The lemming condition

Moral asynchrony and the isolated self

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This article uses **The Lemming Condition,** a fable written by Alan Arkin, as a metaphor for the isolation of the gifted asynchronous child whose level of moral development is out of sync not only with age peers but with human culture itself. These children ask the big questions early, challenging adults to defend the way the world works; adults for the most part fail to answer the questions or even take them seriously. Struggling to make sense of the world on their own, children may doubt the integrity and intelligence of adults, and ultimately the sanity of their own species. They must then engage in an effort to define self either as part of or as separate from that species, from which they feel isolated and alienated, and yet with which they also have a powerful sense of connection. The psychic conflict at the core of the effort to define themselves may lead to giving up on life, on humanity or on self. The task of adults is to recognize the value of children whose development challenges the "world as it is" and help them make the choice in favor of their own, unique vision, a vision that can lead to spiritual growth for the child and moral evolution for humanity.

> *If we do not change our direction, we are likely to end up where we are headed. —Ancient Chinese Proverb*

In 1976 Alan Arkin, actor and writer, published a children's book entitled *The Lemming Condition.* This funny, chastening and ultimately uplifting fable provides a powerful metaphor for the place of the morally asynchronous gifted child in human culture.

The story begins on the day when all the lemmings are about to "head West," an event known to individual lemmings through myth and story alone because it takes place only once in many generations. The plain where the lemmings live is deserted as anxious and uncertain preparations go on in countless burrows beneath the surface. Bubber, the story's young hero, sent to fetch clover for his family, encounters his friend Crow, who has noticed and is curious about the unaccustomed silence on the plain. "It's our time," Bubber explains (p. 6). To the incredulous crow he then relates the lemming's destiny, the journey they are about to take west to the cliffs above the ocean — and then beyond.

Crow, manifestly not a lemming, is disturbed. "Can you swim?" he asks. "That's a lot of *water* down there. Have you ever *seen* the ocean?" (p. 9).

Thus begins Bubber's very un-lemming-like personal journey. Bubber begins asking the adults of his kind the crow's difficult questions and some of his own. Each adult has a different way of dealing with these questions, from passive disinterest to outraged, furious dismissal. No one can satisfy Bubber's growing doubts. Few even try. As the other lemmings begin to emerge from their burrows like automatons, facing resolutely west toward cliffs and ocean, Bubber finds himself totally alone in his concern.

When the rush toward the cliffs begins, however, he becomes caught up in the mindless excitement. He searches for his family in the hurrying throng and finally falls into step with his father.

> *It was death, and Bubber knew it, but it was mixed with great relief. All decisions were gone. So was concern for the future, so was the fear of conflicting with his own kind. (p. 48)*

As he runs, Bubber loses all traces of thought, becoming one with the sound of millions of pounding feet. But when he sees the ocean, "Something in him stopped as if he had been hit...Something deep in Bubber called out to him, and he was filled with fear" (p. 54). Struggling against the force of the tide of lemmings pushing from behind, he manages to wedge himself into a crevice to keep from being swept into the sea.

The next morning Bubber, dazed and numb, trudges back across the empty plain, the graveyard of his species, and meets a few baby lemmings who have slept through the great event, just emerging from their burrows.

> *"This is the future," thought Bubber. "This is how we've survived. These few will rebuild the whole civilization, and in a few generations the whole business will happen all over again." (pp. 56–7)*

When the babies call to him to come help them, he refuses. He tells them he is no longer a lemming. When they ask him what he is, he says, "I'll let you know when I find out," (p. 58) and goes on walking to the east.

Like Bubber, gifted children begin asking tough questions early. And like the adult lemmings, we find it difficult to answer. "Why is there war?" "How can we eat steak and pizza and ice cream when people all over the world are starving?" "Why do we say it is wrong to kill people and then execute murderers?" "What do terrorists hope to accomplish?" "Why do human beings hate people of other races — countries — religions?" "Why do we kill animals and trees as if they don't matter?"

What they are questioning are the most basic assumptions of human culture, assumptions which, in many different ways, can lead us to disaster, to our own cliffs and then, over into the ocean.

The early and complex cognitive development of highly intelligent children, coupled with intense curiosity, assures that they will take in the deluge of Information about the workings of the world that flows over us daily through the media. (The real life version of Bubber's Crow.) Having taken the Information in, the children process it to the best of their ability, drawing inferences, making connections, questioning logic and sense and projecting possible outcomes. They do this when other children are busy playing, oblivious to the complications, problems, terrors of the larger world, and long before adults expect it or are ready to cope. Often they confront their parents with troubling questions at ten or five or even three years of age. They do it deeply and persistently, with a high level of personal passion. These are not rhetorical questions.

The result of this observation and mental processing is not at first a questioning of *self;* it is a questioning of the outside world, the way things are. Initially they expect to get the answers. They are still children, in spite of their precocious thought

processes, and they believe that adults, so wise and powerful in comparison to children, so manifestly in charge of the world, *must* know what they are doing.

What happens when they take their questions to adults, however, is all too often the same thing that happened to Bubber. The questions (humanity's biggest and most difficult ones) make us deeply uncomfortable, threaten the foundations of the way we live, challenge beliefs or mental habits that may have been adopted specifically to protect us from looking too closely at those questions — or the answers that are being lived out in our culture. Most of us live in a kind of cultural *lemming condition,* only vaguely and occasionally aware of the difference between our knowledge and beliefs and how we actually live our lives. We do our best to keep these things in separate compartments so we won't have to compare them.

Many or most of us have asked the same questions ourselves, first challenging the world to provide the answers, then struggling to supply them ourselves. But, faced with the sense of isolation and the enormous difficulty of changing the world, we may have given up, like Bubber's Uncle Claude who

> *had settled finally into a wistful acceptance of himself and the condition of his people. It hadn't exactly filled him with any peace or joy, but there were other things in life. A feeling of solidarity with his kind, a tenuous belief in the future, and a semblance of order, (pp. 26–27)*

Some of us have become pessimists, fatalists — certain in some deep part of ourselves that the future holds both cliffs and ocean, only hoping that we (and our own children) will not still be here when "the time" comes, will not be part of the generation that plunges over.

Even those who continue the fight may be all too aware of how little real progress has been made. The world goes on being determinedly what it is instead of what it should be. Instinctively we want to protect children from — so early — having to confront the pain and difficulty of it all. We want them to play like the other children, enjoying the freedom and innocence we attribute to childhood.

So, more often than not, we hush the children up, or redirect their attention. Some of us pat them fondly on the head and praise them for being clever (and good) enough to ask the questions. Some rail against the world or weep in sympathy with the children's concerns. Some provide answers that can be seen by the children to be empty platitudes backed by neither serious commitment nor dedicated action. In too many cases the answers we manage to provide fail to satisfy.

Having begun by questioning the way the world works, the children then begin to question the integrity and the intelligence of the adults in charge. The process brings them face to face with deep, disturbing and often terrifying doubts about the sanity of their own kind.

With these doubts come the inevitable questions about themselves. A child may see herself as the only one who takes these crucial questions seriously. So is she crazy or

is everybody else? *Everybody else?* It is difficult for a child to trust her own judgment over the apparent agreement of the adults and other children in her world that things, while far from perfect, are basically okay. The message she gets as a steady drum beat from the culture at large, partly because her questions are so difficult and partly because she is so young, is "Don't worry, be happy — these are the best years of your life."

What is she to do with this message and with the deep conflict in her own psyche?

How is she to deal with the isolation she feels from her own kind?

One choice (Uncle Claude's) is to fall into step, to give up thought and moral vision in favor of the comfort of belonging. It is a choice *for* the lemming condition and against the self. To one degree or another it is the choice many (perhaps most) such children eventually make.

Bubber does not make that choice. Independent and strong, almost in spite of himself, he sets out to discover who or what he really is. And so *The Lemming Condition* ends with a possibly hopeful beginning — Bubber's solitary quest to find and then to be himself.

True human stories do not end so conveniently with the future still in doubt and the consequences of choice uncertain. Jean Casey described her son Shaun's struggles with the world as he saw it on a Donahue Show about Gifted Children and Suicide in the late 1970s:

> *Our son...he was five years old, the teacher said he is like he has the weight of the world on his shoulders. We heard it but we didn't know what it meant and when he was an eighth grader they said—he was writing journals about totalitarianism and about—I thought, wow, children are really ahead of what I was when I was in eighth grade. It wasn't that so much, it was just that at that age already he was concerned with these deep world problems. He wanted the world to be right and true and perfect and it wasn't... (Donahue, transcript #01161, p. 6)*

Shaun's father added:

> *I wasn't prepared to talk about third world nations with a seventh grader, you know...I kept feeling like I was getting put in position of defending the establishment that I didn't agree with anyway. You know, it was — why is it like this? You're an adult, why did you let it be like this?" (p. 16)*

Bill and Jean Casey had no answers for their son. Nor did they confront his questions. Shaun Casey committed suicide at the age of 17.

There are other ways for asynchronous children to cope with the psychic conflict between themselves and their kind, between the way the world is and they way they believe it ought to be. Ted Kaczynski, the alleged "Unabomber," was a brilliant child

who is said to have described himself as "sticking out like a sore thumb in his surroundings as a child" (Morganthau, 1996, p. 32). When he was a graduate student in math he had "high standards and great integrity" (Morganthau, 1996, p. 35), according to teachers, but he worked in isolation. Always a loner, he eventually withdrew into a hermit-like existence. His "Manifesto" was a polemic against technology and its impact on the planet:

> *The positive ideal that we propose is Nature. That is, WILD nature: those aspects of the functioning of the Earth and its living things that are independent of human management and free of human interference and control...*
>
> *With regard to revolutionary strategy, the only points on which we absolutely insist are that the single overriding goal must be the elimination of modern technology.*
>
> *(Duffy, 1996, p. 35)*

His bombs were aimed at people associated with the technology he loathed. Kaczynski was not the sort of serial killer who killed for the thrill of it; his motive was, to his own logical and isolated mind, intensely moral. After his arrest a college classmate begged reporters, "Please don't make him sound like a monster...he really was a gentle person" (Morganthau, 1996, p. 35). Feeling compelled to choose between the earth and the human species which he perceived to be endangering it, Kaczynski chose the earth. Like Bubber he refused or was unable to identify himself with his own kind.

What is most critical for the healthy development of morally asynchronous children is that they find a way to make a choice different from Kaczynksi's, different from Bubber's — to identify themselves with humanity, no matter how different they may feel. It is, in fact, their innate ability to identify and empathize with others that fuels much of their early questioning in the first place.

In Welcome to the Ark (Tolan, 1996), a novel about four highly intelligent children whose extreme differences have landed them in a mental hospital, sixteen year old Miranda records in her journal her early memory of identifying with a child half a world away whose home had been destroyed by bombs. Her mother had assured her (as Americans were told to assure their children during the Gulf War) that the bombs were falling far away and would not endanger *her.* That night Miranda had her first encounter with what became a recurrent nightmare of being chased and cornered by a purple lion. Her fear, she realizes, came not solely from the teeth and claws of the lion, but from having to face the beast alone.

> *That's what Mother wanted me to be, what everyone wanted me to be. Separate. An 'I' whose house wasn't bombed when another child's was, who didn't need to cry when someone else felt pain. And eventually didn't need to cry at all. I was a good little girl, a smart little girl. Smart, smart, smart. The smartest little girl in all the world. I did what they wanted me to do. And met the purple lion in the night. (Tolan, 1996, p. 104)*

The adults in Miranda's world, entranced by her astonishing mind, focused their attention on that mind, pushing the child to shut down the difficult and painful parts of herself that went along with it — her feelings, her empathy, her deep awareness that all was not right with the world. They taught her that she could be a singular self within the cultural context of her kind by using the capacities of her extraordinary mind to excel, achieve, reach the top in the culture's ground-of-being — competition for status, wealth and achievement. Miranda escaped the pain of her sensitivity, her innate sense of connection to humanity, by doing as she was told, taking refuge in her unusual (and isolated) mind until that survival strategy lost its power to protect her from the psychic conflict at its core.

Peace Pilgrim, a woman who "exemplifies the highest level of [moral] development" (Piechowski, 1992, p. 181), believed that each of us faces many "growing up" tasks; physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Her estimation was that while we grow up physically, many people fail to complete the tasks of mental and emotional growing up; most fail even to *begin* the task of growing up spiritually. As Peace Pilgrim saw it, each of us has two selves,

> *two natures or two wills with contrary viewpoints. Your lower self sees things from the viewpoint of your physical well-being only—your higher self considers your psychological or spiritual well-being. Your lower self sees you as the center of the universe—your higher self sees you as a cell in the body of humanity. (Pilgrim, 1982, p. 8)*

The task of growing up spiritually is to transcend the lower self and operate out of the higher will, to move beyond a life centered on self to a life centered on the good of the whole.

As Peace Pilgrim describes it, the task is seldom easy; it involves a lengthy and intense struggle, exacerbated by the fact that most of the culture weighs in on the side of the lower self. But it is the higher self that knows its purpose in the world, its "divine mission," which is different for each of us and depends on our own unique gifts and attributes. Each cell in the body has a purpose; to be healthy the body needs its cells to recognize and fulfill those purposes.

Mentally, emotionally and spiritually, asynchronous children develop on a different trajectory and at greater speed than other children. It has often been noted that they reach levels of moral development in childhood that are higher than those reached by many adults. But they are still children, facing learning and growth tasks just as all children do. One of the tasks is to discover their purpose in the world, the "divine mission" that requires for its fulfillment not only their particular abilities, but also an understanding and acceptance of the higher self. Whether and how they accomplish their growth tasks depends at least in part on the support the adults in their world provide.

Failing to meet the intellectual needs of gifted children stunts their mental growth and keeps them from living up to their cognitive potential. This is well known in the

field of gifted education and is at least acknowledged by many in the larger culture. The recent publication of *Emotional Intelligence,* by Daniel Goleman (1995), has alerted many people to the fact that children have critical emotional learning needs as well. The principles of this book are beginning to be adopted by some of those charged with raising and educating gifted, asynchronous children. But there is as yet little understanding of the moral and spiritual needs of this population, where development is equally outside of norms and equally vulnerable to stunting or distortion.

A hopeful sequel to *The Lemming Condition* might show Bubber discovering in his eastward march other lemmings who, like himself, questioned the rush to the ocean and refused to participate. These few, able together to accept their identity as lemmings (however unusual) and realizing their mission for "the good of the whole" would devote themselves to making change, living in a new way, raising children who would question the old stories. Through succeeding generations of lemmings there would now be alternative voices (more and more of them) arguing against the myth of the destined plunge over the cliffs into the ocean. Each time the species headed West fewer and fewer lemmings would participate until, at last, a new civilization of lemmings would take the place of the old and mass suicide would be a thing of the past.

Peace Pilgrim spoke of the need to prepare for one's service to the good of the whole by adopting what she called a *right attitude.*

> *This means, stop being an escapist! Stop being a surface liver who stays right in the froth of the surface. There are millions of these people, and they never find anything really worthwhile. Be willing to face life squarely and get down beneath the surface... where the verities and realities are to be found. (Pilgrim, 1982, p. 9)*

Morally asynchronous children, asking their difficult questions so early, need adults who are willing to get beneath the surface, willing to take their own steps toward their higher selves and their unique mission in life. Most of all, they need adults able to take their questions seriously and show them that they are not alone, that there are others who have asked and continue to ask the questions, others who repudiate the assumptions that drive us toward the cliffs. They need people who are making a personal commitment to psychological and spiritual growing up. And they need to encounter the true stories of people who, like Peace Pilgrim, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, have found ways — large or small — to *succeed* in growing up, in living with integrity, defying the lemming condition and molding their behavior to their deepest beliefs.

Just as an individual faces growth tasks, so does humanity as a whole. We are a young species, having inhabited the earth for less than an eyeblink of geological time. Some, looking at the condition of the world we have made, would say we are not much more than toddlers, sitting in our own waste, grabbing at what we want, hitting each other over the head with our toys. The central goal seems to be getting, winning, proving ourselves "best." Competition, not cooperation is the operant philosophy.

But it is not the only philosophy. As a species we are clearly engaged in the struggle between lower and higher self, between feeling ourselves the center of the universe, and understanding that we are only one aspect of the web of life. The number of individuals who represent humanity's higher self is still small, but the very intensity of many of the conflicts evident in our world indicates that it is growing.

Morally asynchronous children, in their early questioning of our basic cultural assumptions, provide humanity both an opportunity for growth and a push toward it. Their early sensitivity and empathy can reawaken our own, can stretch and challenge us if we are willing to face their questions head-on, and engage in the internal personal struggle that results.

Annemarie Roeper has urged educators of the gifted around the world to meet the challenge:

> *We can participate in educating individuals who have the intellectual and ethical capacity to understand and unravel the problems of the world. We can also participate in educating people who have the capability of destroying it because their intellectual capacity is not supported by ethical development. If we recognize and accept that responsibility, it will bring us into certain conflicts and it will demand courage from us. (Roeper, 1991, p. 19.)*

Courage indeed. We, their parents and educators, need to challenge the lemming condition in ourselves, our own wish to fit in and be comfortable, to avoid standing up and standing out. We need to challenge our own temptation to build our lives to benefit only ourselves, only our immediate families and "tribal" groups, thereby going along with the self-centered nature of a culture whose materialism and competition are taking humanity relentlessly toward the cliffs.

We do not have to single handedly change the world; we have only to begin changing ourselves. We can dedicate our gifts and abilities not just to our own well-being, but to the good of the whole; we can make a genuine effort to align our behaviors with our beliefs. We have only to fully engage in our own growth process and honestly share that process (its pains and its joys, successes and failures) with the children. Each of us can be another "different" lemming with whom our young Bubbers can identify.

We can best help asynchronous children trust and believe in themselves by showing them that we believe in the importance of *all* their unique gifts, not just the ones the culture recognizes and values, the ones that will help them "get ahead." We can challenge them not to deny their deepest selves, but to search for their ultimate purpose in the world, the contribution they and only they can make to the good of the whole. We can value and recognize their hearts as well as their heads and help them find a balance. Our purpose must not be merely the creation of better, faster lemmings!

Peace Pilgrim believed that the key to world peace lies inside each individual — our own ability to find *inner peace.* Evolution of the individual spirit drives the evolution of mankind.

As we move toward becoming our own highest selves, we provide both a model and a support for the children. Understanding they are not alone may give them the courage to head east against the tide of their culture. The earlier they begin their spiritual journey, the farther they are likely to go, and the more humanity itself is likely to change in the process. It is not only a Shaun Casey here and a Ted Kaczynski there who stand to benefit from our willingness to confront the questioning of our morally asynchronous children. It is all of us.

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