

On Gifts

People are weird. Everyone thinks that he or she is superb at *something*, even if that something should happen to be monumentally trivial. Regardless of the value of the gift people allege to possess, most of us think of our gift as intrinsic to our nature, a defining trait that allows us to feel as if we are the agents of our destiny. Should our gifts be applicable to employment, they become the labels by which we are known, be it “artist” or “mathematician,” our identity forever linked to our talent.

The weird part is that the very term “gift” denotes something given by someone or something else *to* us, meaning that it must exist independently from us. We may be sharing the gift with some power or entity, but in no way can we be responsible for it or it wouldn’t be a gift in the first place. Gifts are powers granted to us so we can build a small storehouse of courage to draw on, allowing us to go on.

This rather obvious point inspires reflection on a less obvious one: What if someone had an enormous gift *and didn’t know it*? Imagine this scenario: a child is born into a family with no history of genius and no capacity to recognize it. The child grows into a lovely young girl, making her appearance the focus of any and all attention she receives. Her evolving beauty creates vicious challenges to her sense of self-worth, for the men who want to possess her play on her insecurities in order to hold onto her. She will never be beautiful enough, they tell her, to deserve anything more than them.

As she matures, the young woman’s beauty intensifies until she has the presence to stun all who behold her. People lose their power to intimidate her, but not their determination to define her. She *is* her beauty, and it’s magnificent. But what if under that blinding veneer there churned a mind for the ages, if behind shimmering green eyes was an intelligence capable of changing our world-view?

The simple truth about gifts is that they first must be unwrapped. Then they must be put to work. An unopened gift, or one that lays idle, is a terrible fate, not just for the individual, but for all of us. It is music that is never played. While surface beauty is almost always acknowledged

and often rewarded, it can also mask far greater gifts. When we encounter a mind-bending physical beauty, we tend to elevate her to icon status and regard her appearance as belonging to the world. Genius is no different; it's just harder to detect.

A brilliant mind is a wonderful gift, but not unconditionally so. As it lies hidden, it may go unrecognized for years. And brilliance is rarely bundled with natural social graces, so it may ferment in silence, a lonely outpost with little connection to the world. Perhaps afraid of the tireless awareness that is its gift and curse, the brilliant soul may never announce itself, fearful that its otherness will trigger even greater isolation. So sad.

The point, Dear Reader, is that not only is it the obligation of the gifted to share their gifts, it is the obligation of all of us to nurture the gifted in return. Just because people are gifted does not make their lives easy; in fact, talent can be a real bitch to live with. The gifted need support, encouragement and fuel that fires their particular genius. Just because people are talented doesn't make them complete.

If you are fortunate enough to cross paths with a talented but undernourished mind, don't assume that brilliance alone will bring its owner to some happy destination. Everyone needs help. Even Tiger Woods has a coach. Reach out. You may help more than you realize. And you just might find, behind eyes so radiant they defy us to see past them, a genius waiting to be born. Let the music play.

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