



Kathleen Noble

interview by Douglas Eby

Kathleen Noble, Ph.D., is Research Associate Professor of Women's Studies, and Assistant Director of the Early Entrance Program, University of Washington in Seattle, where she also has a private practice as a psychologist, working with gifted women.

She is author and editor of a number of books and also, she notes, "a lover of animals; human to two cats, one parrot and one horse. I'm a committed horsewoman, and ride four or five times a week; it's sanity."

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"One of the reasons I wrote 'Sound of a Silver Horn...' was thinking about role models for women in popular culture," notes Dr. Noble. "I remember when I started it, I was really disgusted by a couple of things; one was the fact that the best selling books were focusing on women as victims and as problems: the 'Women Who Love Too Much' genre.

"At the same time, I was aware that Walt Disney movies, the 'Little Mermaid' type, were coming back full force, and offered such an awful model to young girls: the old stereotypical 'Wait in the wings for your prince to come' and then your story's over. Then you're in your place."

Because of those two issues, and Joseph Campbell's work on myth being popularized by Bill Moyers at the time, Noble says she was "so struck by the sexism, and his unwillingness to really deal with that. I think at one point he talks about 'Well, there are lots of role models for women: the hero's mother, the hero's queen, the damsel in distress. And seriously believing those should be enough.

"So I thought the best thing I could offer was to take that model, and try to build a model of psychological development that really focuses on the need to confront issues, rather than to retreat passively, or wait for them to go away; to see them as a normal and necessary part of life, rather than a

momentary aberration. And to see the claiming and living the heroic life, which to me is a profound spiritual quest to live an authentic life, to see that as the point of a life, and to make it explicit for women. It has been made explicit for men."

She thinks there are many stories of real women's lives that aren't necessarily told or popularized, "but who could inspire others to that heroic life.

"Recently I was talking to some of my students, who are very bright and aware young men and women, fifteen and sixteen, and I said 'I don't see any what I would consider real role models for women: strong, heroic models, on the tube; what do you think? And these kids, who are extremely verbal, lapsed into silence.

"We had a debate about whether Xena, the 'Warrior Princess', could be considered a role model, considering the fact she's bursting out of her costume, and what is it we're supposed to notice? Her martial arts skills or the fact that no warrior could dress like this and keep her dignity intact? Basically the consensus was we couldn't think of any role models.

Dr. Noble agrees the book "Smilla's Sense of Snow" was "wonderful" and thinks author Peter Hoeg is "one of the few male writers whom I have ever read who has written a great female character. And he got it. I was so impressed. Of course, he's from Scandinavia. Could that have been written here?"

Considering her private clients and a variety of students in women's studies classes and other departments, she estimates that everybody she works with, in one way or another, is gifted. "But I'm much more familiar with the emotional, psychological and social issues of females, because so few men talk," Noble adds. "Even my boys, who are very verbal, aren't self-revealing and don't talk the way women do, unless they're gay."

Asked about the impact of gender role socialization on gifted women, she says her first response is the notion "The more things change, the more things stay the same." "And my second response," she continues, is "That's depressing. So I've been struggling with what I really feel. Yes, things have changed, but they change in geologic time; it's so slow, there's so much work to do, these attitudes are so deeply entrenched that it's just going to take an enormous amount of time.

"Part of why that's so is that the backlash is so strong, yet so subtle. It would be much easier if there were sort of a Jerry Falwell-esque backlash, where you could point to it and really galvanize people's anger. But the problem is much, much more subtle.

"Change has to come in terms of both social evolution and individual. Most of the women I work with who are gifted deny that they are, or are totally embarrassed to admit it. It seems I am always teaching women about the characteristics of giftedness, and asking them to look at themselves: 'Even if you don't want to admit this out loud because you think it's immodest or because you're embarrassed, at least in your own heart of hearts admit what you're dealing with.'

"That's absolutely crucial to do, because I think in order to take one's own life seriously, which includes making decisions about how that life is going to unfold, whether it's going to include partners or children, or what kind of work, you have to see life as a deliberate quest."

The starting point, Dr. Noble declares, "is always self-awareness, which is not narcissism. And for gifted women, that absolutely includes the recognition of giftedness, because most women who are gifted, as you well know, think they're freaks, and feel horribly different -- isolated, alienated, ostracized, 'What's wrong with me?'"

"And I believe it is not possible to live deliberately, heroically, consciously, without saying 'I am not a freak; this is who I am, and I have to find a way to be this.' To help women get to this kind of self-acknowledgment, I always tell them to read, and (at the risk of feeling embarrassed and immodest myself,

"I say 'I'm going to give you some things I've written, but it's not because I'm tooting my own horn, it's just there are so few of us writing about gifted women; I can count on one hand the number of psychologists or thinkers who have written about these issues.' So the starting point, for me, is always reading.

"Gifted women are smart, and you have to recognize, respect and work with their intelligence. I know people who say, 'Well, isn't that rationalization or intellectualization, but I think not. I think it's awareness. If you have a disease, the first thing you should do is learn everything you can about it. And I think the same is true for having any particular talent or intellectual ability: learn everything you can about it. It's pretty basic."

Isolation seems to be a common issue for gifted women, Dr. Noble feels. "And part of the isolation has to do with introversion. Not all, certainly, but I'd say the majority of gifted women are introverted. And introversion by itself leads one to isolate. When you're introverted in an introverted culture, there's more acceptance; but America is a very extroverted culture. To be introverted in an extroverted culture is to sort of give you a double whammy.

"So along with understanding what giftedness is all about, it's important to understand what introversion is all about, and that it's a normal temperament, and they really get their energy from solitude. So they need that solitude. That's healthy. In fact, to not make space for solitude really puts gifted women at grave risk for developing everything from depression to eating disorders, as a way of trying to create enough personal space, maybe totally unconsciously.

"Another thing is that part of giftedness involves an affective awareness. Not a hundred percent of the time, but a lot of gifted women have intense radar; they're very psychic, and that can intensify introversion, if you withdraw from crowds because you always feel raw, or pick up too much energy. So if you do have that kind of sensitivity, you really have to honor it, and respect it, and learn how to choose those energies that nourish you and avoid those that drain you. That's hard. We're learning all the time.

"In terms of finding peers, you have to realize it is hard, and you have to work at it. Barbara Kerr, bless her heart, she's such a sweetie and so smart, one of the things she talks in her book "Smart Girls, Gifted Women" about falling in love with an idea, and how important that is. And I think it comes from falling in love with ideas, broadly construed, that brings people into contact with kindred spirits. I don't think you can necessarily join a health club and sit at the coffee bar. But if you focus on ideas and the things you love, you're more likely to attract a kindred spirit.

But that meaningful contact may not have to be in person. The internet is providing the means to find and explore relationships. "That's particularly important for rural women," notes Dr. Noble. "It's a little bit easier to find kindred spirits if you're in a city, or if you're connected with a university or some kind of idea factory. It's much harder if you're in the corporate world or the retail world, or at home with small children."

One of the topics of her book "Remarkable Women..." is resilience as "a trifold process of recognizing and resisting the intrinsic and extrinsic obstacles that inhibit the development of one's potential"]

"I think resilience is the key. It's really the cornerstone of "Silver Horn" [her book], and I think the way you go about enhancing resilience is to first of all recognize how critical a psychological factor it is. And the second thing is that a woman has to look at her life objectively in terms of the kinds of obstacles she confronts, has confronted, perhaps will confront. You've got to know what you're up against.

"I think the third part of resilience is reaching out. You have to be able to do that, for support, for nurturance, for commiseration. That can be reaching out to a book, reaching out to a group, another person in some way, or a therapist. Although the caveat there is to make sure your therapist is gifted, or else it can be an awful experience. Reaching out is really important, because I think a lot of women don't. We're really used to being there for other people, and not used to asking for help ourselves. And that's crucial.

"Another aspect of resilience is reaching in, in a deeply spiritual and reflective way. And perhaps the last part of resilience is doing something. It's really important to translate what you are, what you learn, to some activity. It doesn't mean saving the world, because nobody can, but doing something and doing it deliberately. I choose to spend a lot of my time with young, gifted teenagers.

"I adore adolescents. A lot of people can't stand them, but I find them so wonderfully idealistic, and I want to do everything I can to keep stoking their fires. Or maybe if you have a daughter, making sure that she has access to feminist literature, or role models, or people she can talk to. Or becoming politically active, if that's your interest. Or if you're writer, being very deliberate about what you write, instead of perpetuating stereotypes."

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[on the topic of pathologizing the gifted:]

"A number of my gifted clients are psychic or have psychic abilities. That's only one place they might get pathologized. There are a number of qualities that gifted women possess that can easily get mislabeled and misdiagnosed. For instance, those gifted women who are very verbal are often told they talk too much. Now, it is true that many gifted women talk a lot.

"Some of them do in fact talk too much, and don't know how to listen well. But I have seen, particularly in adolescents, that gifted girls who are very high energy and high verbal are often punished by teachers for those qualities, and the qualities are then negatively represented, rather than positively

acknowledged.

"There is an old study, in the late 70's I believe, in which researchers asked a large group of mental health practitioners to suggest adjectives that described mentally healthy adults, mentally healthy men, and mentally healthy women. What they found was that the profile of mentally healthy adult, gender unspecified, was virtually identical with mentally healthy men, and diametrically opposed to mentally healthy women.

"And that is a really important piece of information to keep in mind talking about giftedness, because gifted women tend to be highly androgynous, and because they defy so many of the expectations of women in traditional cultures, they are oftentimes labeled, if not misdiagnosed, in some negative way.

"One of the things I've written about in "Silver Horn" and some of my articles is the fact that gifted women tend to combine qualities that we tend to ascribe to both genders. So for instance, you get women who are highly sensitive and highly empathic and compassionate (which are all components of psychic ability), combined with high energy and high drive, high independence and autonomy, which are qualities that the culture rewards in men but not in women.

"So in some ways, the pathologizing comes from the fact that gifted women, by their very nature, don't fit the narrowly prescribed gender roles. And not just in a developed country like America, or Canada, but also in developing countries, where roles are generally even more traditional.

"Societal attitudes create what we consider normalcy to be. So when you talk about pathology, you are talking about deviation from what is presumed to be in the norm, and anything that is outlying statistically, or different from what we consider the norm, gets labeled pathology or 'bad.'

"Now there are definitely disorders. Gifted people are by no means disorder-free. We know there is a strong correlation between creativity and depression; creativity and mania. And that's very well documented. Gifted people are not immune from narcissistic personality disorder, or borderline personality disorder. And I really do consider those real categories, after having been a psychologist since 1984. And giftedness is no protection against them, and certainly exacerbates some of the more negative aspects of those character disorders.

"A couple of my adult clients right now are being tested for ADD. One is a woman, one a man. So I'm in the process of thinking more about the connection between giftedness and ADD. I think they are very different. You can be ADD without being gifted, and you can be gifted and struggle with ADD. And the giftedness allows them to function better than you'd expect, but the ADD prevents the giftedness from being expressed as powerfully, as positively, as it could otherwise be.

"As for Dabrowski, I think he's really on to something when he talks about Positive Disintegration; I think that's absolutely accurate. What I object to in Dabrowski -- and it may be an error in translation, because he was a Polish psychiatrist -- and people talk about 'overexcitabilities': I don't know what the original Polish was, but I recoil from the descriptor 'overexcitability' because that's pathologizing right there. But positive disintegration does happen, and is something that can easily be misdiagnosed as a breakdown. It is a breakdown, but it's also a breakthrough.

"Mania, for example, is not positive disintegration; it's a biochemical disorder, and there are a number of characteristics that distinguish mania from what I think of as positive disintegration. I don't really think in terms of 'overexcitabilities' but I think positive disintegration is what I was talking about in "Silver Horn" when I was talking about transformation, and the process by which our larger selves propel us and compel us to grow, and oftentimes that's in very painful times. I think positive disintegration happens within a climate of psychological pain. That's different from mania.

"Mania is out of control. If you're being creative without being manic, you can bring yourself; if you're manic, you can't. And what starts out feeling like a great rush, or a great high, becomes very jagged and jarring after a while, and that's because of the biochemical imbalance that's happening. A person feels that her thoughts are out of control; they can't slow themselves down; they can't sleep; they can't stop.

"When they do, they're generally plunged toward the other pole, which is depression, so they're on the cyclothymic seesaw. But you can certainly have that wonderful high that comes from being in a creative rush, but you can bring yourself down: you can sleep, you can take a walk, you can 'veg out' -- but manics don't know how to 'veg out'; they can't 'veg out.'

"Giftedness, per se, has often been described as pathology. I've had a lot of clients who come to me who have been told they are 'too sensitive', 'too empathic', 'too smart', 'too verbal.' I can't think of one person I've seen who hasn't been pathologized, for being 'too' -- and I put that in quotes -- all those things: 'too high energy', 'too quirky', 'too introspective', 'too intuitive' -- blah, blah, blah.

"It just depends on the setting. One of my clients is a physician who's extremely intuitive: when she was in medical school, she could make diagnoses that she hadn't the knowledge yet to be able to make, but she could read the body. And of course, what did her professors tell her? 'You're so weird.'

"That's why I think if a person, a gifted woman, is going to seek help from a therapist, the first she has to do is educate herself about giftedness. That is critical. And then she has to educate her therapist about giftedness, because very, very few mental health practitioners know the first thing about it."

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 **books**

Barbara Kerr. [Smart Girls](#): A New Psychology of Girls, Women, and Giftedness

books by Kathleen Noble , PhD. :

[Remarkable Women](#) - Perspectives on Female Talent Development

[publisher:] "...the first book to consolidate and expand existing knowledge about highly

capable women and the internal and external forces that lead them to extraordinary adult accomplishment. The collected studies include women from a wide variety of backgrounds and talent domains whose paths to exceptional achievement illuminate the nature of female talent development and provide models to help more women fulfill their promise in adulthood.

[Riding the Windhorse : Spiritual Intelligence and the Growth of the Self](#)

[publisher:] "What is spirituality? What kinds of experiences are considered "spiritual"? What does it mean to "be" spiritual. Do spiritual experiences help or hinder psychological health? Is there such a thing as spiritual intelligence? These are some of the challenging questions that Dr. Kathleen Noble tackles in this provocative book... an exploration of the concept of spiritual intelligence and the ways in which this frame of mind can promote psychological health.

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