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Counselor's Corner: An Interview with Tom Greenspon

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Interview

Counselor's Corner: An Interview with Tom Greenspon

Tom Greenspon, Ph.D.
Interviewed by Tracy L. Cross, Ph.D.

With its dedication to studying the psychology of giftedness, SENGJ will be featuring clinical psychologists or counselors who have worked with individuals with gifts and talents. In this first interview of the series, Tom Greenspon describes his 40-year career and shares profound insights that can only come from such extensive experience.

Dr. Tom Greenspon

It is an honor to participate in this interview by *SENG Journal*, a journal which promises to be a significant addition to our understanding of the needs of advanced learners. What follows are my answers to a series of questions posed by Editor Dr. Tracy Cross.

My interest in psychology began as I entered college; it became a lifelong passion with my acceptance into Yale's honors interdivisional major entitled "Culture and Behavior." C&B's interdisciplinary focus on the social contexts of human psychology set my path. I went on to a Ph.D. in psychology at the University of Illinois, focusing on the experimental study of visual perception and neurophysiology, as part of a general interest in conscious experience, and then did postdoctoral study at the University of Rochester before a 7-year stint as a faculty member at the University of Alabama in Birmingham Medical Center. My wife Barbara and I then moved to Minneapolis for her Family Therapy internship and my sabbatical research; we ended up staying, and ultimately opened a private practice of psychotherapy lasting for 38 years until our retirement in 2016. Along the way, among several professional activities we have initiated or joined together, Barbara and I served as Co-Presidents of the Minnesota Council for the Gifted and Talented in the early '80s. Our interest in this had been sparked by the educational needs of our children, both of whom now have their own Ph.D.s. I am a long-time active member of two international, contemporary psychoanalytic organizations, and I continue to teach couple therapy at the Minnesota Institute for Contemporary Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis. Barbara and I first met as activists in the civil rights movement in the early '60s; as part of a continuing commitment to social justice, I currently serve on the Diversity and Equity Committee of the National Association for Gifted Children.

Much like the experience Dr. Ed Amend describes in his interview for this journal (Amend, 2022), students with gifts and talents (SWGT) would typically come to me during my practice years with issues their parents and/or teachers were concerned about: lagging school performance, problems staying on task or staying motivated, heightened fears and anxieties, etc. Many times, these and other issues would turn out to be signs of anxiety disorders or depression. All of these issues might be intensified by bullying at school or, because of the student's heightened sensitivities, by concerns about issues of social injustice or climate change (the Covid pandemic had not yet arrived by the time of my retirement). Many of these issues would have sparked a conflict between student and parents, so that the family environment was tense. Parents might disagree about what the problem was, or even whether or not a problem existed; the resulting turmoil would itself be affecting the student's emotional state. The student referral might result in the parents' decision to enter couple therapy.

The various symptomatic complaints that prompt calls to counselors and therapists do not happen in a vacuum; they are situated in particular social and historical contexts which shape their appearance, and which change over time. While it is essential to provide students (and their families) with techniques for addressing and ameliorating symptoms, I believe that addressing the contextual sources of these symptoms is crucial to sustained improvement of emotional health and wellbeing.

Readers of SENGJ may be aware that the topic of perfectionism has been a long-standing professional, and personal, concern of mine (see, for example, Greenspon, 2021). The psychology of perfectionism is an interesting subject in itself, but it also helps to illustrate a variety of broader topics in human psychology, of relevance to SENG concerns.

Although advanced learners are no more likely to exhibit perfectionism than others as a group, the capacity to do exceptionally well does make perfect performance more enticing, and since as a society we tend to equate giftedness with outstanding accomplishment, the struggle for perfection can sometimes be a struggle to maintain

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one's self-identity as a gifted person. Symptomatically, perfectionistic individuals can appear to be driving themselves, and usually others, crazy with the pressures they put on themselves to constantly reach the highest achievement levels. Alternatively, they may appear to be maddeningly difficult to motivate (for fear of incurring judgement). From extended clinical observation, perfectionism, beyond these observable symptoms, is understood as a serious self esteem issue reflective of anxieties about felt personal shortcomings and social acceptability. It is neither healthy nor adaptive in any way; perfectionistic people can be highly successful, for sure, but research indicates such success is despite, not because of, their perfectionism. The psychological origins of perfectionism lie in the negative personal meanings given to mistakes made. The particular meanings we give to our personal experience are shaped within a web of interpersonal relationships, from which we develop a set of emotional convictions about who we are and how we are regarded by others. These pre-reflective convictions guide our understanding of the world and how we should act. If families are demanding of high performance, for example, or if they seem to acknowledge high achievements but not personal qualities or uncomfortable feelings, or if they are in some turmoil which the child hopes to fix, the motivation for perfect performance and avoidance of mistakes can be singularly intense.

Families themselves exist within a social and cultural web which shapes how they view the goals of life, including child-rearing. In addition to particular neighborhood, religious, or political dictates, US American culture is materialistic, hyper-competitive, and hyper-individualistic. Outstanding achievers become idols, admired for their cultural power and their personal possessions. Personal pressure to perform frequently takes precedence over regard for others. The tide of Western culture runs counter to inner peace and allegiance to the commons, which is why recovery from perfectionism is frequently a life-long undertaking, however earnestly sought.

Because perfectionism is a symptom of underlying anxieties, it frequently entails a pernicious dilemma: outstanding performance can easily be inhibited by fears of failure; hence the aphorism, "The perfect is the enemy of the good." It is not the only emotional issue, however, that can have profound effects on academic performance and educational growth. Perhaps more acutely for SWGT, intense curiosity and the desire for understanding are impeded, or even derailed, by anxieties about how well one is doing, or by the impression that one can never be good enough. This same intensity is also seriously impeded by other worries about family circumstances, environmental issues, school safety, homophobia, racism, antisemitism, Covid and other significant illnesses—the list is long and reflects a real world in which the ability to securely immerse oneself in study becomes especially difficult. Anxieties, fears, necessary attention to life circumstances, or a sense of hopelessness about the world all become foregrounded in one's emotional world, perhaps even more acutely in highly sensitive SWGT, and all constitute powerful distractions from the ability to participate in the learning environment at school. The behavioral technologies which help students maintain focus or improve their organizational skills are vital for performance and self esteem, but these approaches can sometimes feel like pushing back the tide. A more depth-oriented, conjoint exploration of self-negating emotional convictions, and how they make sense given where they have come from, can result in a freeing sense of agency and expanded possibilities. Such a conjoint effort can also help a student feel understood and acceptable as a person, and it might motivate joining with others in efforts to change the circumstances affecting one's life.

In a still broader context, foundational elements of Western modernity, such as individualism and a belief in meritocracy, have left us with the notion that success is a solely personal accomplishment, and lack of success a solely personal failing, as the political philosopher Michael Sandel describes in detail in his book, *The Tyranny of Merit* (Sandel, 2021). Perfectionistic striving is a natural outcome of this worldview. So is the assumption that because certain groups have not risen far on the meritocratic ladder, they are less intelligent than others, and that this is due to motivational and biological differences rather than the social conditions these particular groups have historically endured. Early intelligence tests were produced by psychologists who were primarily White men, whose outlook and the tests they created as a result were limited by the worldview of their culture. As a result, when we think of gifted kids, we have typically thought of them as middle class and White. Only in more recent years has this inherent bias been examined with regard to our understanding of giftedness and its various manifestations. In another interview contained in the first issue of *SENGJ*, (Shutiva, 2022), Dr. Charmaine Shutiva discusses elements of the worldview held in many indigenous cultures regarding the nature of intelligence and how it is exhibited, and she also lays out an approach to advanced learner education that privileges the kind of communal effort and honoring of relations with others, and with the whole of creation, that so-called modernity has left us mostly bereft of. Within such a relational worldview one is aware that the ground for individual success is always prepared by the labor of others—family, teachers, coaches, teammates, coworkers, community labor, etc.—and that lack of success is a communal event eliciting renewed joint effort and support. "Giftedness," which we tend to treat as a kind of object a person can possess or not possess, can be seen instead as situated, that is, as a fluid, dynamic quality that becomes apparent in certain interpersonal or physical circumstances. Our view of it depends entirely on the

nature of the procedures we use to assess it. Expanding our worldview, or what some philosophers refer to as our particular cultural clearing in the midst of myriad others, is possible though admittedly quite difficult. In the face of our impending climate crisis, it seems also to be a necessity.

If I had to choose one topic to be included in counseling and clinical psychology doctoral programs concerning the psychological wellbeing of advanced learners, I would want to impart a phenomenological focus on the capacity for empathic understanding of the lived experience of their future clients. Whatever the diagnosis was, and whatever the presenting issues were, in my clinical experience with advanced learners there was almost always a pervasive sense of not being recognized. I might hear that "my teacher doesn't understand me," or "no one at school really knows me," or "I feel different from everyone," or "I'm alone." The observable symptoms of such experiences might lead to diagnoses of depression or anxiety; effective treatment of such disorders should include addressing the subjective, affective issues of otherness and lack of recognition. Again, the particular meanings given to one's experience will determine the functions of the various symptoms that bring them to therapy, and the conjoint search for these meanings can lead to the feeling of being recognized and understood that liberates and empowers. I would also want to mention that being in the presence of a young person who is noticeably brighter than oneself can be daunting, but that the conjoint search for understanding can feel especially enriching to the mental health professionals who make the effort to engage in it.

If I were giving a final talk to the field of gifted education, it is the value of this sense of personal recognition I would want to emphasize. I would suggest that we do best with our children when our abstract understandings of the nature of educational approaches can be related directly to their lived experience. Personal recognition of students is not simply an acknowledgement of their presence; it is an honest curiosity about what their world is like, and an encouragement of a sense of agency about matters affecting their lives. In the face of climate change, school shootings, the rollback of reproductive rights, and the silencing of educators, students themselves are organizing and speaking out. Can adults have the courage to join the dialogue, and the action?

We are in an age of "don't say gay" laws, book bans, and the cynical manipulation of voters to attack school boards and teachers, all of which prompts me to offer some concluding thoughts for this interview. Although neighborliness and commitment to common goals have been enduring elements of US cultural history, today we are seeing much more open and defiant expression of the negative and dangerous viewpoints which have also been with us since the beginning. The threats of racism, homophobia, anti-semitism, gender and sexuality biases, and violence have always been present in the conscious awareness of the people being targeted. Now, increasingly, our children are not safe. When a Black child, carrying a communal history of slavery, lynching, and Jim Crow into contemporary life, is made to feel like a different species of human and induced to be constantly aware of the suspiciousness, disdain, and potential violence of many in the White world, the resulting racial trauma comes full force into the classroom and cannot help but affect learning. The fact that in some places it has become illegal to talk about any of this in the schoolroom is making it impossible to create any conversation there about how make things better. The accusation that such discussions would be bringing politics into the classroom amounts to what psychoanalysts call projection: every one of the current teaching bans is itself a politically-motivated intervention into the business of the classroom. We do all of our SWGT immense harm in this way, limiting the vital resources advanced learning depends on and making the lived experience of Black, indigenous, and LGBTQ+ students invisible (Greenspon, 2022). As a result, these students are made to feel like outsiders, and classrooms are robbed of the benefits of the experiences of resilience and resourcefulness such students might bring in. Silence in the face of all of this amounts to complicity. It is vital to deal openly with these issues in any therapeutic setting; it is just as vital for educational professionals, and community members who care about education, to do what we can to call out and resist these anti-educational forces of negation and hate.

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Tom Greenspon, Ph.D. is a psychologist, marriage and family therapist, and author, now retired from a 38-year private practice with his wife, Barbara. After a B.A. from Yale, a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Illinois in 1968, and a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Rochester, he joined the faculty of the Medical Center at the University of Alabama in Birmingham until moving to Minneapolis in 1977. Tom is an active member of two international psychoanalytic organizations and their social justice committees. He teaches couple therapy at the Minnesota Institute for Contemporary Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis and has written extensively on the topic of perfectionism.

Tom is a long-time member of the National Association for Gifted Children, currently serving on its Diversity and Equity Committee. Among their joint endeavors, Tom and Barbara were Co-Presidents, 1982-84, of the Minnesota Council for the Gifted and Talented.