

‘Gifted and talented’

Moira Laidlaw 8th Jan 07

I start from the premise that every human being is gifted and talented. That is not a wishy-washy liberal wishful-thinking, but my increasingly-honed awareness and observation of the nature of being human. My brother is a case in point. Unable to talk until the age of five (labels like autistic, psychotic, morbidly withdrawn were ricocheted around like a spray gun, sticking onto every interaction in his vulnerable little life), my brother lived in a different reality. He was a genius. So far off the scale of gifted and talented that the words became meaningless. He occupied a reality in which music lived, as corporeally as the objects psychologists presented him with to measure his intelligence. How do I know? Well, that’s where my gifts and talents came in.

Alastair is eleven years younger than me. An unwanted third child, and a boy to boot – my father wanted girls who could wait on him, and my mother didn’t want another child at all: she was in her forties and life taxed her – my brother did actually begin to speak at the age of five months. He almost immediately gave it up, though (as a way of communicating that didn’t communicate what he wanted as far as I could see). Retreated (emerged?) into another land in which the language was music, the landscape was audible, and his journey somewhere ineffable and yet substantive and fulfilling to him. Yes, of course, there was something awry about him. He wasn’t happy. This registered itself in what appeared to be autistic routines, rocking backwards and forwards listening to music for hours, tantrums of terrifying proportions if his routines were disturbed. He built a fortress of music around him, drew up the ramparts, and lived inside, safe, untouchable and untouched.

I wanted to touch him. At the age of thirteen and fourteen, I would come home from school and straight up to his room, where he’d be listening to Bach and Mozart, Richard Strauss sometimes. Don Juan, the tone-poem, was his favourite. He’d listen to it over and over again, working a record-player that no one had ever shown him how to use, sitting on the floor, vulnerable, alone, abandoned it seemed, rocking his little life away. I would stand in the doorway of his bedroom, his prison cell, and watch him. I could feel his abilities oozing through the silence. Everyone would talk about him as a misfit, as a weirdo. Best thing for him would be to go into a home where specialists could give him the proper care and attention, they would say. My mother started to say it. My father was ashamed of his ‘retarded’ son and didn’t want the neighbours to know how he spent his days. When people came to visit, Alastair was just ‘upstairs’. He’d be down later. Of course he never arrived.

People tinkered with my brother all the time. This test here. That test there. No one, it seemed to me in my adolescent certainty, spent any time trying to join him, trying to reach him. A battery of tests and the best doctors doesn’t equal cure. Love equals cure. And what was ‘the cure’ anyway? Everyone was assuming that he was dysfunctional and that word described the whole of who he was. I knew, from such an early age, that this wasn’t fair. This wasn’t fully human. Alastair was far more than the sum of his

apparently dysfunctional parts. He had this phenomenal gift. I saw and heard evidence of it everyday. He would listen to a Mozart symphony, for example, say the fortieth, that bastion of hope against life's despair, and then sing it through, all twenty minutes of it, note by note in perfect timing and pitch. I once played him a Schubert symphony and after this first hearing, he sang it through afterwards, note for note. I'd never heard anything like it. He would sit under the keyboard of my piano as I picked out complex Bach fugues, and would sing the dominant voice, emphasizing how it ought to sound. My brother was a genius.

So, and here's where my own insights come in. I started a regimen of love with him. It was purposive. It wasn't a gushing of feeling that I had to expiate. Rather it was a mature insight into the nature and purpose of love itself. I channeled my love into reaching my brother in ways which didn't violate his super-sensitive sense of space and boundaries. I sat with him hour after hour after hour listening to his music with him, not trying to get him to be outward about it, not trying to get him to do anything. I just wanted to become part of his world so that he could show me what it was like. Alastair's world was truly beautiful, graced by serenity and multi-dimensional realities. He eschewed physical contact, but gradually, through the months and two years of this 'programme' he began to allow me to sit with my arm around him, and would occasionally stop rocking during this contact. I would sometimes chat to him now, not expecting answers, not expecting anything, just showing him that I loved him unconditionally. His fortress was beginning to crumble, but I was acutely aware (and again I see this awareness as my gift and talent) that with the dissolution of his fortress, erected from his life's blood and sense of reality, he would have to have something else to replace it with otherwise he would knock down the walls to be with me, and might face a new reality that would destroy him. I didn't know how I knew this, I just knew it. It made every action I performed with him seem acute to me. I was trying to build a bridge. This bridge, however, had to be one he was also building. This mutual effort would result in something durable, that would withstand him climbing out of his exile. I therefore mustn't help him to reject everything from his world, but help him to bring those things with him. His musical talent, his gentleness, his innocence, his brilliant, enquiring mind, indeed his personhood - all those were strengths he would need in the world of others too. So I set about making his world *our* world. For several months I set up possibilities for him to listen to music in my bedroom not just in his. I had my piano moved from the downstairs study up to my room on the first floor. I had stacks of story-books in both rooms.

What struck me at the time was how certain I was, even at the ages of thirteen to fifteen of the rightness of what I was doing. I KNEW I was right. This wasn't arrogance, but a different kind of knowledge from the ones being used around me all the time. It was a knowledge borne of love, out of love, for the sake of love. I don't mean I always felt this love as an emotion. Sometimes, like any teenager, I was selfish and wanted my own way and got impatient. I failed my own insights. However, generally, this period of my life was to ground my future almost entirely. After such an experience, I could never again wholly commit myself to other people's knowledge or scientific rigour not precipitated by personal experience, and mediated through love. I felt I was right passionately. I experienced the nuances of changes in Alastair's behaviour on a daily basis. One day, for

example, after listening together to Vivaldi's Four Seasons, I clapped at the end. He joined in. It was a moment of pure revelation to me. And I caught him, surreptitiously, looking at me out of the corner of his eye. I purposely didn't grab the occasion, for fear of frightening him off in his foray into unknown territory, but smiled gently and turned away with a beating heart. The next day, he looked at me for a couple of seconds and then *he* turned away smiling.

The greatest breakthrough came one evening when I was reading him our accustomed bed-time story. He was five years and one month old. I was telling him a fairy-story and my custom was to tell the story and ask questions, which I would answer myself or just leave. Anyway, I asked him, 'Who's married to the king?'

'Queen!' he exclaimed, as if he'd been talking forever.

'Who?'

'The Queen!' he tried again, gently. He was looking at me now, his eyes wide and trusting and enquiring. He'd finished making his side of the bridge at last and had joined it onto mine. There was no flaw in the joining. We were brother and sister in the same reality. I could *feel* it. He was home.

When we talk about that time, Alastair tells me that my presence was felt as hope and happiness in his lonely world. He doesn't remember much about the earlier months, but he remembers the later ones and the awakening during the story-time. He remembers my presence more than anything that happens. This only confirms my sense that the process and the outcome of his development were mitigated through love.

This story has the power of myth to me. It exists both as a true story and as a source of personal epistemology and ontology. I am because he is. He is because I am. This reality has infused itself into everything I have ever done in the name of education and in the service of humanity. The lessons I learnt, the processes I underwent with Alastair were the blueprint, the real thing, not the shadows of Plato's cave.

If I am talented and/or gifted, the quality, which is a kind of empathy I suppose, first came alive through its encouragement of my brother's emergence into the world, and my own emergence into my own humanity. It is this humanity I try to bring with me and through me into education. It underlies my passion for fairness, for empowerment, for people to speak for themselves about those things, which concern them. It explains my deep sense of discomfort when I see people shackled to their own sense of disempowerment, and when I see the people who would shackle them.

Today, my brother is happily married, with a full-time job, living on the east coast of England. He is 41 years old.