



*Exclusive Interview
with James T. Webb*

BY ADRIENNE VAN DEN BOS



The man behind the work

According to his wife, James has missionary zeal and his daughters tell him he has “flunked” retirement.

Throughout the years he has contributed greatly to the gifted community. And at age 77 he is still actively working on spreading the word about giftedness, helping parents with their gifted child and he is currently president of Great Potential Press. James has been recognized as one of the 25 most influential psychologists nationally on gifted education.

A lot is written about his work, but I was curious, who is James? Who is the man behind the work and what are some of his stories. As I sat down with James, I quickly discovered, he has many good stories to tell. All of them worth reading. So here it is, probably one of the lengthiest interview you've come across, but for everyone of you, I'm sure there is a part that grabs your interest.

Enjoy your reading,

Adrienne

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A LITTLE BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT JAMES

In 1981, he established SENG (Supporting Emotional Needs of Gifted Children) and later on started the Gifted Parent Groups: The SENG Model. He wrote award-winning books including 'Guiding the Gifted Child' and 'Misdiagnosis & Dual Diagnoses of Gifted Children and Adults'.

For his newest book 'Searching for Meaning: Idealism, Bright Minds, Disillusionment, and Hope' he has received several awards, including the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Arizona Association for Gifted Children.

When and how did you find out you are gifted?

I found out when I was in my forties and already working as a psychologist. I didn't learn about it in my education, but ran across the term gifted because parents came to me asking what to do with their gifted child. It was then that I started realizing what giftedness was.

Although the term was never used, looking back, it was clear that I was bright and it was clear that I was gifted. I consider myself lucky being able to start school at a young age. When I was barely 4 years old, my mother applied for a nursery job. She was hired and able to start right away. At that time children would start school around 5 years old. So my mom told the school she couldn't leave me at home by myself and asked what to do. They told her to just bring me along.

The next year, I wanted to start attending kindergarten, but my mother said no. I was too young, she said, I had to stay behind. However, I refused to go back to the same grade level. My mother was given the advice to just have me sit outside of her classroom. Sooner or later, they thought, I would give in and come back inside.

Well, two weeks went by and I was still sitting on the same chair outside of that classroom. And I wasn't planning on giving in anytime soon! Realizing that I probably wasn't going to surrender, the principal of the school said that they would test me to see if I was at the right level to move along. Since the results showed that I was clearly bright enough, they decided to move me a grade level up. As a result, I stayed 2 grade levels ahead, which made it possible for me to graduate and start college at age 16.



Did you struggle with your own giftedness?

As a child I definitely did. I would get extremely upset about matters that involved fairness and would often find myself in intense fights with my brother and power struggles with my parents. I had a terrible temper, and my parents had no clue what to do with this and how to respond to it.

They simply had no knowledge of what giftedness was and therefore couldn't understand what was going on. As a result they didn't know what I needed, how to guide me in my process and how to communicate with me about this.

This is definitely where the fire in my belly comes from. I want to help parents understand their gifted child, their intensity, sensitivity, their idealism. I want to facilitate them in their journey so they can make sense of it all and find ways to stay connected with their children.

It's so important for parents to be able to communicate with their children. And this is only possible when you understand where their intensity, sensitivity and idealism comes from and the impact that it has on their behavior and their lives.

How important do you think it is to acknowledge your own giftedness?

The label; not so much. But understanding the characteristics of it and what it means for you, that is important.

As a gifted individual you have a different sense of humor that isn't always understood by others, you're more intense, sensitive, idealistic, impatient and able to see things that others don't see. The more you know about yourself and the concepts of your own giftedness, the better. It's also important to note that the term gifted doesn't do justice to what it really is.

First of all, it implies that all gifted are the same. But there is such a broad scale of variations within giftedness, it's not one group of individuals that are all alike.

Secondly, it doesn't describe well enough what it actually means. Being gifted is not about being a better species; it just means we're wired differently. It also doesn't mean that all gifted individuals perform well. Many gifted people are underachievers and underperformers.

What was it like, growing up as a gifted individual?

I grew up in the Deep South in the 40's. My dad, who was a respected dentist, told my brother and me that he wanted us to become 'real doctors'. This was his definition of success.

Despite my dad's attempts to turn us into doctors, my brother became a very talented musician. He actually played a solo in Carnegie Hall. After his incredible and memorable performance, we stayed up and waited for the official review to come out in The New York Times newspaper. As expected, the review was wonderful, it was full of praise and glory. While we were celebrating this great review, exhilarated as we were, my dad turned to my brother and said 'you know, there's still time to make something of yourself, instead of being just a simple guitar picker'. And all of our jaws just dropped. I know my dad wanted the best for us; he wanted us to be successful in life, but in his mind, success was not being good in music. Success meant being a doctor.

As for me, I kinda ducked under the radar. I was a severe underachiever. I failed classes in high school simply because I didn't like the teacher, and in college I was more into 'social studies', which in my case meant, going on a lot of dates.

When I was in college, I was very fortunate to have a roommate who opened my eyes to new ideas and concepts. I had grown up in a conservative culture with rigid beliefs. I had come to believe that this was as it was supposed to be, and that everyone else had the same values, worldviews and behaviors. My roommate, Richard Christie, however, had many different experiences, and by asking thoughtful questions about my worldviews, he helped me learn to think and question about traditions and about life.

"To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment."

*Ralph Waldo
Emerson*

Existential Depression & Giftedness

Existential depression is a depression that arises when an individual confronts certain basic issues of existence. Yalom (1980) describes 4 such issues (or “ultimate concerns”)–death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness.

Meaninglessness stems from the first three. If we must die, construct our own world, and if each of us is ultimately alone, then what meaning does life have?

Existential concerns occur among gifted persons disproportionately. This is partially because substantial thought and reflection is needed to even consider such notions, rather than simply focusing on superficial day-to-day aspects of life. Other more specific characteristics of gifted children play part in this as well. As idealists, gifted individuals are able to consider the possibilities of how things might be. They are simultaneously able to see that the world is falling short of how it might be.

Because they are intense, gifted children and adults feel keenly the disappointment and frustration, which occurs when ideals are not reached.

Read more:

www.sengifted.org/existential-depression-in-gifted-individual/

*"Hold fast to dreams,
For if dreams die,
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.*

*Hold fast to dreams.
For if dreams go,
Life is a barren field
Covered with snow".*

~ Langston Hughes

Richard made me think in ways I hadn't considered before and discussed with me about different cultures, traditions, societies and religious beliefs. He showed me the inconsistencies and the self-delusions in many people's beliefs, including my own. As it turned out, I didn't have it all figured out!

This was a shock to me. I discovered that the idyllic life that I grew up believing in, was nothing more than a sham.

It was based on traditions and rituals, emphasizing appearances and social standing. I realized, that by adopting these beliefs and behaviors, I had been deceiving myself as well. My idealism was shattered, I felt like a fraud and betrayed by the unquestioning surety with which my parents and teachers had told me how life should be lived. I was trapped in feelings of doubt, anger and disillusionment.

How was it to write the book 'Searching for Meaning'?

Well, it took me four years to write this book! I had a lot of struggles throughout the process. Many of these struggles came from the doubts I had about myself, worrying that it would seem as if I was so full of myself, thinking that I had all the answers.

Sometimes I would ask myself "who the hell am I to tell someone to find meaning?!" I kept on going because I know that understanding existential depression has been very meaningful for me and for others. I also know that when you suffer from an existential depression, it makes you feel very alone. As if you are the only one seeing the world's absurdities, discrepancies and that no one is doing something about it.

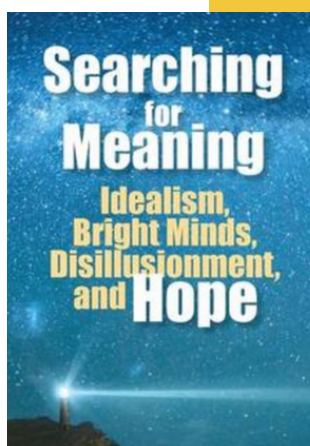
I hope that the readers of the book realize they're not alone in this. And that there are many others out there who experience the same things they are. That's also my favorite part about the book. In addition, the book has allowed me to put the concept of existential depression together with giftedness. It describes how it's tied in. It's only recently being linked with the idealism and the attached dissolution, which is common for gifted individuals. And this book has played a part in this.

About the book

Many bright idealists find themselves disillusioned in today's world, and they may experience existential depression as they examine their lives and search for meaningfulness.

This book will help such individuals to understand themselves and their struggles. It includes helpful information and suggestions for actions that disillusioned idealists can use to better manage their feelings and thoughts in ways that will nurture their idealism and provide a sense of satisfaction and contentment.

People with existential depression need more than medications. It's fundamentally more important for those with existential depression to become aware that others have had similar experiences and to realize that someone truly understands their idealism, disillusionment and anger that things are not as they "should be."



Searching for Meaning bridges this gap and provides a safety net for those floating in the abyss of concentrated disillusionment. It offers guidance and support in taking the first steps towards new perspectives and helps to promote a solid foundation to prevent future relapses.

About SENG

Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted

Every gifted person has unique needs and traits. SENG works to create a world where giftedness is better understood and gifted needs can be met. Education on giftedness is therefore crucial.

SENG also connects gifted individuals and families with a community who understands them and their experiences. Gifted people and parents of gifted children often feel isolated and misunderstood, and this can have drastic effects on mental and emotional well-being.

SENG fosters a community where gifted individuals and their families can find belonging. Working together we can make a difference.

*You can find many resources and interesting reads about giftedness here:
www.sengifted.org*

Why and how did you start SENG?

SENG was founded somewhat by accident. There was a computer whiz-kid named Dallas Egbert, a student at Michigan State University. One day he disappeared. No one knew where he went, it was as if he had gone up in smoke.

His parents hired a private investigator to find him. Eventually Dallas was found working in the oil fields in Texas and was brought back home. Suffering from depression, he was sent to a psychiatrist who had no knowledge of giftedness. Sadly, Dallas ended up shooting himself.

I didn't know Dallas, but his parents reached out to me, asking if I knew of any organizations that focused on the social and emotional needs of gifted individuals. At the time I didn't know of any. They asked if I could keep an eye open, and I soon realized that it simply didn't exist! The parents of Dallas asked me if I would start such an initiative. Back then I was a professor at the Wright State University, and I asked my dean if we would be able to start such a program. The dean went along with it and we founded SENG. We started working with parents, thinking it would probably just stay a small program, nothing too big, just something in the corner of the University somewhere.

This quickly changed when The Phil Donahue Show wanted to do a TV show about giftedness. Mrs. Egbert had arranged that I would be on the show and able to talk about SENG. In the show, there were 5 families who had children suffering from depression, who had attempted suicide or were very rebellious. It was electric. And afterwards, The Phil Donahue Show received over 20.000 letters saying there is a need for SENG and there is nothing like this now. We then realized it might become a little bigger than expected.



As we integrated giftedness more and more in the programs we offered at the University, we also discovered something else. We had students working with gifted parents and saw that many children were being misdiagnosed. This in turn has led me to create the Misdiagnosis Initiative. All of these events have definitely shaped my career.

What do we need to know about misdiagnosis?

It's important to know that gifted individuals are often overlooked, misunderstood and misdiagnosed, mostly because of a lack of training. Many gifted people are 'quirky'. We cut the tags out of our clothing, find humor in absurdities only we seem to see and we do what we do very intensely. But this of course is not an illness! In our society however, it seems that physicians have become less tolerant of quirkiness and started labeling it more and more as a disorder. It's important to remember that most creative people are non-traditional and therefore often seen as quirky.

About About the Misdiagnosis Initiative

SENG's Misdiagnosis Initiative helps educate parents and health care professionals of the risks of misdiagnosis, and how to avoid them.

Medical misdiagnosis is devastatingly common among gifted children. Without significant improvements in medical knowledge of giftedness and twice-exceptionality, gifted children will continue to be both over-diagnosed and under-diagnosed with mental health and learning issues. And additionally, their giftedness may be at risk of being unnoticed completely.

You can learn more about misdiagnosis and the Misdiagnosis Initiative here: www.sengifted.org/programs/misdiagnosis-initiative/



What can you do?

First, you must understand yourself. Secondly you must join together. Meet with other gifted people and support children and adults in the home, school and work environment. It's important to have people in your life who understand you and to form genuine relationships with.

We can all play our part in creating a better understanding of giftedness and can support the social and emotional needs of gifted people around us. This is the critical part. Giftedness is so much more than academics. You can add meaning to the life of others by helping them understand their own giftedness. As you most likely can remember someone who has done this for you and who has helped you create a better life for yourself, so can you for someone else.

You can inspire and support, make gifted individuals excited about life and about trying new things.

If you are a physician or psychologist or counselor, it's very helpful to reach out to people in your line of profession to help them understand what giftedness is. As a parent, you must educate your physicians if they have no knowledge about giftedness. You can offer them books or send them the SENG brochures to help them understand the concepts of giftedness and to see the difference between a disorder and giftedness.

AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE FROM JAMES TO YOU

Read as much as you can about gifted children and adults. Understand yourself and the relations with others and your children. Also, by reading you won't feel as alone.

Existential depression causes people to feel alone and helpless. So, it's important to get with other idealists. This will make you feel more empowered since more people can make a bigger difference.

Look at any cause that has advanced and realize that all great things that have been achieved, were once started by only one or two non-traditional idealists who wanted to make a change, a difference. They all felt alone in the beginning, but got with others who nurtured them when they felt overwhelmed or trapped. So join together!



**Hope you enjoyed reading this interview.
Feel free to share this with others. Do want to know more about
giftedness? Send me an email: adrienne@giftedpeople.eu,
and I'll direct you in the right path.**

