among other words of advice, he urged graduates to serve their country, to “insist that we support science and the arts,” and to be active in solving challenges facing our nation. After the presidential election, one Stanford graduate wrote Burns to confess regret about her initial negative reaction to his speech, and to ask his advice on moving forward post-election.

Burns told the Washington Post that it took “a while to write her back.” After the election, he said, he felt like “Frodo in Mordor.” (For those not familiar with The Lord of the Rings, in the last half of the trilogy, Frodo and his companion, Sam, struggle through enemy territory on a near-hopeless mission to save Middle Earth.)

In your role in education, have you ever felt like Frodo in Mordor?

Perhaps you are the only educator or parent trying to follow best practices for a specific student, or the only person advocating to save, start, or improve a district program. You may be a teacher, a parent, a school administrator, a lawmaker, or an advocate for public education. You may feel hopeless in your struggle for adequate funding. You may feel terrified as you fight against proposals and budget cuts that could strip away any real chance of a decent education for students in low-income neighborhoods, or for students with certain special needs and learning differences.

How do you cope with seemingly impossible challenges in the field of education?

Burns responded with advice that can help in many situations, regardless of political beliefs or affiliation, whenever we feel overwhelmed and hopeless. He encouraged the writer to seek engagement and to start with “awareness and commitment.” He said: “go forward. Engage. Don’t despair. Find likeminded people — not from your social circle, but everywhere.”

In other words: look for others who feel like Frodo in Mordor, and become Sam.

In Tolkien’s trilogy, Sam is not always treated with respect, including by Frodo. Being Sam is not a glamorous job, and Sam is not praised in any minstrel’s song. Readers don’t often see Sam as the hero of the story – yet more than once, the fate of all Middle Earth rests in his hands.

Sam never seeks glory or recognition, and throughout the tale, he follows his convictions. It is Sam who chooses to trust and befriend Tom Bombadil and Faramir, saving the quest. In their most difficult moments, Frodo and Sam face impossible challenges alone – yet they go forward, and they find unexpected allies. They support one another, and ultimately, they prevail. Sam does what is needed to further the mission. He always helps, he works harder than anyone, he keeps going, and he creates the companionship he and Frodo need to survive. At times, Frodo despairs, but Sam does not give up – and in his loyalty, honesty, creativity, bravery, and determination, Sam discovers that he is stronger than anyone realized.

Not all of us have the resources or connections to be the warrior-king Aragorn – at least, not in every situation, or not yet – but all of us can be Sam, at any time.

At first, you may not see like-minded educators or parents in your neighborhood, in your class, or even in your school district. They exist. Keep looking until you find them. You can collaborate with those who face different challenges but who share your values.
and ultimate goals. If you search, you may find that reputable organizations are already working to overcome the obstacles you now face. (Please note that if you are unable to move past despair even with support, professionals and organizations such as NAMI are eager to help—and please feel no shame in being one of the 1 in 5 adults who needs mental health support in any given year.)

Children, too, can face isolation, heartbreaking challenges, and anxiety about the future—and as adults, we struggle to help them cope. While professional help or therapy is sometimes needed, some adult coping strategies also work for children. To help existential depression at any age, Psychologist James Webb recommends: “getting involved in causes they believe in is the best remedy to combat feelings of hopelessness and helplessness and questions of life meaning” (Webb, 2013).

Do you know a student who feels alone in her struggles, her worries about the world, her commitment to honesty and truth, or her search for support? Sam Gamgee might be the literary hero he or she needs to meet.

It is not an easy time to be an educator or a parent. In our current post-truth reality, as we fight for science, struggle to find reliable news, and weather new attacks on the public education we desperately need for global survival, we need one another.

Whatever role you play in education, small or large, please continue to engage. Follow the advice of Burns, Webb, and countless others, and do not give up. For the sake of our children, do not become resigned.

When you need help, reach out. You are not alone. We may be in Mordor, but hope is not lost.

We can all be Sam.

References


For an excellent post about discussing climate change with children, please see the EcoScienceGirl blog.

Thank you to Laurie Stein for bringing NAMI (the National Alliance on Mental Illness) to the attention of parents and professionals in the DFW area.

5 Lessons for Teachers and Parents from Adam Grant’s Originals [Infographic]

By Ben Koch

Adam Grant’s book Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World is a fascinating exploration of the often counter-intuitive principles and practices that drive the world-changers among us. It provides a rich trove of insights for those in business and industry seeking an innovative edge, as well as those in the arts and sciences looking for breakthroughs or pathways toward new paradigms.
As an educator who works with FUTURE world-changers across all industries, I read it with a slightly different filter. I asked myself, "What from this chapter could I tell a teacher at next week’s training or a parent at my next workshop that could help shape tomorrow’s originals?"

In all honesty, my first list was way too long for an infographic. Choosing these 5 concepts feels like a betrayal to the dozen or so I left out, but my hope is they’ll be surprising and impactful enough to prompt you to read it yourself!

**5 LESSONS FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS**
*From Adam Grant's *Originals* *

*Originals* highlights the behaviors, habits, and conditions which support innovators and world changers. What can we learn as parents and teachers about nurturing young originals?

**STEAM POWER**
A study of Nobel Prize winning scientists showed they were "dramatically more likely" to be involved in the arts than less accomplished peers.

STEM + Arts = STEAM!

(page 46)

**PROCRASTINATE**
Doctoral student Jihae Shin demonstrated by putting off a task you increase opportunities to engage in divergent thinking, thus increasing creative solutions.

(page 94)

**RULES VS. VALUES**
Parents of "regular" children have an average of 6 rules. Parents of "highly creative" children have an average of less than 1, and instead emphasize moral values over specific rules.

(page 164)

**THE ACHIEVEMENT TRAP**
Achievement motivation crowds out original thinking and fuels fear of failure. Conformity, mediocrity, and "guaranteed success" are enemies of creativity.
Your Rainforest Mind: A Parent’s Book Review

Posted on November 15, 2016


Review by Emily VR

Raising any school-age child inevitably brings back parents’ own school memories – both positive and negative. For children identified with learning differences and special needs, parents may recall having the same diagnoses, or they may discover missed diagnoses in themselves. Either way, parenting a child with differences can raise questions and trigger self-reflection.

When a child is identified as “gifted,” and when parents begin to understand their child’s academic and social-emotional needs, they can experience a variety of conflicting emotions. They may feel curious, apprehensive, skeptical, or excited about their child’s potential. They may feel helpless, frustrated, or even angry when they realize how few states and districts follow research-based best practices in gifted education. When parents look back on their own education and their career choices, or if they recognize gifted characteristics in themselves, they may feel validated – or they may experience sorrow, regret, or loneliness.

For adults and teenagers who want to understand and better cope with unusual sensitivity and ability, Paula Prober’s new book is a welcome guide and companion. Paula is a licensed counselor with a background in education, and she writes a popular blog (*Your Rainforest Mind*) for gifted and sensitive adults and youth. Her book is a wealth of information, compassion, and helpful advice.

The book is organized by areas of gifted characteristics and challenges, and it provides a road map for the journey of self-discovery traveled by gifted youth and adults. For those of us who love evidence and want to dig deeper, each chapter is grounded in research with quotes and
footnotes. Readers may see themselves in many of the counseling stories (used with permission, names changed), and each chapter ends with a section of coping strategies, advice, and resources. Readers who feel uncomfortable with the term “gifted” (as many of us do) can find relief and reassurance in the metaphor of the title; rainforest minds, or RFMs, are used in lieu of “gifted” throughout the text, and can refer to both intellectually and creatively gifted minds with high sensitivity and intensity. Paula explains that though “all ecosystems are beautiful and make valuable contributions to the whole, rain forests are particularly complex: multi-layered, highly sensitive, colorful, intense, creative, fragile, overwhelming, and misunderstood... the rain forest is not a better ecosystem, just more complicated. It also makes an essential contribution to the planet when allowed to be itself, rather than when cut down and turned into something it is not.”

Those familiar with gifted education will find important topics covered in a fresh, new light: perfectionism, multipotentiality, intensity, the need for intellectual peers, existential depression, impostor syndrome, and asynchronous development are included. Yet Paula’s book does not read like a research guide, but rather as a series of warm and personal sessions with a compassionate counselor and mentor. She offers an understanding of both gifted strengths and weaknesses, and she discusses them with empathy, without negative judgment, and with solutions that can improve daily life, increase happiness, and offer hope.

Whether you are starting on the “what is giftedness?” journey, advocating for a gifted child in school, homeschooling your child, or just looking for help in coping with life’s challenges, Paula’s guide gives wisdom and assistance to readers. Not all parents have access to local counselors familiar with the emotional issues faced by their families, but it is comforting to know that Paula and her book are here for parents, and can serve as companions on our parenting journey.

Your Rainforest Mind: A Guide to the Well-Being of Gifted Adults and Youth is available through Amazon, and is published by GHF Press, a Division of Gifted Homeschoolers Forum. To learn more about Gifted Homeschoolers Forum, please visit http://giftedhomeschoolers.org/.

p.s. To educators of the gifted: let’s face it, communicating with intense gifted parents can be a challenge, especially if they have strong emotions from past years, aren’t yet familiar with research on gifted children, or lack self-awareness. This book may be a welcome recommendation for them, and it could help improve parent-school communication while improving parents’ quality of life. (If you are new to gifted education, it may help you better understand the emotional needs of your students, as well!) In the meantime, please have patience with gifted parents, and please listen to them. Their insight is often needed for their child’s success, and they have a tough job... as Paula understands.
Of all the gifts a teacher has the potential of offering a student, perhaps the most vital and significant is to empower the student with the ability to create a meaning and a vision for her life.

Yet how do we as humans create meaning for our lives? This is a philosophical, even theological, question well beyond the scope of simple assertions. Yet if we narrow our scope to explore what teachers can do within the classroom to help students develop the capacity to create meaning, we can indeed gain a little ground. Brain-based learning expert Eric Jensen (2000) asserts that our brains are designed to seek out meaning, and that unless teachers are able to provide students with opportunities to discover meaning, “we will continue to produce robots and underachievers” (p. 279). Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1984) holds an even stronger belief that the “will to meaning” is the primary motivation of our existence.

With the search for meaning being such a basic part of our makeup, it would seem that a teacher’s job in this regard would be relatively straightforward—we simply push along, or guide, our students in their natural, spontaneous quest for meaningful contexts. But what if the educational system itself is sabotaging this natural, healthy quest for meaning, and in fact depriving students of opportunities and contexts for the healthy development of meaningful lives? The very fact that standardized tests have become the guidepost around which all curriculum seems to revolve, and so much teacher energy is devoted, is a sad indication that this deprivation is occurring.

Educational philosopher William Ayers (1993) believes that “standardized tests push well-intentioned teachers and school leaders in the wrong direction; they constrain teachers’ energies and minds, dictating a disastrously narrow range of activities and experiences” (p. 118). Many other roadblocks to meaning will be discussed in later sections.

Unless we as teachers want to propagate our future with the robots that Jensen has warned us about, we must quickly and skillfully remedy, or at least counteract, the narrowing effects of the current educational system. Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall (2000) have given us a wonderful framework through which to do just that. They have developed the concept of “spiritual intelligence (SQ).” In their book, Spiritual Intelligence, The Ultimate Intelligence they outline the basis and technique for engendering the overarching intelligence in human consciousness that enables our capacity for meaning, vision, and value.

**WHAT IS INTELLIGENCE?**

Despite uncertainty about this very question, the current educational environment regards the nebulous idea of intelligence with a certain holy deference. “IQ” scores are used to determine student eligibility in Gifted and Talented programs, or to determine whether a struggling child belongs in a “Special Education” program. Across the country, state-developed standardized tests are used to gauge student achievement and even rank schools into categories. However, research is increasingly demonstrating that our traditional definition of intelligence is an extremely narrow view and does not acknowledge a vast spectrum of human abilities and insights.

Zohar and Marshall (2000) posit that there are three kinds of intelligence we can recognize based on observation of neural organization and processes, as well as human behavior. The first is a linear, serial intelligence that one might associate with logic. We can consider this rule-bound thinking. Neural tracts in the brain are hard-wired to follow specific rules in accordance with formal logic. These are the neural tracts we access to perform highly logical tasks, such as learning the times tables, or grammatically diagramming a sentence. This is the kind of thinking that is measured on traditional IQ tests as developed by Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon in 1905 (Wigglesworth, 2002). No one would argue against the usefulness of this kind of intelligence, but unfortunately, argue Zohar and Marshall, this kind of intelligence does not provide us with our sense of meaning. It simply processes information but cannot make any qualitative assessment of it. After all, computers can have a high “IQ” in the context of this type of thinking, but we would never ask a computer to make a qualitative decision for us, such as what shirt we should wear to work, or even who we should marry.

But another piece of the puzzle is filled in by a second type of intelligence based on a different type of neural wiring we all possess. Neural networks, as opposed to linear neural tracts, are associative in nature, and provide us with our “associative, habit-bound, pattern-recognition, emotive thinking” (Zohar & Marshall, 2000). This associative thinking allows us to literally associate objects in our environment, and thus make connections. In its simplest sense, this represents conditioned response, and the most classical example would be the scenario of Pavlov’s salivating dogs. However, the important difference between associative thinking and IQ is that associative neural networks are not hardwired, rule-bound tracts; rather, they “have the ability to rewire themselves in dialogue with experience” (p. 52).

Because this is the type of thinking that allows us to make links between our emotions and our feelings, events, people, etc. it is often referred to as “emotional intelligence” (EQ). In fact it is this type of neurological processing Daniel Goleman popularized with the phrase “emotional intelligence” in 1995 (Wigglesworth, 2002). Jensen (2000) also puts great emphasis on the importance of emotions in learning. Because emotions trigger the release of crucial neurotransmitters which signal to the brain the importance of what is being learned, there is
THE BASIS FOR SPIRITUAL INTELLIGENCE

Both IQ and EQ represent kinds of thinking that can be replicated by computers—serial and associative. Yet as humans we possess a certain awareness, and even an awareness of that awareness, that we know intuitively no machine or computer is capable of. This third dimension of intelligence is what allows us to think creatively, to make rules, and, of course, to break rules. A computer must simply follow its rule-bound and associative programs when given a command. A human being, on the other hand, has the ability to question the command, or even refuse to do it! This is a direct reflection of this third, unitive intelligence.

Zohar and Marshall (2000) take an extensive look at the most recent neurological research and find striking support for a neurological basis of this unitive intelligence. Because the purpose of this post is more practical, and aims to support teachers in applying these concepts to benefit students, this post will only briefly summarize the supporting research.

Zohar and Marshall (2000) describe how recent research has shown there are oscillations of varying frequencies that occur in the brain. You might almost think of them as “waves” or frequencies that vibrate throughout different parts of the brain. Scientists have been able to associate these oscillations of different frequencies with specific levels of mental activity and alertness. In essence, these oscillations seem to be another way for the brain to communicate with itself. For example, upon perceiving a specific object, different areas of the brain might oscillate simultaneously. Of particular significance, however, are neural oscillations at the frequency of 40 Hz. These 40 Hz oscillations occur throughout the whole cortex, occur whether one is awake or sleeping, and seem to “transcend the ability of any single neuron or localized group of neurons” (p. 74) in that they integrate processing across the whole brain. In other words, these 40 Hz oscillations are such a crucial, indispensable piece of the puzzle because they seem to allow the brain to “see itself” in a wider context than a single neural tract or neural network. This neurological process translates into allowing us to reframe our knowledge and experience in a wider context of meaning. For this reason, these holistic oscillations are what Zohar and Marshall cite as the neurological basis for SQ.

The discoveries of the role of these 40 Hz brain oscillations in unifying consciousness obviously open the floodgates for a whole new wave of questions. What is consciousness? What is mind, and where does it come from? Zohar and Marshall do passionately delve into these questions, and in the end rest in a position that recognizes a self-transcendent quality of consciousness: “We conscious human beings have our roots at the origin of the universe itself. Our spiritual intelligence grounds us in the wider cosmos, and life has purpose and meaning within the larger context of cosmic evolutionary processes” (p. 88).

The significance in finding this innate human physiological basis for SQ is that we can acknowledge it as the birthright of all human beings, and not simply the special aptitude of a few “blessed” individuals. Whether consciously or not, we are all creating meaning, and we all have the potential to increase our capacity for value and meaningfulness by developing this innate intelligence.

Obviously, this view makes spiritual intelligence absolutely crucial in the quest for creating meaning and purpose. In fact, this third, unitive kind of intelligence that allows one to create a meaningful context seems to be exactly what Adlerian psychologists Mosak and Drei kurs (2000) are referring to when they say: “If social embeddedness is the key to a person’s feeling at home on Earth, then cosmic embeddedness is its counterpart in the existential realm” (p. 263). So it seems no coincidence that SQ is directly linked to Adler’s foundational principle of “social interest.” Like social interest, SQ is the pathway by which one creates meaning and moves toward a state of self-realization.

One useful and crucial quality of the concept of SQ is that it doesn’t, in fact, rely on any particular religious platform. It is simply an acknowledgment that human beings create meaning and value through a holistic, unitive form of intelligence. For some, this may indeed find its resonance in a traditional religious tradition. However, Zohar and Marshall emphasize the fact that even an atheist can have very high spiritual intelligence, and an extremely devout religious fundamentalist can have very low spiritual intelligence. Which leads us to the next important question: What does spiritual intelligence look like?

WHAT ARE THE QUALITIES OF SPIRITUAL INTELLIGENCE?

Though it may be difficult to articulate, teachers have an intuitive understanding of SQ as the ultimate form of intelligence. At least, we all understand that IQ and EQ alone are not enough to explain a student’s state of “intelligence” or well-being, or value. For example, we’ve all
met students who are recognized as highly “gifted” (high IQ), but have no social skills and act out with self-destructive behavior. This scenario alone, repeated year after year in schools across the country (and world) is proof that IQ is not a valid measure of the potential for a successful, meaningful life. Such a student obviously has a gap in which EQ is not developed, but the self-destructive behavior suggests a more crucial gap. There are many other scenarios in which the variables change, such as the highly charismatic, socially fluent student (high EQ) who is failing math. These all prove the same thing—namely that teachers need to recognize a third, more crucial variable of intelligence—SQ. What, however, are the qualities of a person with highly developed SQ?

Cindy Wigglesworth (2002), president of Conscious Pursuits, Inc.—a company which trains organizations in developing spiritual intelligence—has adapted Zohar and Marshall’s descriptions of SQ into a list of nine qualities of a spiritually intelligent person:

1. She is self-aware.
2. She is led by vision and values.
3. She has a capacity to face and use adversity.
4. She sees the world holistically.
5. She thrives in and celebrates diversity.
6. She possesses courage, or field independence.
7. She has a tendency to ask “why?”
8. Spiritual Intelligence
9. She has the ability to re-frame things into a larger context of meaning.
10. She possesses a spontaneity that allows her to be responsive to the world.

It is clear from this list that these are natural human qualities independent of any religious or particular spiritual doctrine, and yet at the same time they are qualities we might easily identify in those people we consider to be highly spiritual, of whatever religion. It is also easy to see how each of these qualities, without exception, would assist a student in creating a meaningful context in which to develop. This makes spiritual intelligence a particularly useful and effective way to discuss the higher order development of students without treading into dangerous discussions of religion.

WHAT ARE THE ROADBLOCKS TO SPIRITUAL INTELLIGENCE?

The sole purpose of developing SQ in teachers and students is for them to lead healthy, whole, and connected lives. There is no need here to discuss the abounding evidence that young people today are, for the most part, not leading this sort of life. One could examine statistics on dropout rates, gang and other school violence, drug use and so on and quickly eliminate “healthy,” “whole,” and “connected” from their descriptions of many students. Spiritual sickness, Zohar and Marshall (2000) argue, occurs when we are cutoff from the nurturing spiritually intelligent centers of ourselves through “fragmentation, one-sidedness, pain or distraction”. As an entire culture we are sick they argue, due to an “alienation from meaning, value, purpose and vision, alienation from the roots of and reasons for our humanity” (p. 170-1).

Frankl (1984) blames the “existential vacuum”—a feeling of emptiness and meaninglessness—as a root cause of depression, aggression, and addiction. Though Frankl didn’t say it as such, this void certainly equates to the same alienation from SQ that Zohar and Marshall describe.

To frame it another way, we might say that spiritual sickness occurs in students when their “will to meaning” is obscured and they begin to shut down their connections with the world and beings around them, one by one. In this state of hopelessness students might react in one of two equally unproductive ways. First, they may emotionally withdraw in order to isolate themselves in an attempt to reduce their pain. Second, they might attempt to overcome their hopelessness through control and intimidation of others and their environment (Beaves & Kaslow, 1981). By helping students develop the “tools” of SQ, teachers can prevent both of these extreme reactions to students’ struggle for meaning.

As teachers, are we propagating this spiritual disease of alienation by neglecting our students’ greatest tool for creating value and healing themselves? If teachers had the ability to engender the nine qualities of SQ described above, how many fragmented, disconnected young people would be able to reframe their embattled lives with a wider, transcendent view of self that might actually bring healing and new hope? SQ can serve as what Zohar and Marshall call our “compass at the edge.”

HOW CAN TEACHERS ENGENDER SPIRITUAL INTELLIGENCE IN STUDENTS?

Though SQ is a quality that has been present in humanity for millennia, it is a relatively new conceptualization that has not yet achieved wide acceptance. Since it is such a young concept, still in its establishment and validation stage, its direct application into specific fields is very undeveloped. Even Zohar and Marshall make minimal references to how SQ might be applied in the field of Education, even while acknowledging the natural SQ qualities that manifest in children, who in many ways are more in touch with their spiritually intelligent
So the role of this post, to a modest, minimal degree, is to take those first steps at integrating the concept of SQ into the hearts and worlds of teachers in the hopes that wider knowledge and development of the concept will soon create a more fertile ground for these ideas to be tested and discussed further.

Here are eight ways I believe teachers can directly and indirectly engender SQ in their classrooms, thus laying before students tools with which they can create meaningful lives. Within the description of each I have included which of the nine qualities of SQ described by Wigglesworth I believe it encompasses.

1. **Embody SQ as teachers:**

By whatever means is most appropriate to their own lives, teachers should continue to evolve and develop their own connections to their spiritually intelligent center. Cynthia Wigglesworth defines SQ in a way that I think is extremely appropriate for teachers: "the ability to behave with Compassion and Wisdom while maintaining inner and outer peace (equanimity) regardless of the circumstances" (Wigglesworth, 2002-2004). Modeling these qualities as a teacher creates the framework through which students can begin to conceptualize their own spiritually intelligent selves.

2. **Engage in creative insubordination (She is led by vision and values):**

Curriculum and teachers today are enmeshed in a world of standardized testing in which measurable results drive all else. Because this situation is not naturally friendly to the development of SQ, teachers must engage in what William Ayers (1993) has called "creative insubordination". He tells the story of how he once stood on a chair to unscrew and disconnect his classroom loudspeaker after his students' learning time and space had been interrupted several times in a single morning. These harmless acts don’t hinder student learning, which is what makes them justifiable, according to Ayers. In the context of SQ teachers may need to occasionally close their curriculum books and open their hearts. They will need to take risks in their lessons and their classrooms that stimulate the very centers of students, rather than simply rustle them out of their naps long enough to answer a few multiple choice questions. When we as spiritually intelligent teachers are led by a vision of social interest, in which our purpose is truly to benefit students and not simply further our careers, then the wide, inclusive framework within which we create our classrooms and encounter students will empower us to take skillful actions that benefit students, regardless of whether or not they harmonize with robotic bureaucracy.

3. **Dwell on the Synthesis and Evaluation level of Bloom’s Taxonomy (She has a tendency to ask “why?; She has the ability to re-frame things into a larger context of meaning):**

Most teachers are quite familiar with Bloom’s taxonomy, especially in relation to levels of questioning. The taxonomy has six tiers: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation. The higher the tier you work from as a teacher the more higher-order thinking you are requiring from students. The Knowledge and Comprehension tiers, for instance, require little more than recall of facts and basic ideas. These are certainly important building blocks for developing knowledge and thinking skills, but in the context of SQ these are skills deeply embedded within linear thinking (IQ) and will not help a student build value and meaning. Based on my analysis of the taxonomy, I propose that only when teachers can consistently question and hold discussions from the top two tiers are we developing and honing SQ. In Synthesis it is said the student “Brings together parts (elements, compounds) of knowledge to form a whole and build relationships for new situations” (Lujan, 2003). Only in Synthesis does the student begin to reframe knowledge and experience into a larger context—a hallmark of SQ. And yet we can extend student thinking (intelligence) even further with Evaluation, in which the student “Makes informed judgments about the value of ideas or materials. Uses standards and criteria to support opinions and views” (Lujan, 2003). In Evaluation students finally arrive at the stage of assigning value to knowledge and experience—an ability which I’ve argued in this post is possible not through the limited neurological systems of IQ and EQ, but only through the transcendent capacity of SQ.

Again it is no coincidence that this ability, highly linked with SQ, is at the top of Bloom’s taxonomy. Yet how often as teachers and schools are we evaluating students from the lower tiers of development? In our rush and frenzy to prepare students to pass standardized tests, which only rarely enter the higher tiers of the taxonomy, how many opportunities to develop SQ are we losing?

4. **Create mindmaps and give students the opportunity to create them (She sees the world holistically; She has the ability to re-frame things into a larger context of meaning):**

Creating mindmaps is a tested technique for drawing connections between words, ideas, concepts and entire worlds. The connections that mindmaps uncover help develop a sense of the natural interdependence of objects and ideas. One of the first and most widely known proponents of mindmapping, Tony Buzan (1993), says that mindmaps develop the mind’s “radiant thinking” capabilities, which empower the individual to see connections and make decisions beyond the normally limited state and become a “mentally literate human.” A mentally
transcends our limited selves, which reinforces that as teachers we are sim
incomparable guide to hope. In fact, as Zohar and Marshall suggest, we are neurologically developed to experience the world in a way that
give larger universe and a feeling of harmony with (at least part of) it” (Beavers and Kaslow, 1981
A key facet of creating hope is to “develop or rediscover beliefs in values beyond one's own being and one's family, a relatedness to the
larger universe and a feeling of harmony with (at least part of) it” (Beavers and Kaslow, 1981, p. 122). Engendering SQ will indeed
give students a vision beyond their own being and develop the sense of connectedness with the universe. In this sense, SQ is an
incomparable guide to hope. In fact, as Zohar and Marshall suggest, we are neurologically developed to experience the world in a way that
transcends our limited selves, which reinforces that as teachers we are simply guiding students to the state of meaning, value, and harmony

5. Create an Appreciation of Deep Diversity (She thrives in and celebrates diversity):

The phrase “deep diversity” is simply my own way of suggesting that we need to go beyond tokenism in the classroom and give students the
chance to encounter diversity on a deeper level. As teachers we don't always have control over the students that end up on our roster, but
we do control many of the interactions our students will have throughout the year. A teacher might create opportunities for his students to
interact with classrooms of students of a different age, race, ability, ethnicity, or even language. A teacher whose class is predominantly
white, for example, might create meaningful encounters for them with ESL, Bilingual, or Special Ed students on the same campus. These
encounters should personally engage students and not be mere superficial presentations of holidays and customs (which are great in some
contexts). I believe that appreciating diversity in the context of SQ means seeing oneself in the “other”, regardless of how far removed they
seem from one's cultural context. Teachers have a wonderful opportunity to develop this aspect of students' SQ by giving them meaningful
encounters with diversity.

6. Help students create their own visions and goals (She is led by vision and values):

Teachers should openly model and discuss their own goal-setting strategies and the visions that propel them. When students see examples
of how intention can bring about fruition, they may begin to develop faith in the goal-setting process. Also, journal exercises and
discussions which force students to confront their own beliefs and articulate them (at whatever level they are capable) will lead students
toward to a deeper understanding of their own value. In an ideal scenario, the teacher could help students create an evolving "mission
statement" that reflects their own vision and values. The teacher could possibly hold the students accountable to their statement as a sort of
"vision contract.” A vision that is grounded in SQ will help a student transcend the vicissitudes of life’s daily struggles and develop a
capacity for resilience.

7. Provide opportunities to journal and reflect (She is self-aware):

Students should have a venue to explore themselves at all three levels of intelligence—intellectual, emotional, and spiritual—that is non-
judgmental and supportive. Journals are the perfect outlet for this type of reflective exploration if they are understood to be confidential
AND the teacher is able to provide regular constructive feedback. It is up to the skillfulness of the teacher to guide students' journaling
towards a deeper self-awareness.

8. Study and discuss biographies of spiritually intelligent people (She has a capacity to face and use adversity; She possesses courage, or
field independence):

Students arrive with a variety of life experiences. At a young age some have already encountered great adversity that has tested their
spiritual fabric and courage. In these cases teachers should have the courage to recognize and help the student use that adversity to grow
their SQ and develop their own courage. In other cases, students have had relatively sheltered lives and little opportunity to encounter and
learn from adversity. Yet we know that as human beings they certainly will encounter adversity. In both cases students need good models
and frameworks through which to encounter and learn from adversity. Whenever possible the teacher himself should model this SQ skill. He
should be open to discussing how he overcame and learned from difficult situations in his own life. He should be able to discuss times in his
own life when he had courage, and times when he didn't. This modeling can be broadened by studying the lives of those we might
recognize as very spiritually intelligent. There are some obvious example, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Ghandi, but it would
be easy to find examples that might relate to particular students or groups of students. How about Helen Keller for students with some form
of disability? How about Jim Abbot, the pro baseball pitcher with one arm, for students with a connection to athletics? This list would be
easy to extend, but it would be most appropriate for the teacher to use his own understanding of his students to provide them with good
models of courage in the face of adversity.

CONCLUSION: A PATH TO HOPE

A key facet of creating hope is to "develop or rediscover beliefs in values beyond one's own being and one's family, a relatedness to the
larger universe and a feeling of harmony with (at least part of) it” (Beavers and Kaslow, 1981, p. 122). Engendering SQ will indeed
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incomparable guide to hope. In fact, as Zohar and Marshall suggest, we are neurologically developed to experience the world in a way that
transcends our limited selves, which reinforces that as teachers we are simply guiding students to the state of meaning, value, and harmony
Numerous obstacles stand before the teacher whose heart is in the highest interest of his students. Some of these are externally relevant—standardized testing requirements, curriculum restrictions, financial limitations. Yet many other of these obstacles are the result of his own internal limitations. Frankly, we teachers, as much as the students themselves, become alienated and fragmented in the storm of what’s expected of us in our occupation. Perhaps the problem is, as Dreikurs suggests, that we lack the “courage to be imperfect.” In fact it is two qualities of SQ—courage and spontaneity—that Dreikurs suggest we most need as teachers in order to transcend our own self-interest and instead skillfully encounter the needs of the situation. Only then, he argues, can we achieve a state of “inner freedom” and in turn impart a healthy philosophy of life to our students. This resonates strongly with the concept SQ. In short, it suggests that only spiritually intelligent teachers can produce spiritually intelligent students.

In the generous and invigorating spirit of social interest, we must become worthy as vehicles of temporary transference onto which students can project their hopes and gradually develop their own SQ. By temporarily “borrowing hope” from teachers in a way that Beavers and Kaslow describe (1981) for therapeutic situations, students can “develop or recapture a sense of basic trust and its corollary, an optimistic belief that life has value and meaning” (p. 121).

If developing SQ were simple, campuses and classrooms would be happier, healthier places in which the values of harmony, vision, and values thrived. Yet these kinds of classrooms are rare. Spiritually intelligent schools require spiritually intelligent teachers, and these certainly constitute a minority. A teacher might become hopeless or discouraged about ever transforming so many minds in a sea of spiritual sickness. Yet that would deepen the very existential vacuum we are trying to fill, or overcome. Instead, we can, as Frankl (1984) proposes, accept the “challenge to join the minority. For the world is in a bad state, but everything will become still worse unless everyone does his best” (p. 179).

Armed with an awareness of our own innate capacity to develop the spontaneous and healing qualities of SQ, we should enter classrooms and schools with the boundless, selfless courage of a warrior, emboldened by the vigor of a cosmic social interest.

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We are proud this post is part of the June 2016 Blog Hop on Hoagies' Gifted Education Page!

Blog Hop graphic by Pamela S Ryan – click above for more Blog Hop posts.

Posted in Books and Movies, Classroom How-To, Ed Research and Trends Tagged Blooms taxonomy, emotional intelligence, empathy, existentialism, neurological systems, spiritual intelligence, SQ, student engagement, Victor Frankl 4 Comments

All Along the Watchtower: Jimi Hendrix and the Search for
The recent death of Prince has prompted us here at The Fissure to think about giftedness in celebrities, particularly in the arts. In this era of selfies and news scandals, we sometimes equate celebrity with a shallow narcissism, and we can forget that many highly successful artists and performers reach the pinnacle of their craft as a result of extraordinary ability and resilience.

As more stories and anecdotes come out about Prince as a young passion-driven musician, we can’t help but draw a keen comparison between Prince and another gifted artist: Jimi Hendrix. Like Prince, Hendrix was able to redraw the cultural lines of racial, ethnic, and gender expectations. Both developed their gifts against the odds, in an often hostile world, and produced a legacy of beloved music in the process.

In this post, we present Jimi Hendrix as a case study of our need to identify and develop the talents of young, gifted students from diverse backgrounds. Using Dabrowski’s overexcitabilities as a framework, and drawing on the research of Reva C. Friedman concerning giftedness in low-income families, educators can learn important lessons from his journey.

In the summer of 1966, a virtually unknown and self-taught musician named Jimi Hendrix walked into a New York club to audition for a show. In a typical and all-too-common scenario, his guitar had been stolen the previous night, so when he got on stage another musician handed him a right-handed guitar. For most musicians in Jimi’s situation this would have been the end of it, and he would have needed to forfeit his audition—Jimi was left-handed. Yet, without a second’s hesitation, Jimi took the guitar that had been handed to him, flipped it over, and, to the astonishment of all present began jamming on it upside down as effortlessly and seamlessly as if he were playing his own lefty guitar.

This display of uncanny, virtuosic talent was typical of Jimi Hendrix’s meteoric rise to fame, and within a year of this event he was enjoying the success of nearly worldwide renown. In the end, however, the rags-to-riches story of Jimi Hendrix is the tragic tale of a gifted human being whose unique needs were never met. Just like a meteor, his life came crashing to a fiery end, leaving us to wonder what spectacular displays his creative mind might have given us. The life story of this gifted musician and performer holds many insights and lessons for educators and researchers interested in the identification and development of gifted children—in particular those under-identified students from a low SES background, like Jimi.

Using traditional achievement-based methods of identification, it is doubtful that Jimi would have been identified as “gifted” in most programs. Growing up in Seattle in the 1950’s, he displayed the classic symptoms of underachievement: there was a gross inconsistency
against him! He lived most of his childhood in transitory homes with a father who thought his interest in music was a waste of time, and his
promote predictability of functioning and reliability” (Snow et al. as cited by Friedman, 1994, p. 326). Yet Jimi had even these two strikes
success of gifted children: they establish a “supportive climate for development” (Friedman, 1994, p. 326) and are “organized in ways that
Reva C. Friedman (1994) points out several traits of low-income families which show resiliency despite the stressors which challenge the
parents or other relatives—just struggling to stay alive—to understand the subtleties and special developmental needs of gifted children?
educating teachers even today. If teachers weren't even properly equipped to assist Jimi's development, then how could we expect his
were not armed with the knowledge to properly identify culturally diverse gifted students in the forties and fifties – it is a struggle
reactions of those around him. In all aspects of the concept, he was a “self-made” talent. It is not a surprise, however, that Jimi's teachers
individual in addition to a musician. Yet as it was, no one, not even other musicians, would begin to recognize Jimi's special gift until years
becoming a musician, that early energy could have been effectively channeled into helping him become a well-rounded and successful
If anyone—a teacher, a relative, a well-meaning adult—could have recognized and acknowledged the power of Jimi’s focused obsession on becoming a musician, that early energy could have been effectively channeled into helping him become a well-rounded and successful individual in addition to a musician.
Many stories of Jimi's special sensitivity come through extended community members: though Jimi and his brother were essentially left to fend for themselves, even to the point of stealing food to survive, they had many unofficial foster families throughout their Seattle neighborhood. One story involves Jimi's sudden interest in music at about age 11. Having never so much as touched a real guitar, he procured a broom and transformed it into his imaginary instrument. Nearly every day after school he would turn on the radio and strum along with his broom as if he were playing. One man in the neighborhood observed that he would "play that broom so hard, he would lose all the straw" (Cross, 2004, p. 52). Later, Jimi was able to upgrade his broom to a beaten-up acoustic guitar with one string. To most, this would have been a useless instrument, but to the now-obsessed Jimi it became more of a science project: “He experimented with every fret, rattle, buzz and sound-making property the guitar had” (Cross, 2004, p. 52). He was now displaying incredible aptitude and creativity as an engineer, if you will, or even a scientist in the sense that he was solving authentic problems. This singular obsession, driven by his intense imagination, totally overtook Jimi. When he saw the movie "Johnny Guitar," in which one of the actors walks around with his guitar hung on his back, he began to carry his one-string guitar around like that, even at school. He would wander the neighborhood and whenever he heard music coming from a garage or home, he would wander in and ask if he could play along. This same one-pointed focus would drive him throughout his career. As an older musician, he would bring his guitar to clubs and shows and pester musicians to teach him tricks, or beg them to let him plug into their amplifiers during breaks. Though generally an extremely shy and understated person, when it came to anything related to advancing his music career, Jimi was a fearless risk-taker.
If anyone—a teacher, a relative, a well-meaning adult—could have recognized and acknowledged the power of Jimi’s focused obsession on becoming a musician, that early energy could have been effectively channeled into helping him become a well-rounded and successful individual in addition to a musician. Yet as it was, no one, not even other musicians, would begin to recognize Jimi’s special gift until years later. Though in nearly all other areas of his life he lacked confidence and self-esteem, for this one passion, his music, he seemed to possess the internal locus of control so typical of many gifted individuals. This allowed him to carry on despite the criticism and harsh reactions of those around him. In all aspects of the concept, he was a “self-made” talent. It is not a surprise, however, that Jimi’s teachers were not armed with the knowledge to properly identify culturally diverse gifted students in the forties and fifties – it is a struggle educating teachers even today. If teachers weren’t even properly equipped to assist Jimi’s development, then how could we expect his parents or other relatives—just struggling to stay alive—to understand the subtleties and special developmental needs of gifted children? Reva C. Friedman (1994) points out several traits of low-income families which show resiliency despite the stressors which challenge the success of gifted children: they establish a “supportive climate for development” (Friedman, 1994, p. 326) and are “organized in ways that promote predictability of functioning and reliability” (Snow et al. as cited by Friedman, 1994, p. 326). Yet Jimi had even these two strikes against him! He lived most of his childhood in transitory homes with a father who thought his interest in music was a waste of time, and his
family’s few resources were hardly “supportive.” The most predictable aspect of Jimi’s family life that when somebody drank, somebody would get hit (Cross 2005).

How was it, then, that against so many odds, and with no encouragement whatsoever, Jimi persisted in the development of his special talent? Evidence suggests that his imaginational OE and vision were strong enough to overcome even these odds. One surrogate mother who described Jimi as “introverted, downcast...[and] extremely sensitive” tells of an evening when young Jimi uttered an "otherworldly” statement to her whole family. She recalls how he told them all that he was going to become rich and famous, and leave the country and never come back. (Cross, 2004, p. 47). For a poverty-stricken, nearly homeless boy to make such a statement in the early fifties must have seemed incredible, and his announcement was, in fact, met with laughter. It would, however, turn out to be an eerily prophetic statement.

In Dabrowski’s concept of positive disintegration, heredity, environment, and autonomy are the three driving factors that determine how one will overcome the suffering and struggles of life. In many ways, Jimi did resist and overcome the trappings of his heredity and environment. During his maturation he became fixated on his desire to be a musician, and doing so, he discovered a need to develop personal goals and to acquire the tools to realize them. As was mentioned above, his internal locus of control in this area of his life seemed to indicate the “strong instinct to development that leads to the individual’s higher level of being.”

Yet unfortunately there were many events and circumstances of struggle in Jimi’s childhood that he never was able to positively disintegrate. The authoritarian shadow of his father, for example, seemed to haunt him even after he was a famous rock star. The unresolved theme of his mother’s early death due to alcohol was one that came up again and again both in his music and in personal conversations. The fact that his father had prevented him and his brother from attending their mother’s funeral seemed to only add to the unresolved nature of the experience.

The fact that no mentor appeared in Jimi’s life who understood the special developmental needs that his sensitivity and giftedness demanded is the great tragedy of his story. On stage, he was a genius in complete control and command, displaying a spontaneous virtuosity that was unparalleled. Yet in many ways “the same trait that made him such a talented musician—the ability to be lost in the moment of performance—also caused Jimi to act on his immediate desires of urges, with a recklessness at times” (Cross, 2005, p. 179). Offstage, the internal locus of control he seemed to possess in relation to his talent seemed less influential, and he was often manipulated by those around him with ulterior motives. Eventually this lack of a compass in his off-stage life led him into the dangerous waters of drugs and groupies, and these would prove to be influences that would lead to his early death.

The great lesson in Jimi’s story for educators is the importance of expanding the net we cast in our search for the gifted, and searching very carefully through what we find. Using the multiple criteria approach outlined by Davis and Rimm (2004) would certainly be a big step forward by overcoming many of the limitations of using standardized tests as the sole identification method. However, Jimi’s story takes us one realization further—there may be many whom our current system of gifted education simply isn’t ready to support. Until that time, educators need to be vigilant in watching for students who display a special talent, sensitivity, or single-minded passion. These kids may not find a home in a gifted program, but they do need a special mentor. They need a guiding hand that can lead them to develop a well-rounded confidence in life, and to develop an internal locus of control to help them navigate their passion to maximum success and fulfillment.

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Tagged creativity, Dabrowski, gifted and talented, gifted identification, giftedness, Jimi Hendrix, musical intelligence, Prince, theory of positive disintegration

“Poke the Box”: Inviting Students to Wonder and Initiate

Posted on January 18, 2016
In his 2011 book, *Poke the Box: What was the Last Time You Did Something for the First Time?*, prolific marketing and business expert Seth Godin implores us to reclaim the curiosity that drives INITIATION. Simply put, initiation is the will, the habit, the discipline, and the audacity of starting things. New things. Risky, untested things with a pretty good chance of failure. His metaphor of “poking the box” invokes that unique mix of boldness and insatiable wonder that drives the doers of the new economy. When you poke the box, you are curious enough to want to manipulate, analyze, and maybe even reverse engineer it, despite the high risk of failure. How’s that thing work?! This, says Godin, is the true path to innovation.

While the book invigorated and inspired the entrepreneur in me, it was the educator and parent in me who began to mentally overlay Godin’s vision onto the world of schools and classrooms. I asked: are there not just opportunities, but in fact *invitations* to “poke the box” in the learning environments we create for students?

Poking the box is so crucial, asserts Godin, because “without the ability to instigate and experiment, you are stuck, adrift, waiting to be shoved” (p.4). Hmm. I think back to the hundreds of classrooms I’ve seen, and I realize I’d never thought of the classroom environment in quite that metaphorical light–how is a classroom that values compliance and linear, pre-ordained objectives like a BULLY that shoves students into submission?

Godin frames this desire to initiate in terms of types of capital. There can be financial, network, intellectual, physical, and prestige capital, for instance. All crucial to some degree for success. The most important capital, though, the one difference-maker, says Godin, is Instigation Capital: The desire to move forward. The ability and the guts to say yes. “The ability and the guts.” I like that his definition includes guts, because guts imply courage, and courage implies risk. Are our learning environments creating students willing to take risks? Because that’s the key stepping stone, the primal ingredient for developing students into adults who later possess instigation capital.

If set expectations and the fear of failure are the gravity that keep us in an orbit of the familiar, than I like to think of curiosity as the one force strong enough to break us free from that orbit. The rocket fuel to leave the atmosphere of Planet Status Quo. Indeed, in his mini chapter *Where Did Curious Go?* Godin laments the fade of true, insatiable curiosity, that hungry, hellbent drive to just KNOW: “Not the search for the right answer, as much as an insatiable desire to understand how something works and how it might work better.” (p. 24). He’s careful, though, to distinguish between the merely creative person, and the person with initiative: “The difference is that the creative person is satisfied once he sees how it’s done. The initiator won’t rest until he does it” (p. 24).

In the context of the business world, Godin highlights the contrast between that which is “allowed and not-allowed.” Invariably, employees can rattle off a running list of what’s not allowed at work. But who knows what IS allowed? Why not focus on that, on the realm of the possible? Godin feels we “might be afraid of how much freedom we actually have, and how much we’re expected to do with that freedom.” (p. 37) I immediately applied this filter on the classroom. Pick a random student and ask her to list off all the rules of what not to do to avoid getting in trouble. Now ask the same student what IS allowed. She’s likely to give you a most befuddled look. Classrooms are about constriction and control, not about expansion and possibility.
If set expectations and the fear of failure are the gravity that keep us in an orbit of the familiar, than I like to think of **curiosity** as the one force strong enough to break us free from that orbit. The rocket fuel to leave the atmosphere of Planet Status Quo.

Three years ago, after over a decade in the public school classroom, I walked away to launch my own education company with a friend and business partner. I didn't have the vocabulary to articulate it at the time, but looking back now, I see the classroom as a box, slowly but surely becoming a hermetically sealed cube, not to be tampered with. The quest for correct answers driven by high-stakes testing has created a system which values conformity and douses curiosity like a dangerous torch. By upper elementary, most students have complacently accepted the “A, B, C or D world” and stopped wondering about the off-the-page option, let alone how to *initiate* it.

So, through our company, we started poking all kinds of boxes, seeing what OTHER ways we could enrich the students who needed it most. What types of programs and curriculum and learning environments, when “unshackled” from the constraints of mainstream schooling objectives, really work? Turns out, having the freedom, the curiosity, and the guts, to see education with new eyes, as a system to POKE, has been extremely fruitful.

Well, here are 4 well-wrought and tested pieces of experience-wisdom from these last 3 years of creating “alternative” learning spaces. Am I sharing these to get your kid into one of our programs? While that would be swell, my real motive for sharing is because I sincerely believe these lessons can be applied in virtually any learning environment. Whether you’re a radical unschooler or still teaching in a traditional classroom, there are degrees to which the following can spark up your learning environment to increase initiation capital for your students:

### 1 Create Mixed-age Learning Interactions

Research on asynchronous development tells us the arbitrary “date of birth” metaphorically stamped on your gifted child’s behind might just be the least important thing to consider (watch a [thought-provoking animation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=example) of this from Sir. Ken Robinson’s Changing Paradigms talk), and yet our entire industrialized school system hardly wavers from that one organizing principle. We thought, “well, they say intellectual peers are key for gifted kids, so let’s open up the environment to let those connections happen organically.” Nearly all our programs, from our flagship summer camp to our after school enrichment courses, are mixed age, open to grades 1-8. Parents are encouraged to let students gravitate to a course based on their passion. Because where there’s passion, there’s curiosity, and where there’s curiosity, there’s… you guessed it, the drive to initiate!

### 2 Take Leaps of Failure

Some of the greatest moments of discovery over the last 3 years have taken place when I, as the teacher, stood at the brink of an unknown step right alongside a student. “Will this work? I don’t know! What’s gonna happen? No idea. But is it right? Who cares?!” True, sometimes these mystery steps ended up as face plants onto academic concrete. But many times these moments of unknowing revealed wildly unforeseen solutions and pathways that, had I been the “expert,” we never would have facilitated. Our notion of teacher as “sage on the stage” was so exploded, in fact, that we had to invent a new term to describe our role with students: *inspirator*. Part educator, part inspirer. An inspirator drives ahead with the same curiosity of his student, and willingly takes leaps of failure.

### 3 Remove the Burden of Grades

We create academically rigorous, interdisciplinary courses designed to push kids through their zone of proximal development. This ain’t fluff, folks. And we’ve never offered a single numerical/letter grade. Yet students carry through to the very end, digging deep, creating elaborate final projects, and beaming with excitement for the “next step.” How do we do it? Why do students even care? Turns out there’s life after the carrot and stick! Remember when you were 6 and you spent 5 solid hours building a LEGO universe, because your whole being was invested in it? When students meet authentic, passion-driven curriculum that aligns with their own curiosity, there’s a chemical reaction of which the by-product is intrinsic motivation. It’s a thing! And no it can’t be bottled!

### 4 Embrace Creative Play

Many of our programs are based on the concept of creative play— that students “open up their minds to what’s possible, take chances, solve problems, collaborate and become better creative thinkers and doers” (see the [Imagination Foundation](https://www.imaginationsfoundation.org)).

One event, for example, is inspired by the remarkable story of Caine, the (then) 9 year old boy who transformed his dad’s parts shop into a
“maker” arcade of cardboard, tape, and trinkets. I’m still overcome with emotion every time I see it. We host an annual event (like many others around the world with the encouragement of the Imagination Foundation) called the Cardboard Challenge, in which students show up and are presented with one simple challenge: “Here’s a bunch of random stuff, mostly cardboard. By the end of the day, we need a functioning arcade game. Go!” In the beginning, we worried about perception. Would parents see value in this? On the surface it appears loose and unstructured—few see the hours and hours of prep that had gone into creating this open learning environment. Then, at that first event, we saw magic happen. Real, intense, mind-bending alchemy of extraordinary imagination, creativity and problem solving. By not placing boundaries with expectations, young INITIATORS searched for their own boundaries. My first thought, to be honest, was lamentation over the years of wasted opportunities in my classrooms when I’d had too little faith in the organic power of creative play.

You don’t have to be a zany “edupreneur” like us to approach your gifted students’ learning in this way. Wherever you are—a homeschooling mom, a Middle School principal, a 3rd grade public school teacher—poke that box! Initiate a new learning situation. See what happens.

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We are proud to include this post in the Gifted Homeschoolers Forum blog hop!

3 Reasons to Take Your Kid to The Martian

Posted on October 13, 2015
In an era of cinema when reboots, remakes, and endless "-ilogies" have come to dominate the multiplexes, I don't blame you, parent, for being skeptical about whether films of any deep educational value still grace the silver screen. Sure, you indulge the kids now and then with a superficial superhero flick because, let's face it, even YOU are looking for that spark of inspiration, perhaps that Rosebud-like secret from your own childhood love affair with movies that ignited something special. When previews for the newly minted box office hit *The Martian* began appearing, I feared yet another high-budget dud. I saw just enough hope glinting off Matt Damon's astronaut visor to compel me, however, to surrender yet again to the big screen experience.

Believe it or not, *The Martian* delivered. From a science point of view, the film has even successfully traversed the tricky crucible of culturally savvy, movie-loving astrophysicist Neil Degrasse Tyson, whose only "critique" seems to be a very early tweet about the movie's over-optimistic depiction of high-powered stakeholders actually taking science, serious science, into full consideration when making policy decisions. It's a depiction he suggests is the most fantastical element of the entire film.

 Evidence that the [@MartianMovie](https://twitter.com/MartianMovie) is fantasy: All who make important decisions are scientifically literate.

— Neil deGrasse Tyson (@neiltyson) October 2, 2015

But he then went on to praise it on several levels.

The [@MartianMovie](https://twitter.com/MartianMovie) — where you learn all the ways that being Scientifically Literate can save your life.

— Neil deGrasse Tyson (@neiltyson) October 2, 2015

I don't come to you with the scientific chops of an astrophysicist, but as a teacher, and as an advocate for revolutionizing education to prepare students for a future perhaps not unlike the one depicted in *The Martian*. This is not a review or a synopsis, but rather a plea to parents and teachers to not yet abandon the big screen as a source of insight, inspiration, and educational fodder.

Here are, in my opinion, 3 reasons to take your kid (or heck, teachers, your whole class!) to see *The Martian*:

### One – Diversity in Representation of STEM

This film immediately caught my attention as an exception to the tired formula of a secondary token minority represented among a gaggle of scientists and engineers. Minorities and women are represented in key, influential STEM roles. And here's the clincher: it doesn't feel contrived, or that it's done with any self-conscious preciousness. It feels natural in the universe of the movie. It could be argued, in fact, that the real hero of the movie is the awkward, brilliant African American physicist Rich Purnell (played by Donald Glover) who cracks the real conundrum with some hard-core lateral thinking (more on that below) that facilitates the rescue of stranded astronaut Mark Watney (Matt Damon). Passionate, driven project manager Vincent Kapoor (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor) is portrayed as an African American whose "father is a Hindu" and "mother is a Baptist." If you based it on screen time, he's essentially the main protagonist for the Earth-based action. And this is a mainstream flick!
In addition, females play prominent stakeholder roles across the cast, including mission captain Melissa Lewis (played by Jessica Chastain), who leads the international crew of the mission with gusto, assertiveness, AND compassion. Minority females, however, are not well represented. In fact, the film has recently come under harsh criticism by the Media Action Network for “whitewashing” certain Asian roles with both white and black actors (including the character of Vincent Kapoor, mentioned above).

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**Two – A Model of Grit in Action**

Mindset, the philosophical shift in thinking proposed by Carol Dweck, is a wave that has swept and reshaped our beliefs about the power of attitude in success, but it’s quickly approaching the dangerous status of becoming a series of concise platitudes (“Just add ‘yet’ after every ‘I can’t’ statement!”). Often equated with the term “grit,” a growth mindset allows us to persist in the face of setbacks and failures, and in fact grow from those experiences. In *The Martian*, both astronaut Mark Watney and his colleagues on Earth are the embodiment of grit, stubbornly EMBRACING setbacks as the keys to unlock the NEXT solution. “I woke up alone on Mars, left for dead, with a piece of shrapnel through my gut? Guess I’ll go perform some self-surgery, stitch it up, then assess my food rations!” Now that’s a growth mindset in action.

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**Three – Divergent Thinking, Not Multiple Choice**

One of my favorite activities for developing flexible, divergent thinking in students is a game called “morphing” in which we must re-imagine everyday objects by mentally transforming them into new objects based on one or more transferable attributes. This helps counter functional fixedness and encourages students to apply lateral thinking to the problem solving process. When astronaut Mark Watney is alone on Mars, he must use all the “stuff” left behind to survive for what he knows could be 4 years. This quickly becomes a massive exercise in divergent thinking. What do some giant tarps, astronaut poop, and burning hydrogen have to do with growing crops on Mars? How do you modify a rover intended for limited daytime trips into a long-distance vehicle able to survive frigid Martian nights, recharge itself, and stock enough survival supplies? There was no room for dogma or reliance on stock answers for any of the problem-solving required, and that’s beautiful.

Deep into an era in which high-stakes testing has driven us to think of the world in terms of multiple choices, the realities of survival depicted in *The Martian* reflect the spontaneous, divergent nature of real innovative problem solving.

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**The Flaw: A Missed Opportunity**

For as much passion as I have for STEM and the excitement that innovative thinking brings to my visioning of the future, in my heart of hearts I confess I’m a humanities guy. For this reason, I almost never address STEM on its own, and instead embrace STEAM, an approach which couches STEM in a human cultural and philosophical context (The “A” represents “Arts”, thus expanding the acronym to “Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math”).

As razzle-dazzled as I was by how Mark Watney kept his BODY alive through ingenious problem-solving, inventiveness, and grit, I would be much more intrigued by how he kept his MIND intact through what would be the most isolating situation a human has ever experienced: being alone on a PLANET.

Whether you have spiritualleanings or not, the philosophical questions provoked by Watney’s circumstances would have made excellent fodder for deeper psychological ponderings by the film. Granted, watching him have an existential break over a left-behind copy of the *Tao*...
Te Ching would not have made for a riveting two hours, but the film seems to skim this spiritual/psychological question too lightly. We get tastes of our lonely astronaut's evolution via the video diary he keeps throughout the film, but other than transforming into a gruff, skinny, bearded Leonardo Di Caprio-esque figure by the end, he seems to have come through it all relatively easily.

Alas, a movie is still a movie, and it has to entertain. After all, we do have the BOOK to deepen the narrative. Remember, the book? We can get Mark Watney back from Mars, but can we find time to read? Now that's a problem worth chewing on. In the meantime, DO take your kid to see the movie. It just might plant some positive seeds of wonder, and might begin to prepare them for a future in which we really do tackle complex problems like an international mission into the outer reaches of our solar system.

“The Martian film poster” by Source. Licensed under Fair use via Wikipedia –

Posted in Books and Movies  Tagged arts, divergent thinking, diversity, engineering, existentialism, grit, math, Matt Damon, mindset, movies, Neil Degrasse Tyson, problem-solving, STEAM, STEM, the martian  7 Comments
Quotes about books vs movies. By Stephen King, Kurt Vonnegut, Werner Herzog, Gary Oldman, Francis Ford Coppola, John Grisham, Nicolas Roeg, and more. 25 best quotes comparing books and movies. by Piotr Kowalczyk Updated: Feb 11, 2018 / 08:37. What do the world's greatest minds think about the relation between the book and its adaptation? Check out the quotes below. Every year, a few books get new life thanks to their movie adaptations.