

Pathways to Eminence

Dong Yul Lee, Canada

The purposes of this paper are twofold: (a) to summarize the published research findings related to people who achieved eminence, and (b) to submit several suggestions for parents, guardians, and teachers that are considered to be helpful in creating facilitative environments for eminence.

I will discuss the topic under the following three headings: (A) Definition, (B) Recalled Early Family Characteristics of Eminent People, and (C) Concluding Remarks. In so doing, with the target audience of parents, guardians, and teachers in mind, I have deliberately avoided extensive references.

A. Definition

Eminence refers to a position of great distinction or superiority in achievement, position, rank, or character (Albert, 1991). It is the demonstration of outstanding performance and/or the notion of towering above all others in a chosen field. Achieved eminence is frequently related to profound giftedness

and creativity, and thus, overlapping between the two may be substantial.

An operational definition offered by Goertzel and Goertzel, authors of Cradles of Eminence, should be introduced. Goertzel and Goertzel (1962) selected 400 20th century people about whom at least two books, if he/she was born in the U.S.A., or one book, if he/she was born outside the U.S.A., had been written. As might be expected, Goertzel and Goertzel excluded those who achieved notoriety because of a brush with antisocial behavior, such as Al Capone. In passing, it would be interesting to Korean readers to observe that the only Korean included in the list of 400 is Syngman Rhee, the first President of the Republic of Korea.

In addition to the above, the following information is worth mentioning: (a) Achieved eminence is not a frequent phenomenon. Being included on the list of Who's Who or graduating from university summa cum laude does not automatically qualify as eminence. The observance of eminence is rare

indeed. (b) To be eminent does not necessarily suggest being in an homogeneous group. Even within the upper reaches of eminence there is a great deal of heterogeneity. Every achieved recognition of eminence seems to be unique. (c) Although it is reasonable to expect profoundly gifted individuals to achieve eminence in their fields, this is not always the case because eminence requires more than superior ability. In addition to giftedness in talent or ability, eminence also requires certain sets of values, motivations, experiences, opportunities, and luck. (d) Children who grow to achieve eminence as adults are often characterized by a certain specialness or a number of unusual experiences. For example, many eminent people experienced early parental or sibling loss. Often they are oldest children or only children. In addition, those who achieved eminence frequently recalled childhood experiences of having highly focused, intense, individualized and stable motivation.

B. Recalled Early Family Characteristics of Eminent People

Without question, the family is the

cradle of eminence. It establishes the child's basic foundation, especially during the first 10-15 years of life, by setting an emotional and cognitive tenor for development. Major elements believed to be critical in achieving eminence, such as identity, self-esteem, sense of adequacy, and intellectual competence, are believed to be formed during this period. Identity refers to an individual's cognitive and affective understanding or perception of himself/herself, which is formed by the child by comparing his/her behavior to others. According to Heckhausen (1967), a German psychologist, the meaning and evaluation of a person's behavior, by comparison with others, is stabilized around eight to nine years of age. This experience profoundly affects the child's self-esteem as well as his/her need for achievement. Ego-ideals refer to the images of self to which the individual aspires, consciously and unconsciously, and against which he/she measures himself/herself. Ego-ideals usually are formed by the child identifying with parents and significant others. It should be emphasized that making comparisons is one of the critical ways in which people come to perceive themselves (identity), and to view their futures (ego-

ideals).

Most researchers who investigated early childhood experiences of eminent people stress the importance of the ages 11 to 13. By age 12, many important personality traits and values have stabilized. The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget(1972) asserted that, by this time, a child's cognitive development reaches the formal operation stage where he/she can think abstractly and hypothetically. Similarly, Hamilton (1983) asserted that the biological and cognitive changes that occur around age 12-13 give pre-adolescents a degree of focused and selective attention that did not exist before. These changes may be self-regulated and allow for more cognitive control. These changes also influence daydreaming and imagination.

To achieve eminece, all the factors that are known to be related (i.e., giftedness, personality, motivation, values, interest, and experience) must be integrated into one single entity: career choice. That is, parents, guardians, and teachers must help the gifted child to choose a career that is congruent with his/her aptitude, values, interests, and experience.

At this point one might ask, "What

kind of parent-child relationship would contribute to the achievement of eminence?" Before I go further, I will comment on the question. First, both emotionally and cognitively, it can be said that the family is the basic developmental "greenhouse" in which all the needed elements start to ferment. Second, healthy development goes beyond mere survival. Healthy development makes possible the start of courage, respect, playfulness, humour, and creativity. Third, the two chief villains that could interrupt healthy development are: excessive, uncontrollable parent narcissism and indifference and rejection. These two villains, opposite in nature, stifle the child's self-worth and capacity to take initiatives, and prevent the development of depth in interpersonal relationships, thus breeding mistrust and anxiety in the child. These two villains often lead to lifelong difficulties for the child in exploring his/her feelings, understanding the feelings of others, and in feeling competent in real life situations.

As far as parent-child relationships are concerned, there seem to be two different pathways, oppositional in nature, that gifted children are likely to follow to achieve eminece (Albert, 1991). The first,

hereafter called path I, is a congruent, harmonious path, which can be found more frequently among people who achieve eminence in science - symbol - oriented careers. The other, hereafter called Path II, is a conflict-ridden path, which is seen primarily in people in passion oriented careers.

Path I is characterized by congruence, harmony, and agreement. Although it may not always be a path of serenity and tranquillity, parents and guardians in Path I families accept their level of agreement, but low emotionality, among family members. Often, parent-child relationships are moderate in emotionality, career pressure, and overall parental involvement. Path I families are more common in science - symbol - oriented careers.

Path II, on the other hand, is marked by frustration, conflict, incongruency, and disagreement between child and parent, and between parents. The family frequently engages in turbulent disagreement or disharmony, with either too little or too much parental control. Another significant characteristic seen in Path II involves the salient differences between the child and parents, about the child's career choice. Many writers and painters,

especially in the 19th century, had parents, especially fathers, who had careers in mind that had little relationship with the child's talent. As might be expected, this kind of disagreement is more likely to occur when the parents' or guardians' predominant values are traditional and/or conventional. In Path II families, the child's progressive individualization is hampered or resented by the parents. Thus, conflict, apathy, disagreement, hatred, rejection, and ambivalence are common. In short, it can be called a "troubled home." Paradoxically, because of the early turbulent, conflict-ridden frustrations and disagreements between the children and their parents, these children seem to develop a greater sensitivity and interest in people. The disappointments, disagreements, frustrations, and conflicts seem to motivate these children to "rise to the occasion." Many come from homes in which, even as young children, they had to take care of their parents and manage the household. They felt compelled to be good and competent.

C. Concluding Remarks

Even if a family appears to be

prototypical with respect to achieving eminence, being equipped with every known eminence-facility factor, it may fail to promote eminence after all. On the other hand, a Path II family characterized by parental rejection, indifference, hatred, and over-control may produce eminence in spite of these seemingly insurmountable handicaps. Such irregularities and unpredictability can be a thread of hope for parents who are frustrated over the slow progress towards, but have not yet given up the dream of, their child's eminence. It can also be a consolation to those parents who tried their best, and yet were disappointed by their child's failure to achieve eminence.

Whether by Path I or Path II, it can be safely asserted that an abundance of energy, enthusiasm and devotion, physical and psychological vigour, and hard work and involvement are all important factors that facilitate emergence of eminence.

Eminence should be considered to be a by-product of how one develops and uses the tools and opportunities one has in life. Eminence is not born, but created. However, it is not always created.

References

- Albert, R. S. (1991). People, processes, and developmental paths to eminence: A developmental-interactional model. In R. M. Milgram (Ed.), *Counseling gifted and talented children: A guide for teachers, counselors, and parents*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing.
- Goertzel, V., & Goertzel, M. (1962). *Cradles of eminence*. Boston, MA: Little Brown Company.
- Hamilton, J. A. (1983). Development of interest and enjoyment in adolescence. part I. Attentional capacities. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 12, 355-362.
- Heckaunsen, H. (1967). *The anatomy of achievement motivation*. New York: Academic Press.
- Piaget, J. (1972). Intellectual evolution from adolescence to adulthood. *Human Development*, 15, 1-12.