



Bright star — black sky: A phenomenological study of depression as a window into the psyche of the gifted adolescent.

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigated the lived experience of the depressive state of ten gifted adolescents. In-depth unstructured interviews were conducted, transcribed and analyzed to reveal the essence, structure and meaning of the depressive state for each of the subjects. The analysis revealed a complex stratum of influences fueling the depressive experience. At the core of the experience is the gifted teen's absolute need for **knowledge** for **communion** and for **expression**. The analysis revealed that the gifted adolescent is at risk for varying degrees of depression when **any** or **all** of these needs are stymied. In particular, meeting communion needs — for meaningful spiritual and emotional exchange — proved problematic for the gifted teen who is often isolated because of extraordinary innate cognitive and emotional complexity. The results from this study have strong implications for specific developmental support and for appropriate therapeutic intervention.

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"Few maladies touch so many aspects of the self as depression. Informed discussions of this ancient and pervasive human affliction must range freely from the faint rattlings of molecules in the brain, through the fleeting thoughts and emotions that compromise mind, to the unfathomable mysteries of spirit—the subtle essence of consciousness itself"

(Nelson, J.E. and A. Nelson, 1996)

This article presents the results of a comprehensive study of the depressive experience of the gifted adolescent. One out of ten high school students experiences some form of severe depression during the high school years (McCracken, 1992). Depression has been causally related to about 60% of suicides (Stoudemire, Frank, Hedemark, Kamlet, & Blazer, 1986).

The higher incidence of depressive experience for gifted teens has been documented (Brown, 1993; Hayes and Sloat, 1990; Silverman, 1993). While not extensive there seems to be a higher incidence of suicidal tendencies in gifted adolescents than in the average population (see Hayes and Sloat, 1989). In a recent preliminary study, Silverman (1993) suggested that gifted adolescents are more at risk for suicide than are their classmates. Other studies reveal a high incidence of high achievers in the population of those who commit suicide in high school. (Delisle, 1986, 1990; Farrell, 1989; Hayes and Sloat; Kerr, 1991; Leroux, 1986).

The suggested rationale for the higher incidence of the depressive experience and suicidal behaviors is diverse and as complex as the individuals in this population. Brown (1993) presents gifted perception as "often holistic, incorporating spiritual, kinaesthetic, and emotional, as well as cognitive components of a problem." (p.185). The gifted adolescent prefers complexity, is often intense and has the capacity to consider many contradictory ideas at one time. Lacking an appropriate audience, these complex emotional and intellectual constructs often remain internalized resulting in the gifted adolescent being at risk for isolation and despair. The need for a more informed understanding and therapeutic response to this prevalent and often life threatening affliction is inarguable.

The initial intent of this study was to document the scope and nature of the depressive experience with the aim of providing recommendations for therapeutic response. The material provided by the gifted adolescents themselves, however, revealed a more comprehensive scope with responses that address the etiology of the depressive experience for this group. James Hillman suggests that:

The wound and the eye are one and the same. From the psyche's viewpoint, pathology and insight are not opposites - as if we hurt because we have no insight and when we gain insight we shall no longer hurt. No. Pathologizing is itself a way of seeing; the eye of the complex gives the peculiar twist called "psychological insight" (Hillman, 1975)

Thus it was that this study of depression proved to be a powerful lens into the complex workings of the gifted adolescent psyche. Throughout the interviews the gifted adolescent's propensity for self-reflection and self-analysis was evidenced. This self-reflective capacity was a pivotal determinant in data collection resulting in material that was extraordinarily rich and dense.

The phenomenological methodology employed allowed the subjects (referred to as co-researchers or CRs) to simply tell their story. No attempt was made to mold or shape the CR's experience to fit a pre-determined perception or theoretical perspective. In this value free context, the gifted adolescent was free to muse, recall and reflect; each CR offered a complex and gripping portrayal of an often crippling and always distressing psychological state. Collectively, their testimony provided the researcher with an idea about the guts of the depressive state for the gifted adolescent and, importantly, with a glimpse into the underlying, common psychic structure which gives rise to the depressive experience. This resultant structure provides a comprehensive perspective on the attitudes, feelings, perceptions and evaluations that gifted adolescents hold about themselves. It profiles the *self* of the gifted adolescent: "the person's total subjective environment;...the distinctive center of experience and significance". (Hamachek, 1971). Importantly this study suggests that transcendence of the depressive experience moves the gifted adolescent from an undifferentiated to an increasingly more authentic self.

METHODOLOGY

Definition of Terms

The operational definition of *giftedness* used in this study was that of the Columbus group:

Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally. (The Columbus Group, 1991)*

**The Columbus Group includes international experts and parents of gifted children. This definition is part of the unpublished transcript of their meeting in July of 1991.*

The *depressive state* describes a syndrome or cluster of disorders wherein the mood state is typified by a profound mood of sadness, sense of inadequacy, a feeling of despondency, a decrease in activity and reactivity, and an emotional state marked by pessimism, despair and related symptoms.

Recruitment and Characteristics of Co-researchers

Gifted adolescents were sought who were capable and willing to provide information about their experience with the depressive state. All were between the ages of 16 and 19 (mean age 18), members in an educational gifted program, self-referred as having had experience with a depressive state, referred by staff members as emotionally intense and, finally, free of coexisting physiological or psychological conditions that would significantly alter the individual's retrospective telling of their depressive experience. Membership in the gifted program insured a baseline cognitive criteria of an IQ of 130. The emotional intensity criteria served as an initial screening for the sample and fit, as well, the descriptor of heightened intensity.

The basis for the depressive state self-referral involved prospective research participants responding affirmatively to at least three or more of the symptoms listed in the *Diagnostic Criteria for Depression (DSM IV)*. Forty percent affirmed a very strong or extreme manifestation of five of the ten depressive state criteria. One CR affirmed a very strong or extreme manifestation of nine out of ten depressive state criteria. The length of time that the depressive state lasted ranged from a low of two weeks to the high of "the last two years of my life". The average was two months. Four of the co-researchers reported a depressive state that lasted for longer than three months.

Overview of the Phenomenological Research Approach

The phenomenological orientation usually involves three interrelated processes. The first step is **description** in which the phenomena is described precisely as it was experienced.

The second step involves a reduction operation in which the raw material (tapescripts of unstructured interviews) is systematically studied and broken into naturally evolving units of meaning. This step demands a **bracketing process** in which the researcher disengages from all past theories or knowledge of the phenomenon. Personal presuppositions about the phenomenon under study are carefully noted to reduce, as much as possible, contamination of the data from subtle influence. This temporary disengagement from a particular frame of reference allows the phenomena to manifest themselves as they are.

Fidelity to the phenomenon is an explicit criteria of this methodology. The specific intent is to capture, as clearly as possible, the way in which the phenomena appears in everyday existence.

The third process involves the **search for essences** or core of the phenomena. The researcher describes the essential character-

istics of this core and their relationship to each other. This becomes the structure of the phenomenon. It is the fundamental framework which supports all other information. The phenomenological research methodology requires an attitude shift that demands a different way of looking at the investigated experience. For instance, the data collection process requires that the researcher enter into the co-researcher's world or field of perception in order that human experience be *understood from that co-researcher's perspective*. The research data, then, are those experiences shared by the CR and the *subjective meaning that these experiences have for that individual*. In a sense, then, phenomenology is propaedeutic to science as it is essentially a prescientific step with a rigorously defined starting point which is neither expectant *nor* predictive. The phenomenon is allowed to speak for itself and in so doing imbues its particular meaning.

Data Sources

Each of the ten coresearchers participated in two 60-90 minute interviews. In the first in-depth, open ended interview one question was asked: "Please describe for me your experience with the less than positive emotional state commonly known as depression." The researcher's response included active listening, empathic reflection and minimal encouragers. The second interview involved each CR validating the results of the first interview by verifying the resultant tapescripts (referred to as protocols). In individual interviews CRs read their protocols and were given the opportunity to affirm or negate the results. This addressed the fidelity to the phenomena criteria and insured lack of distortion (Giorgi, 1994).

The researcher's self-reflectivity remained a central feature of the analysis. All research exchanges were documented and carefully scrutinized for tacit biases and assumptions. Completing the datum was some documentary evidence including participant's journals kept both in conjunction and independent of this research.

Data Collection

1. Protocols were read to gain a good grasp of their essence; the researcher remained open to the text and refrained from imposing any explanatory model on the process. Protocols were exceptionally lengthy ranging from 15-40 pages in length.
2. Discrimination of the Meaning Units (MU) involved dividing each subject's protocols into smaller, discrete units. This sectioning occurred wherever the researcher discerned a shift in meaning irrespective of grammar or syntax. Examples of meaning units are as follows:

MU#1: Sometimes I'm not really sure about my values and how I can put everything into some sort of *life*, so that I can live successfully.

MU#2: But usually things are just flying around and I don't know how to catch them and everything starts getting real dark.

3. The partial phenomenological reduction occurred when each MU was transformed into an adjacently presented referenced *paraphrase* which summarized its specific and essential meaning. Each CR was presented with the material at this juncture to insure that the truly *essential* aspects of each MU had been captured. A paraphrase of MU#1, for instance, would be:

CR 13 seeks clarification of her personal values that she might integrate them in a desired lifestyle.

4. The paraphrased MUs were then examined and gathered into like components called *thematic clusters*. Examples of thematic clusters are:

Heightened Sensitivity and Altruistic Needs.

Initially each paraphrased MU was considered relative to this question: *What is the meaning of this fact in light of the depressive experience as this individual expresses it?* Eventually it became obvious that CRs had been presenting their experience along three lines of inquiry.

Three phases of experience thus emerged containing the aggregate of the CRs lived experiences: Precursors and beginnings of the depressive state, the depressive experience itself and, the perceived impact or meaning of the experience. The paraphrased meaning units became the building blocks of each of three experiential phases. Further paraphrasing occurred as essential characteristics emerged from the aggregate data. This exacting process brings to mind the child unpacking the wooden Russian hand carved dolls — each doll encased in the next only to be revealed with careful scrutiny, sensitive handling and an absence of force. In such a way each core piece emerged, inextricably bound to other core pieces.

5. Individual protocols were then incorporated into a so-called *general structure*. This creation revealed those constituents that were invariant (present in all protocols) and those that were manifest (specific to one individual's experience). The essence of the depressive experience was derived from the transituational constituents evidenced at this point. These factors which



were present in all protocols provided the scaffolding for the core structure of the depressive experience for the gifted adolescent.

6. At this point liberation from the empirical data (protocols) and reflection on a more abstract higher level occurred. Each emergent theme in each of the three phases was reflected upon to glean the essential constituents of the depressive experience of the gifted adolescent. Several emergent encompassing themes arose at this point.
7. The final step arose from an academic challenge issued by Katz (1994). He stated that current phenomenological interviewers do not consider the language medium the data is immersed in. He suggests that we might rethink the nature of the research interview in terms of the power of linguistic methods for analyzing language. Thus it was that the encompassing emergent themes were subjected to a deep and intuitive consideration with the intent of generating core constitutional elements of the depressive experience for the gifted adolescent. This was an intuitive process aided by etymological analysis of the key words that ran throughout and established the emergent themes. In the end two essential elements of the depressive experience for the gifted adolescent manifested. These two core constitutional essences seem to fuel all aspects of the experience.

Phenomenological Research Results

The CRs retrospective telling of their depressive experience involved the following process: Precursors and beginnings of the depressive state, the depressive experience itself, and the CRs subsequent perceived impact of the depressive state. There was a *much* greater emphasis, in terms of content, on the first phase. This reflected the CR's emphasis. Ninety percent of the transcript content in nine out of ten protocols centered on a probing or explanation for the emergence of the depressive state. This need to figure out the *whys* of any phenomena is characteristic of this population; this phenomenological methodology afforded them a rare opportunity to reflect upon and make meaning of deep experience.

In the final analysis — step seven — two words emerged as central to the CRs description of the emergence and transcendence of the depressive state. They were, in the context of the Russian doll metaphor, the innermost structure — nestled and supporting the encompassing, remaining shapes. Extensive analysis revealed that these concepts were integral to the mechanism and meaning of the depressive experience in its entirety. These two recurring themes are *emotion* and *affect*. This data suggests that they are inextricably bound in the gifted adolescent psyche, their relationship and combined effect central to the depressive experience for this group. They are, it seems, imbedded in the self of the gifted adolescent; the very stuff of their existence.

The implications of the noun emotion as a primary component of the depressive state required the kind of systematic analysis as recommended by Katz (1994). Emotions, defined in a standard dictionary are strong feelings. Feelings are described as the perceiving of experience, of being conscious. An etymological investigation reveals emotion as a physical disturbance; a *disturbance of mind or feeling*; an affection of the mind, feeling (Onions, 1982). The word emotion comes from the Latin word “*emovere*” meaning to *disturb, to stir up, to excite or agitate*. As well it is derived from the word *exmovere* which means “after motion”. A related word is *emotive* which means to cause movement.

Bound to this concept of emotion is the second integral thrust of the experiences presented in this study: the verb *affect*. Etymological analysis reveals its essence as the “capacity to act upon or influence; to move or disturb emotionally or mentally” (Onions, 1982, phenomena. 16). *Affect's* roots are disclosed as “to impress, influence or move”. As well it draws its meaning from displaying or assuming openly, to aspire to, to endeavor.

At the core of the gifted adolescent psyche is a seemingly intrinsic need to *affect* in this world – to influence, to make an meaningful impression, to move, to experience a sense of having shaped or touched or acted upon human experience in a meaningful way. CR 3 was their spokesperson in this as he expressed a deep desire to “drink the marrow from the bones of life”. All CRs wished to act upon, apply themselves to phenomena; all sought knowledge and the opportunity to express – display openly – the deepest experience.

Implicit in their testimony was a deep need to give birth to their most authentic selves; to know and to be able to act upon that which was the very essence of their individual being. Most distinctive, in this regard, is the gifted adolescent's need to ground this birth of self in *contributing positively* in the human community. All CRs spoke of a need to participate in a meaningful way in the commons; a need for ethical congruence in thought and in action. The gifted adolescents in this study sought to align their personal efforts in such a way as to make a vital contribution in the world.

This need to affect is related to the second theme of emotion – a feeling state that occurs after motion or, alternately, which disturbs, stirs up, excites or agitates. These twin concepts of emotion and affect were woven into all protocols, at all levels and in all three processes of the depressive experience. This data suggests they are the *psychic fuel* for the gifted adolescent. The depressive mechanism involves the gradual shutting down of this capacity to affect and is often prompted by a sense of not

being able to express complex emotion. To experience reciprocal emotional exchange is an essential human need seemingly inextricable from the gifted adolescent's drive for meaning in the world.

Springing from this thematic, etymologically derived base emerged six key characteristics and related needs that proved to be central to the depressive experience for the gifted adolescent.

The Depressed State of the Gifted Adolescent: Characteristics and Related Needs

The first identified characteristic is a *stymied capacity to manifest perceptions and experience*. The gifted adolescents' remarkable capacity to comprehend, their exceptional reasoning ability and intellectual curiosity demanded an expressive outlet, which, for a variety of reasons, was not available. CR4's description of his heightened awareness has poetic weight; the transcendent experience he describes is emblematic of these gifted adolescents' deeper awareness.

I'm struck by a fleeting sense of absolute elation... When I feel truly alive... my senses are heightened... I start to quiver... even breathing seems a miracle...

Such heightened receptivity and perceptivity often remained unprocessed in the external world. This expressive inaccessibility created tension and disequilibrium for these emotionally and intellectually intense individuals.

The English language totally isolates you... if you didn't have to use language you could just **feel** what everyone else felt... why can't I... why can't I be like that... it's so frustrating... (CR 1)

The second identified constituent is *disturbances in the capacity to affect*; the individuals perceived themselves as lacking in the capacity to influence or express themselves openly.

Yet again I feel depressed... I just can't tell anyone how I really am... Does it really matter? Am I expecting too much? (CR7)

The capacity to affect is intertwined with related knowledge and emotional needs:

If we judge other's capacity, human capacity, by getting good grades...but not having what they learn affect... which is something we value, obviously, right, which is **definitely** something I value (CR7)

Extreme experiencing of either the presence or absence of feeling and a concomitant immobility are indicators of the third key characteristic. This immobility pervades the afflicted teen's thoughts and actions:

I hit this state of absolute indifference to anything... nothing meant anything to me... I was not feeling anything... I absolutely felt nothing... It's beyond being bored... a complete indifference and lack of empathy to... anything... I didn't feel depressed... I could never have forced myself to cry... I kind of got beyond that... (CR 3)

I experienced feelings of self-criticism, extreme anxiety... then the thoughts of death come... I feel like I've been removed from all feeling... I have no energy and no capacity to create (CR 1)

... a feeling of deep, deep anguish... almost inexpressible... my mind was rolling over all this dark stuff... I was trying to get to sleep and it was just... like physically it was just like there... this huge surge like I would just have to vomit... it would build up in my stomach and right up in my throat; but there was no physical material... it was just **feeling** (CR 4)

Three invariant elements were identified as facilitating positive emotion and the capacity to affect. The absence of any or all of these characteristics placed the gifted adolescent at risk for a depressive experience. All three constituents factored in the gifted adolescent's emergence from the depressive state. These characteristics are referred to as the "Tripartite Needs System (TNS) of the Gifted Adolescent", under-scoring their relatedness and centrality in the well being of the coresearchers in this study (see Figure 2).

The first need in the TNS of the gifted adolescent is the need for **under-standing or knowledge** about self, others, relationships, phenomena, the cosmos. This need to grasp the deepest meaning, to comprehend the essential nature of a thing is paramount in the gifted adolescent psyche. It profiles in several milieus including the secular and the sacred:

For me curiosity it's just...it's insane... It's absolutely nuts because I have the kind of mind that likes to analyze things logically and I do that to myself, constantly. (CR4)

When I am at the university I get the feeling that I want to... absorb it **all**... right now I need to find something that I am really passionate about and I really want to seek information on it (CR3)

I know I am here because of something, there is a reason; it is not just for me. It has something to do with God (CR9)
Is the world...really... an illusion ???... I wonder... (CR6)

Figure 1

The Depressed State: Characteristics and Needs

The Depressive State is Characterized By:

1. Stymied capacity to manifest perceptions and experience
2. Disturbances in the capacity to affect
3. Extreme experiencing of the presence or absence of movement and feeling

These Characteristics are Related to the Following Manifest Needs:

4. For understanding and knowledge
5. For communion
6. For expression

struggled with a need to shape an authentic self based on often painful self-scrutiny and self-appraisal.

The potency and depths of my own nature are intriguing. Things, right now, are rapid and chaotic... I don't know who I am and I don't know if I love myself... I don't know if I deserve love...(CR4)

I think I'm an honest person, insofar as what I know I won't lie... I mean you lie about things you don't know but that's not really lying. I remember reading in Fitzgerald Monk's book, *Great Gatsby*, once that the narrator suspects himself of a few cardinal virtues. I **think** I'm very honest (CR7)

There was strong evidence of awareness of a higher self, a selfhood steeped in universal values of love, truth, justice, freedom, beauty.

It all stemmed... because I had some higher thing in me I am not going to call it intelligence... it makes me sound so arrogant... but there must be something...(CR3)

CR7 describes his newly formed relationship with other members of a gifted program as:

That was sort of the experiential realization... (of **communion**) but my own world view I had always held (based on the concept of love and divine love) as intellectually true. I simply had not realized it. Meeting people opened up new doors... at the same time realizing **experientially** divine love and truth changed my attitude.

There was a suggestion that this higher self, steeped in universal values and personal authenticity involved human interconnectedness.

We are much more than a bunch of chemical and brain impulses. There is definitely a soul and I believe we are all inter-connected in some way (CR1)

The second need in the TNS of the gifted adolescent is that of **communion**, the deeply felt desire to be able to exchange thoughts, emotions, experience with a strong emotional or spiritual essence. The communion need might be summarized as: I am seen, I am known, I am connected and I am connecting. The communion need was implicit and explicit in all protocols; this study suggests it is essential for well being, for optimum development. The difficulty with the gifted adolescent meeting his communion needs was expressed in CR7's journal during the height of his major depressive experience:

Self-knowledge was, for all co-researchers, a primary motivator.

In searching for meaning... is...where am I ??? Who am I ??? Why am I ???... whatever... I've lost it... I've forgotten how to live... you know, seize the day *carpe diem* kind of thing... (CR4)

Each sought reflection of selfhood in relationships with peers, with parents, in the community. All were, in varying degrees, thwarted in finding a reflective pool that could clearly reflect this burgeoning sense of self.

It is not that I seek community, just people of any kind, it is kind of mirror, other people who know the place that you are in. Who just get "it"; even the parts you can't express. (CR7)

The endless search for essence, for meaning applied to the self was evidenced in their testimony as well. In all cases CRs

Figure 2

Tripartite Needs System (TNS) of the Gifted Adolescent

1. **For Knowledge:** To know and comprehend the *nature or meaning* of phenomena as opposed to simply inferring or believing. This need profiles in the gifted adolescent psyche in three ways:
 - a. The need to understand myself (in the immediate sense and in the greater existential sense of "what is my place in the cosmos?")
 - b. The need to understand physical and spiritual phenomena
 - c. An often unmet reciprocal need to be understood by others
2. **For Communion:** To be able to exchange *thoughts and emotions* or share something *in common involving strong emotional or spiritual exchange*.
3. **For Expression:** To be able to transform into words or manifest an emotion or feeling without words through music or art or some other nonverbal means



I'm always hiding myself and what I really feel. Even articulation is a way of hiding feelings. In articulating them they lose their substance. I wonder if someday I will lose control. I am just another fucking teenager coming to grips with his stupid fucking emotions...

Differences between the gifted adolescents and their peers were expressed by all. The gifted adolescents in this study expressed awareness of an evolving self undergirded by complex ethical awarenesses. This burgeoning moral imagination—capacity to “feel” other— was experienced as incompatible with the norms of the broader adolescent culture.

I think my character's a little different than the people I'm around alot... and sometime I get depressed that my friends have different values than I do... and there's not a place where I fit in... my niche in life, or my groove (CR10)

Inner tension arose, however, when these sensitive teens gave voice to these perceived differences as judgments about others proved to be inconsistent with a deeper moral code.

People are shallow... I wonder sometimes if these people have ever thought about... existential concerns. I think... you're such a shallow loser and then I start thinking **that was awfully snotty** (CR6)

Lack of meaningful communion experience was a potent catalyst for deep anxiety and extreme isolationist thoughts:

People are pure distraction. I betray myself by being with them. I am someone who seeks solitude from society... and the petty superficial tedious gossip... that seeks to distract people from what they really want. (CR4)

In these words CR4 profiles his own need for deep meaning. He expresses, as well, his sense that the human drive for personal authenticity is often thwarted by misguided and superficial social interaction.

The need to be understood and experience communion in the family setting was expressed by all CRs; in many instances this need remained unmet and was a source of discomfort for some and the roots of despair for others. Seventy percent of the CRs stated explicitly or implied that this lack of communion with a parental figure was at the roots of their depressive state:

Situational things bring on the depressive state... but once it is started... the other situations in my life like my Dad being overseas — I often start crying... when... I... talk about... it... I feel **bad** for him... (CR8)

CR9 describes a time when she was reunited with her estranged birth mother after a period of five years:

She was imagining me like a doll or whatever and then she saw me and I guess she was disappointed. She totally wanted to change me. She didn't like the way I was which made me feel I didn't want to be who I was...

A similar sense of repudiation by her mother was expressed by CR3 when she responds to her mother's directives for the “successful life”:

Don't do that... don't press those things on me... It's not that I really hate all that stuff (the status quo formula). It's just that my parents have never really expressed a deep interest in me personally... I don't remember being asked anything of emotional content...they're not like that... passion and emotion... that's not what they run on. My parents don't attend to that. They're not going to respond to emotional things because it affects the family balance. There is no emotional outlets; it is just the way they are. “Do whatever makes you happy” my friend's parent said to him. I have never heard that from my parents; I don't know if I ever will. If they don't understand what's in your head they don't understand what's in your heart...

CR1 describes her conflictual relationship with her mother providing insight into the implications of complex moral functioning underpinning relational issues:

I guess the depressive state started...because of the problems I had with my Mom... I was a...**weird** kid... I seemed more... hmmm... I didn't respond to her... like a normal kid would... I responded more like an adult and she didn't know how to control herself with me... I was really **strong**... stubborn... and I talked like an older person she didn't exercise restraint when she talked to me... She'd say mean things... She'd tell me that everyone hated me... that I was a phony so that's basically why I started to get depressed. It never really went away after that... I guess I was never able to forgive her...

While less conflictual, the family tone for some CRs was less than emotionally satisfying or steeped in communion. In some cases there were no systems of action that allowed for meaningful interaction; in some cases parents misunderstood or disregarded significant emotional sensitivity and complexity:

I've never really got close to my family... I don't know... it's not really a close family... He's (father) either in his office or watching TV. It's like all those... **great** discussions while watching TV... (CR6)

I kind of hinted at it (excessive anxiety, extreme sensitivity and **emotional overload**) sometimes and... they just like,

well, you know, you don't need to do this, don't be silly... they'd be strict with me about it and I'd have to control it... I was forced to control myself... (CR5)

The final constituent of the TNS for the gifted adolescent is the need for a means of expression. It is inextricably bound to the other two needs - for knowledge and communion – as detailed by CR10. The need for expression was viewed as essential in successful transcendence of the depressive experience :

It was because of my mother's neglect that I withdrew... I kept things inside... I had to get things out... that's what saved me... the need to get things out... because I felt I had the need to talk to some-one (CR9)

Talking to my Dad meant getting it out in the open... It was the key to my successful resolution of the depressive state. If I had not talked to my Dad this experience would have been destructive... there was a need for catharsis from the state itself... reflection was not enough. I'm always reflective. It affirmed for me the importance and lived experience of my most fundamental spiritual values... Realizing people did love me when I really didn't love myself; this made me believe it (CR7)

Successful resolution of the depressive experience for this co-researcher involved, as well, a deepening friendship with two students from the gifted program. In these relationships he reported a burgeoning sense of community:

That was sort of the experiential realization... but my own world view I had always held — base on the concepts of love and divine love — as intellectually true. Yet I had not realized it. Meeting people opened up new doors... at the same time realizing experientially divine love and truth changed my attitude.

The articulation of the roots of his discomfort allowed this coresearcher to reassess his perspective and in so doing promoted self-knowledge:

Through this experience I learned to restructure my negative self-judgments. I can say, yes, I'm a failure in this endeavor... but that is not where it ends...

In a final statement illustrating his level of integration CR7 states:

Depression is not necessarily a bad experience if it is used to build character instead of destroying character...

Thus the data finds that the three components of the TNS system factor in the onset of the depressive experience for the gifted adolescent. The existence of a re-formulated understanding, communion and expressive mode are necessary for full resolution of the deep experience. In this study of ten gifted adolescents only one coresearcher (CR7) experienced full integration of the depressive experience. Three other CRs reported unsuccessful experiences with both talk, process and pharmaceutical therapeutic interventions and were, at the time of this study, deeply entrenched in a depressive state. The remaining six CRs had passed through the depressive experience and reported partial integration through *one or two* of the TNS components.

Discussion

The literature on the gifted is replete with supposition about the incidence of and concern about depression in this population. Several theories exist to explain the depressive experience of the gifted adolescent (Gallagher, 1990; Silverman, 1993). This study is distinctive in its systematic presentation of the lived experience of this phenomena from the perspective of the gifted adolescents themselves. The core constituent themes—of emotion and affect—and the Tripartite Needs System of knowledge, communion and expression establish a coherent construct-focused framework for understanding the complex stratum that underpins the depressive phenomenology.

The communion need factored as an integral aspect of the developing psyche of these gifted adolescents. Both peer and, importantly, parental communion was essential for their well-being. The nature of this desired communion is a relationship that is authentic, respectful and mutually affirming. It is a communion intrinsically intertwined with the gifted adolescent's related knowledge and expression needs. It is, therefore, a complex interpersonal need; not easily attained without sustained awareness, attention and effort. The gifted adolescent's heightened receptivity and perceptivity, moral and sensitive nature create a rich ground for relationship. Intrapersonal complexity, however, is always multi-layered and not always easily engaged. Factors that were shown to contribute to dynamic, sustaining relationships included honesty, humor and unconditional positive regard.

These results indicate clearly that self-awareness for the gifted adolescent and for his/her parents are essential to insure optimum functioning and development. The CRs in this study spoke about the need to engage in mutually sustaining emotionally based exchanges with those they were closest to. These developing adolescents wished to know who they were in the home and in the broader community, to have their experiences mirrored and understood. They all spoke of the need for a safe place to express themselves. CR9's description of his retreat to the chapel during melancholic periods serves as a metaphor for this



deepest of human needs.

The chapel is like a safe container where something greater occurs and all is peaceful. It was a bay, a little haven. My music is not heard.

All of the gifted adolescents in this study sought such a haven: a place to be, to express the deepest sense of self, to be reflected without judgment. The need to find place through networks of belonging steeped in mutual understanding and reciprocal action was deemed essential for growth. All of these exceptional teenagers longed for a sense of meaningful and authentic participation in the cosmos.

This study suggests that the awareness and emergence of the authentic self requires the courage for honest self-appraisal and exchange. Developmental counseling approaches which foster self-reflection, empathy and personal empowerment are recommended. The cultivation of means of both verbal and nonverbal expression is also desirable to insure adequate outlets for complex cognition and emotion. All of these preventative measures exercise healthy psychic mechanisms allowing the gifted adolescent to navigate developmental challenges with sufficient personal resources.

Educational programming and recreational experience which afford the gifted adolescent opportunities to interact with true peers may truly be a life saving measure. It is clear, however, that leadership from mentors and adults must be available to encourage the gifted adolescent in their communion efforts. The gifted adolescents in this study were often inhibited in social situations with non-gifted peers; this inhibitory reflex did not disappear when afforded a chance for like-minded communion with their gifted peers.

I built a wall of cynicism around myself... and other people have probably done the same because they're not willing any more to be... because... they see that their vulnerability isn't respected (by their non-gifted peers) (CR7)

Parents and teachers must provide models of effective, morally founded means of interaction to enable these exceptional young people to participate in authentic and life affirming relationship. Interactive environments that build trust, offer stimulation and challenges and recognize the inherent sensitivity of the gifted adolescent are essential for the gifted adolescent to flourish. In the absence of communion, with peers and with family, the gifted adolescent is very much at risk.

The two thematic constituents — emotion and affect — underscore the importance of the need to help the gifted adolescent find ways to make meaning and take action in the world. The deep need to shape and mold phenomena, to contribute, to feel their unique presence in relation to others fueled the psychic structure of these gifted adolescents. This need was supported, as well, by a related need to understand their complex emotions and complex needs. Educational programming which addresses cognitive and affective variables and affords real life experience are recommended.

Finally, this study suggests that successful resolution of the depressive experience may result in a more integrated, self-aware individual. This idea is supported by the work of Dabrowski (1972), Jung (1960) and Hillman (1975). The occasion to restructure the self through heightened awareness and self-knowledge, differing forms of creative expression and a deeper communion is suggested by this study. Undergirding this movement toward a more authentic self is a deep need for a sense of participation in the cosmos. This view of the depressive experience is beautifully captured in an essay written by a highly gifted fifteen year old girl:

Due to my rashness, I ignorantly mistake the distance between others, my family and myself as abandonment. Then, at times when I am so selfish and think only of my despair, I feel as though inwardly I were dying. And when my wretchedness appears most overwhelming and I long to be enveloped by its tempting embrace, a light appears. This light is the realization that to go into another life, one must first die and this death for me would be in the most abstract and unphysical form. (Leila, 1994)

Thus a depressive experience, supported, understood and expressed may, in the end, be a positive developmental experience. This study suggests however, that without communion, knowledge and expression, the gifted adolescent may not emerge from such deep experience.

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