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Creativity: The Burdens of Talent

John E. Gedo, M.D. ⓘ

In certain respects, children endowed with unusual constitutional capacities necessarily behave differently from their peers, if only because of the sheer pleasure of exercising their talent. Such satisfaction will pull them into frequent spells of certain repetitive activities that do not occur with the ordinary child. In many cases, their constitutional assets appear, simultaneously, to entail relative handicaps in terms of some other functional capacities, so that any particular child may be misidentified as having a deficit, rather than potential talent. In any case, it is likely that a child who has the potential to grow up to be a creative person may be atypical in his or her development. Such a circumstance presents caretakers with a more difficult task than does raising an “ordinary” youngster. Performing well as a parent is, at best, a challenge seldom met with unqualified success; any condition that makes it more difficult will defeat most families. It stands to reason that rearing talented children has turned out to be quite problematic.

Fairly typical of the difficulties of raising a child destined to be a major artist is the history of Lucian Freud—albeit his own accounts have not as yet been subjected to much scrutiny and may, in some respects, turn out to be myths (see **Blackwood, 1993**; **Gowing, 1982**; **Hughes, 1989**; **Lampert, 1993**). At any rate, the current official version is that this grandson of Sigmund Freud, raised by wealthy parents in Berlin, joined a delinquent gang at the age of seven. The family emigrated to England as soon as Hitler came to power, when Lucian was eleven, and he was sent to an exceedingly progressive boarding school, where he concentrated on horseback riding—so much so, that he is said to have forgotten German faster than he was learning English.

After several transfers, Freud ended up at a private art school that he was allegedly responsible for burning to the ground, having engaged in smoking

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in bed. He ended his adolescence by running away to join the merchant marine (in wartime) in some irregular manner; he was mustered out because of an illness, the nature of which is thus far undisclosed. (Although Freud is generally secretive, in conformity to family tradition, such a gap in his history suggests that the problem may have been psychological in nature. It may be too embarrassing for a Freud to acknowledge any emotional difficulty.) John Richardson (1993), who met Freud soon afterwards at the Royal College of Art, reports that Lucian was the envy of his fellow art students because of his dazzling capacity as a draftsman. Even if some of the delinquent exploits Freud claims to have pulled off turn out to have been fantasies, rather than facts, such daydreams must signify that the boy could not tolerate his actual status in an ordinary upper-middle class Jewish household.

The psychoanalyst/clinician is obviously more likely to encounter creative individuals whose parents failed to solve the problems presented by a gifted child than those whose families successfully mastered these obstacles. Hence, I cannot claim to know whether talented children are more likely to develop personality problems than is the general population, although (by extrapolation from my clinical experience) I infer that this hypothesis is valid. What my actual observations do confirm is the finding that the specific configuration of such problems in creative persons is most frequently that of difficulties in the regulation of self-esteem. Talented people, even those with creative achievements to their credit, tend to be very uncertain about their own worth (often fluctuating wildly between extremes of self-depreciation and self-love). They are often excessively vulnerable to criticism; they may angrily attempt to disprove unfavorable judgments of their performance through renewed creative efforts or lapse into depression and inactivity. As one author I have worked with told me, “Some of the things I need to be rescued from are publication experiences, and then I write a book to rescue me from a publication, thus guaranteeing a further one, so my career has the general shape of a snake eating its tail.”

What accounts for such vulnerability to narcissistic injuries in the very people who, from an “objective” viewpoint, have more reason than most to esteem themselves? In my judgment, this fragility can only mean that such persons have sustained severe wounds to their self-esteem in the past—probably the childhood past—and that current criticism, especially if it is experienced as unjust, is likely to reopen those wounds. In other words, my clinical work with creative people has often led us to the conclusion that, when these persons were very young, the caretakers had seriously underestimated their worth. In many instances, with the best will in the world, the parents can only view the early manifestations of what will turn out to be giftedness as problematic (see **Gedo, 1972, 1983**).

The most dramatic example I have seen of such a misdiagnosis concerned the son of a patient; I have followed the latter for half a lifetime. Soon after her

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baby was born, the mother noted that something was seriously amiss; the pediatrician recommended a neurological work-up. The results of this examination were in some ways confusing, but the parents were told to expect severe mental retardation. As a toddler, the child was

wild, difficult to soothe, and hard to communicate with. With much coaching from me, the mother made heroic efforts to mitigate these handicaps, but she felt that having a defective child was also an indication of her own basic worthlessness. (For the mother, this almost intractable problem of self-esteem is what has necessitated a series of therapeutic interventions scattered over more than 30 years.)

In a recent visit to deal with her own residual self contempt, my patient mentioned that her son, now in his early 30s, has become very successful as an audio-engineer. Not only does he have a university degree in this complex technical field, his highly unusual perceptual capacities in the acoustical sphere have enabled him to do specialized creative work in the communications industry, for which very few others are qualified. The young man is now married to a defective woman whom he nurtures as his mother once nurtured him; from a social perspective, he might be described as an eccentric, but there can be no question of his superior intellectual capacities in general and of his possession of a rare talent. Will he ever be able to transcend the consequence of the fact that his mother believed him to be living proof of their joint unworthiness?

In the biographies of certain eminent creative figures, we find echoes of similar misdiagnoses. For example, the poet and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was thought by his parents to be mentally retarded because of a delay in the development of his language functions. (I discuss this in greater detail in [Gedo \[1983\]](#), chapter 10; see also [Kaufman \[1968, 1980\]](#)). Albert Einstein also developed unusually slowly in this regard—among many other greatly talented persons ([País, 1982](#)). Nietzsche's family consulted a physician, who misdiagnosed the condition in his turn. Although he did not suspect that the child was retarded, this “expert” falsely attributed the absence of linguistic competence to the ill-effects of overindulgence, and the Prussian regime of frustration he instituted in place of the parents' natural inclinations very likely aggravated the derailment of dialogue between the child and his caretakers.

Nietzsche's exceptional, broadly based talent manifested itself quite early in life: by the time Friedrich reached school age, he arranged elaborate performances of plays he had written for miniature theaters of his own design, with musical accompaniments he had composed, and so on. In adolescence, he produced some fiction; as a university student, he became a distinguished scholar, was granted a doctorate without having to write a dissertation because of the distinction of his earlier publications, and was appointed to a professorship at Basel as soon as he received his degree at the age of 24. As a personality, he was

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a strange, somewhat isolated person, prone to depression but proudly aware of his vocation as a secular prophet. In his poetry as well as his spiritual autobiography, *Ecce Homo* (the last work he produced before his collapse into confusion, probably due to a brain disease), [Nietzsche \(1967\)](#) articulated profound introspective insights: he knew that he was hopelessly disillusioned with people and frozen in his isolation. Because he begins the climactic section of *Ecce Homo* by enjoining the reader not to mistake him for someone else, I assume that Nietzsche was stating that his being nauseated by others was due to the fact that his caretakers had so radically misunderstood him.

Of course, ordinary parents can hardly be blamed for being unable to see past childhood developmental anomalies, still less to discern in them the roots of adult creativity. Medical histories such as that of Nietzsche actually suggest that, in some instances, it is precisely the atypical organization of the nervous system that simultaneously handicaps the person (especially in childhood) and permits the development of special skills that may facilitate certain creative endeavors. In my clinical work, I have encountered a number of histories of this kind; among these, perhaps the most dramatic was that of a young scholar whose parents had distinguished themselves as scientific investigators. My patient had failed to achieve creative success, having chosen a discipline precisely because he found it difficult. Both his academic record and aptitude tests indicated that he was best suited to the type of quantitative scientific work in which both mother and father excelled, but this man had, with supreme arrogance, disdained following in their footsteps because any success that might have resulted would have been too easy.

The analysis soon revealed that the patient's grandiosity was borrowed from his mother, who had always treated him, her eldest child, as superior to everyone—except herself. For example, she taught him to have contempt for his father. Although this was not stated explicitly, the underlying message was that only her blood relatives were persons of real value. That much we were able to learn easily enough; it was much more difficult to discover that, as a small child, my analysand had accepted his mother's unrealistic assessments, however absurd, because they served to deny his own unfavorable conclusions about his worth.

These were based on the realization that he was constitutionally defective and, if left to his own devices, unable to perform at age-appropriate levels. Never did his mother indicate, by word or deed, that she was aware of his glaring handicaps; rather, she consistently intervened to assist him to adapt in spite of them. This covert symbiosis did not adequately prepare him for autonomous functioning as an adult, and it was because of the resultant difficulties that he sought analytic treatment. At the same time, he was always impelled to test his capacity to master any fresh challenge on his own because he was continuously humiliated by his need to depend on the assistance of

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“secret sharers.”¹ It was the characterological attribute of having to deny his handicaps that determined his choice of a demanding career for which he was not as well suited as he would have been for following in his parents' footsteps.

Ultimately, the history of this man's grossly atypical development in early childhood did come to light. Among other handicaps, he was extremely slow to acquire language—unlike Nietzsche, however, he did not eventually become a virtuoso of self-expression. His motor development was also retarded: he had great difficulty maintaining equilibrium and continued to walk on a broad base (i.e., with feet planted widely apart) until middle childhood—so much so, that he remembered that, for a long time, he thought of himself as a penguin. Even more troublesome was the fact that, as an infant and toddler, he suffered from severe digestive disturbances that caused his caretakers

great concern and unpleasantness. Although this problem was thoroughly investigated, no cause for it was ever found, so that it came to be attributed to a maturational lag of unknown origin. It must be noted that all of the childhood handicaps from which this person suffered gradually disappeared in the course of development; by the time he was ready for college, he was functionally adequate in every respect and *very* superior in quantitative skills. His tragedy was that, by then, he needed to prove that he could overcome any and all obstacles.

It would be misleading to imply that, in childhood, the atypical organization that is “talent” invariably shows itself primarily in terms of deficiencies. In the biographies of most eminent people, it is actually the early manifestations of special skills that are likely to be recorded. For example, the copious literature on Pablo Picasso (e.g., **Richardson, 1991** or **M. Gedo, 1980**) tends to emphasize his interest in drawing at a time when he could only say a few words, his early immersion in art, and his claims later in life that he could draw like the adult Raphael before he reached the age of 12. As psychologically astute historians have noted, Picasso was a disturbed child; like the analyst I have just described, he felt helpless when he was separated from his family (although in his case, the secret sharer was apparently the father). Although some biographers (Richardson, for one) prefer to argue with his self-assessment, Picasso was consistent in describing himself as intellectually impaired in childhood; he was especially handicapped in learning arithmetic because he was unable to see numerals as symbols, viewing them instead as concrete representations of figures in action. Moreover, Picasso implied that his learning impairment was pervasive, extending well beyond arithmetic.

In the majority of instances, however, there is no record of any impairment of bodily functions during childhood; rather, talented children are frequently

¹ This phrase was invented by the novelist Joseph Conrad to refer to persons who covertly lend themselves to a symbiosis that facilitates the achievement of difficult goals.

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described as *psychologically* atypical. To be sure, these claims are mostly inferential; they are based on the high correlation in certain groups of adults who engage in “creative” activities (like students enrolled in writers' workshops) between putative talent and depression (**Andreasen, 1987; Jamison, 1989**) or between talent and “psychoticism,” a technical term applied to a combination of personality characteristics among creative persons also to be found in most people afflicted with psychoses (**Eysenck, 1993; see also Gedo, 1993**). Some authors (notably **Niederland, 1967, 1976**) rightly view the childhood psychological difficulties of persons who grow up to be creative as manifestations of early injuries to self-esteem; because such injuries inevitably follow either chronic physical impairment or any constitutionally determined disorder of thought, affectivity, or learning, “narcissistic” problems are expectable, whatever the source of childhood handicaps may have been.

I do not doubt that the foregoing correlations, reported by various observers, are valid; however, because they are not universally present, it cannot be concluded that creativity is a *reaction* to childhood depression or to narcissistic injury, as some of these authors have claimed. The evidence merely suggests that, whenever children do sustain severe blows to self-esteem, creative success is an effective way of trying to overcome these wounds. In my clinical experience, early narcissistic injury is often caused by the disadvantages of atypical developmental patterns (often confined to the psychological sphere), and these, in turn, are to be expected in individuals with special talents, as anlagen of the functions that will permit superior performance in adult life.

The degree to which the child's differences from his or her peers will impair self-esteem depends on the parents' ability to discern that these differences may be *advantageous*. I have the impression that this may be particularly difficult to do precisely when the potential talent is truly great. How could Einstein's family have known that his difficulties in language acquisition were harbingers of an extraordinary capacity for abstract thinking? Flaubert's affectionate nursemaid clearly concluded that he was feeble-minded and so reported to his early biographers after he predeceased her (**Lottman, 1989**).

Because any physical or psychological handicap, whatever its cause, is very likely to lead to unfavorable consequences with regard to personality organization, it is extremely difficult (especially retrospectively) to differentiate the original derailment of development from the psychological complications its presence will inevitably produce. Let me try to illustrate this difficulty by recalling aspects of the history of the eminent French novelist Marcel Proust (see **Hayman, 1990**). The future author was sickly throughout his life; he suffered from severe allergies and, from the age of 10 on, bronchial asthma. However, there is no reason to believe that these specific health problems were in any way connected either to his talent or to his upbringing. The behavioral manifestations

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of the transactions between advantageous constitutional endowment and the child's environment lay elsewhere.

Proust was the older of two sons of a distinguished Paris physician and a cultivated woman descended from a family of considerable wealth. Educated at home for a number of years, the boy was eventually enrolled at one of the best schools in Paris, the Lycée Condorcet. Despite spotty attendance due to his poor health, Marcel soon showed an unusual devotion to French composition, arousing the sympathetic interest of an instructor in literature. Proust's writings were often read to the class; however, they struck the other students as mannered and peculiar—only an expert critic like his master teacher was able to discern that these odd performances were signs of a great linguistic talent.

These quasibizarre productions actually betray the fact that Marcel was exquisitely attuned to the example of his mother and maternal grandmother, both passionate devotees of literature, whose conversation echoed past literary conventions but in a precious and outmoded way. Marcel's ability early in adolescence to adopt their style foreshadowed the path through which he was to enter the literary world: for

a considerable period, he wrote pieces for journals in the style of famous authors of the past, making an art out of the despised activities of the *pasticheur*. Already in his school days, this supreme prose stylist was supremely sensitive to the nuances of words and to the music of phonemic juxtapositions.

The defect inherent in these virtues was that the adolescent Proust was utterly unable to establish friendly relations with his peers, who simultaneously found him to be offensively aloof and, in an emotional sense, excessively demanding. No doubt these social difficulties were, in part, premonitory signs of Proust's homosexual destiny, which appears to have crystallized when he reached the age of 17 or 18. At the same time, these objectionable traits were consequences of the boy's exclusive attachment to and identification with his mother—a conclusion shared by many observers. Although Mme. Proust was, in *Swann's Way* (in **Proust, 1981**), portrayed by her son as sweet and compliant—a characterization seconded by the novelist's biographers—her actual behavior toward Marcel was often rigid and disapproving, especially about his attempts to cling to her.

Ronald Hayman (1990) explains this apparent paradox on the ground that Mme. Proust treated her difficult child in accord with the ill-advised counsels of her own mother. I am more inclined to suspect that, under her yielding exterior, Proust's mother was actually rather self-willed. At any rate, Marcel's insistent clinging had a decidedly aggressive quality: he consistently *forced* his mother to abandon her efforts to make him “grow up.” When these unpleasant patterns of behavior were repeated with others, they led to Marcel's ostracism. It is also fascinating to note that, not many years later, as a young man about town, Proust became extremely sought after because he was deemed to be the

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best conversationalist in Paris. The personality characteristics that were unacceptable in a schoolboy became valued in the world of the salons.

Because we have no data bearing on such a “psychoanalytic” question, I find it impossible to judge whether Proust's mother lost the battle to stop Marcel from clinging to her because, on a deeper level, she was gratified by his symbiotic wishes or because, in an empathic mode, she recognized that he really needed her to comply. **Proust's (1981)** autobiographical masterpiece, *The Remembrance of Things Past*, begins with a section entitled “Overture” that describes these transactions between the child and his caretakers, subtly indicating that their early responses to his emotional needs were crucial determinants of his creative potential.

Proust portrays himself as a child at the mercy of a propensity for overstimulation, one who could only be calmed down by his mother, preferably by her compliance with his demands that she read to him in bed. In the vocabulary of the late 19th century, Marcel was overly sensitive, a “nervous child.” This stood in marked contrast to the constitution of his robust younger brother. Yet Proust also made it very clear that he only became overwrought at bedtime because his imagination tended to run riot. In other words, these childhood “difficulties” were, at the same time, manifestations of the exercise of skills that were to enable him to compose an immense novel in seven volumes! In **Nietzsche's (1967)** words, Proust's caretakers were guilty of mistaking him for someone else.

It would seem that the constitutionally determined “talents” of many children have the potential of giving rise to psychopathology insofar as their early behavioral manifestations have a tendency to be mistaken for difficulties the caretakers have to do their best to eliminate—to suppress at the very least. If the “remedial” measures taken are unempathic and seriously frustrating, they may poison the parent-child relationship, as they did in the cases of both Nietzsche and Proust. In this regard, it is instructive to compare the laissezfaire response of Flaubert's family to his peculiarities as a child and the harmonious relationship this ladies' man maintained with his mother throughout her life, to Nietzsche's withdrawal and misogyny or Proust's bitchiness and homosexuality after the unempathic upbringing they suffered.

I do not mean to imply that, in either instance, the parents would have been sure to avoid provoking the child's ambivalence if the issues involving the latter's unusual endowments had not arisen; clearly, both mothers were ready to apply draconian methods despite their affable exteriors, so that power struggles with their eldest sons could well have broken out in any case. At the same time, a manageable equilibrium may be disrupted by a relatively small shift in the balance of forces, so that it would not be safe to assert that these relationships would have ended up as badly as they did without the added burden caused by the misdiagnosis of the children's “difficulties.”

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Although such a misunderstanding almost inevitably arouses the child's hostility, ambivalence to one or both parents does not, in itself, constitute psychopathology. Such a situation will lead to maladaptation if the child reacts to perceived handicaps by denying their significance and lapses into compensatory fantasies of grandiose preeminence (such as that of the young man who felt like a penguin). More frequently, however, pathology ensues because the child comes to accept the caretakers' low valuation of his or her worth. Take the instance of my long term patient whose son became the prominent audio-engineer. This woman's self-esteem was undermined by the desertion of her father when she was about 5 years old; she was caught in her sense of worthlessness because her mother merely laughed when, a few years later, she repeatedly complained that certain male relatives began to molest her sexually. The *coup de grâce* came when, in adolescence, the girl became very appealing sexually: the father who had neglected her for a decade now became quite interested in selling her to older members of the criminal underworld to become an expensive concubine. She did not find it difficult to fend off these repugnant suggestions, but she did accept her father's underlying value judgment that a woman's intellectual assets count for nothing. She did know that it was in that undervalued realm that she could hold her own with anyone.

As the historical examples I have cited demonstrate, however, the childhood difficulties in adaptation to unusual endowments may

also lead to pathology in the realm of human relationships—whether a chilly avoidance of intimacy (characteristic of Nietzsche as an adult) or insistent symbiotic entanglements (like those Proust forged with his mother and later with certain lovers) or labyrinthine sexual complexities (such as Lucian Freud's innumerable affairs and hordes of offspring). Of course, beyond patterns such as these commonly encountered difficulties in human relatedness, the variety of psychopathological outcomes to be found in creative persons is enormous, but this variability is due to the influence of determinants in their character formation unconnected with their endowments as such.

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