Looking Through the Glasses: J. D. Salinger’s Wise Children and Gifted Education

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Abstract

Gifted children are often Big Picture thinkers (Schultz & Delisle, 1997). Even as young children, they may ask profound questions and view life from the perspective of The Most Important Things: meaning, goodness, truth, spirituality, death, and the like. J. D. Salinger’s stories about the gifted and precocious Glass children offer a vivid, provocative, and very useful description of a spiritual Big Picture perspective on life. This essay describes the Glasses’ spiritual development and draws out implications of their thinking and dilemmas for a critique of gifted education. It suggests that gifted education can adequately address the spiritual life of gifted students and other “Big Picture” perspectives only by becoming concerned with educating gifted children for life.

She went on at beautiful length about how she used to fly all around the apartment when she was four and no one was at home.

—Boo Boo Glass describing her sister Franny

Like many adolescents of the post-World War II generations, I read J. D. Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye in high school. I still read Salinger, motivated, usually, by the most unprofessional of desires: for pleasure and, occasionally, for inspiration. For some time I had wondered why I had never encountered mention of Salinger by anyone in gifted education. His Seymour and Buddy and Franny and Zooey Glass are among the best-known gifted kids in 20th century Western literature.1 Surely, I thought, someone in the field had been inspired by these charming, upsetting, and sometimes really annoying wunderkinds to write about them. The Glass stories might have served as literary looking glasses, fictional foci, offering occasions for the field to reflect upon itself. A literature search confirmed my impression. The Glasses are not discussed in the gifted education literature. Not even R. D. Feldman (1982) mentions them, and she tells the stories of the “Quiz Kids,” contestants on a radio show very similar to the fictional “It’s a Wise Child” in the Glass stories.

Half a century after the first Glass story was published, the looking glass metaphor is still, transparently, an illuminating idea. The Glasses are in many ways typical precocious gifted persons: sensitive, excitable, cynical, highly developed in their moral thought, possessed of an odd sense of humor, readers, thinkers, appalled at the awfulness of the world, and so on (cf. Gross, 1993; Piirto, 1994; Silverman 1994). Most of the constructions

Putting the Research to Use

The Glass children are the ultimate perfectionists. Nothing less than perfect enlightenment satisfies them. Though we cannot easily develop forms of education that would serve their uncompromising values, their philosophy and their “example” can inform current practices by helping us expand our awareness of the inner lives of gifted students and by challenging our beliefs about school. Following are key useful points extracted from the “lives” of the Glasses.

1. When we worry about gifted students not living up to their potential in school, we should remember that they may be developing more important potentials. Much of the lives of gifted students, often the deepest parts, may be untouched by school.

2. Skills, facts, and techniques matter most when students can relate them to who they are and who they are trying to become.

3. Even young gifted children may have spiritual lives.

4. Developing a spiritual life is risky and unconventional. It can cause suffering and isolation.

5. Self-development should drive talent development, not the reverse.

6. The goal of education is wisdom, not employment.
of gifted persons in the field are products of teachers, psychologists, and researchers who, more or less, read the same texts, take the same sorts of gifted education classes in graduate school, and have the same sorts of concerns. By examining the lives and ideas of gifted persons who are creators of a professional writer, in this case one possessed of exceptional talent and a peculiar religious sensibility, we can see more clearly attitudes, values, and prejudices, even, in the field of gifted education. Indeed, any writer who has one of his characters, a 10-year-old boy who remembers his past lives and calmly predicts his death, say of young children, “I’d get them to empty out everything their parents and everybody ever told them,” should be consulted periodically by everyone in education as a source of extracurricular loans and disquieting ideas.

The appeal of the Glass stories for adolescent seekers and wandering adults both is the Glasses’ “religious life” (Zooey, p. 115). We read the stories because we are fascinated by the tale of Seymour’s fatal failure to follow his own spiritual guidance and by Franny’s and Zooey’s ecstatic success in overcoming alienation and achieving illumination. The Glasses, like many gifted children, are Big Picture thinkers (Schultz & Delisle, 1997), and, as such, they place education, indeed all of life, in the context of The Most Important Things in Life. The most important things to them are spiritual in nature, and their ideas and experiences provide material for a spiritual critique of schooling. This critique receives support from and supports developments in gifted education and gifted studies that are currently at the periphery of the field. The most notable of these developments are the efforts of Roeper to bring the Self into education and of others to explore the spiritual life of gifted persons (Clark, 1992; Feldman, 1986; Lovecky, 1998; Morelock, 1995; Piechowski, 1991, 1992, 1997, 1998, 2000; Roeper, 1990, 1995; Roeper & Lind, 1998). Though the Glasses have the benefits and opportunities (and curses) of childhood celebrity, the rich cultural inheritance of Irish-Jewish parents who “had a remarkably good song-and-dance-and-patter act in vaudeville and music halls” (Seymour, p. 145), and the guiding hand of a cranky, recluse creative writer, their religious quest and spiritual experiences are very real (cf. Coles, 1990; Hoffman, 1992; Robinson, 1978, 1983). Seymour, Buddy, Zooey, and Franny are all “spiritually gifted” (Piechowski, 2000).

This essay traces, in classic dramatic form, the spiritual development of the Glasses, pausing at points to peer at gifted education through the lens of their ideas and dilemmas.

**The Glasses**

Salinger published the first Glass story in 1948, the last in 1965. Buddy Glass, Salinger’s self-described alter ego, “wrote” all of the Glass stories and *Catcher in the Rye* and “Teddy” (Alsen, 1983). The seven Glass children, issues of Bessie and Les, were born between 1917 and 1935: Seymour, 1917; Buddy, 1919; Boo Boo (Beatrice), 1920; the twins Waker and Walter, 1921, Zooey (Zachary), 1930; and Franny (Frances), 1935. All appeared pseudonymously on “It’s a Wise Child,” a radio quiz show/round table guested by precocious and variously charming kids.

The two oldest, Seymour and Buddy, and the two youngest, Franny and Zooey, are the principal *dramatis personae* of the stories. (The other Glasses have but minor roles, mostly off-stage.) Seymour, Buddy, Zooey, and Franny have sterling gifts *bona fides*. Buddy, the bard of the Glass saga, began his writing career at 5, at which age he was proficient in French, Italian, and Spanish. Later, he learned German, Latin, Greek, Japanese, Pali, and Sanskrit. From 1947 until he published his last story in 1965, Buddy taught at a small women’s college in upstate New York where he lived alone in a badly insulated cabin without phone or electricity.

Seymour, an English Ph.D. at 19, “nearly” a full professor at 21, by 7 had read everything he could find in the New York Public Library on God and religion. In a long letter from summer camp, which constitutes most of “Hapworth 16, 1924,” he asks to be sent any books on the subject of God written by authors whose last names begin with “H” or beyond. Buddy classes him as one of the great poets of the century, though we are allowed (for legal reasons, having to do with the wishes of his widow) to see only two poems, one a piece of juvenilia from his eighth year, the other, a Haiku, his last poem.

John Keats
John Keats
John
Please put your scarf on. (Seymour, p. 124)

The little girl on the plane
Who turned her doll’s head around
To look at me. (Zooey, p. 64)

Seymour, a sage and seeker, whose spiritual attainments, according to Buddy, place him somewhere in the vicinity of a “mukta, a ringed enlightened man, a God-knower” (Seymour, p. 106), is also a “sick soul,” saddled with more bad karma than he can handle in his life as a Glass. He realized too late that the spiritual path he had chosen was producing results exactly opposite of those he had intended (Alsen, 1983). In 1948, at age 31, Seymour blew his brains out while...
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his wife Muriel slept in the next bed (“A Perfect Day for Bananafish,” Nine Stories). “The little girl on the plane” Haiku was found on the desk blotter in the resort hotel room where he was staying with Muriel after being released from three years in the psychiatric ward of an Army hospital. Seymour, alive and dead, with Buddy as his aide-de-camp, is the younger Glasses’ mentor and guide in the religious life.

Zooey is an in-demand and well-paid TV actor, a “hunk,” to use the vernacular, and the owner of one ulcer, in full bloom. His vocabulary at age 12, a team of psychologists determined, was “on an exact par with Mary Baker Eddy’s” (Zooey, p. 55). An M.A. in mathematics, he “once got over an unhappy love affair by trying to translate the Mundaka Upanishad into classical Greek” (Zooey, p. 60).

Franny, in the eyes of Seymour and Buddy, who know how to judge these sorts of things, is a wonderful actress. When we meet her in “Franny,” she is in college, has just quit acting, and is having a spiritual crisis cum nervous breakdown born of disgust with nearly everyone she knows, including herself. She resolves her conflict in Zooey. The Glass spiritual journey described herein follows Franny’s progress.

School and Education

Knowledge

Seymour has a Ph.D., Zooey an M.A., Franny is getting her B.A. when we last hear from her, and Buddy has about half a B.A. (rejecting a formal terminus, with “no regrets,” out of snobbery and a reluctance to compete with Seymour). For the Glasses, going to school was like joining the armed forces or riding a subway—just something you did because you lived in a certain time and place. The Glasses had no fondness for school, even though two of them, Buddy and Seymour, were teachers. At best they speak of school with gentle mockery and irony.

Franny is sickened, in the way, perhaps, that only a very beautiful, very smart, very emotional young woman who is studying acting can be, at the superficiality and vanity she sees all around her:

I got the idea in my head—and I could not get it out—that college was just one more dopey, remote place in the world dedicated to piling up treasure on earth. . . . I don’t think it would have all got me quite so down if just once in a while—just once in a while—there was at least some polite little perfunctory implication that knowledge should lead to wisdom, and that if it doesn’t, it’s just a disgusting waste of time. (Zooey, p. 146)

She says of one of her professors, “He has no enthusiasm whatever for his subject. Ego, yes. Enthusiasm, no” (Zooey, p. 128).

In response to a question from Buddy, Seymour said that nothing about teaching gets him down, but one thing did frighten him: “the penciled notes in the margins of books in the college library” (Seymour, p. 168), a reference to the disappointing level of understanding shown by most students. Buddy refers to Seymour as “a teacher . . . poor bastard” (Seymour, p. 118). He mocks almost all of his students, usually gently, humorously, but with honest scorn. In a letter to Zooey, he writes that, of the 38 short stories he has to grade, “thirty-seven will be about a shy, reclusive Pennsylvania Dutch lesbian who Wants to Write, told first-person by a lecherous hired hand. In dialect” (Zooey, p. 58).

The Glasses have nothing good to say about school-like institutions either. In his summer camp letter, Seymour deplores the petty restrictions on freedom, inflexible times for lights out, room inspections, the lack of love with which meals are prepared, the use of children. He says of his fellow campers, “Here as elsewhere on this touching planet, imitation is the watchword and prestige is the highest ambition” (Hapworth, p. 34). Psychologists, psychiatrists, Freudians, the whole hobo-glin of professional helper types, are, with one hypothetical exception (Zooey, p. 109), criticized, rejected, ridiculed, scorned, and feared by Buddy and Zooey Glass. Buddy tells us:

Off and on, during their broadcasting years, all seven of the children had been fair game for the kind of child psychologist or professional educator who takes a special interest in extra-precocious children. In this cause or service, Zooey had been of all the Glasses, hands down, the most voraciously examined, interviewed and joked at. Very notably, with no exceptions that I know of, his experiences in the apparently divergent fields of clinical, social, and newsstand psychology had been costly for him, as though the places where he was examined had been uniformly alive with either highly contagious traumas or just plain old-fashioned germs. (Zooey, pp. 54–55)

Psychotherapists, so far from being white-frocked nightingales of mental hygiene, are a positive source of infection. Their goal of “adjusting people to the joys of television, and Life magazine every Wednesday, and European travel, and the H-Bomb . . . and the responsibilities of the Westport and Oyster Bay Parent–Teacher Association” (Zooey, p. 108) is, to any mildly free-thinking believer in human goodness and perfectibility, patently despicable.

What is it about school and other psyche-shaping institutions that the Glasses don’t like? Well, in short and in toto, as the foregoing loudly hints, just the people: the students, the teachers, the administrators, the counselors, the therapists, the military officers. Teachers have neither love nor wisdom. Students have neither a desire for wisdom nor a love of learning, nor a sense of much beyond money and prestige. No one in school understands what’s really important in life.
Everything in school and camp and the military has to do with mass values, conformity, cruelty, insensitivity, vanity, and ego. Of the camp counselors, writes Seymour, “most of them appeared slated to go through their entire lives, from birth to dusty death, with picayune, stunted attitudes toward everything in the universe and beyond” (Hapworth, p. 34).

The Glasses rail against and suffer from school and other institutions, but they are not reformers or revolutionaries. They do not think, for example, as Hollingworth (1942) did, that one problem with school is that it wastes the time of bright students. The problems of school cannot be remedied with institutional changes or new programs. The Glasses are deeply pessimistic about the prospects of great improvement because they are deeply pessimistic about the prospects of anyone escaping the “stunted attitudes” that society offers them. Zooey names only one decent college teacher; Franny, not even one. Seymour writes, “Close on the heels of kindness, originality is one of the most thrilling things in the world, also the most rare!” (Hapworth, p. 39). Albert (1990, p. 28), in a discussion of his study of identity and career choice in a group of highly gifted boys, expressed a similar sentiment summed in a quote from Lumsden and Wilson (1981): “only with difficulty can individual development be deflected from the narrow channels along which the great majority of human beings travel” (p. 357).

The Glasses’ real life is outside of school. They are gifted kids without gifted programs. Their center of life is not school success or socialization, but, roughly, the existential task of figuring out who they are and how they should live… and living as they should. School is but a small part of their lives. Their real education comes from their own initiative and the initiative of those who love them. They are, at heart, autodidacts and home schoolers. Their most profound and important learning occurs through love—love of what they are doing and learning and the love of those who love them and want to share what they love with them.

The Glasses’ real education puts school learning in what they see as its true light and answers a question that, I heartily suspect, has been nagging at the minds of those familiar with the lists of characteristics of gifted children: Isn’t the Glasses’ criticism of school simply a case of hypertrophied perfectionism and a pathological failure to suffer fools gladly?

**No-Knowledge**

The action in *Zooey* begins with the eponymous character soaking in a bathtub and reading a tattered, much-read letter from Buddy. The evening before, Franny had arrived in tears and settled into the living room couch in the Glasses’ Manhattan apartment. In the letter, Buddy explains why he and Seymour took over Zooey’s and Franny’s education “as early and as haphazardly as we did” (Zooey, p. 64). One reason is that they “were nervous, even frightened, at the statistics on child pedants and academic weisenheimers who grow up into faculty-recreation room savants” (Zooey, p. 65). The second, more important reason is their belief that education should begin with “a quest, as Zen would put it, for no-knowledge” (Zooey, p. 65). Seymour and Buddy taught Franny and Zooey all they knew about the “saints, the arhats, the bodhisattvas, the jivanmuktas—who knew something or everything” (Zooey, p. 66) about the state of being illuminated by the source of all light, of which school knowledge is a dim, dim reflection. What is the source? Dunno exactly. But when you have it, you have got detachment, egollessness, universal love—the usual accomplishments of the average saint, Eastern or Western variety.

A goal of the pursuit of no-knowledge is to unlearn “the illusory differences between boys and girls, animals and stones, day and night, heat and cold” (Zooey, p. 68). Teddy, Buddy’s mouthpiece for Seymour’s ideas, describes one way to do this:

I think I’d first just assemble all the children together and show them how to meditate. I’d try to show them how to find out who they are, not just what their names are and things like that. . . . I guess even before that, I’d get them to empty out everything their parents and everybody ever told them. I mean even if their parents just told them an elephant’s big. I’d make them empty that out. (“Teddy,” *Nine Stories*, p. 195)

This approach would lead students to see everything the way it really is: all one and all God. If students wanted to learn the ordinary, logical, conditioned ways of seeing things, they could do so after they had learned to see things nondualistically.

No-knowledge should not be placed on the legislative agenda for consideration as part of a national curriculum. But, there is a part of it that all those who have any role in education can use: Learning should be premised upon and related to self-knowledge. It’s an old idea. Socrates had something to say about it. More recently, Schultz and Delisle (1997), two educators of the gifted, addressed the topic. Unless school learning is tied to self-knowledge, or at least to the attempt at self-knowledge, it is empty, soulless, a collection of unconnected bits of stuff. Palmer (1998) says simply “without the ‘I’—without inwardness—real education cannot happen” (p. 27).

The search for no-knowledge is the heart of the Glasses’ spiritual life. It takes Franny and Zooey right through the problems the quest itself creates, the problem
“behind” the Glasses’ critique of school, the problem of ordinary people.

The Religious Life

The Central Problem of the Religious Life: The Problem of Ordinary People

The central struggle of the Glasses, the one that killed Seymour, provoked Franny’s crisis, inspired Zooey’s ulcer, and fuels Buddy’s misanthropy, is trying to live in a world without spiritual values, a world of ordinary people. Throughout most of the stories, the Glasses are deeply critical of themselves and others and critical of their own criticality. Franny cannot stand her inveterate, sarcastic “picking” at anything ego-ridden and phony, which is mostly everything, in the mood she’d been in:

I actually reached a point where I said to myself, right out loud like a lunatic. If I hear just one more picky caroling, unconstructive word out of you, Franny Glass, you and I are finished. . . . For about a whole month at least, whenever anybody said anything that sounded campy and phony, or that smelled to high heaven of ego . . . I at least kept quiet about it. (Zooey, pp. 144–45)

Zooey cannot stand his own constant criticism of nearly everyone he meets:

I’m tired as hell of getting up furious in the morning and going to bed furious at night . . . because I sit in judgment on every poor ulcerous bastard I know. . . . That doesn’t bother me so much. But there’s something—Jesus God—there’s something I do to people’s morale . . . that I can’t stand to watch much longer. . . . I make everybody feel that he doesn’t want to do any good work but that he just wants to get work done that will be thought good by everyone he knows. (Zooey, pp. 137–38)

Seymour feared that the “human tongue,” his own and others’, I understand, will be his downfall:

the human tongue could all too easily be the cause of my utter degringolade in this appearance, unless I get a move on. I have been trying like hell since our arrival [at camp] to leave a wide margin for human ill-will, fear, jealousy, and gnawing dislike of the uncommonplace. (Hapworth, p. 42)

Buddy, perhaps because of his role as author of the Glass stories, shows his contempt for others more obliquely. It is apparent, for example, in his sarcastic and withering descriptions of members of the bride’s party with whom he finds himself in a car after Seymour failed to show for his marriage to Muriel. Of a Mrs. Silsibu, suffering in a hot, crowded automobile, Buddy says, compassion leavens his burlesque,

At both her forehead and her upper lip, perspiration had seeped through even her heavy pancake makeup. A black patent-leather handbag was under her left arm. She held it as though it were a favorite doll, and she herself an experimentally rouged and powdered, and very unhappy, runaway child. (Rooftops, p. 51)

They are, all of the Glasses, “freaks,” as Zooey calls himself and Franny, raised or born with odd, high standards for themselves that put them at odds with themselves and nearly everyone else. In the gifted literature, gifted persons are also odd, different, at odds with others. They suffer from feeling different, from having no peers to talk freely with, and from the stupidity of the world. The Glasses’ suffering is more refined. They’ve got it down to the basics: ego, theirs and others’, which is to say, theirs alone. To criticize ego in the way they do, with feeling, shows lack of a certain attainment, a failure to transcend dualism. Trying to provoke Franny out of her self-absorbed breakdown, Zooey says, “In the first place, you’re way off when you start railing at things and people instead of at yourself” (Zooey, p. 139). Later, Franny says, “Just because I’m choosy about what I want—in this case, enlightenment, or peace, instead of money or prestige or fame or any of those things—doesn’t mean I’m not as egotistical and self-seeking as everybody else. If anything, I’m more so!” (Zooey, p. 149).

What in the gifted literature is a psychological/socialization problem is for the Glasses a spiritual problem. Maybe not a problem exactly—more of a task, really, the task of the spiritual life: overcoming/coming to terms with an ego-centered/ego-ridden/grasping view of self and the world so that one can see things aright. Franny’s breakdown, Zooey’s ulcer, Buddy’s sarcasm, and Seymour’s suicide are symptoms of their struggle. Their strivings and sufferings are a stage in their development, a period of spiritual pride, a misunderstanding of themselves, exacerbated by years of being childhood entertainers.

The Religious Life and Suffering

God instructs the heart, not by ideas but by pains and contradictions.

—De Caussade

Sarcasm, preaching, self-revelation, and debate having failed to rouse Franny from her depression, Zooey leaves her sobbing on the living room couch. He walks down the hall, drapes a handkerchief over his head, and enters the room of Buddy and Seymour, left untouched since Seymour’s death. There he plans a strategy to restore Franny’s equilibrium. The strategy, as it turns out, fuels an epiphany for them both. Zooey reads the “God instructs” line from the Catholic mystic De Caussade off of a piece of white board that Seymour and Buddy had tacked to the backside of their bedroom door. Over the roughly 20 years they share the room, the two
brothers had covered the board with hundreds of neat, orthographically flawless lines from Aurelius, Kafka, Tolstoy, Ramakrishna, and other of their beloved writers. The De Caussade line points to a key aspect of spiritual growth shown in the stories: Suffering is necessary to growth and a source of wisdom. Gautama Buddha had this idea. Hindus have it. Christians, too. I would not bring it up at all if suffering were not held in such general ill-regard by the field of gifted education and, well, by pretty much everyone.

In the world of the Glass stories, suffering is inevitable and necessary to spiritual growth. Each of the Glasses passes through (or, in Seymour’s unfortunate case, passes on from) a period of moral suffering—self-disgust, despair, self-criticism, anxiety over failure to realize ideals, observations of the sufferings of others—which they have quite honorably earned through their own efforts, or lack thereof. Seymour writes in his camp letter:

> a vein of instability runs through me like some turbulent river; this cannot be overlooked; I have left this troublesome instability uncorrected in my previous two appearances, to my folly and disgust. . . . It can only be corrected by dogged effort on my part. (Hapworth, p. 42)

In the field of gifted education, suffering is counseled away and prevented, even, through professional intervention, and growth is channeled into the narrow parameters acceptable at school. Even proponents of the most radical and broadest view of human development in the field, Dabrowski’s theory of emotional development (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Piechowski, 1991), which honors a certain sort of inner conflict and certain empathic perceptions of others’ suffering as a necessary phase of growth, are, when they recommend programs and courses of action, as school-bound as everyone else (e.g., Silverman, 1993). The difference between the Glasses and the field of gifted education lies in the respect they pay to moral suffering, which reflects the stakes for which each is playing.

The Glasses seek meaning, overcome despair and disgust with the ordinary world, struggle against vanity and pride, try to love. All of them ask, “How ought I to live?” and “How can I live the way I think I ought to live?” Of course, the field of gifted education recognizes that gifted kids search for meaning (e.g., Gross, 1993; Hollingworth, 1942; Silverman, 1993). It sees the search as one that can be facilitated with a proper understanding of the unique characteristics and psychosocial issues facing gifted kids. The counselor, so armed, can bring the gifted child through the dangerous waters of the search for meaning to the safe shores of positive identity and good self-esteem. For the counselor, as for most in gifted education, giftedness is almost entirely a school phenomenon about which the important questions are “Who should we define as gifted?” “What are the special needs of gifted children?” “What sort of educational and other services should the gifted receive?” and so on. All aspects of life—death, meaning, sexuality, politics, desire, identity, commitment, spirituality, friendship—are filtered through the narrow lens of the possible and acceptable in school.

There is hardly a place for a real religious quest, or a real artistic quest, or a real quest for self in the field of gifted education. These quests are dangerous. They can kill you. Danger, real risk in making one’s own life, real freedom—these the field seeks to extirpate, even advocating counseling in advance of any upsets or misery (Delisle, 1986; Farrell, 1989; Silverman, 1993). The field domesticates giftedness, making it into something that any middle-class family with a concern for perpetuating its way of life could understand and support. Indeed, giftedness pretty much is just this hot-house species of creature—seeds of high academic potential, sensitivity, creativity, and so forth that blossom into flowers that enliven a corporate board room, a middle-class kitchen, or a Broadway stage. Albert (1990) writes, “At best . . . culturally determined selection and training of talent cannot help but be a mixed blessing. . . . Within limits it succeeds, but ironically the perils of this acculturability are almost always proportionate to its efficiency and successes” (p. 28). The results of Robinson’s (1978, 1983) research on the religious experiences of British children (no reason to think things are different in the U.S.) may be summed up by this quote from a highly gifted woman who sounds remarkably like Franny:

> I feel that most of my education was a block and a barrier to real religious experience. It gave little help or guidance in living, and was always wary of delving too deeply into mystery, and of crossing thresholds. I felt that my real self was neglected by the educational system and the teachers, and that they were ignorant of fundamental truths; it was an education lacking in wisdom. (Robinson, 1978, p. 48)

What do we expect? Gifted education reflects society: “Behind gifted child knowledge there is a definite purpose: the preservation of a social order, a class, a race, a community of knowledge” (Margolin, 1994, p. 3). There is hardly a place in the whole of society for real religious quests. They happen, but with intimations, charges even, of lunacy and dereliction of duty: “It’s very hard to meditate and lead a spiritual life in America. People think you’re a freak if you try to” (“Teddy,” Nine Stories, p. 188).
**Resolving the Central Problem of the Religious Life**

Zooey sits in Seymour and Buddy’s room, face in hand, for 20 minutes. He reads a page of Seymour’s diary written on a discarded shirt cardboard. He resumes his former position for about half an hour. His actions are mysterious, portentous. With a thin width of pages left between thumb and forefinger, the reader is confident that something significant will happen. Zooey places his handkerchief over the phone, calls Franny, and, in Buddy’s voice, asks her how she’s doing. Zooey slips. Franny unmask him. But, she doesn’t, as we expect, hang up. And, in a few pages, the reader’s exultation growing with Zooey’s powerful exposition of Seymour’s philosophy and Franny’s dawning awareness, Franny and Zooey together arrive at the moment of satori in which they realize the truth of Seymour’s teaching, which Seymour himself could not live (Alsen, 1983). Zooey tells Franny two things. One has to do with who she is. The other with who everyone is.

The Self. As good quasi-Hindus and all-around religious universalists, the Glasses believe that there is a self that each of us really is. This self, one infers from Zooey’s passionate exhortations to Franny, is the result of hankerings, desires, in this life and lives previous. Franny must have wanted to be an actress in some life past, and, according to a karmic logic, a logic of the consequences of desire that Zooey pressures on her, “if you are an actress, you are supposed to act” (Zooey, p. 199). “In one damn incarnation or other,” Franny had forgotten or neglected to take seriously “that the only thing that counts in the religious life is detachment... Desirelessness. ‘Cessation from all hankering’” (Zooey, p. 198). She is stuck with the consequences of her desires, and her duty now is to be an actress, the best one she can. Franny must act, not because she was identified as having exceptional intra- and interpersonal intelligences, not because acting is her way of fulfilling her responsibility to society as a gifted child, not because acting will raise her self-esteem to healthy levels, not for any reason other than she is an actress: “We are all born for a specific natural duty and the most religious thing we can do is perform this duty with detachment” (Alsen, 1983, p. 226).

We can, as we are wont, take or leave the ideas of karma and reincarnation. In either case, Seymour’s Hindu concept of self supports a movement in the field of gifted education that seeks to avoid the syllabus of “gifted achiever” and the chalkboard of “gifted child” approaches to education (Morelock, 1996). Roeper (1996) characterized these approaches as “talent development on one side and the growth and development of the psyche on the other” (p.18). She argued that they meet in the self of the gifted child: “Self-actualization, talent development, and creativity are all intertwined” (p. 18). Roeper does not express any interest in detachment, but otherwise, her view of education meshes neatly with the Glasses’ concept of self. For both, talent development, self-expression, and creativity are rooted in self, self-knowledge, and choice, not in external mechanical identification of socially useful abilities and talents.

The Fat Lady. Throughout Zooey’s disquisition on acting and detachment and what to do with her life and where her responsibility lies, Franny holds her head like she’s nursing a bad tooth. She’s listening, but waiting for a clincher, and we’re waiting with her. She’d heard all that stuff before. She’d been brought up on it. None of it quite speaks to her disgust with her feelings toward other people that led her home to collapse. Not until Zooey mentions Seymour’s Fat Lady does Franny get excited.

Seymour had once told Zooey to shine his shoes before a “Wise Child” broadcast. Zooey, then 7, objected that everyone associated with the show was “a moron,” and he wasn’t going to shine his shoes for them, and besides it was radio. Seymour gave him “a very Seymour look” and said to shine them for the Fat Lady. Seymour had also told Franny to be funny for the Fat Lady. He had never told either of them the Fat Lady’s identity.

Zooey, with a nearly audible chorus of trumpets raising their voices in the background, delivers the clincher:

*There isn’t anyone out there who isn’t Seymour’s Fat Lady... Don’t you know that? Don’t you know that goddamn secret yet? And don’t you know—listen to me now—don’t you know who that Fat Lady really is?... Ah, buddy. Ah, buddy. It’s Christ Himself. Christ Himself, buddy. (Zooey, pp. 201–202)*

The problem of other people vanishes in the awareness of the essential identity of all beings. There are no other people. We should act for Christ or God or Buddha or the essential no-oneness of all of us—the answer can be stated in any number of religious languages. Wisdom, compassion, and an awareness that all beings are connected replace ego, contempt, isolation, and bitterness.

**Spirituality, Schooling, and Education**

What can gifted education take from the Glasses’ spiritual search without moving its university departments to seminaries and sanghas? What, the reader, alert to practicalities and strict divisions of labor, finally asks in exasper-
ation, do religious ecstasy and spirituality have to do with gifted education? Viewed from the perspective of the dominant concerns and values of gifted education, the Glasses’ story is largely irrelevant. Gifted education as now constituted recognizes that gifted children have spiritual lives and seek meaning and look at the Big Picture and such, but any spirituality or other life concern as serious as the Glasses’ is too eccentric, too demanding, too antithetical to the values of modern compulsory schooling to have a place there.

Looked at from the perspective of the Glasses, as we have done, modern gifted education is mostly irrelevant and unhelpful as regards what is most important in life. For the Glasses, the most important tasks, the tasks that give meaning to all other tasks, happen outside of school. It is not true, however, that gifted education cannot learn from the Glasses or from others who have deep spiritual and moral commitments. But, when it does, it risks transforming itself.

Schultz and Delisle (1997), for example, present an apparently innocent guide for teachers to help students strive for the Good Life, the “process of self-examination and reflection—making sense out of one’s existence in relation to others and being able to live conscience-free with the results” (p. 99). But, as they seem to recognize, they offer a Trojan Horse. If ideas like this get into school, school will no longer be school:

Regardless of what the curriculum guide states, a child’s curriculum follows the path of interest and intrigue that generates from the process of living that all in the educational enterprise engage in daily. This continually changing milieu confounds a school environment seeking efficiency and a controlled set of curriculum offerings—teaching and learning cannot be dictated by course of studies, content guides, or textbooks, especially for gifted students. (p. 101)

Schultz and Delisle recognize that gifted education is not gifted schooling. The important topics in gifted schooling are pull-out, inclusion, enrichment, acceleration, identification, curricula, counseling needs, and so forth. The important topics in educating gifted children are self, meaning, sex, relationship, community, life, purpose, ethics, spirituality—that is, the Most Important Things in Life. As Roeper (1990) argued, schooling is for school and work; education is for life. Gifted schooling cannot address the deepest, most powerful, most important desires and inclinations of gifted children. Gifted education can. The story of the Glasses’ spiritual development shows some of what must be taken into account if gifted education is to be truly gifted education. The work of Roeper (1990, 1995, 1996) and others (Lovecky, 1998, Morelock, 1995; Piechowski, 1992, 1997, 1998; Schultz & Delisle, 1997) begins to show how.

References


Salinger, J. D. (1965, June 19). “Hapworth 16, 1924.” New Yorker, XLII, 32–113


End Notes

1. There are contenders for the title of most famous fictional gifted children—Nancy Drew, Ender, Harry Potter, and the space-age Tom Swift, to name a handful. But, I think only the Glasses have had the gifted tag confirmed by the earnest efforts of modern psychologists (Zooey, pp. 54–55).

I deviate from APA style in the interest of facilitating familiarity with the Glass stories. References to Salinger’s works are to the stories themselves in the editions listed in References. For example, Seymour refers to “Seymour: An Introduction” and Zooey refers to Franny and Zooey.

2. We need not fear the idea that characterizations of gifted persons, fictional and nonfictional, are constructions, nor need we hesitate to mine fiction for useful philosophy. The recognition of a gap between world and idea that we must everlastingly o’erleap with acts of imagination and convention, far from being a product of modern “post” thought, is an ancient awareness of the human condition. Coleman, Sanders, and Cross (1997) identified this belief as the core of the Interpretivist Mode of inquiry in gifted education. Young Seymour Glass sums it as follows:

“For the dubious satisfaction of calling anything in this beautiful, maddening world an unsalvageable, respectable fact, we are quite firmly obliged, like good-humored prisoners, to fall back on the flimsy information offered in excellent faith by our eyes, hands, ears, and simple, heartrending brains. (Hapworth, p. 80)

Whether the information is rendered into story or study, its value, to borrow from William James’ pragmatism, is the use to which we put it.