Book Reviews

ARNOLD, KAREN. (1995). *Lives of Promise: What Becomes of High School Valedictorians.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., hardcover only , $29.95, 330 pp., ISBN 0-7879-0146-6.

Almost 15 years ago, in 1981, Terry Denny and Karen Arnold embarked on the Illinois Valedictorian Study of eighty-one youth who had achieved the ultimate "gold star", the top ranking of their high school graduating class. Having traversed an educational system considered exemplary for its intention to provide high quality, equal educational access to all children, these valedictory youth were especially primed for further academic success and, as the author of this volume states, "Lives of Promise". As we the readers vicariously join in the journey through the eyes of these researchers, we are eager to be reassured that the journey is indeed as noble and valuable, as promising of life-long satisfaction as is the vision of school success many of us have held and continue to hold dear.

As I read, I soon began, however, to experience a sense of unease. Have we as educators, parents and teachers, school planners and administrators, overlooked a critical ingredient in setting appropriate goals for those with outstanding intellectual ability? What have school visionaries overlooked in planning the journey of school? More important, have we miscalculated the rewards we set up to persuade youth to "stay the righteous path" to academic heights? Has the implicit promise of a pot of gold, or at least a vessel filled with the keys to careers unlimited, been based on a flawed premise about motivation? Has the further implicit notion of school achievement, based on the belief in high grades as its critical measure, led youth (or all of us, for that matter) to focus on the wrong outcome in overseeing their learning? Is success recognition through grade ranking an empty promise? Is it possible that outstandingly creative life successes often have come not to those who so diligently sought the grade-point carrot, but to those youth who merely tolerated the system, or even dropped out of the race, if not during high school, during college?

But I digress – we need to look first at the wealth of underlying messages conveyed in Karen Arnold's rendition of Lives of Promise as she and her colleague followed the stories of life after valedictory success for these 81 midwestern youth over the next 15 years of college attempts and early adulthood tasks.

What are the issues examined by Arnold and salient messages extracted from her and Denny's own markedly persistent pursuit of the valedictorians' stories that might make you eager to read this volume? In separate chapters Arnold focuses on nine areas of inquiry, intricately weaving the warp of descriptive narrative and philosophical perspectives with the woof of 18 selected case examples and quotations. In succession, Arnold addresses what being school smart involves, the valedictorians' views of success in life after high school, the nature of early years of college and the "little fish in a big pond" syndrome (i.e., the larger competitive pool), contingency planning as a major gender issue for women but not men, variations in success channels from college to career, critical encounters in the transition between adolescence and adulthood, the reality of the thirty-something years, and the frustrations valedictorians experienced with their previously held belief in achievement as an appropriate life mission. She tops her list with the issue of whether high school valediction fulfills its presumed promise in individuals' lives as a gateway to eminence or actually distracts from the reality of adulthood.

Each of these areas are addressed succinctly yet examined critically. It was my sense that Arnold held the optimistic, "glass half full" perspective for the most part, yet the insights she derived and that readers may construct on their own explore the darker side as well. Arnold has provided readers with much raw material from which to ponder the positive and negative consequences of provisions we as educators have made for youth.

Arnold's work generates a wealth of insights about our current system of school and our attitudes and values regarding the proposed roles of youth in planning and implementing their own educational sequence. There is much to be learned from this study that schools must address if we are to actualize lives of promise, and so many ways in which we in gifted education have foreshadowed the missing ingredients, such as promoting the value of ownership of one's own gifts and becoming creators of new knowledge instead of merely consumers of old. A few of the outstanding insights of Arnold's work should serve to pique your interest.

A first quite obvious one verified by the valedictorians' statements is that valedictory success came only partly because of intelligence and schoolwiseness, but also because of their intensive effort, persistence and drive to achieve. More critical is the realization that families, teachers, rewards and pressures that drove academic performers were fueled by peer competition, with achievement as the sought after mark of respect and admiration of others more than as an intrinsic need. These youth were "bright, motivated, ambitious, responsible, cooperative, hard-working ... also led exceptionally well-rounded lives" (p.275), and remained well-rounded as adults. Arnold reports that while 80 percent of them chose professions with scant possibilities for creative eminence, nearly nine in ten of them do hold professional level positions. Although the remaining 20 percent

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exhibited high potential for intellectual creativity, most have not chosen (nor perhaps been able to find the path) that leads normally to eminence. Given such findings, we are again reminded that Torrance and others who promote creative endeavor do not support "becoming well-rounded" as a pathway to outstandingly creative productivity. Public professional achievement seemed to become a less desirable life mission as they matured and pursued relationships and balance between work and personal fulfillment.

Extensive insights regarding career guidance and the critical need for mentors, mentoring, and more mentoring are sprinkled throughout the book. It becomes quite apparent that mentors have been one of the most overlooked assets, even essential features, of a successful post high school educational pursuit and satisfying career entrance. Other intriguing findings have to do with the connection between race, class and tacit knowledge about the ins and outs of intellectual career pursuit; the lowering of intellectual self concept by over one quarter of the women by their second year of college while men steadily increased their intellectual self ratings; the strong tendency of women but not men to adjust their career plans to accommodate the prospect of parenthood; and the varying direction and width of career paths followed by these 81 in which variables of race, economics, gender, guidance, and self knowledge became critical determiners.

There are a few rather annoying systems of organization in this volume that frequently interrupt the flow of "the story". In an attempt to build separate sections on particular themes, Arnold often takes the reader back and forth through time, revisiting the lives of specific individuals. One is then left with the sense of missing pieces in these particular lives that might, if we could find them again, help us better understand the theme and its effect on them in this circumstance; though, as in spy novels one can learn to accommodate. In addition, the characters with their pseudonyms, who are undoubtedly at this point, so familiar to Arnold that she knows them as old friends, became somewhat of a blur as she consistently assumes we too know whom she is talking about. An abbreviated time line with major referents, for only 18 become individually known in the course of the book, is found in an Appendix Table and was a helpful support.

A second problem with the case examples occurred in the introductory chapter where brief stories of Jonas and Marilyn served as contrast to demonstrate the overarching influence of one's background and family on post-high school educational experiences and career pursuit. Although I think Arnold did not intend to generate a pessimistic mental set for the entire volume, a strong sense of dismay about the limited contribution of school success to success and satisfaction in adult life generated from these examples remained throughout the book.

As an example of inductive data analysis and constructivist research, case study and longitudinal efforts for understanding the dynamic nature of phenomena, Arnold and Denny have executed their interview study well. There are, however, some underlying concerns in a report that vacillates between analyzing the phenomenon of "life as a valedictorian" through individual cases and then generalizing from summative data on the entire 81, replete with statistical significance for differences in questionnaire responses. In the first case, the purposive sampling these researchers did should not have needed the justifications given. Furthermore, as in naturalistic inquiry guidelines and as recognized by Arnold in her note to researchers, it is up to users of the study to extract the generalizations that are most reasonable for the populations and situations with which they themselves are working. In fact, it seems quite presumable that the experiences described as specific to valedictorians, may just as well reflect the varied post school progress and life satisfaction of others who were especially successful academically but did not receive the distinctive valedictorian stamp of approval. In such competition as is set up for academic ranking and in the tenuousness of grade point differences between 4.0 and 4.01 or even 4.001, there are the many also-rans, who surely exhibited equally intensive effort, persistence, drive to achieve, intelligence, and schoolwiseness. In Arnold's defense, her generalizations about the meaning of school success, the contributions that educators (teachers and parents and guidance counselors) did or did not make, the roads not traveled in directing the academic post secondary pursuits of these youth, do make sense for other school-achieving youth. However, we wish that Arnold had engaged in more hypothesis-generating than in her limited closing paragraph, in order to promote the readers' reflections about the questions that remain, or are as yet unasked about lives that remain just as variable and independent of each other now as when they entered the study in 1981.

Nevertheless, the most telling statements of the volume come in the last chapter on "What Really Happens to High School Valedictorians?" when Arnold states "valedictorians achieve their academic honors by accommodating generalist demands in an institutional setting" (p. 287). She adds, "The Illinois Valedictorian Project shows that equating grades and adult career success is a very tricky proposition," particularly when you are from one of the categories of "academically talented women, students of color, and first-generation college students" (p.289). The path becomes quite elusive there apparently is no yellow brick road.

In any case, readers will have to decide whether Arnold's answers are a compliment for the procedures and external rewards we have used to designate success in a child's school learning, or an indictment for our too frequent failures to see the world beyond school, and college,

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career and vocational pursuits as the foci for changes we must make in our educational system. The insights cited in this review are just the tip of the iceberg for what you will find in "Lives of Promise." Arnold has been able to assemble a large amount of information in a format that makes the book very readable. Even though almost every sentence densely packs a main idea into it, the descriptive text is enlivened with the words and happenings of the valedictorians referenced, and organized so that the messages extracted from the data are clearly evident.

"Lives of Promise" is a must read for all educational planners, but especially for teachers, guidance counselors, and parents, because they are the ones who will most quickly be able to transmit to youth its key messages: (a) High school students must earnestly seek wise guides to assist them in monitoring their post secondary educational and career pursuits; as the Music Man would say, "You gotta know the territory!" and managing the system in college and real life is not quite the same as in high school; (b) Intrinsic satisfaction and joy in the *process* of learning are likely to be just as important for *creative* career pursuit and life long satisfaction as the academic grade points which may open doors to scholarships and prestigious schools, but may not always promise a satisfying life mission; and (c) Not emphasized but evident, serendipitous or chance occurrences remain at the forefront in shaping individual lives!

— Reviewed by
Patricia Haensly
Bellingham, WA

MILLAR, G. W. (1995). *The Creativity Man: An Authorized Biography*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex. Cloth, $59.50, ISBN 1-56750-165-6; paper cover, $24.50, ISBN 1-56750-165-4, 387 pp.

In her Foreword to *The Creativity Man*, Mary Frasier highlighted the book's essence well:

> It would appear to be ... impossible to capture the ongoing, lifetime contributions of so eloquent and prolific a scholar as Dr. Ellis Paul Torrance. Yet Dr. Garnet Millar ... has undauntedly managed to capture ... Torrance's life under one cover — no easy task! ... Dr. Millar has presented a comprehensive synthesis of significant periods in Dr. Torrance's life and his passion for the study of creativity — from his beginnings in rural Georgia to his emergence as an eminent scholar, respected and revered worldwide by researchers, teachers, and students."

I would emphasize the word *revered*. The personality of this academic and humanitarian giant is a recurrent theme that never gets tiresome. Consider this sample of descriptions of Paul Torrance: a darling man, accepting, accessible, approachable, caring and selfless demeanor, childlike openness, compassionate to others, concerned, considerate, delightful sense of humor, empathy, earns highest respect/esteem/affection/admiration, even temperament, generous, gentle genius, gracious, great sensitivity, high ethics and courage, humaneness, humility, incredible patience, incredible support and encouragement, infectious delight, inspires others to be the best that they can be, kindness, low-key, modest, never refuses requests, "not mean enough" (as department head), pleasant, quiet strength, quietly enthusiastic, radiates immense love, simplicity, soft-spoken, sweet eyes and smile, thoughtful, tireless mentoring, and warmth second to none. Anyone who has met Paul Torrance will agree with each one of these descriptors. He has earned much love, awe, and respect.

My first draft of this review used the name "Torrance," but it did not work. Like author Millar, I was comfortable only with "Paul."

The text of the book is 243 pages, dividing six periods of his life into chapters.[1] After the text, we find 35 pages of delightful photos divided into the "early," Minnesota, Georgia, and Retirement years. There are four appendixes. Appendix A includes, in 106 pages, a year-by-year account of Paul's publications. Appendix B presents the letter and questionnaire used to solicit comments from former friends, colleagues, and students. Appendix C describes 3 creative factors (based on fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration) and 13 creative strengths (e.g., keep open, visualize, and glimpse infinity). Appendix D contains 15 pages of "Significant Events, Honors and Distinctions ...," from October 8, 1915 (birth) to 1994.

One bothersome problem was the absence of a subject index, although there is a name index.

The Creativity Man obviously was written for anyone interested in a microscopic look at the life of Ellis Paul Torrance. A second benefit stems from the many insights into creativity, largely elaborations of Paul's conclusions about, for example, the nature of the creative personality and the ultimate "beyonders," including comparisons of ace pilots with other high achievers; prerequisites for creative productivity; the philosophy and development of the *Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking* and other Torrance creativity tests; the application of creative thinking principals to senior citizens and persons with learning disabilities; and much more. The book therefore is valuable as a supplementary instructional resource for college students in creativity courses or others pursuing interests and research in creativity or gifted education. For the friends, admirers, colleagues, and disciples of Paul Torrance — as well as all other serious students of creativity — *The Creativity Man* is

[1] The table of contents and the title of Chapter 6 show the retirement years as "1966- Present," which is incorrect. Torrance went to Georgia in 1966 and retired in 1984.

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