CHAPTER TEN

JOHN CURTIS GOWAN (1912-1986): PIONEER IN GIFTED AND CREATIVE EDUCATION

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John Curtis Gowan was a pioneer in gifted and creative education. His developmental stage theory provided the principles to guide the development of gifted youth. His work in gifted and creative education led to investigating the psychic phenomena of human creativity as it relates to extraordinary development and mystical states of consciousness.

John Gowan began his professional educational career at the age of 17 when he entered Harvard University. He earned an undergraduate degree followed by a master's degree in mathematics. His first job was as a counselor and mathematics teacher. John earned a doctorate at UCLA and became a founding member of the educational psychology program at California State University at Northridge.

He became interested in gifted children after the Russians launched Sputnik and formed the National Association for Gifted Children. Dr. Gowan served as editor of the Gifted Child Quarterly which offered, and continues to offer, new information and creative insights about giftedness and talent development in schools, at home and in the wider society. (www.nagc.org)

While at UC Northridge, he developed a program to train campus counselors on approaches and strategies for working with gifted students. Gowan felt much could be done to identify and develop the talent in this country. His intent was to develop each student's potentiality to its fullest potential. Gowan was one of the first to publish on the subject of counseling the gifted

In his monograph, The Academically Talented Student and Guidance (1971), he and Catherine Bruch provide a two-fold message: 1) gifted and talented students include not only those with high generalized abilities but also those with a variety of specific abilities and 2) gifted and talented students experience many problems and *need* adequate guidance (p. ix). At the time, both of these concepts were relatively new to many educators and guidance personnel because the prevalent view was that able students could readily resolve their own problems and that acceleration was the only aspect to be considered in guidance.

Gowan and Bruch (1971) argued that the more able students often have specific problems related to their giftedness and abilities. Accelerated academic growth may not be mirrored in social and emotional development. They proposed that guidance counselors had a unique role in helping gifted

and talented youth bridge the gaps in development and in fostering environments for growth.

> "Guidance personnel can play a major role in fostering the optimal development of talented and gifted children, youth and adults. Counselors need to understand such bright persons in more than simple terms based upon generalizations about the gifted as a group. Gifted persons display a great variability in cognitive and personality characteristics. They present highly individualistic problems to guidance staff, problems sometimes related to their own unique qualities." (Gowan & Bruch, 1971, p. 1)

> "…there is no given style for the gifted's pursuit of achievement and self-actualization. Their complexity and sensitivity compound the guidance problems." (Gowan & Bruch,1971, p. 2)

Gowan believed that an effective program for the gifted needed some approach to the improvement of parents' understanding of giftedness in general and in their own children in particular. Parents need to understand that they have a special stake in their child's future by providing enrichment and not solely depending on the school. Not only do parents need to plan for their childrens' educational futures but also deal with their psychological and emotional growth.

Parents can help their children learn more creative behavior by exemplifying creative problem-solving strategies with the family (Torrance, 1969). Gowan (1971) suggested that parents can help their children become more creative by a) providing a fostering attitude, b) facilitating the child's own mental health, c) facilitating the creative child's social relationships and d) facilitating the child's own cognitive development from simple to complex.

Gowan advocated for counseling guidance as necessary for the continued development of gifted and talented students (1960). The concept of differentiated guidance for the gifted, in order to make them creative, was a very new idea.

> Proper guidance for the gifted and talented is not a luxury by a necessity of American cultural life. The organization of adequate programs of guidance for the academically talented awaits only the demand of the districts and the efforts of educational personnel. It is time for us all to come to a realistic appraisal for the importance of guidance programs for all youth in the procedures of general education and in the specific problems of the gifted and talented. In no other way shall we meet the problem of achievement and productivity which appears to be in the process of becoming the central educational issue of the mid-twentieth century. (Gowan, 1981, p. 223)

Besides being a long-time researcher and author in the fields of guidance and measurement, he also became interested in creativity and development. This led to the first of a trilogy of books. The first was The Development of the Creative Individual (1972) where he joined Erikson's affective stages with Piagetian cognitive stages into his Periodic Developmental Stage Theory which identified creativity as a cognitive development stage beyond formal operations.

Gowan used developmental stage theory to provide a framework for helping gifted children become creative (Gowan, 1981b). He saw giftedness as potentiality. A gifted child was defined as one who has the potential for verbal creativity. A talented child was defined as one who had the potential for non-verbal creativity. In both cases, it is the actualization of the potentiality, not the potentiality itself, that is important.

His developmental stage theory contained three paramount stages for educators of the gifted:

1. Stage 3 (ages 4-6) – creative fantasy or magic nightmare
2. Stage 4 (ages 7-11) – teaching to avoid the creativity drop
3. Stage 5 (ages teens) – establishing verbal creativity at adolescence

> Developmental stages are characterized by escalation which means to raise the level of action by discrete jumps. The objective of escalation is creativity, which is emergent in the personal unfoldment of the individual as part of the developmental process. This unfoldment is as natural as the budding and blossoming of a rose, if proper conditions of sunshine, soil and moisture are present. (Gowan, 1981b, p. 77)

Gowan believed that the preservation and stimulation of creativity were paramount issues for teachers of gifted students. Failure to do so would create both a source of anxiety and a waste of talent. A key concept was the elicitation of right hemisphere imagery, either through the direct method of stilling the left hemisphere functions or through the direct method of stimulation of the right hemisphere while the left is operant.(Gowan, 1981b).

> Right hemisphere imagery is the vehicle through which incubation produces creativity. Incubation is any technique of relaxation of the conscious cognition (left-hemisphere function) which allows subliminal processes (right-hemisphere functions) to operate. (Gowan, 1981b, p. 81)

Incubation allows for creative insights to emerge. Whereas most functions of the left hemisphere are concerned with convergent production, functions of the right hemisphere are principally concerned with divergent production. These functions involve imagery through which incubation produces creativity (Gowan, 1981b)

It appears that right hemisphere imagery goes on all of the time and that it is merely necessary to pay attention to it. Learning how to do this is a

new educational challenge, if we are to educate both halves of the brain and hence stimulate creativity in young people. (Gowan, 1981b, p. 82).

> Growth creates differences within the individual and emphasizes her/his uniqueness from others; these differences are combined into new patterns giving rise to originality; originality is intrinsic in creativity, so creativity is an outcome of development. (Gowan 1974, p. 90).

The second book, The Development of the Psychedelic Individual (1974), identified mind expansion (psychedelia) as the subsequent cognitive stage beyond creativity. This book contains Gowan's most complete assessment of psychedelic experiences and their potential to help the individual grow and break through barriers. Gowan dubbed it a "book for the 21st century," a rigorous examination that embraces both science and mysticism.

It outlines the emergent traits and experiences possible in the course of extraordinary human development, particularly for gifted children and gifted adults. It traces developmental stages of integrative growth in the relationship between the individual ego and the collective preconscious, which underlies creativity and psychedelic or mind-expansion functions.

The work was based in the idea that the preconscious is involved in a developmental process which starts with anxiety and ranges to creativity through well-known stations on the continuum of mental health.

Creative performance is the synthesis of several different systems:

a. different abilities and their stimulation (as in Guilford's structure of the intellect model)
b. mental and physical health
c. nurturing tendencies in parents and other in the environment
d. lifestyles

These aspects can occur at any time in a human's lifetime. Tendencies toward creative performance, especially those influenced by education, can and do occur at all stages of development.

Creativity occurs early in the development of the mentally healthy individual and promised the continuation of such mental health. Creative performance tends to influence development in the direction of mental health.

Adverse conditions or circumstances may deny the early promise or the playful creativity of the child may not have been bolstered with the cognitive tasks necessary to produce the more formal and finished productions of adult creativity. Childish creativity requires only playfulness; adult creativity requires discipline. Hence almost all children are creative, but few adults are.

Creativity enhances mental health in the adult, but in adults, as in children, creative insights often come before the power to nurture the idea and follow through with it is gained. Most of us have creative ideas on occasion, but most of us continually abort the creative ideas and never bring them to fruition. (Gowan, 1974)

Creativity is not a rare experience accessible only to genius. It is a characteristic not only of individual human behavior, but also of the species in general. It is a natural and indeed an inevitable outcome of an intelligent

mind when functioning in conditions of desirable mental health. Creativity is an early dividend of progress toward mental health and self-actualization. It seems increasingly certain that healing and creativity are different pieces of a single picture. (Gowan, 1974)

> Creativity in the mental domain involves the emergence of a new and valid synthesis of ideas, not by deduction, but springing by "intuition" from unconscious sources. Gowan, 1974 , p.308).

The third volume, *Trance, Art & Creativity* (1975), describes three modes of contact between the conscious ego and the collective preconscious. The book is concerned with a taxonomy of the cognitive representation of numinous experiences arranged in a hierarchy.

The numinous element was described by Jung (1928) as the collective unconsciousness. There appear to be three modes of contact between the individual ego and the numinous element. They are (Gowan, 1975):

a) Trance - prototaxic experience characterized by loss of ego. It is a disengagement from ordinary reality; suspension of the ordinary criteria of common consensus; it consists of primitive consciousness.
b) Art - parataxic experience characterized by the production of images whose meaning is not clear or categorical. It represents the numinous element transformed into archetypes, dreams myths, rituals with art as the final product; it represents the numinous element transformed.
c) Creativity - syntaxic experience where meaning is more or less fully cognized symbolically with the ego present. This numinous experience is received cognitively with full consciousness.

> The process of development in our individual lives and the process of evolutionary development of our species is simply an “immense journey” from the prototaxic through the parataxic and eventually to the syntaxic mode of representation of the numinous element or the movement from trance, through art to creativity. (Gowan, 1975, p. 22)

The syntaxic mode embraces three levels. The first was the creative which was identified as the sixth developmental stage. This level generally involves the ordinary state of consciousness. The essential feature of the syntaxic mode is the attempt to grasp the numinous element with the mind rather than with the body.

The next level was the psychedelic, identified as the seventh developmental stage. This level involves the transient altered state of consciousness known as an ecstasy in which there is loss of time, space and self.

The third level was the highest level called the intuitive, the eighth developmental stage. Words fail to be of much use in describing this high level. Individuals who dwell here are in a permanent altered state of consciousness with attendant psychic powers. (Gowan, 1975).

Gowan's third volume, Trance, Art & Creativity (1975), investigates the psychic phenomena of human creativity as it relates to extraordinary development and mystical states of consciousness. According to Gowan (1975:

> The numinous element appears in the process of becoming, in the process of manifesting, in the process of building toward what is to us a future event of perfection. All that precedes that dawn is prologue, including the dream world in which we live, for this can be conceptualized as no more than the numinous element trying out different facets of its power and energy through the medium of our individualized lives, much as a concert artist tries out themes before a symphony concert. But that rehearsal is a necessary part of the evolution, for when housed in us, it is able, if but in the blink of a man's lifetime, to blend its awesome power with the personal element which it alone lacks… (p. 388)

This chapter merely serves as a introduction to the work of John Curtis Gowan. Dr. Gowan was an intellectual who was very thorough in his research and writings of the higher levels of thinking and creativity. His writings were exhaustive of the current literature on the creative mind and its expansion.

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