

THERE AND BACK AGAIN

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TEMPO and I have something in common: We've both been interested in the lives of gifted children for more than 40 years.

When Dr. Krys Goree asked me if I would write something for this final issue of *TEMPO*, it took me only a minute to say "yes"—not only because Krys and I have been colleagues and friends for decades, but also because TAGT has been such a positive force in advocating for the needs of gifted kids. You know, "those kids" who many others think "have it made" and don't need any particular educational, financial, or emotional support in order to succeed. Of course, if you are reading this, you *know* that gifted kids have the same needs for understanding, love, equity, and advocacy as any other child with a learning difference. Gifted kids need us, and thanks to TAGT, the gifted kids of Texas have an unending base of support.

I've written for *TEMPO* several times before, and I've presented workshops on giftedness from Brownsville to El Paso, from Amarillo to Tyler. So, yeah, I know Texas! I know it educators . . . its parents . . . its gifted kids. Rather than talk about what the future holds for gifted kids and those who advocate for them, I thought I'd write something more reflective—to consider what I've learned from and about gifted kids in the 43 years that I've worked on their behalf. Thanks to you, *TEMPO* readers, and the gifted individuals who have impacted your lives, I have gained many lessons I shall never forget—lessons like these three. . . .

#1: GIFTEDNESS IS NOT SOMETHING YOU DO, IT IS SOMEONE YOU ARE

For most of my 43 years working with and for gifted kids, there has been tension in our field. We can't seem to agree on how to properly identify giftedness, how to serve gifted kids when we find them, or whether to consider kids who test well but get low grades in school as being gifted *at all*, as some would argue that you need to "prove" you are gifted by acting that way. For clarity on these issues, I have returned time and again to the knowledge, wisdom, and experiences of one individual: Dr. Annemarie Roeper. Although we are not related, I long ago "adopted" Annemarie as my "gifted grandmother." I met her in 1979, just as I was beginning my career in this field and getting to know the intricacies of giftedness. As the head of the Lower School at the Roeper School, which she and her husband, George, founded in 1941 in suburban = Detroit, Annemarie understood the importance of social-emotional learning and whole-child education long before they become buzzwords among today's educators. I visited the Roeper School frequently and served on its Board of Trustees for 7 years, each time benefitting from conversations with George and Annemarie and later, once they retired and moved to California, with the Roeper School educators who knew George and Annemarie best.

I speak of all that Annemarie gave to me—to us, really—every time I give a presentation to educators, parents, or gifted kids. And of all the remarkable pieces of insight that I have gained from Annemarie, the most foundational one of all is her strikingly precise conception of giftedness:

Giftedness is a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and a greater ability to understand and transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences. (Roeper, 1982, p. 21)

Among all of this tension I mentioned that has engulfed our field about who is gifted and who is not, I follow the advice of my gifted grandmother, believing now more than ever that her conception of giftedness is the most accurate one of all. Giftedness is not something you *do*, it is someone you *are*. Students demonstrating lower achievement can be gifted, and high-achieving scholars can just be smart test takers. We do a disservice to gifted kids everywhere when we use the term “gifted education” instead of “gifted *child* education,” because it is not the curriculum or instruction that is gifted, but rather the child who is receiving it. Annemarie died in 2012, yet her legacy is eternal thanks to her many publications. If you truly care about the gifted children you teach, get to know the work of my gifted grandmother, Annemarie Roeper. Your life and the lives of the gifted individuals you know will be enriched greatly.

#2: SERVING GIFTED CHILDREN IS NOT ELITIST

My first two university degrees are in special education for children with disabilities, and my first job as a teacher was working with students with cognitive delays. No one ever questioned *why* children with cognitive delays both deserved and required an education that took those delays into account, no one ever thought that my classroom interventions were giving my students “special treatment,” and certainly no one ever said that by teaching my students at their expressed instructional level I was practicing elitism.

Then I became a teacher of gifted children . . . and everything changed. My teaching colleagues

often resented that I was taking the “best” students from their classrooms to serve them in my pull-out program. When budget cuts came, services to gifted students were often threatened, as the general perception was that gifted services were a luxury, not a necessity. And more than a few school board members and school administrators thought that serving gifted kids was a new form of segregation—a way to separate the intellectual chaff from the intellectual wheat. Indeed, I was labeled an elitist for simply wanting to do what I had done for my students with cognitive delays: instruct them at levels that were commensurate with their abilities.

In 2001, I wrote an article titled “In Praise of Elitism” that was reprinted in my 2003 book, *Barefoot Irreverence: A Collection of Writings on Gifted Child Education*. Rereading it recently, I find its ending message is as relevant then as now. Here’s an excerpt:

Elitist? You bet I am, because I believe in the sanctity of human differences and the reality that an IQ of 145 *does* earmark you as different at age 10 from your fourth-grade classmates in some important, but unseen, ways. Elitist? You bet I am, if it means taking a child aside and emphasizing that giftedness is a lifelong quality that does not go away when the school years end. Elitist? You bet I am, and it has nothing to do with social or economic or racial classes, but instead is simply an indication that abilities—intellectual and emotional—differ among and between people. Always have, always will. Elitist? You bet I am, for if gifted students need a foot soldier to explain to others that they may be as different from average students, academically and emotionally, as are children with (cognitive delays), then I will be their man. (p. 261)

In many ways, it is not easy being a gifted child. How could it be, when even educated adults who should know better dismiss your learning needs as unimportant? Likewise, it is not easy being an advocate for gifted kids, as the specter of elitism pervades many conversations when, as a parent or teacher, you express support for gifted children. Given this public reaction to serving gifted kids in schools, which can range from ambivalence to animosity, it is no surprise that educators of gifted kids need to support each other like never before. No educators should ever have to defend the job they are doing on behalf of the children they are serving, yet those teachers and coordinators of gifted kids have to do it all of the time. Thank goodness for TAGT and organizations like it, for they keep our internal fire burning when others wish to extinguish our sparks. Call me an elitist if you wish, but I'll continue to do my job because I know the price that gifted children will pay if I give up on them. So do you.

#3: FOLLOW YOUR HEART

I spent the bulk of my career after receiving my Ph.D. as a professor of education at Kent State University. I was there for 25 years. I enjoyed my academic home, yet something was missing—kids. How ironic: I went into education to affect the lives of children, yet the more college degrees I received, the fewer kids I saw. I needed a change; I needed to follow my heart.

So, in 1991, I left Kent State for a one-year, unpaid leave of absence. After interviewing for three classroom teaching jobs that I did not get, I was hired to teach fourth grade in a suburban Cleveland, OH, school district. Five of my 29 students were identified as gifted, but the rest were a mix of everything possible that humans can be. It didn't take me long to realize two things: first, that this would *not* be

a year off, and second, that I didn't go back to the classroom, I went *up* to the classroom.

I'd never worked so hard, I'd never felt so overwhelmed, and by the school year's end, I knew that I could never again return to university teaching as my sole occupation. So, I made an arrangement with my dean and the school district superintendent that I would work one day a week as the school's enrichment teacher, conducting large-group lessons on creativity, critical thinking, and community service. Four years later, I moved to a different school district, where I spent one day a week for 10 years as a middle school teacher of gifted seventh and eighth graders. And today, even though I retired from Kent State 12 years ago, I've taught highly gifted ninth graders every month for 8 years at a public school in South Carolina designed just for them.

Why tell you this? Because I believe a lot of individuals—individuals like you—working with gifted children need what I needed: a seismic shift in your day-to-day, professional routine. If you are a gifted coordinator who sees gifted children only sporadically, change that up, even a little, by working directly with the kids who brought you into this field in the first place. If you are a university professor who teaches adults how to best serve gifted children in schools, get what may be a needed dose of reality by teaching math or writing occasionally to kids who don't care about your current research as much as they care if your classroom lessons are engaging. And if you *are* a teacher of gifted children, talk to your coordinator or principal about designing or rewriting curriculum, or establishing a framework for serving gifted kids who may be underserved due to their young age or life circumstances (yes, too many gifted children from traditionally underrepresented groups are still awaiting our attention). Such a job share option might enlighten you as much as it does the person who teaches your students while you are doing other stuff.

Thanks to social media, I remain in touch with dozens of my former elementary and middle school students. They don't choose to stay in touch because I was a great language arts instructor; they maintain contact because we developed a bond over the 2 or more years we worked together. I *got* them. I *liked* them. I made being gifted an okay thing to be.

Follow your heart. It just may lead you to some places that you thought you left behind or outgrew.

CONCLUSION

My new favorite book is titled *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse* by Charlie Mackesy. It's related in theme to greats like *The Little Prince* or *The Hobbit*, as it takes the book's characters on a personal journey of hope and wonder. In one episode, the following conversation occurs:

"Sometimes," said the horse.

"Sometimes what?" asked the boy.

"Sometimes just getting up and carrying on is brave and magnificent."

The two friends then look over a pond, where two swans are swimming.

"How do they look so together and perfect?" asked the boy.

"There's a lot of frantic paddling going on beneath," said the horse.

"The greatest illusion," said the mole, "is that life should be perfect."

As I reflected back on my 4-plus decades of work with gifted kids and those who work on their behalf, and as I reread what I've composed

here, I realized something: Even though I began this article by stating I would use it to reflect on my past work, I have to wonder if my reflections portend as much for the future as they represent the past. Both yesterday and tomorrow, you need to recognize gifted kids for who they are beyond their accomplishments. You need to appreciate that your advocacy efforts are worthwhile and necessary, despite criticism from others who might not respect gifted kids' needs as fully as you do. You need to envision a future—*your* future—by retracing the steps that brought you into this field in the first place and, if necessary, by listening one more time to the horse in my new favorite book:

"When the big things feel out of control . . . focus on what you love right under your nose."

To all of the many authors, editors, and production staff at TAGT who have made such strong commitments to gifted children, their parents, and their educators by publishing a print version of *TEMPO* for the past 40 years, much gratitude is due you all. Keep up the fine and needed work, as I'm sure that the online version of *TEMPO* will maintain the excellence that has become its trademark. A different format for *TEMPO* does not mean a different vision of what we need to do for our gifted kids.

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