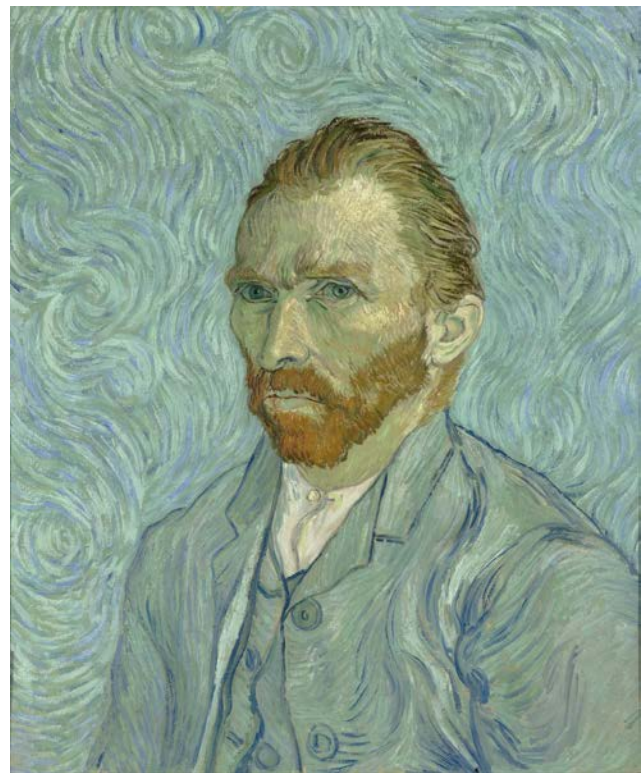


History *of* Research *on* Genius

By Ann McGee-Cooper, Ed.D

In the spring of 1950, I remember seeing my first exhibition of the work of Vincent Van Gogh in the museum in Houston. As I walked out into the spring sunshine amid the blossoms of fruit trees I remember feeling deeply saddened by the realization that during his lifetime only his brother, Theo, recognized that amazing genius of this incredibly gifted artist - that he died never enjoying the support and recognition of the general public and struggled to live yet was totally committed to his art. It was this awareness that struck a chord deep within me. I vowed that I would do my best to recognize genius early and become that appreciative and supportive audience that could encourage emerging genius early, during the lifetime of the artist, architect or in whatever form the genius might be expressed. And so a personal calling took root in me and began to direct the course of my life.

I married a young man who I saw as unrecognized genius and devoted the next seven years to supporting and encouraging his talent. I learned a valued lesson during these painful seven years. My support frightened him as he wasn't ready to express his full genius. He



would write or paint and then destroy his work. I would take dictation, type and retype his seminary papers only to see him destroy them at the eleventh hour. What I learned was that I only had the right to grow and express my genius, and I must respect the freedom of others to make their own choices. He became more

and more destructive, yet through this time I learned so much as I sought counseling to understand my part in this process and finally was able to dissolve the marriage, recognizing that I couldn't make decisions for anyone other than myself. I realized that I had a responsibility to get both my small son and myself out of a dangerous and abusive situation. I learned that I had been co-dependent, enabling the abusive behavior of another through empathy. Yet I was part of the problem in not having the skills to hold him accountable for his behavior. During this time I learned the shadow side of genius.

During the next several years I became a teacher with a special interest in youngsters that others viewed as hopeless or problems. I was fortunate to be mentored by



Wade Thompson, a true servant-leader, who was principal of Everett Lee DeGolyer Elementary School. Mr. Thompson believed firmly that every child belonged in our school family, no matter how severe the disabilities. "If they are warm and breathing, it's our responsibility to create a healthy, supportive learning environment. And all the children will be better from helping to support and encourage the least among us. Every child has a gift to share. Let's find those gifts and honor the best in each child."

Mr. Thompson taught me so much about starting from strengths and building from the best in each child. When it came time for him to retire, I remember him calling me in to help me plan for my future. "Ann, it's time for you to go to

the university level and help teach others the creative ways you reach into the lives of every child to awaken the special gifts they have been given." "But I have so much more I need to learn. I'm not ready to teach teachers."

"Ann, let me put it another way. I'm planning to retire in May and I don't think I can find another principal who will fully appreciate your creative approach to teaching. I think it best for you to find a university that will welcome the unique ways you can reach even those youngsters that all others consider unreachable. You have a gift and a responsibility to teach it to others. Go find a way to recruit more like you into the teaching profession."

With that charge, I spoke with five universities for whom I had supervised student teachers over the past four years and chose Southern Methodist University because they agreed that I could establish a lab school as an innovative way to grow and develop a different kind of person into the teaching profession.

Like Weaving a French Braid, the Strands of Understanding and Growing Genius Come From All Directions and Flow Into an Elegant Pattern, Each Making the Next Stronger.

Through two failed marriages I learned painfully that I couldn't live anyone's genius but my own.

I learned painfully about the Jonah Complex, or running away from one's Calling. I learned about the fears of owning one's genius, the depression that comes from keeping a lid on one's Calling and the unmatched and abundant joy that accompanies the courage to unleash one's personal gifts.

At SMU I founded and directed the Experimental Arts Program, a research initiative

and bold dream which proved repeatedly that every child could become extraordinary! We focused on those youngsters others had given up on, and one-by-one, each lived into their giftedness. Recognized internationally as a unique model of educational excellence, we achieved what no one thought possible with no funding except the creative volunteer efforts of an incredibly gifted faculty of carefully selected teachers and university students. We used the arts as a vehicle to make learning fun and enhanced the philosophy of Montessori with the belief that every child had the innate, creative capacity to express personal genius. Leading educators came from around the world to learn from our work. The Minister of Education from Brazil, seven faculty members from Texas Tech University and ten faculty members from Teachers College, Columbia University all came to observe and learn.

Two years of bold research at Purdue University with postdoctoral scientists and engineers proved that everyone has the potential for creativity.

Back in Dallas I began research with gifted and talented children. I designed curriculum with Dallas ISD and Richardson ISD and helped identify and prepare teachers uniquely suited to teach in Talented and Gifted (TAG) programs. In this process, we learned that there was one important characteristic for a teacher to qualify for the TAG program: that he or she had the courage to claim and live their own giftedness - for society typically punishes those who march to their own drummer. Having the empathy to understand the journey of owning one's genius demands the courage to be on that journey personally.

On the graduate faculty of University of Texas, Dallas, TWU and University of North Texas, I created a unique graduate level course designed to awaken genius in each graduate student (all of

whom were already experienced teachers working to qualify to teach in TAG programs). In 4½ months, through series of exercises and assignments, lives were transformed in astounding ways!

For two years, at Perkins School of Theology, I taught a similar course to connect theology and creativity. The leap of faith in one's spiritual journey was connected to the creative leap in the arts. Again, lives were transformed in remarkable ways.

Then I met Duane Trammell, then a graduate student and exceptional young teacher in DISD's distinguished TAG program. Together we began to do research with youngsters, applying these concepts designed to awaken genius. Then one day we wondered what might happen if we took what we had learned with children of all ages and teachers and brought it to business leaders? (I had pioneered and created a program for gifted adults in the Dallas County Community College District (DCCCD)). Once again, the work was richly validated as repeatedly individual lives made remarkable leaps toward personal genius and calling.

Perspective III was born at TXU, thanks to the support of Bob Gary, then Executive Vice President of Generation. His goal was to wake up the creative right brains of his engineering managers, and for the next two decades we taught and expanded our research on awakening the latent genius of individuals and teams. We worked with leaders and teams internationally with unprecedented results. Business results were consistently remarkable but equally, personal lives, health and well being were enhanced as individuals began to claim the characteristics of what it means to become self-actualized as defined by Dr. Abraham Maslow.

Parallel to this research, in 1976 I was invited by Jack Lowe, Sr., CEO and owner of

TDIndustries, to learn about servant leadership and develop an innovative curriculum teaching servant leadership to Employees at every level of the business. I was introduced to Robert K. Greenleaf and his work in servant leadership. I had the opportunity to be mentored by him for the last decade of his life. Drawing from this experience, I designed servant leadership classes for TD. Many of the participants in these classes were craft workers with only a high school education, yet some had advanced degrees in business, engineering and accounting. I used the theory of Accelerated Learning developed in Bulgaria by Dr. Georgi Lazanov, applying his model of teaching advanced philosophical concepts through fun, creative, experiential learning and all the senses. This program has become uniquely recognized worldwide as one of the most effective in this field.



In 1990, after reading *The Fifth Discipline*, I attended the first Pegasus Conference in Boston and met and studied with Dr. Peter Senge. Later joining the Society of Organizational Learning, another essential strand became woven into our work and learning. Senge and Greenleaf were very supportive of each other's work and would agree that one cannot be a successful servant-leader without understanding and applying the five disciplines (shared vision, team learning, personal mastery, mental models and systems thinking). And one cannot successfully grow a

learning community without living into what it means to become a servant leader.

In 2000, AMCA began a new research initiative called the Servant Leadership Learning Community.

Reflections:

I hadn't fully realized how all these strands have come so elegantly together, each bringing value and new insight to all others, until I claimed some quiet solitude to reflect on the meaning of the journey into genius and my own personal vision, mission and Calling. Then, for several days, synchronicity began to tap on my shoulder and hold up this mirror, helping me to see how everything in my life has contributed to prepare me to do this work. For me this is spiritual work. I view the unique gift given to each of us as a divine gift along with the expectation that we have the courage to live into our uniqueness and through it give back to the world. This takes extraordinary courage because, as I learned in my doctoral program focused on Creative Problem Solving and the Politics of Change, society will do its darnedest to keep each of us conveniently complying with the status quo and not coloring outside the lines. Genius is typically not celebrated until it is safely dead for many years. My quest is to change all this and encourage all those around me to dare to claim and live personal genius and, through our example, encourage others to do the same. When we become our best selves, we enjoy extraordinary energy and the world opens up to support us.

This is my passion. This is what I want my life to be about. And this is the work I am here to do.

Seminars and additional resources are available from Ann McGee-Cooper and Associates, Inc. 214 357-8550 or visit us at AMCA.com