This is the first installment of a series of columns I hope to write for this excellent journal. You may notice that at times my thoughts are rather bare-boned and you may at times wonder why I haven’t developed an idea, concept, or story a bit further. The reason is that I’ve agreed to remain within a 1500 words limit. Therefore my primary goal is to write only an introduction to topics which I hope will lead to further discussion. Here are some of the questions I’ll be dealing with in future columns: When is a suit an argument? Why do some people not know how to feel? Why do some philosophers have difficulty seeing the philosophy in real-life issues and problems? What is the difference between giving advice and offering a variety of perspectives? And: Why do some people commit deeds they know to be evil? In this issue I want to consider the ‘problem’ of intelligence.

Of all the remarkable talents evident in humanity it is the talent of intelligence which at times causes the greatest grief. Throughout history, whenever a totalitarian political regime has taken power, its first order of business has typically been to kill off the so-called ‘intelligentsia’. The justification has always been expressed in terms of the potential threat posed to the new regime by well-educated individuals. But the politically-motivated condemnation of the brightest doesn’t just occur at a national level. I’ve had the disturbing experience of working with an elementary school teacher who considered the smartest child in his class a threat to his position of authority. Similarly, I’ve had some very intelligent adult clients who were refused further treatment by their medical doctors because they questioned their doctor’s diagnoses when it conflicted with their subjective experiences of their own bodies. Who are these so-called intelligentsia, and why do the people in power consider them such a threat?

Recently a mature student of mine approached me after class in tears. ‘Sally’ is the mother of boy who is an “A” student, and whose teacher claims he is disruptive in class and anxious to finish his assignments so quickly. He isn’t allowed to help others in his class, and he finds it difficult to simply sit still. Sally told me that the psychologist her son was sent to see called him a delinquent and diagnosed him with ADHD. He is now taking medication to slow him down, and he is often isolated in a room meant to ‘calm him down’. In discussion, Sally and I came to the conclusion that he may simply be a very bright boy trying to cope with a massive case of boredom. But his abnormal intelligence does not fit in well with the ‘norms’ of his class. While the boy is not suffering from anything, it seems clear his teacher is. Unfortunately it is the boy who is being forced to change. When a bright child doesn’t conform to the needs of the teacher for quiet and order in the classroom, it is easier to medicate the child into ‘normalcy’ than to change the classroom environment. To try to help her feel better I mentioned to Sally that about 80% of North American children diagnosed with ADHD are boys (girls tend to have an easier time adapting to the constraints of the classroom structure).

I had a similar experience while doing a semester of philosophy with children. The hand of one boy in class was always up; he was constantly bursting with answers. His teacher hated him. This set the example for his classmates to resent him. His teacher punished him for his eagerness by turning his desk so that he was facing a blank wall.

When I mentioned the topic of intelligence to the hygienist working with my dentist she told me how she had managed to finish her dental studies two weeks earlier than everyone else. But this caused problems for the course administrators. They assumed she had either not completed all the requirements, not done the work properly, or perhaps even cheated. She remembered this experience as the terribly unsettling consequence of “being too smart.”

I have a client who is far more intelligent than I am and approximately half my age. ‘Joy’ has been abandoned by family members, and mistreated by her friends most of her life because of her quick mind. Her current emotional problems are in part the result of her attempt to ‘dumb down’ her own thinking, to stifle her imagination and mental acuity so as not to offend her current friends and drive them away. Part of what I try to give her in our counseling sessions is the opportunity and freedom to be as intelligent as she wants to be - as she actually is - knowing that I’m comfortable being “dumber” than she is, and that she won’t be punished or ridiculed by me for who she is.

During one of our sessions Joy told me that to be truly human you need people to validate you, but there’s no one to validate you when you’re ten years ahead of everyone else.” When others don’t understand you it’s like you don’t exist.

As an intelligent person, Joy told me, you see things quicker than others, you already have answers to problems when others don’t even understand the problem yet. She came to realise that others didn’t want answers because as long as they could say they were suffering with some sort of problem it gave them the excuse to just carry on since they were able to just blame their miserable, messed-up life on ‘the problem.’
She said they would get very angry at her if she pointed out to them what she could see as an obvious solution to their problems.

Joy says being smart makes it difficult to keep friends. She has discovered that some of her past friends are just now beginning to understand what she told them more than ten years ago. She says as an intelligent person it’s difficult to work with professionals. “They don’t hear me; they don’t want to listen to me because they feel threatened by my insights, and the fact that I can clearly understand immediately what it took them years to learn.” Worse than losing friends, she told me, was the time she went to see a psychotherapist and realised she risked being diagnosed as having an over-inflated ego and pathological visions of grandeur. Her intelligence, she said, can easily be professionally diagnosed as a mental illness. I asked her how this made her feel. She said she feels like she is different than other people, disconnected, and lonely; and she often feels frustrated when speaking to someone because she has to wait for that person’s mind to “get up to speed” to where they can finally follow what she is trying to tell them.

Not only must an intelligent individual often endure the pain of the recurring loss of friendships, but when one spouse makes an effort to develop intellectually, by, for example, going back to university to complete a degree, it can even cause their marriage to collapse. Many a marriage has run into difficulties because the passion to develop a dormant intellect has awoken a desire in one partner that is resented by the other.

But what exactly is an intelligent person? It’s not necessarily someone who knows a lot of facts. What makes a person intelligent is not simply a collection of information in the brain. It requires a driving curiosity, as well as the ability to understand pieces of data quickly. This in turn requires a dynamic imagination which enables the person to envision patterns in seemingly unrelated events, to grasp underlying meanings and hidden implications, and to perceive subtle connections between the past and the present. These things in combination give intelligent individuals the ability to see with obvious clarity what others miss, and to predict the probability of events with far greater accuracy than chance would have it. And it’s this ability that has led some of the greatest visionaries in history to the pyre and the gallows.

Intelligence is not only a threat to teachers and politicians; it can also be threatening to therapists and counsellors. Like their medical counterparts, some therapists and counsellors resent and even dislike clients who are well-read in medicine, psychology, philosophy, and related fields. They tremble with fear whenever their client speaks, imagining every question to be a personal attack, a hostile challenge to their diagnostic aptitude and therapeutic expertise. Because of their inner sense of inferiority to an intelligent client, some therapists and counsellors punish those who come to them for comfort by either imposing a traditional power relationship in which the client holds the subordinate position, or by simply driving the client away. Of all the therapeutic modalities I have studied, philosophical counselling is clearly the best able to bring relief to individuals seen by the rest of society as too smart for their own good.

Peter Raabe is the first person in Canada to be granted a Ph.D. based on a dissertation in the area of philosophical counselling. He is the author of Philosophical Counselling: Theory and Practice and Issues in Philosophical Counselling (Greenwood Press/Praeger). He has a private philosophical counselling practice in North Vancouver, Canada, and he teaches courses in philosophy for counsellors at University College of the Fraser Valley (UCFV).

You can visit his website at http://www.interchange.ubc.ca/raabe/.

Email: raabe@interchange.ubc.ca