

Tom Byrne

Professor T. Chapman

English 403 - Children's Literature

April 1, 2013

Jonathan Livingston Seagull and the Treatment,
Ostracism and Nurturing of Gifted Children.

“He felt better for his decision to be just another one of the flock. There would be no ties now to the force that had driven him to learn, there would be no more challenge and no more failure.” (Bach, 8)

Jonathan Livingston Seagull, a novella by American author Richard Bach, chronicles the journey of an extraordinary seagull to rise beyond his limitations as a simple gull. The titular character finds that he is interested in flying, essentially to the exclusion of all else. As time goes on, he also finds that he is gifted as both a student and teacher, in addition to his exceptional flying ability. His journey of learning to push past his limits while flying, as well as his interactions with other gulls are extremely similar to the way that gifted children act. Gifted children find that they suffer many of the same difficulties that Jonathan does - being singled out by adults and their peers, bullied, and ostracized. Jonathan goes on to find other gulls that share his giftedness and love of flying - but our gifted children are all too often left to fend for themselves amongst a hostile flock.

When a child is identified as gifted or talented, a many year long struggle is often the result. Before the child reaches school or pre-school age, and is not in constant contact with their

peers, their behavior and abilities can more easily be nourished and encouraged. The lack of peers implies a lack of negative peer pressure, as there is little or no need for intellectual comparison. Once a gifted child reaches school age and is immersed in a so-called 'peer group' for the purposes of academics, the difference in abilities will become more obvious. There are perils, however, in the idea that gifted children will be recognized or accepted as such by standard educational institutions: "The belief that gifted children are easy to identify and hence will receive appropriate education is fallacious. If we examine the characteristics of some children, ... we see that the beliefs and understandings of the professional dictate the perspective." (Diezmann, Watters, 3). Children who are gifted can and are often pegged as "different" or "troublemakers", due to the inability of the standard educational system to recognize and nurture these children. While parents are often the first people who discover and nurture these abilities, without the proper viewpoint, these children can even have these negative ideas and stereotypes hung on them by their own family. Does a child's non-conformist and rebellious attitude signify a gifted learner who excels at independent learning and creative thinking, or does it merely imply that the child is stubborn? This is a quandary that parents must deal with as well.

Once a child's abilities have been recognized, the battle has begun, as gifted children often have to battle both peers and teachers due to their difference. Gifted children can easily be considered to be nonconformists and have strong antiauthoritarian streaks. The boy Martin in Diezmann and Watters' paper frequently found himself struggling with these: "However Martin was repeatedly at odds with the teacher over his non-conformity and non- use of standard mathematical algorithms."(5). This nonconformity can lead to further alienation, as being

marked as different can cause the gap between the gifted child and their peers becomes more visible: “Since Hillary is so different from most of her peers, she does not have close friends” (“Gifted Children”, Winner, 210). Once a child is set apart in this fashion, other children can and will label them, resulting in bullying: “They often are ostracized as being different and weird and are labeled as nerds and geeks” (“Exceptionally High Intelligence”, Winner, 1). This is often amplified because precocious children may have interests and desires that are far too mature for other children in their group to share. “...serious communication problems and social ostracism can arise when gifted children attempt to share interests with age-peers.” (Diezmann, Watters, 8). A gifted child’s parents may struggle with this negative social interaction as well. Parents will likely have their own experience and wisdom to draw upon, and can often see the hard road ahead that a child might follow due to their differences. This may result in an encouragement to try to fit in, or act more normal, especially if the parent has difficulty in understanding the child’s giftedness. Jonathan Seagull finds himself in this exact position, with his own parents encouraging him to act as normal as possible, in order to fit in, and being unable to understand why he isn’t. “Why, Jon, why?” his mother asked. “Why is it so hard to be like the rest of the flock, Jon?” (Bach, 6). Jon listens, and does attempt to do so, but in the end, his gifts drive him back to doing what he loves. He doesn’t mind spending his time alone, flying, but instead is frustrated by his inability to make others understand what he’s trying to say: “His one sorrow was not solitude, it was that other gulls refused to believe the glory of flight that awaited them; they refused to open their eyes and see.” (Bach, 10). Again, this is a trait that we see in gifted children: they have an advanced ability to be alone, and in fact, often enjoy solitude in a

way that non-gifted children don't, as one of Winner's examples demonstrates: "... she does not mind being alone much of the time." ("Gifted Children", 210).

Despite their ability to survive and enjoy being alone, in order to truly thrive gifted children need to be challenged and surrounded by people and an environment that can both cherish and nurture their special gifts. In Part II of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, Jon moves on to the next level of his education. He is brought to a new flock who is different from his old in the biggest respect - his new flock is focused on flying and learning: "Jonathan saw that there was as much to learn about flight in this place as there had been in the life behind him. But with a difference. Here were gulls who thought as he thought." Being surrounded by similarly gifted peers can help a student's emotional health and self-image, in addition to being academically nurturing, as we are told by Martin's mother: "I feel he is more accepting of his differences because he has met a whole group of 'like' children." (Diezmann, Watters, 7).

Unfortunately for all of us, special schools for the gifted are few and far between, and most schools are ill equipped to handle gifted children. Children who are genuinely considered gifted are (in most states) offered an "enrichment" period that ranges from between 20 and 120 minutes per week. While this may be better than nothing, studies actually show that it does very little to help gifted children excel: "But in all the studies of such programs, gains were modest." ("Gifted Children", Winner, 262). Gifted children have the potential to grow into gifted adults, and we should be pursuing ways to make this happen. Although many eminent adults appear to have been gifted children, there is not a corollary showing that most gifted children grow into eminent adults, "... most gifted children do not grow into eminent adults and do not ever make major contributions to the way people think..." ("Exceptionally High Intelligence",

Winner, 4). The possibility of what our gifted children could become if given the proper environment, challenges and nurturing is something that we need to consider, even if is simply because of what they themselves could achieve. One of the greatest possibilities that lies in store for our gifted children is that as gifted adults, they could become exceptional teachers, sharing their deeper understanding and knowledge to non-gifted or “normal” people, bringing their giftedness to everyone. Of all the achievements that are possible, this could be the greatest. Jonathan Livingston Seagull realized this, and returned to his hostile original flock with this in mind. He found new students who wanted to learn and understand, and although some showed giftedness, others were ordinary, or even disabled. Jonathan saw each gull’s potential, and was able to demonstrate and impart his wisdom such that any and everyone who was interested could begin to achieve greatness: “Every hour Jonathan was there at the side of each of his students, demonstrating, suggesting, pressuring, guiding.” If nurturing and fostering our gifted children can help them to achieve greatness, can we not hope that they can help everyone to do the same?

WORKS CITED:

Diezmann, Carmel M., Watters, James J. "Bright but bored: Optimizing the environment for gifted children". *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*. 22(2), 17-21. Web. 1 April, 2013.

<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/2696/1/2696.pdf> PDF File.

Winner, Ellen. "Exceptionally High Intelligence and Schooling." *American Psychologist*,

October 1997, Vol. 52, No. 10. Web. 1 April, 2013. <http://psych.wisc.edu/henriques/papers/>

[Winner97.pdf](#) PDF File

Winner, Ellen. *Gifted Children: Myths and Realities*. BasicBooks; A Division of HarperCollins,

1996. Print.

Bach, Richard. *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*. Scribner; Original Edition, 2006. Print.