

Spirituality and the Highly Gifted Adolescent

by Stephanie S. Tolan

Writing about spirituality and highly gifted adolescents is a daunting task. It has often been said that individuals at the high end of the intellectual continuum vary from each other more than any other group, regardless of age. Extreme variation is true for abilities, passions, personality, temperament, social/emotional issues and life experience. It may be *especially* true about spirituality, which partakes of all those other differences and is so fundamentally personal. There is no way to produce a handy map or a set of predictors to mark the trail through the thickets of adolescence. The best I can do is offer a few principles and share a few stories.

Let me begin by distinguishing between the terms *spirituality* and *religion* as I will use them here. Religion is an organized belief system promulgated and sustained by a human institution, ethnic group, tribe or culture. Religions include rituals, practices, rules for behavior and usually a class of individuals (priests, ministers, gurus) whose job is to maintain the structure, to teach, counsel and mediate between the individual believer and the religion's god or gods or first principles. Spirituality, on the other hand, is an individual's experience of and relationship with a fundamental, nonmaterial aspect of the universe that may be referred to in many ways -- God, Goddess, Great Spirit, Higher Power, Universal Mind, the Force, Mystery, the Transcendent. It is the way the individual finds meaning, the way the individual relates to "life, the universe and everything." Religion is a group activity, spirituality is a personal reality. Though the subjects are closely related -- religions originating as a way of meeting humanity's possibly innate need for spirituality -- they are not interchangeable and not always linked. A person may have religion without spirituality or spirituality without religion.

Herbert Benson, medical doctor and author of [*Timeless Healing: The Power and Biology of Belief*](#) (1996), suggests that we are biologically programmed to believe in the divine, in something or someone greater than ourselves. If so, it would seem that in the last several hundred years, the majority of scientists and intellectuals have managed to overcome biology. In much of academe and in the intellectual hierarchy of western civilization, materialism (with its tacit assumption that anything that is real can be observed, measured, counted and replicated) has ruled, leading many to assume that God exists only in man's imagination.

Focus on the material in modern science has been so relentless that some have suggested that science has become a religion in itself, complete with dogma, a hierarchy of sustainers and mediators very like priests, a community of believers, and an all-encompassing deity -- reason. Though there are many individual scientists who are able to balance their pursuit of scientific inquiry with a religious or spiritual commitment in their personal lives, the ongoing sense of warfare between science and religion is testament to the gulf between them.

Into a culture split by the disagreement between those who believe in spirit (in whatever guise) and those who do not, come gifted children with their early interest in the big questions and their constantly questing, intense and active minds. Though

relatively little has been written about the spirituality of children, the idea that gifted and especially highly and profoundly gifted children ask what are essentially spiritual questions unusually early in life, has appeared in innumerable books and articles. (For instance, Hollingworth [1942], Webb, Meckstroth & Tolan [1982], Morelock [1992], Lovecky [1998].) Some of their questions: How did the universe start? Who is God? What is life? Why are people here? Why am I here? What happens after we die?

How they form answers to those questions, a process that involves both their unusual cognitive processing and their often intense emotional sensitivity, has always depended to a large extent both on the models provided by parents and other significant adults in their lives and by their own life experience. Children from religious families are most likely to be given the traditional answers of their particular religion; children from agnostic or atheistic families may be given the parents' own thoughts (or doubts) about the questions, along with the moral/ethical guidelines of their culture, or the questions may be dismissed as unanswerable, so that the children are left to come up with answers on their own.

In any case it is likely that the children both weigh and measure with great care the answers they are given or develop on their own, and that they then judge the effects of those answers on the events of their own lives or on what they observe about the world in general. For many or most highly gifted children the questions are deeply, personally important. And home may not be the only place the questions are raised. As many parents discover, sometimes to their chagrin, the highly gifted child's asynchrony is just as evident in religious training as in school. These are not children for whom pat, glib or simplistic answers (no matter how old or how authoritatively offered) will suffice.

One generalization it seems possible to make is that by the time highly gifted children reach adolescence, they have already been through many stages of what Robert Coles calls their spiritual pilgrimage. J.W. Fowler, in [Stages of Faith](#) (1981), postulated the *Synthetic-Conventional stage* as the stage that occurs between the ages of 12 and 21. "Young people develop a personal ideology grounded in rules, outside authorities, and beliefs." (Lovecky, 180) That may be a stage reached by younger highly gifted children; in adolescence they are likely to venture well beyond rules and outside authorities.

During the time between 12 and 21 many changes are likely to take place in the child's spiritual understanding and belief pattern, but those changes will be outgrowths of the journey that has come before.

Sarah, an adult currently engaged in a new and challenging spiritual journey, recently told the story of her own childhood pilgrimage. A highly gifted girl from a conventionally religious protestant home, Sarah was sent during preschool and early elementary years to Sunday School and Vacation Bible School at the Presbyterian Church in which she had been baptized. Occasionally she attended "grown up" services with her parents. In religious classes with other children her age she was more interested in arts and crafts and snacks than in the conventionally related Bible stories that she felt had little relevance to her life. The image of God as a bearded man up in heaven did not make sense to her -- she had seen no sign of golden

streets or pearly gates in the sky and couldn't connect the "old man" image with her own sense of the infinite and awesome universe.

A passionate lover of animals, Sarah refused to believe that animals had no souls, and doubted that humans had been divinely ordained to govern earth's other life forms. "If God put people in charge," she told her mother, "then He either didn't know people very well or didn't care very much about what He created." She felt far more in touch with what she referred to as "everything" when she was out in nature -- under a bush or up in a tree -- than she did in church. Though she had intense questions about the origins, the size and scope of the universe and about her place in it, she did not associate those questions with church and did not ask her parents to answer them for her. They were her own, private, personal questions, the ones that both intrigued and frightened her as she lay in her bed at night staring out her window at the stars and the moon.

When her family moved to another state and her parents did not like the minister at the local Presbyterian church, they began attending a Congregational Church. Sarah was confirmed and joined the very active youth group. Soon she had become committed to the message of love and forgiveness that she found in the gospels and to a sense of herself as a Christian, striving (often unsuccessfully) to live up to the principles her religion represented to her. She often involved herself in discussions with Jewish and Catholic classmates, trying to figure out what beliefs and ideas she shared with them and what she did not.

When she was 14, during a conversation with her parents, she was horrified to learn that they did not believe in the divinity of Jesus. "But that means you aren't even Christian!" she told them. When they explained that the minister of the church was no more sure of Christ's divinity than they, she first confronted the minister, then dramatically renounced the church. The rift that was already growing between herself and her parents became, as far as she was concerned, unbridgeable.

At age 13 Sarah had been enrolled in a parochial school that her parents hoped would meet her extreme intellectual needs. Not long after the religious split with her parents, Sarah converted to Catholicism and began talking about her intention to become a nun. How much of that short-lived plan came from a romantic sense of the selfless dedication of the monastic life and how much merely a way to horrify her parents, she isn't sure. She does think that at least some of her commitment to theological searching had to do with her involvement with a small cadre of highly gifted girls (the first "true peers" she had ever found) and their adulation for the nun who supported and encouraged their religious intensity.

Meantime, in spite of her apparently full acceptance of Christianity as a guide to human relations, it was the pantheism she learned about while studying Wordsworth in English class that made most theological, spiritual sense to her. Because pantheism was officially deemed heresy, she kept that part of her personal belief system strictly to herself.

By the end of her second year in college, Sarah's spiritual pilgrimage had taken a dramatic shift away from religion altogether (she stopped attending any church) and became focused on the intellect. Having come under the influence of her university

professors, intellectual "priests" of material rationality, she declared herself an existential nihilist and looked back on her "religious period" as an embarrassing sojourn through primitive superstition. She had not, however, entirely given up her sense of something greater than herself. As she had done with pantheism, creating a space for it within her Catholicism, she made a space for the transcendent within her intellectualism. Writing poetry made her aware of what she termed the "magic" of the realms reachable through imagination, realms she remembered visiting as a small child in nature. But eventually, presenting herself to the world as a strictly rational intellectual, she came to believe that her imagination was solely an aspect of her own mind, and lost conscious contact with the sense of a larger reality that had been with her since childhood.

As she says today, "My current spiritual journey is focused on getting back to where I think I was as a child, to that sense of oneness with the universe. I knew then that my life had some sort of meaning, I only wanted to know what it was. In all that intellectually focused time between, I lost the sense of meaning altogether. I need it now."

David, another adult currently engaged in a spiritual search, grew up in an observant but not overly religious Jewish family in New York. At 13 he studied hard for his Bar Mitzvah, partly because it was "the thing to do" for a boy who had attended synagogue all his life, and partly because he did not wish to disappoint his parents, who had planned a huge party. It turned out to be his last visit to his family's place of worship. "I realized that day that what I was saying, what I had learned, had no deep, personal meaning for me," he said later. "What was important to me about it was the power I felt standing up there in front of the whole congregation, holding their attention. My parents hoped I'd become a Rabbi. The only thing that appealed to me about that, aside from the intellectual part, was the chance to be up in front of an audience. I decided I would rather do that as a television journalist. Wherever my spiritual search takes me now, I am sure it won't be back to my family's religion."

How much of the spiritual changes these two people report during adolescence came from their developmental need to form a separate identity from their parents, it's impossible to say. There is evidence of a degree of adolescent rebellion in both cases. Clearly, though, both of them brought their considerable cognitive intelligence to bear on the beliefs with which they had been raised, and evaluated them partly in terms of their understanding of the world and partly in terms of the meaning of those beliefs in their own lives. Both took the issues very seriously and considered them important enough to require taking a stand for their own authenticity against the belief system of their family. For Sarah the spiritual quest also involved relating to peers, another developmental task of adolescence.

Another girl, raised in an evangelical Christian family, decided in early adolescence that she had essentially "outgrown" Christianity and began to study Buddhism. In her case, however, teen rebellion was less likely to be a motivation; her family was open to her quest for spiritual meaning, and supported her in her search beyond the boundaries of their own traditions. This girl, too, considered religion and its underlying personal spirituality to be critically important in her life. Not having found the meaning she was looking for, she headed -- alone -- into unknown territory.

Peace Pilgrim, the latter portion of whose life was devoted to "walking for peace," and a woman who is often held up as an exemplar of saintly faith, though she came from a pacifist family, had no religious training during childhood. She was 16 years old before she set foot in a church -- for the wedding of a friend. A highly gifted child and passionately inquisitive teenager, she was to create her faith entirely without the aid of religious authority. First she adopted the Golden Rule as a way of life, and then, as a high school senior, asked everyone she thought might have an answer, "What is God?" Unable to accept any of the answers she was given, she went for a walk with her dog to ponder the question herself. She often received answers to her most important questions while walking in nature (no doubt a large part of the reason for her choice of a walking pilgrimage for her life's mission) and this walk provided her with her answer -- that anything we are unable to understand we lump together and call *God* (Rush, 1992). It also taught her that she didn't need to look outside herself for her answers. For the rest of her life she trusted her own interior quest.

In his study of the spiritual life of children (1990), Robert Coles talked to a 13 year old boy who felt pulled between his Catholic mother and Episcopalian father and noted that children whose families were not religious often have a freer opportunity to find their own spiritual pathways. "You take the kids whose folks aren't into any religion...they ask a lot of questions about life, and they want to stop and talk about things, about what's right and wrong, and what you should believe, and after I'll talk with them, I'll say to myself, hey, maybe if you have no religion, you end up being more religious." (279) Later, the boy added, "Some kids will say to me: 'I think for *myself*. I think about God and all that stuff, real deep stuff, and no one's dictating to me, no priest, no minister, and no rabbi. It's just me and my thoughts.' That's great." (280) The freedom of that position may be particularly attractive during the teen years, when the individual's relationship to authority is iffy at best.

As they begin to define themselves as separate individuals, it can be difficult for highly gifted adolescents, many of whom identify to a large extent with their intellect, to decide how to place themselves with regard to spiritual issues which (because of the cultural split between intellect and spirit) they may come to regard as irrational or superstitious. They may go through a period, like Sarah's, when they reject their former belief system, or they may take refuge from the problem by focusing solely on morality, ethics or "self-actualization" (which fit more readily into academe), rather than spirituality. Psychology, sociology and philosophy may give them for a time (perhaps even for life) a sense that morality alone is a solid basis for a meaningful life.

In [*The Moral Intelligence of Children*](#) (1997) Robert Coles reminds his reader, as a young woman student of his at Harvard forcefully reminded him, that there is a vast difference between moral reasoning and moral behavior, between getting an A in courses in moral philosophy and treating people with decency, kindness and respect. As Coles's student made clear, it is all too easy for intellectuals, particularly in an academic world where spirituality is seldom discussed and morality may be reduced to philosophical conceptualizations, to substitute talk for substance.

As Dabrowski has pointed out, gifted individuals have unusual potential for moral reasoning. But if we stop there, if we merely reason about it rather than integrating it into our lives, never choosing to "walk our talk," we are likely to remain hollow at the

core, the big questions apparently "answered," but the answers not lived. Living them, no matter how impressive our reasoning power, requires more. It may require taking the next step, into spiritual territory. As Sarah and David have come to realize, rationality may not suffice to give us a sense of transcendent meaning in our lives. We are likely to be taken back to our earliest big questions.

It may be that the experience of spirituality among highly and profoundly gifted children and adolescents is changing. Whether that is because children themselves are changing or whether it is because the culture around them is moving in a direction that allows more openness about spiritual issues (or a combination of both) is not clear. More and more families tell of children who seem to come into the world with an innate connection to realms that were formerly associated only with mystics and religious prophets.

David Feldman reported in [Nature's Gambit](#) (1986) the apparent past life memories of one of his study's prodigies. When I am speaking to groups of parents and suggest that such memories, along with a variety of psychic or mystical experiences, are common among highly and profoundly gifted children, I am bombarded with stories, which have become so plentiful now that they can no longer be dismissed as rare or even unusual. These children (particularly between the ages of 3 and 5) may speak of their "other mothers," from "before" when they lived somewhere else. Or they correctly (and often with intense feeling) identify photos of places they (or members of their family) have never been. They relate what they did when they "used to be a grown up," and may say that they've come back to finish the work they started then. At varying ages they may tell of talking to relatives or friends who have died, or of conversing with angels or animals or the spirits of plants or lakes or mountains. Claiming to be very clear about what is "imaginary" and what is "real," they insist that these interactions are *real*. Often their stories use the vocabulary and imagery of their family's religion, but even children from families with no religion, or children whose religious traditions do not include reincarnation, may speak past lives using language that comes from spiritual traditions they have not been exposed to. Many parents find these stories disturbing or even frightening. They do not fit readily into a strictly rational view of reality. Is this phenomenon new, or are we merely noticing it and allowing ourselves to speak of it for the first time?

P.M.H. Atwater, in [Children of the New Millennium](#) (1999), suggests that it is new, and theorizes that humanity is taking an evolutionary leap, heralded by children who come into the world with many of the same "enhanced faculties" that are observed in children who have had near death experiences (NDEs). Having had more than one near death experience herself, Atwater has for twenty years studied people who experienced one or more NDEs, and her focus has more recently been on children, whose experience of an NDE may differ significantly from that of an adult. Many of these children return from an NDE with abilities they did not exhibit before, some cognitive, others psychic. Finding almost identical characteristics in highly or profoundly gifted children and in children who have had NDEs (the only difference seems to be in the tendency toward perfectionism and competition in the highly gifted which is not found in NDE children), she has associated the highly gifted with evolutionary change, what she suggests is a growing ability to access and use "other" aspects of consciousness.

Atwater's conjecture is very like my own theory that highly and profoundly gifted children exhibit not only unusual cognitive abilities (the "text" processing Ornstein [1997] associates with the left brain), but unusual intuitive, nonrational abilities (the "context" processing associated with the right brain) and so may represent an evolutionary trend toward integrating the rational mind our species has been developing over the last several thousand years with the nonrational mind that the species probably used in its early development. (Tolan, 1998).

Just as enhanced potential for moral reasoning does not automatically translate into more moral behavior, enhanced faculties are not in and of themselves a positive development. They may be used for various ends, either positive or negative. To assure the positive use of those faculties, it is still necessary for the individual to undertake the spiritual journey that, as Peace Pilgrim describes it, leads from the lower to the higher self, from the sense of oneself as the center of the universe, to the sense of oneself as a "cell in the body of humanity."

If our children are here with a greater capacity for undertaking that journey than earlier generations, it is important that we discover what they bring to the process, and respect and nurture it, no matter how strange or apparently new.

As we raise (or work with) highly gifted children and adolescents, whether they have shown these unusual aspects of consciousness or not, it is critical that we be available to them as they move from their earliest spiritual questioning, through the adolescent tasks of establishing a self, separating from adults, and connecting with peers. In purely practical terms, adolescence is a rough passage for anyone. Because of their many-layered and complex cognitive processing, their greater difficulty finding true peers, and the hostile environment in which many highly gifted children must function, adolescence is likely to be rougher on our brightest kids. What assistance American culture has to offer them as they make their way through it comes from the fields of psychiatry, psychology, and counseling, where spirituality is seldom addressed or even considered. Counseling can often provide a lifeline for someone who has become lost along the way, but a young person with a firm hold on his or her own spirituality, with a sense of personal mission, purpose and meaning, may be the best equipped to make the journey.

No one can give someone else mission, purpose and meaning. But if we model the importance of seeking those things and take the issues as seriously as the children do, right from the moment they share their first questions, listening, honoring and respecting their quest, we may be able to provide them with the help they need.