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### **Abstract**

An egalitarian setting; that is, a setting established on an ideological and cultural basis, in which individual differences traditionally is a sensitive and often problematic issue, the counseling of gifted individuals present a particular problem. Sweden provides the setting in which the current study was carried out. This qualitative case study focuses on how one highly gifted individual—a 27-year old male—has experienced his school years and university training and how successful counselling for him was construed. The case is argued to be fairly typical, and it is also suggested that Received Mentorship might be the only way to counsel a gifted individual in a forbidding egalitarian setting. The article concludes by proposing a number of recommendations for Counselors who work in similar settings.

## Introduction

"Swedes are ambivalent about their 'stars'... whether in sports, show business, or culture.", ethnologist Ake Daun (1994) observes after many years of trying to chart, in international comparison, what might be considered a "typical Swedish mentality." "Successes may be admired," he continues, "but their exclusiveness and out-of-the-ordinary achievements often give rise to envy and therefore to malicious pleasure when the stars 'fall'. The high value awarded to sameness makes all personal success problematic" (p. 107).

This sensitivity towards individuals who, in one way or another, are outstanding has been termed "The Code of Jante" by Danish author Axel Sandemose in the 1930s and outlined by him as a decalogue (see Table 1).

Table 1 about here

The Code of Jante in Sweden is known to everyone in Sweden. Biographies on outstanding Swedish individuals who made an internationally recognised career tend to deal with the issue. Film director Ingmar Bergman (1987) and Tennis legend Björn Borg (1992) are only two typical examples. The issue is mentioned frequently in media as well as in private conversations, and referred to when a public figure causes headlines in the national press. In social-psychological terms the phenomenon may be understood as a demand for social conformity, and anyone challenging "sameness" by virtue of being too different from the rest (and it often does not matter how the challenger is different),

the individual who deviates from sameness will attract the displeasure of the group. Note that there is often also a distinction to be made here: Deviation as such is not always, within reasonable limits, necessarily the problem. It is, as Sabini (1992) concluded, "that the pressure to conform arises not from some general desire to be like everyone else, but from a fear of being wrong about a clear, objective matter. People are willing to be different, they just don't wish to be [regarded as] crazy" (p. 29). Hence, The Code of Jante is most likely a universal social dynamic principle at some level, which in some countries, for political and ideological reasons, has been particularly emphasised and has developed into a pronounced culture-specific trait. This is undeniably the case in Sweden which, as a socially fairly homogenous nation, has been termed a large "full-scale economic and social laboratory" (Lindbeck, 1997), where an issue such as equality has been firmly established in national awareness at all levels of society, surprisingly also psychologically. The latter, crucial to understanding the Code of Jante in a Swedish context, may possibly be explained as a typical socialist legacy. In the former USSR, for example, and in countries then under Soviet influence, psychological tests were forbidden. They were regarded as instruments of class discrimination (Urban & Sekowski, 1993). Although psychometric test use is on the increase at the moment, psychometric testing has long been frowned upon, also by psychologists. Such tests are still only sparsely used. The Swedish Well-Fare State is a social construction on mainly a socialist ideological basis. Individuals with outstanding talents, visible to all, appear indeed to consistently result in, as Swedish journalist Göran Skytte (1997) puts it, "a begrudging and nationally endorsed attitude of envy". It is in Sweden more or less

tacitly agreed, that to be individually outstanding and making it official, is to challenge the democratic rights of everyone.

Similar social developments have been observed in Australia (Thompson, 1994) and in India (Raina, 1996). For a further discussion on the cultural precursors to talent and giftedness in Sweden, see Persson, Joswig and Balogh, (2000).

To counsel the highly able pupils and students in this social context, needless to say, presents particular problems. The aim of this article, therefore, is to briefly outline the difficulties associated with an egalitarian social structure, taking Sweden as an example by discussing a case proper: a 27-year old highly talented male. In conclusion, general issues are considered regarding counselling in similar contexts and a few recommendations are made.

## **Method**

### Definitions

There is as yet no consensus on what is meant by the term "gifted", although there are multiple efforts of trying to create models, which in different ways include components such as the g-factor, motivation, creativity, task commitment, problem-solving, domain specificity, expertise, the traditional nature - nurture problem, and so on (for an overview of this complex issue see Sternberg & Davidson, 1986 and Ziegler & Heller, 2000). However, while giftedness may well comprise all of these components, and more, we must not forget also, that giftedness is invariably a social construct. As Sternberg and Davidson (1986) note, it is something we invent rather than something we

discover. It becomes what any society wants it to be; or in fact, wants it at times not to be. I have defined giftedness atheoretically, to create understanding in an egalitarian context and facilitate suitable provision rather than argue theoretical issues. A gifted individual on this criterion, for the purpose of this article and my everyday work with these questions in a usually prohibiting social context, is therefore understood as "someone who consistently gives cause for surprise through repeated achievements and/or insights into one or several domains" (Persson, 1997a, p. 50).

The concept of counselling needs also to be defined in this context, since counselling in Sweden is not a task assigned to merely one specific professional group. As Brown and Lent (1992) point out, "it has expanded from an initial concern with educational and vocational guidance to the remediation and prevention of personal, interpersonal, vocational, and educational concerns" (p. XI). A counsellor in Sweden is rarely a psychologist in education-related matters. There are Guidance Counsellors, usually trained as teachers, who offer advice on career choices in primary, secondary, and tertiary education. However, there are also Sociologists (termed "Curators"), who act as counsellors by means of social work. They listen to pupils' and students' problems and try to solve them practically. Psychologists, on the other hand, are at hand only when severe problems exist or when consistent disorders are suspected. They do not have much of a counselling function other than in relation to a particular diagnosis provided by them. It is important to observe, that none of these counselling functions are in anyway, to date, informed of the particular needs of gifted individuals.

In discussing "counselling" therefore, I draw from my own experience and work,

and I find it very helpful to construe counselling as mentorship, which I understand as an individual who "gives the student courage to work on a problem of particular difficulty ... sticks by the student during times of difficulty ...[and] assists a student with low self-esteem to evaluate his or her talents and skills ... to give students the courage to try" (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 1992, p. 73). The mentor's role is much different from that of the traditional clinical psychologist and counsellor. It excludes the traditional neutral stance of the counsellor. It rather involves forming friendships, which has been shown to be a catalyst for the development of talent (eg. Manturzevska, 1990; Sloboda & Howe, 1991). It includes, however, the more traditional therapists' role of making the incomprehensible comprehensible, thereby alleviating perceived threats and, at least in an egalitarian setting such as the Swedish, make possible a coping strategy, where immediate solutions to context-inflicted conflicts are not currently available (Storr, 1990). Counselling in this context, therefore, is psycho-social in nature.

### Research design

This study may be considered a qualitative case study outlined as an ABAB design (cf. Peck, 1989). However, it must be pointed out that no measurements were made to check on progress, as is customary in clinical research of this type of design. The subject of the study – a 27-year old male – did himself refer to sessions and conversations as "therapy"; so, in a sense, there was "intervention", but one that was actively sought rather than one that was provided or recommended in accordance with a specific school of thought or therapeutic method. Psychosocial counselling would be

the most appropriate descriptive term. The aim of the sought intervention was for the individual to gain understanding of self and context, which was indeed progressively achieved.

To generalise from a case study is not possible, but a case may nevertheless be indicative and typical of a certain setting. I therefore argue, as based on experience and a multitude of anecdotal accounts, that the case presented is fairly typical insofar as how he has experienced the non-accepting educational context, how it has reacted to him and what the psychological and social reactions were.

In order to secure validity of the presented account, observations made, conclusions and concluding recommendations, the case subject has been asked to read and comment on the article (Kazdin, 1977).

### Context outline

I worked as Associate professor in psychology in a medium-sized university and in its Education and Psychology Department somewhere in Sweden at the time. The department hosted some 2000 students. Most attended various teacher training programmes. It must be noted that because of the nature of teacher training, the distance between teaching staff and students is not great. Students are, as a rule, mainly taught in groups of 30 students, less frequently in classes with 100 students or more. In addition, staff frequently meet students in tutorial groups of five to seven students each. The organisation of teaching is much in accordance with the collectivist notion of group-orientation, which in turn is in tune with ideologically based education policies and



cultural traits. Hence, students in teacher training (as well as in many other training programmes) come in close contact with teachers – for better and for worse. They will be able to discuss almost any issue relevant to their training in class and, if very talented high-achievers, they will also at times be exposed to lecturers' shortcomings and lack of understanding for "gifted behaviour". Occasionally there will arise a conflict between the gifted flexible mind of a student and more rigid and routine-like teaching. Such teaching will sometimes take place in presumably most universities all over the world; more due to academic tradition than to the knowledge inhabiting institutions (cf. Bourdieu, 1984). In fact, it seems that quite a few internationally renowned and exceptional individuals have not fared well at all at any educational institution – nor at any level (Persson, 1997a).

### **The case of "Punch"**

I have had the privilege of counselling several students during my work in the department, all of whom I consider highly gifted by any means and measures. None have been identified in the traditional psychometric sense, but they have indeed caused many an eyebrow to be raised in surprise and have sadly also been cause for annoyance and conflict, where they have known more and better than the systems devised to educate and train them.

Our paths have crossed mainly due to their choices of courses. On occasion I have been sought out especially to provide an explanation for their perceived "non-fit situation" in the teacher training programmes; in spite of the fact that they were all fully

committed to becoming teachers and desired nothing more. Interestingly, most have been male students. Only one was a woman. It has occurred to me several times in meeting with these students over time, that a context not recognising giftedness as an issue, nor making particular efforts of providing suitable stimulation, might be particularly hard on developing a gifted male gender role (or a male professional role). This has indeed been suggested for male gender roles in general (Pleck, 1995). Perhaps a special case could be made for gifted men. So far, research in this particular area has mainly focused on the difficulties of an emergent gifted female identity (eg. Kerr, 1997).

Of the gifted students paying regular visits to my office one stands out particularly: nicknamed "Punch" by me; a mature student, 27 years of age at the time; who already had an impressive academic background as he commenced teacher training. His all-round knowledge was impressive, and he learnt almost anything with ease. He rarely studied course textbooks – mostly because he did not want to. He still managed to convince a number of lecturers he had studied everything they presented him with at great depth. His strategy was simply, he once confided, to pick up a few "buzz words" in class, plus assimilating what was said during lectures. From this he synthesised something that often struck colleagues as "brilliant" and "very insightful". Little did they know he manipulated them to maintain some reasonable level of stimulation, in a circumstance he sometimes thought was mediocre, illogical and inconsistent.

In addition to his very obvious academic skills, this young man had an even more impressive athletic background. Having retired from competition, he single-handedly

founded and successfully held together a national sports federation and has as a trainer been responsible for bringing several world champions and European champions to victory in his sport.

Also, but perhaps not always obvious to colleagues meeting with him in a teacher-to-student situation, was his extraordinary understanding of social dynamics and an ethical conviction, which governed his skills for the benefit of everyone around him.

All of these skills combined serve him exceedingly well in the profession of his choice: being a teacher. He eventually graduated and currently teaches Special Education. He is in charge of a group of children, all diagnosed with the Asperger Syndrome. To the astonishment of parents and his employer, he has managed to achieve in learning with these children, what psychiatrists responsible for diagnosing them have put in writing was not possible for them to learn. His reputation as a "miracle-working teacher" is steadily growing. However, although recognition for this work is sometimes given, he is still prone to frustration. When the children he has worked with leave his tutelage, as a rule, they become integrated again into a school system where children all too often meet less skilled and less understanding teachers, and Punch's astounding work effort is brought to naught. The children in his care who grew and blossomed again return to becoming "hopeless and impossible" in the regular classroom, the very reason they were remitted by schools to Psychiatry in the first place.

On all accounts "Punch" is an exceptionally outstanding individual, and as a teacher presumably one whom all parents would wish to send their children to if they had choice!

### The nature of the counselling

After lectures where Punch either ended up in a conflict with the lecturer, or when he had been forced by a lecturer to work in groups with other students – more accepting of the culturally enforced notion of co-dependence, and less understanding of cause and effect – as part of the course, he often came by my office to let out some frustration. Which, as far as I could tell, almost always resulted from flawed logic, others' failure to see structure and patterns, and to draw suitable conclusions – all of which were usually obvious to Punch after only little information given. He called these impromptu sessions his "emergency therapy".

Mostly, it seemed, he needed understanding of why he reacted the way he did and also why others reacted to him. He had never before heard the notion of giftedness and his experience of previous education at all levels was a dire one. He was usually considered a trouble-maker. In primary and secondary school only one teacher admitted to him she marvelled at his accomplishments. During our conversations he confided that in school, he hated his own ability to understand and to learn with greater ease than most of his contemporaries; even to the extent that he tried to "remove" it. To make himself more like "everyone else" he decided to inhale the solvent fumes of a certain type of glue, which he knew would cause brain damage if he exposed himself to it long

enough. Fortunately the self-destructive attempt failed. All the while, up to the point of meeting with me the first time, he was unable to construe his talent as something positive. He was always painfully aware of the cultural pressure to conform in accordance with "The Code of Jante"; to be like everyone else. Note that research has indeed pointed out self-destructive behaviour, even to the extent of suicide, as part of the picture in understanding the maladaptation of gifted individuals in various social settings (Leroux, 1986; Fiedler, 1999).

The need for confirmation and emotional support is well known in the literature focussing on giftedness and talent (eg. Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde & Whalen, 1993; Kelly-Streznewski, 1999; Stednitz, 1995). Hence, simply being informed of the nature of giftedness and the various ways in which highly able individuals tend to behave and react meant the world to Punch. He immediately recognised the pattern in his own life. He confided again, that when he realised that he could be called "gifted" and that what he had experienced was by no means unique, he cried as he returned home from our first meeting. Suddenly it all made sense. It is interesting to note though, as Punch indeed did, that people outside of the educational system much more easily discovered what he was capable of! (cf. Rosenhan, 1973).

However, Punch also needed an explanation as to why his skills were not welcome everywhere and why no-one really cared for the educational and socio-emotional needs he indeed had had all through his education. There are no ready-made answers to provide here, so by implication only and knowledge of culture and political ideology, after many discussions, we arrived at the understanding of Swedish

educational policies, and to some extent Scandinavian culture, much as it is outlined as introduction to this article.

The question of his need for intellectual growing and stimulation in the university setting, which did not challenge his inquisitive mind at all, remained. Lectures, as a rule, presented him with few issues he did not already know, or were presented at a pace so slow it tried his patience too much. Our sessions and conversations turned into the oasis in the wilderness that he needed and had been looking for. We discussed everything from social relationships to Systems Theory and nutrition. He increasingly developed an interest in psychology, which he subsequently began to study.

Visits to my office were frequent and always welcome. Inevitably a friendship developed. I had been chosen his mentor (Torrance, 1984). Occasionally he also came to visit me at my home for discussions and to sample my private library, which seemed to contain everything he had an interest in. He was particularly happy when he found literature on behavioural genetics and sport psychology.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Punch was not the only student to come visit my office for the same reason he did, but others had different needs. It sufficed for them to let the university be the boundary of the mentorship. But also none were as outstanding as Punch. Without being able to generalise from the case presented and other students I have encountered, I suspect it is fair to conclude nevertheless that the more extreme the level, and perhaps also the type,

of giftedness, the greater also the need for extraordinary measures from a counselling perspective (see Gross, 1993). I am convinced that a mentorship is the only viable counselling solution in an egalitarian context, void of recognition and of particular provision for gifted individuals and, in addition, that because of cultural (or sub-cultural) patterns, more often than not ignores or even frowns on individual prowess and achievement.

Mentorships are much overlooked in giftedness research. They tend to be of interest mostly to the fields of management and business. One reason is likely to be that gifted individuals tend to choose their own mentors—and for a variety of reasons. Hence, it is not likely that a particular and standardised method for mentoring could be successfully developed. Rather, one develops in each case encountered. Note the difference here between how management and business use the term, and how the term needs to be used in counselling. In management and business a mentor is appointed after official and/or organisational scrutiny in accordance with certain suitability criteria (Reilly, 1992). Also, the selection process is mainly directed one way: A student or a trainee is provided with a mentor believed to be suitable. In the case of the gifted individual, it is more likely the selection process will go both ways: the individual appoints after his or her own criteria and the chosen mentor accepts, or rejects as the case may be from time to time. An appropriate term, perhaps, for the latter and much more informal type of mentorship would be Received Mentorship as opposed the more formal and rationalist Provided Mentorship.

There is one issue in Received Mentorship, which I have found instrumental, in a "clinical" setting but also in interviewing in general, that goes somewhat against the scientific and medical tradition, namely to be candid and personal (Persson & Robson, 1994, but see also Derlega, Metts, Petronio & Margulis, 1993). I am convinced that openness is essential to Received Mentorship. Hamachek (1991), for example, insightfully points out, that "once the students have learnt that their teacher has feelings, not all of which are pleasant and good, they are more apt to admit feelings within themselves that might otherwise have been buried. If teachers are honest ... and share with them some of their personal inner feelings, they can be much more assured that their students will give them honest feedback ..." (p. 322). Needless to say, normal ethical guidelines do apply, but the Received Mentorship is not a one-way relationship. It craves two-way communication and openness for it to work. This is of course true of any meaningful social relationship (Duck, 1992).

My recommendations for Counsellors in similar situations, where egalitarianism in various ways causes problems for especially gifted individuals, are therefore the following:

- 1) Be open-minded and consider all aspects of giftedness, not only the IQ-related skills and competences.

The research on giftedness is unfortunately much biased in favour of IQ-related abilities, which mainly address academic skills. The results is that we are very likely to by-pass, or simply ignore, other types of skills such as vocational skills (Bals, 1999),



practical intelligence in everyday life (Sternberg et. al., 2000) and perhaps the most taken-for-granted of them all: social skills (Persson, 1997b), which in a somewhat simplified manner could be said to equal Emotional Intelligence (EQ); now properly established as a separate intelligence (Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2000). EQ entails to reflectively regulating and understanding emotions, assimilating them in thought and also to perceive and express emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997).

Punch is a perfect example. His understanding of social interaction, others' feelings as well as of his own was an instrument available to support his other skills for a variety of purposes. Not one of his teachers at any level of training observed his social competence. This is somewhat surprising, since social skills indeed are emphasised and much talked about in the Swedish educational system. It is one of the argued ideological tenets underpinning egalitarianism.

As his chosen mentor, I frequently encouraged him to speak of his various skills. No one knows them better than the gifted individuals themselves! By so doing he confirmed his considerable knowledge of social processes and how he sometimes used them for specific objectives. Also, inviting him to speak of that, of which he had felt prohibited to speak, was a key-issue in his self-confirmation.

2) Consider mentorship a possible solution to aid the immediate Psychosocial and intellectual needs of the gifted individual; particularly Received Mentorship.

Although Punch chose me as his mentor; and he did use the word “mentor”, I quickly realised how important it was to share my own feelings and experiences with him. I could outline my own frustrations within the higher education context in which we both existed, and I would always receive his very astute assessment and understanding of it, which frequently added to my own understanding.

3) Mentorships could be operationalised in two ways: a) you make yourself available to becoming a mentor, or b) you co-operate with the gifted individual to find another possible mentor of the student’s choice.

The reasons Punch appointed me as his mentor are likely to be several. First, I was the first who realised his potential, but also the fact that he could identify with me on several levels. I, too, could be characterised as gifted. I had the same experience as he of being alienated in and by the egalitarian educational setting. In venturing to reflect on my own personality, however, in order to understand Punch’s choice of mentor, it is significant to know that I tend to find it hard to stay indifferent and silent when systems, decisions or policies are not logical and fly in the face of already well established knowledge or experience. I also tend to be “philosophical” and interested in “the larger picture; with an easy understanding of how issues and events relate to each other. I must assume, too, that I do whatever I do with a high degree of professionalism. At least, these are the spontaneous remarks I consistently and frequently receive (from students and individuals not socialised into “cultural-trait egalitarianism”). I mention these particular characteristics, since they have been proposed to be essential

characteristics of teachers involved in Gifted Education, making them very appealing to gifted students and pupils (Maker, 1982; Baldwin, 1993).

Hence, Punch is likely to have recognised these characteristics, and possibly others, which he more or less could identify with. In addition to this psychosocial process, however, I was also able to satisfy his hunger for intellectual stimulation, at least at the time. Apart from spontaneous discussions, where both took the initiative, I suggested a variety of books for him to read.

Not all gifted students though, would be likely to choose their Counsellors to be their mentor. In such a case I would suggest the Counsellor to seek another mentor, discussing it with the student. He or she is likely to have wishes, but in addition to these, a starting point for selection would be that the potential mentor is philosophical, professional and somewhat rebellious; the latter needs perhaps to be defined in context. Needless to say, ethics should also be considered.

4) The mentorship will need to be characterised by openness.

Without my personal sharing of feelings, thoughts, experiences and knowledge, the mentor-student relationship would have been less successful. Especially in an egalitarian setting such openness offers not only psychosocial support but also intellectual stimulation.

Following the first year or so, where perhaps his emotional needs of confirmation were emphasised, the mentorship developed into a more intellectual sharing one. Punch

accounted for his future plans and everyday ideas and I, in turn, shared mine with him, also research ideas and results.

In conclusion, two issues arise as a result of these recommendations, namely what is the difference between counselling a gifted individual and a more “average” individual?

Also, how do these recommendations relate to Carl Roger’s (1991) so-called *Client-Centered Therapy* which, as has been pointed out to me, they do indeed resemble?

I cannot see how Counselling a gifted student would really be much different from counselling any other student or individual, save for taking the social context and the level of giftedness and talent into account. One person’s psychosocial needs differ, of course, from those of another, but there is not likely to exist a qualitatively different psychosocial need with regard to their level of intellectual prowess. For example, it has been argued that felt competence is an essential aspect of actual competence, and that the experience of feeling competent is paramount in developing a healthy and functional Self-structure (Markus, Cross, & Wurf, 1990). For a regular student the feeling of competence is as essential as it is to a gifted student. However, in an egalitarian setting, the regular student usually has a better “social fit”, and is therefore also more likely to receive suitable confirmation of Self in approved-of fields or tasks. The gifted student, on the other hand, has to struggle for recognition. He or she may, in addition, have discovered extreme competence in non-mainstream fields and areas. In an egalitarian social system – particularly in its educational system – it is not likely that confirmation of Self will be provided. Rather, sameness is rewarded. The gifted student

may become isolated and alienated, the consequences of which could occasionally be dire, as exemplified earlier. Again, Punch is a good example (see also Landau, 1990, for several and similar Israeli accounts). Freeman (2000), for example, reports that “although gifted children are possibly more sensitive than others to emotional nuances ... there is no evidence that they are emotionally less stable than other children” (p. 581).

What I propose undoubtedly is reminiscent of a Rogerian client or person-centred approach (Rogers, 1991). The basic premise of this approach is, that “the individual has within himself or herself vast resources for self-understanding, for altering his or her self-concept, attitudes, and self-directed behaviour – and that these resources can be tapped if only a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided” (in Kirschenbaum-Land Henderson, 1989, p. 135). The psychosocial climate in which the person is able to muster his or her own resources towards self-realisation is, according to Carl Rogers and as I have similarly suggested, characterised by genuineness, an unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding.

These attributes of the counselling certainly characterised my mentorship towards Punch. However, not all gifted students who has crossed my path have been in need of, for example, empathic understanding. They have been more directed towards seeking intellectual stimulation I was able to provide them with, presumably having found confirmation of Self outside of the educational context, which they too felt was very restraining.

So, while a Rogerian approach has an important place in counselling gifted students, and could well be regarded as the essence of a Received Mentorship, especially for the

ones in an egalitarian setting with a considerable need for Self-confirmation, some students are more inclined to seek the intellectual (or practical) stimulation they do not receive in their training. Gifted students in an egalitarian system often lack not only the opportunity for confirmation and social acceptance but they paradoxically also often lack the freedom to learn (Rogers, 1983).

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Table 1. The Code of Jante as created by Danish Author Axel Sandemose modelling it after the Mosaic Decalogue of the Torah.

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- I        You shall not think that you are special.
  - II        You shall not think that you are as good as we are.
  - III       You shall not consider yourself wiser than us.

- IV You shall not believe you are better than we are.
- V You shall not think you know more than us
- VI You shall not think you are in anyway more than we are.
- VII You shall not think you are good for anything.
- VIII You shall not laugh at us.
- XI You shall not think that anyone cares about you.
- X You shall not think you have anything to teach us.
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