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***Snakes and Ladders:
The Psychology – and Politics – of Talent Development***

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For almost two decades, I have worked with gifted adolescents and young adults. I started as a licensed psychologist in private practice in Seattle, Washington. Later, I became the psychologist for the students in the Early Entrance Program at the University of Washington's Robinson Center for Young Scholars, and then, in 2000, Director of the Robinson Center and the Halbert and Nancy Robinson Professor.

I've also written many articles and/or books about counseling gifted women (Noble, 1987a, 1989a, 1989b), students' perceptions of early college entrance (Noble & Drummond, 1992; Noble, Robinson, & Gunderson, 1993; Noble & Smyth, 1995; Noble, Arndt, Nicholson, Sletten, & Zamorra, 1999; Robinson & Noble, 1992), rethinking the concept of heroism through women's lives (Noble, 1990, 1994, 2002), spiritual intelligence (Noble, 1987b, 2000a, 2000b, 2001), and a new model of female talent development, the latter with colleagues Rena Subotnik and Karen Arnold (Arnold, Noble, & Subotnik, 1996; Noble, Subotnik, & Arnold, 1999; Subotnik, Arnold, & Noble, 1995).

These experiences have given me exceptional opportunities to observe the complexity of giftedness and talent development in action. What I have come to realize is that the recognition, development and expression of giftedness are extremely fragile, and that the process of doing so is both psychological *and* political in nature. What follows is a précis of what I consider to be the most important issues, attitudes and beliefs that can strengthen this process or destroy it.

The Power of Personality

In our model of female talent development (Noble, Subotnik, & Arnold, 1999), we proposed that a combination of individual and demographic factors provide the foundation upon which talent is developed. Individual factors such as personality style, degree of introversion or extraversion, locus of control, drive, persistence, and motivation are critical components. Equally important are the ways in which a person characteristically approaches the world: Is she assertive and he proactive? Is he curious and she eager to learn? Is he teachable? Is she committed to an idea or a cause that is larger than her own self?

In my experience, there are a number of qualities that will derail a person regardless of the depth or degree of her or his innate ability. These include: a tendency to respond to boredom with apathy and escapism; a lack of task commitment; a feeling of resentment if pushed; a readiness to give up easily if something doesn't come easily; a sense of entitlement – that success ought to come with minimal effort; and passivity or rigidity in the face of external obstacles.

Equally compromising are some destructive beliefs that far too many gifted students hold. One such belief is that perfection is attainable, and that if one is *really* gifted, one should be equally excellent at everything. Many gifted students feel that it is shameful to ask for help or to risk being incorrect. Others feel intense pressure to know what they're going to do for the rest of their lives by age thirteen. Some feel guilty if they aspire to a level of education or achievement that surpasses their parents or separates them from their community of origin.

Ubiquitous fairy tales that assure young girls that “someday their prince will come” persuade them to not take their talents and abilities seriously. False beliefs – for instance, that popularity is more important than achievement, or that you can't be smart and have friends, a marriage, a family and a career - can deeply and negatively affect young women. Young boys aren't immune from harmful ideas either. The old saw that ‘real men’ don't feel, can't care, and should be afraid of revealing intimate thoughts is equally pervasive and just as damaging.

Gift children tend to be intense, sensitive, and extremely aware of the attitudes, beliefs, values and expectations of those around them. And in this regard the power of parents can't be overstated.

For better or for worse, I have heard a number of parents argue that “their kids can be anything they want to be” as long as they become engineers, doctors, or computer scientists; this comment has been uttered by well-intentioned parents, as well as those intent on controlling the future of their children. Parents' aspirations might not be the best fit for their gifted child and then again they might. It's a gamble. But one thing is certain, parental mental health is a gift that keeps on giving: if a parent is addicted, for instance, his or her child will likely be addicted too. And if a parent is psychologically healthy, then so too will be the child.

I often counsel parents “not to follow their children around with a pillow.” Adversity is an essential and necessary (if uncomfortable) component of talent development. There is no magic formula for achieving the right balance between adversity and advantage. However, without opportunities to make mistakes, a child will not develop the resilience and emotional stamina that are critical to success.

The Power of Culture

If it's true that culture is never neutral then it's equally true that a ‘dominant culture’ is prescriptive. The mainstream always proposes certain behaviors and ideals. And those

who mirror those attributes for success are more likely to be rewarded – those who don't are typically marginalized. Gifted children tend to be on the periphery by the virtue of their exceptional intelligence. There are other factors that exacerbate a marginal status: gender, race, socio-economic and class distinctions, sexual orientation, and geography, are but a few. The further one is from the cultural mainstream because of one or more of these factors, the more conscious a person must be in order to achieve.

A final variable is education. Gifted children need to go faster than the standard curriculum allows. They don't need more 'busy work'. They require more breadth and depth of curriculum. Too many educators hold the mistaken belief that "the cream will always rise to the top," but that's not the case for the gifted child. In fact, without adequate opportunities for educational acceleration and guidance, most exceptional students will never rise to the challenge of their potential. (For a comprehensive examination of individual and demographic factors and effective ways to challenge them, see Arnold, Noble, and Subotnik, 1996).

Necessary Attitudes and Psychological Skills

Talent and intelligence are wonderful attributes, but unfortunately they are no guarantee for success. There are many bright, talented people who have few if any opportunities to develop their gifts, and many who have such opportunities but do nothing with them at all. Creating the social, political, educational, and cultural conditions that will enable more people to realize the promise of their potential is a daunting and ongoing challenge. Equally important is to help the gifted cultivate a set of attitudes and psychological skills that will enable them to perceive and take advantage of opportunities for achievement. In my experience, the following are the most essential:

- 1) "Know thyself" is an expression we've all heard time and time again. But what does "knowing thyself" mean? Here's how I understand it: Acquire a solid, working knowledge of who you are, what you want to be and become, what you value, what your real talents and goals are, and how to build a multifaceted rather than a false-choice approach to life. What do I mean by false-choice? Don't assume that certain choices are mutually exclusive, for instance, love and achievement; family and career; money and happiness. Life is not a series of false choices, unless, of course, you believe it is. That's the trap. And that's the challenge.
- 2) "If we deliberately settle for less than our best," Abraham Maslow, the eminent psychologist once said, we'll be desperately unhappy for the rest of our lives (1972). To be your best self is a lifelong process – a process that's never in stasis – a constant state of evolution. And it takes courage, humility, and flexibility – a willingness to change, a willingness to accept failure.
- 3) There's no such thing as 'normal', except, of course, in secondary school. The teenage years are fraught with pressures to conform. And they're more intense in adolescence than at any other time in life. For gifted students, these are the most

formative years – the crucible of talent development. Students who turn off their talents and abilities at this stage will have a very hard time turning them back on later on.

- 4) Friendship isn't friendship, and love isn't love, if you must sacrifice your real self in order to be loved or liked; it's akin to suicide.
- 5) Many gifted people are said to be arrogant and indeed some are. For some, it's a survival mechanism. For others, it's a genuine reflection of their level of ability. The point is, talent development requires a healthy arrogance, a genuine self-confidence – a profound belief in one's ability and the right to express it. Yet, it should never call for hubris.
- 6) Cultivate your inner resources. Learn to listen – to yourself, to your intuition. The wellspring of creativity begins in you. Dare to dream. Dare to honour that dream.
- 7) Buddhists call it “beginner's mind,” letting yourself be new – fresh to novel experience without putting a value on it based on what you already know. It's really honouring your self as a learner, feeling secure in not having all the answers, and willing to get lost in order to find something new.
- 8) Learn to take pleasure in risk – to grow with every mistake. To learn from every fumble and failure. To get back up and maintain your self-respect. This is the essence of resilience. And by being pro-active, you develop mastery rather than a re-active stance of fear.
- 9) Know that there's prejudice and discrimination, but don't internalize them as a personal shortcoming. Don't use gender, race, age, nationality or physical ability as an excuse not to achieve.
- 10) Develop your 'spiritual' intelligence: Live every day as though you were going to live forever with the awareness that you could die in the next moment. Develop your mind, yes. But don't forget about your heart. Compassion, empathy, and “loving kindness” are as important as technological facility and intellectual prowess - and perhaps, in these times of escalating social, political, and environmental crisis, even more so.

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