

Being Gifted, Being Me

Willem Kuipers

Willem Kuipers graduated from Delft University of Technology as a mathematical engineer, became a management consultant, and has been a career coach, counselor, explorer, and writer for uncommonly intelligent and intense adults since the beginning of this century. He runs his own practice in Voorburg, the Netherlands. Additionally, he likes to sing in choirs, smaller groups or solo, and is fascinated by labyrinths, meditative paths based on ancient patterns.

ABSTRACT: This article combines my personal experiences and reflections on being gifted with my professional experiences and theoretical frameworks regarding the subject of (extreme) giftedness. I use temperament theory to present four fundamentally different perceptions of authenticity and of giftedness, while explaining my own preference. The more someone's giftedness is beyond average, the more having a connection with real peers and an awareness of the "hardware" differences with one's environment becomes increasingly vital for an effective and satisfactory interaction and a more accurate self-image. It is my experience that this self-image unfolds over the years, often in leaps, as old convictions of one's personal complexity and intensity prove to be incomplete and obsolete. It takes conscious effort to regain personal balance in using these new-found aspects of one's gifted identity.¹

To me, the issue of "being me" has always been connected to wondering what it is like to be someone else. All my life I've been busy trying to discern *what's mine* from *what's yours*, gradually discovering how and why the two were often different from each other.

Over the last ten years, a part of this typical habit has been explained by my personal discovery that empathy was not equally distributed across mankind, and that I seemingly had been way up front when it was handed out. More precisely, my ease in perspective taking, being aware of someone else's perspective as if I was standing in their shoes, can make it difficult to stand in my own shoes when wishing to express my own views and desires.

So, it feels quite natural to me to combine my *reflections on being me* with my reflections and professional experiences regarding the typical ways of gifted people. Let me explain how these experiences came to pass.

Already in high school, people came to me with personal stories and problems. That continued during my time at university and my work as an operations research consultant, management consultant,

¹ An earlier version of this article was included in the eBook *Being me: Reflections on the gifted person's path to authenticity*, published by InterGifted.

and career coach and counselor. It fueled my interest in psychology and in various esoteric disciplines that try to explain the human condition. I read many books and attended many courses to become more proficient in my profession. But I must confess that the ultimate inner drive to know all these things was: *Who am I, why does my life unfold as it does, and why do the people around me act somehow differently from me?*

Then, in 1999, the topic of giftedness hit our family: first our daughter, and then my wife and I were diagnosed as such. After some reading I became aware that my career coaching clients typically had gifted characteristics, and that they appreciated my speedy and able understanding of their questions. As they told me, they often had had less fortunate experiences with other coaches or psychologists. Suddenly a new perspective on the typicalities and trials and tribulations of life presented itself: What phenomena are typical in the lives of gifted adults?

That started a journey of discoveries about myself, about other gifted people, and about the differences between an objectively assessed diagnosis and a subjectively experienced acknowledgement of being gifted. That journey is still continuing today. For me, it led to the development of the concept of “extra intelligence” or *Xi*, and various other acronyms that start with an X, to describe the typical expression of personal characteristics in the target group, viewed from within. To explain the concept and my drive for this approach, I wrote an article for *Advanced Development*, titled, “How to charm gifted adults into admitting giftedness: Their own and somebody else’s” (Kuipers, 2007).

I wrote the book *Enjoying the Gift of Being Uncommon: Extra Intelligent, Intense and Effective* in 2010 and built a website (www.ximension.com) with an extensive knowledge base to spread the message. And I found out that my talking and writing was most effective when it originated from my own, well-digested experiences, rather than solely from my extensive knowledge of various sources in literature.

I feel very fortunate that because of my meetings with clients over the years, I have repeatedly become quite curious as to the origin and pattern of some of their characteristics that I had not yet studied in more detail. As a consequence, I became aware of my own connections with that characteristic, which was initially sometimes quite unsettling. However, these personal experiences have always been quite helpful to break the news in an empathic way to new clients afterwards.

One of my conclusions is that my quest for becoming—or rather being—my authentic and gifted self has been extensively facilitated by interacting with others, combined with my own rather high capacity for self-reflection. In fact, as I have come to realize, the interaction with others is the ideal playground for being truly authentic, that is, when you have used your heightened senses to assess whether it is safe to do so.

Temperament and Authenticity

One of the still intriguing perceptions from my coaching work is about the concept of authenticity itself: For me it is quite natural and important to value my authenticity, for example, to make sure that my actions are in accordance with my values. I am a serious kind of fellow, you know. This concern is not shared throughout the gifted population, at least not with the zeal that I always have felt to be normal.

An interesting explanation can be found in temperament theory, as developed in the 1970s by David Keirsey and Marilyn Bates (1978) as a kind of extension to the Jungian type theory, formalized in the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (MBTI). Twenty years later in 1998, Keirsey published an updated and much expanded book, adding various new applications of temperament theory. Since then Linda Berens (2010), among others, has elaborated and published on the concept.

I have always been happy to use both temperament and type with my clients. It has helped them a lot with noticing differences and similarities in relation to various people in their environment and in establishing a more elaborated self-image.

In the original version by David Keirsey, the sixteen types of the MBTI, depicted by a four-letter acronym, were clustered in four temperaments: the so-called Artisans (-S-Ps), Guardians (-S-Js), Idealists (-NF-s) and Rationalists (-NT-s).² Of these four temperaments, typically the *Idealists* are the most committed to assure the expression of their own and other people's authenticity and self-realization. The ability to consistently act in accordance with this purpose forms the keystone to their self-confidence.

The other three temperaments have other concerns, more specifically:

- *Artisans* cherish their excellent flexibility to handle every situation in the most effective way, and value their freedom to do so.
- *Guardians* need to act in a way that is considered respectful in the society they live in. They strive to be responsible citizens that bring stability.
- *Rationalists* need to be knowledgeable in the things they do. They strive for mastery and self-control in every endeavor.

In my view these temperaments describe consistent patterns one can recognize to a lesser or larger extent in oneself or in others. I do

² Keirsey considered this clustering more informative and consistent as to what the four types within a certain temperament could be expected to do well under varying circumstances. In his opinion Jung and Myers were more focused on finding out what the different types had in mind, thus ordering them through the so-called psychological functions.

not consider them an obligation nor an objectively measurable prescription for personal behavior. However, the temperament approach may be helpful to realize that some people (*Idealists*, to be sure) are more authentic when they take time to reflect and work on their own authenticity, and help others to do the same, while the people who prefer another temperament may experience authenticity in different ways.

- *Artisans* might be their most authentic self when improvising to apply a different (but the most effective) approach to any situation.
- *Guardians* might be most authentic when organizing their own self-development plans to be in line with the policies and needs of their society.
- *Rationalists* might be most authentic when focusing on the well-defined excellence of their products, instead of on who they are.

My conclusion is: Authenticity has many utterly different faces. In fact, the gifted are well known for their immense diversity and complexity. It definitely helps me to be aware of these fundamental differences in order to find and accept my own ways of authentically being me. The plural form is on purpose.

Temperament and Perception of Giftedness

Temperament theory has also helped me to perceive and accept that there are fundamental differences in the way people react to the concept of giftedness, be it their own or somebody else's, including mine. I studied the needs and values of the different temperaments, as described succinctly in the previous paragraph and far more extensively by practitioners like Linda Berens, and it became clear to me that they lead to principally different perceptions of giftedness or gifted identity. Over the years I have recognized these different perceptions in my clients, but also in the proponents and the vilifiers of giftedness, regardless of how each defines giftedness.

Again, these are patterns, not an obligation to either determine who has which temperament or to choose one behavior and stick to it. But they illustrate how people may react fundamentally differently to acknowledgement, specification, and expression of giftedness—be it their own, their family member's, their pupil's, publicly visible person's, or just anybody's.

- *Artisans* have a quite limited interest in the subject. They do not like labels and their implications in general, as they may limit someone's flexibility to act in the way that seems most effective to them at that moment. They usually value uncommon smartness, dexterity or sensitivity but are focused on its contextual usefulness and impact, not on its origins or

related theoretical framework. As Artisans prefer to learn experientially and are driven to achieve mastery in creating something of relevance with their preferred tools or instruments, they may be convinced that excellence and so-called giftedness is just about practicing more and harder than average.

- Guardians usually consider the subject of giftedness important because of its possible benefits to society. That is also why underachievement is a serious worry, and they may react with strong disapproval if they suspect the underachiever is to blame in any way. Guardians prefer clear rules and measurements to determine whether someone is ‘entitled’ to be called gifted. They expect society and its institutions to properly scout and foster gifted persons, in order to make good use of their special gifts. Similarly, as gifted persons they tend to feel quite responsible for making sure that their own contributions are up to expectations: “Noblesse oblige.”
- Rationalists take giftedness seriously as long as it is objectively verifiable in some way and conceptually valid. They may go to great lengths to come up with underlying principles to ultimately and irrefutably define giftedness. Given their preference for objective, logical analyses, theories, and models, Rationalists are hardly tempted to investigate “the inner experience of being gifted,” let alone allow their own feelings on the issue to become part of their concepts. Similarly, they prefer to link giftedness more with excellent academic results than with the identity or personal development issues of the person behind these results.
- Idealists consider the subject to be very much about identity and personal development. Results are important too, of course, but what is more important is gifted emancipation and spreading knowledge about giftedness to all involved. They are deeply touched by stories about underachievement because they feel the unhappiness and the blocking of personal growth. The gifted Idealists most often have a very strong intuition of which they definitely need to become well aware. It helps them to remain emotionally clear on the differences between their own and somebody else’s gifted identity and possibly related intricacies.

In conclusion, it is no surprise that all my life, I have identified with the characteristics of the Idealist and still do, although the specific type within that temperament may vary. Again, the knowledge of these very different perspectives, and my typical gifted ability to be aware of these perspectives simultaneously, has helped me to balance and articulate my missionary and coaching efforts. It made it easier to be my Idealist Self on this subject and also respect the efforts and views of others.

However, over the years I have come to wish that more people would consider how the perception or definition of giftedness is influenced by individuals' values and needs. From that perspective, it would be helpful when these values and needs were explicitly mentioned and discussed for their relevance, given a specific situation. It is disheartening and a waste of talent when individuals are—or feel—rejected as 'not-gifted' due to a specific definition of giftedness, while they exhibit personal characteristics that typically relate to giftedness. Their personal effectiveness is increased when they are made aware of these characteristics, as is my experience with introducing them to the concept of extra intelligence (Xi).

Extreme Giftedness and Authenticity

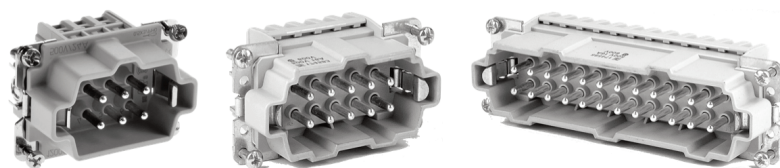
I can still remember the shock when it dawned on me, after six years of knowing that I was gifted and working in that field, that my giftedness was far from average. I had looked up my IQ test score from 2000, and disbelievably asked a friend who is a psychologist. She confirmed that this was rather high and congratulated me.

Eleven years later, I cherish the memories of many intense exchanges on the topic with colleagues, friends, and clients. At the time, the dread of being lonely and weird was often on my mind, and quite often that notion is the first to be brought forward when someone faces the possibility that it may apply to him or her.

I also cherish the discovery of engaging articles and books by writers like Stephanie Tolan that offer information and, very importantly, role models. When you start looking for it, there are more authors and main characters in fiction and movies that fit the description without making it explicit through use of the G-word. For me, stories have often worked as a powerful tool for personal development and healing, more so than formal theories or eloquent discourse.

Similarly, I can state that, in my experience, fully accepting and living this quality greatly enhances your abilities to recognize your peers quite easily. In my article "Coping with Solitude" that was published in *Embracing the Gifted Quest*, an InterGifted compilation of writings (Kuipers, 2016), I compared it metaphorically to the exchange of information between two 24-pin connectors, while people of average intelligence exchange information through 6- or 10-pin connectors (See Figure 1). The more extremely intelligent you

Figure 1. A Variety of Exchange Characteristics



are, the more ‘hungry pins’ appear on your connector. A meeting with someone sporting a similar connector is unmistakable and an intense experience. And after some time, you become aware that there are somehow more people like you than your fears had convinced you of before.

My conclusion: It is much easier and enjoyable *being me* in all my various aspects when I interact with someone who can truly see me, including all my various aspects. And of course it works the other way, too.

How Complex is Extremely Gifted Authenticity?

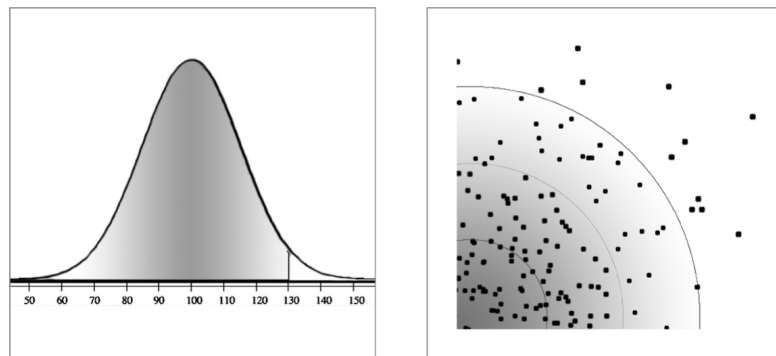
The more I have read about and experienced extreme giftedness, the more I tend to view the topic in a metaphorical sense like having double or triple wiring of your entire nervous system, including all the extra possibilities for connections and interactions between subsystems: Information from actual sensorial experiences interacts with thinking processes and vice versa.

I can understand the societal reflex to relate (extreme) giftedness to very high IQ testing, but I deeply think, and feel, that the “HEPG condition” (Highly, Extremely or Profoundly Gifted) is far more complex than that. I have always liked and recognized Mary-Elaine Jacobsen’s (1999) statement that the gifted are qualitatively, quantitatively, and motivationally different from average: more complex, intense, and driven. One might imagine that these differences increase one level at each extra standard deviation from average.

To support this personal perception, it was quite nice to find some time ago the article by Brock and Fernet Eide (2004): “Brains on Fire: The Multinodality of Gifted Thinkers.” Through functional brain magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) they could see that gifted thinkers are great organizers of diverse information that is processed all over the brain: “It looks like a ‘brain on fire.’ Bright red blazes of high metabolic activity burst out all over the scan” (para. 1). Characteristic for memory retrieval is its “multinodality” whereby all kinds of sensory modalities, verbal or factual impressions, are connected to each other in an uncommonly high number of ways. Although the Eides do not mention extreme giftedness in their article, I consider it very plausible that this “multimodality” increases with the degree of giftedness. However, I also consider it very likely that the individual differences as to which kinds of nodes are involved will increase too, resulting in the well-known large diversity within the (extremely) gifted population.³ Some members will be relatively more sensorially sensitive smart, others more

³ As explained in Stephanie Tolan’s (1999) article “Self-Knowledge, Self-Esteem and the Gifted Adult” in *Advanced Development*, also included in her book *Out of Sync* (2016).

Figure 2. The Same or Quite Different?



abstract cognitive thinking smart, and still others any imaginable combination of various forms of the two.

To further illustrate this diversity, I have added the two graphs that also appeared in my article in *Advanced Development* (Kuipers, 2007). When we define giftedness through the single dimension of IQ score, the customary IQ curve conveys the idea that the gifted are an orderly, compact group at the high end of the spectrum (See Figure 2).

The scattergram next to it gives some idea of the actual diversity, by considering a combination of just two normal distributed parameters representing proficiency in any two different intelligences. The gifted are represented by the dots that lie outside of the concentric arcs. It shows the precious little chance that they will encounter someone with similar gifts. Let alone when they are of the HEPG kind. These dots lie beyond the frame of this scattergram. Another way to look at the HEPG condition is that seemingly complementary qualities stop being “either/or” and become “and, simultaneously” in this group.

Many years ago, Powell and Haden (1984) mentioned that by combining analysis of information with synthesis the extremely gifted move to integration, while devising their own structures to make sense of complex information. People of average intelligence would argue that one can either analyze or synthesize, but not both at the same time. The same applies to being either a specialist or a generalist. But the extremely gifted have a helicopter view, while simultaneously being able to take care of the ants on the ground.

Many of my clients who recognize this helicopter and ants metaphor (“I thought everyone was able to do that! But now I understand why they did not get my perspective.”) also have experienced difficulties answering questionnaires like the MBTI. They recognize both options of some of the questions, often leading to nonsignificant results. By changing the procedure, they end up with two instead of one Type description and recognize themselves strongly in both.

This illustrates that “being me” combines a lot of characteristics simultaneously. Sometimes I feel that it is OK to choose some of

them, but on other occasions I feel that they all just have to be present together to give a proper representation of the complexity of my thoughts or feelings on some issue. To other people this might look like not being authentic: too many faces on one body. To me, it would feel very incomplete to leave one out. Sadly, this is not always understood.

My conclusion is that my awareness and acceptance of these ‘hardware’ differences definitely help me to stick to my own ground, while looking for ways to make my complex perspectives palatable in “fewer dimensions” so that I can relay them more effectively.

When Sensitivity is Extreme Too

The triple wiring metaphor is also helpful to question the physical effects of being extremely intelligent and to consider its impact on “reasoning capabilities.” In Jacobsen’s (1999) book, some of these issues are addressed through her elaboration of “intensity.”

My experiences over the years, both with clients and myself, have made me more aware of the issue of high sensitivities and intuition-like assets that the target group may have. I was quite upset when I discovered (only) last year that there was no denying my highly intuitive sensitivities anymore. It wasn’t that I did not know about it technically and dear and competent friends had characterized me as a “typical case of an HSP” (Highly Sensitive Person) in a casual way long ago.

But last September I was browsing through the questionnaire “Are you an Empath?” in Judith Orloff’s (2017) book, *The Empath’s Survival Guide*, and noticed two things. First, I scored a “yes” on almost all questions. Well. OK, I was already aware that I had strong empathic abilities. Second, I noticed that I felt kind of ashamed about my “yes” to some of the questions. Shouldn’t I be (more) able to block many of these external inputs, or at least some of them? Shouldn’t I be more disciplined, more determined, more focused?

I did not mind being an Empath, but the long list of—for me—quite unstoppable impressions that somehow often derail my intended plans, shifted my perception of myself. Seemingly most other people do *not* have that to such an extent? Isn’t that *much* easier when you make plans? I thought other people were more *resolute* than me, but many were just *less bothered* in their minds by external circumstances.

It was the sudden awareness of the shame that has haunted me so many years that changed my self-perspective and enabled me to look at this typical characteristic in a more compassionate way. It has, again, raised my interest in the sensorial aspects of being extremely intelligent and in the considerable variety in everyone’s balance between handling sensorial input, including feelings of all kinds, and using more logical thinking of the type that society usually associates with the gifted.

At least I know now that “being me” necessarily means dealing with various sensorial inputs that are immediately conveyed to my mind (possibly labeled *urgent*), while I also like coming up with smart solutions to problems quickly, feel an urge to produce various texts on time, and do all kinds of activities to keep me happy and healthy. I feel eager to further investigate the possibilities for balancing all these aspects, as I have already been doing for some time now, both to better counsel my clients and for my own sake.

Happy Ending

Fortunately, I also know that it is typical for the extremely intelligent to want to consider things holistically and to integrate all input in a novel way. So, whether it is part of my vocation or not, there is so much more to yet explore, to experience, to learn, to enjoy, and to share, both about giftedness and about being me!

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Being Gifted, Being Me

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