

## On Genius

We have a tendency, in our daily usage, to cheapen the value of words. We choose them carelessly, tossing them out pell-mell, as if sheer volume were a substitute for meaning. But if we pause on a word for a succession of moments, allow it to breathe on its own, its power can be restored until we recognize why we have something so wonderful as this word in the first place.

Few words have been so trampled by vernacular deployment as the term, “genius.” Every field of human endeavor is deemed to be populated by geniuses, giving us marketing geniuses and football coach geniuses, just to name two categories that have yet to produce any actual geniuses. Genius was never meant to be a mere synonym for facility, cleverness, guile or wit. When we pause to hear the word, we know it’s meant to be reserved for something more.

To try to get a better grasp on the slippery sense of genius, let’s look at one of its most oft-referenced sub-sets, the athletic genius. At the elite level, every sport on the planet is loaded with talented practitioners who exert extraordinary effort in the struggle to be the best. A precious few will rise to the level of champion, but even reaching the pinnacle doesn’t automatically confer genius. We want to see more before we dole out the genius moniker, something that awes us, that makes transparent the fathomless gulf separating their skill from ours.

In any generation there aren’t more than 10 athletes that can claim an incorruptible hold on this exalted term. More than merely ultra-adept, they change the way we think about what is possible. Because they are engaged in highly promoted

sports, we can all witness their uniqueness and jointly confer the mantle of genius. As we almost all engage in some form of athletic activity at some point in our lives, we feel some connection to these demigods even as we acknowledge their differentness.

Let's stop kidding ourselves. We all know athletic genius, marvelous as it is, is not cut from the same cloth as mental genius. A sport is always played with a strict set of rules, rules that constrain even the greatest avatars. Tiger Woods can't make a hole-in-zero. Wayne Gretzky never scored a goal worth five points. Mental genius faces barricades, for sure, but no boundaries. It's better defined by its indifference to rules rather than finding maximum expression within them. It might be said of athletic geniuses that to the degree that they are always in their bodies, they are always at work. This notion applies in spades to the mental genius, whose mind is never at rest. It reaches in all directions at once, never seeing an event at fewer than three levels, always cross-referencing on the fly and forever and ever the questioning, turning, flipping, straining to catch a new mind-hold on the fabric of reality.

Genius is mankind's most exhausting possession, a super-power that drains its mortal host. Hold that thought for a moment while we visit an anecdotal interlude. Recently I've had occasion to have several conversations with a genius. At one point I glibly remarked that I, too, knew what it was like to always be reaching for the next rung. She looked at me the way an ethnologist would examine an interesting primate. "One rung?" As if I had discounted her reach, her ladders radiating across galaxies.

For now, let's consider genius the insatiable, tireless cross-referencing and synthesizing of all information sources. Even if

we accept this definition, this still doesn't illuminate the origins of genius. Is it possible that we all got equal portions (despite all evidence to the contrary), yet only a few of us got the operating instructions? If genius is a gift, who bestowed it?