

Chapter 1

From the Crow’s Nest

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“There must be more to sailing than the mere setting out to sail from A to B to C. There must be exploration, not only of new areas of the ocean, but also of new parts of yourself.” – Tristan Jones

Introduction

Have you ever wished that you could look at your life from a distance? If you could, perhaps you would learn to find your way with greater perspective on the past and the future. Maybe then you would be more able to make decisions that would work well now and feel more comfortable with the life choices that you have already made or are considering.

Bright adults who feel that they are often out of sync with others or who live with someone like this are especially likely to want perspective. Some may feel different, peculiar even, when compared with other people, but they do not understand how their experiences are related to their brightness and creativity. They yearn to understand themselves and to find other people who think, feel, joke, and act in a similarly intense and maybe quirky fashion.

Perhaps you picked up this book to learn more about yourself and your own life, or maybe you were wondering about one or more of the bright and talented adults you know. Maybe you’ll start with the idea of learning about someone else and discover things about yourself along the way. Lots of people never see themselves as bright, talented, or gifted until they start learning more about giftedness and how gifted people experience life. Whether you are reading for yourself or another, you are in good company.

Bright or gifted adults often search for answers about how to live their lives and directions they should go. People like this are usually intense, idealistic, complex, multifaceted, strong-willed, and impatient. In their lifelong journey, they seek to discover if they are “there” yet—that indefinable place where they can find meaning in their lives. Their search is often different from those of other people, and they wonder whether they will ever reach a destination that is right for them.

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Many bright adults feel this way, especially when they don’t want to follow a course that most people take. They feel like they are making it up as they go along, with numerous stops, starts, and midcourse corrections along the way. Some uncomfortably head in directions laid out for them by others, perhaps finding that they are living “lives of quiet desperation.”ⁱ Others drift along with the prevailing winds and tides without the awareness that there might be alternate routes that would give them more meaning and satisfaction.

Charting a Course through Life

In some ways, life is a journey with fairly predictable stages, events, and destinations. As cultural anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson said, “We remember our lives in terms of periods, with beginnings and endings, and we think in terms of watersheds and transitions, turning points and critical moments.”ⁱⁱ Childhood, middle school, high school, college, first job, marriage, travel, and career mark some of those time periods, turning points, and critical moments, and each has expectations, issues, and options, which are different for people who are brighter than average. Being aware of these stages and related aspects can help bright people navigate—and maybe even keep them from running aground along the way.

Regardless of our talents, intelligence, or ability, most of us focus on our own time frame—the 20s, 30s, 40s, or 50s—without thinking much about what lies ahead in the next decades or even what lies behind in the years gone by. Frankly, too, some of us would rather not spend much, if any, time looking back at the past, let alone focusing on the unknown future and what it might hold. However, it can be useful to have a broader view of an entire lifespan and to compare our lives to the journeys and paths mapped out by earlier travelers, particularly those whose passages differed from the average. This book offers a long-range look at the life stages and issues for bright adults—including exciting times, stormy seas, and periods of change.

Other authors who write about gifted adults generally overlook or ignore age-based stages of development.ⁱⁱⁱ However, my experiences have convinced me that life is different for bright, talented, and creative persons at each age and stage of life. Mine is not the first theory to focus on the importance of life stages that occur for all people. However, other authors who have written about these stages seldom incorporate information about gifted adults.

Bright adults have a lot in common with each other regardless of how old they are, and some issues they grapple with span all ages and stages of their lives. They typically experience

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complex emotions as they seek out acceptance, yearn for kindred spirits, and learn how to live with their intensity. Gifted adults are more likely to hunger for significant challenges, to need access to advanced resources, to seek universal principles, to question traditions, and to pursue meaning for their lives beyond the superficial.

Other issues—from understanding the implications of their abilities and uniqueness and the attitudes of other people to dealing with feelings of “differentness”—may not be the same in each stage of life. Of course, some experiences are shared by all people of similar age, regardless of how bright they are. However, life stages for gifted adults are not necessarily the same as life stages for the average adult. In the same way that gifted children often hit their life stages earlier and more intensely than other children, so do gifted adults.^{iv}

Stages of Development—My Model

If we look at what life is generally like for bright adults, we can gain better perspectives about their journeys and typical waypoints along their routes. From my years of work with gifted and talented children and adults, and building on the work of others, I have created a model that describes typical issues and experiences bright adults may experience at various ages and stages of life. (If you’d like more information about how I developed this model, see Appendix 1.)

We will start our journey across the lifespan by looking at differing points of view regarding giftedness and common issues and concerns, regardless of age, before narrowing our focus and considering the experiences of bright individuals just as they enter adulthood—the “Seekers,” ages 18 to 25. We will follow them into their journey as “Voyagers,” from ages 25 to 35. Then we will head through two segments of the middle years—“Explorers,” from ages 35 to 50, and “Navigators,” from ages 50 to 65. Next we will look at two separate groups of bright adults during the later years—the “Actualizers,” from ages 65 to 80, and the “Cruisers,” from age 80 and beyond. We will finish with thoughts about those I have labeled the “Invisible Ones”—those whose gifts are lost or hidden or those who have run aground.

Young Adulthood:

Seekers—Usually ages 18–25: On a quest to find their place in the world.

Voyagers—Usually ages 25–35: Purposely journeying through life to establish themselves.

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Middle Adulthood:

Explorers—Usually ages 35–50: Matching their lives to their identity and priorities.

Navigators— Usually ages 50–65: Using prior knowledge, including self-knowledge, to fulfill their goals.

Late Adulthood:

Actualizers—Usually ages 65–80: On a path of self-actualization as well as helping others actualize their goals and dreams.

Cruisers—Usually age 80 and beyond: Using minds that remain intensely active regardless of physical changes; knowing who they are and what they want in their remaining years.

The Invisible Ones—Found within any of the other fundamental six ages and stages of life: Adults whose giftedness is no longer recognized or recognizable.

Please know that the time frames I have suggested for each life stage are generalizations. The designated time periods and issues aren't carved in stone. They simply describe what most gifted adults have in common at these approximate ages and stages of life. Some people encounter these issues earlier, some later, and some cycle back to revisit one or more of the earlier stages depending on the circumstances of their lives, their unique experiences, and their individual perspectives.

What Does “Gifted” Mean?—A Brief Explanation

When I talk about people who are bright, talented, and gifted, the first question I am asked is, “What do you mean ‘gifted’?” You may be wondering that, too. Sometimes people mistakenly assume that “gifted” is equivalent to “genius.” “Bright” and “talented” blend into gifted, and the next chapter goes into that in more detail. For now, I will highlight some aspects that relate to all of this.

Newer definitions of giftedness are significantly different from those that focus primarily on achievement and performance, a viewpoint still held by many people in the world, including quite a few educators and legislators. But the abilities and talents of many adults are not necessarily apparent to others around them or even to themselves, especially if they do not have opportunities to highlight their characteristics and capabilities. As Willem Kuipers, a counselor

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for gifted adults, said, “If those adults do not produce as expected or become unable to do so, they may get rated as not gifted, after all.”^v

Our perception of giftedness needs to focus on the individuals rather than on their performance. Viewing giftedness through this lens helps us gain a better perspective on our own experiences and how they relate to our lives and the lives of the people we know. It takes more time and consideration to comprehend the inner awareness and understanding of bright adults, especially those who deliberately hide their deepest thoughts and feelings, such as the “Invisible Ones” whose giftedness is no longer recognizable.^{vi}

Perspectives on Others and Ourselves

Don’t be surprised to find yourself wondering if much of the book isn’t true for everyone in the world. The fact is that our personal frame of reference for the way we view ourselves primarily originates from other people like us—friends, family, and people we know or have read or heard about in the media who share our background, experience, interests, goals, and values. We grow up seeing the world through our own eyes, and we assume that our experiences, behaviors, and ways of thinking are essentially the same as those of others. This excludes a vast number of people who are not much like us and are not in our lives or on our minds at all. This is as true for people in general as it is for highly gifted people, and it prompted psychologist Patricia Gatto-Walden to write, “. . .since their brightness is normal for them, they almost uniformly assume it must be normal in the world, which causes confusion.”^{vii}

Each stage of life for bright adults has its own issues, satisfactions, and challenges. For some bright adults, life seems to be a voyage on calm waters. They fully enjoy the opportunities available to them, and regardless of ordinary ups and downs, their lives are marked by smooth sailing. Others strive against inner storms from time to time or outer turbulence that seems to assault them from all sides.^{viii} However, even the lives of those who battle stormy seas are not *always* problematic. Bright adults, in general, are quite likely to have good lives—but lives that are characterized by more intensity and complexity than those of others. Nonetheless, as psychologist Nancy Alvarado said, “An overemphasis on the positive aspects of being gifted does a disservice to the many gifted adults who are experiencing difficulties. It discounts their personal experience and places another expectation upon them: to be gifted, they must have

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better than average mental health, greater stability, and better coping skills.”^{ix} This can create a burden that’s pretty hard to bear.

Gifted children grow up to be gifted adults, whether they or anyone else recognizes that, and their experiences at each stage of their lives are worth considering. As author Stephanie Tolan asked, “How are we as adults to interpret the journey of our lives, our gifts, our complexities, our frustrations and failures? And what might we be?”^x

Knowing what commonly happens for bright adults at various stages of their lives can help you feel more comfortable about your own journey. This book is designed to make navigating your life easier and to assist you as you contemplate life decisions and grapple with issues that commonly arise for bright adults. It is my intent to: 1) help shed new light on what life’s journey is all about for bright and gifted adults, 2) provide greater clarity about life and its challenges for them, and 3) help them gain new insights so that they can better chart their course across the lifespan.

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After reading the early chapters, which provide general information, you may wish to skip to the chapter about the age and stage of your life or the life of the person you had in mind when you picked up this book. Or you can read the chapters in chronological order and consider ages and stages sequentially before returning to relevant chapters.

ⁱ Thoreau, 1854; Thoreau, 2004.

ⁱⁱ Bateson, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Subotnik, 2009.

^{iv} Webb, 2013, p. 118.

^v Kuipers, 2010, p. 4.

^{vi} “In the most basic terms, gifted adults are obviously different to the untrained eye in fundamental ways.” Jacobsen, 1999, p. 26.

^{vii} Gatto-Walden, 2013, p. 163. Patricia Gatto-Walden, a licensed counseling and clinical psychologist in private practice, has spent more than three decades working with gifted and talented children, adolescents, and adults.

^{viii} Fiedler, 2009.

^{ix} Alvarado, 1989, p. 77.

^x Tolan, 2009, p. 225.