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Childhood and Youth of Adrienne von Speyr (1902–1967): A Case Study of Giftedness

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the unique giftedness of the Swiss physician and mystic Adrienne von Speyr (1902–1967) during her childhood and youth. The following research issues are addressed: 1) the research method and biographical sources on von Speyr, 2) a holistic portrait of her, 3) her early years, 4) the three-ring conception of giftedness as a fitting theoretical framework, and 5) an exploration of Adrienne's case using Renzulli's three-ring concept. Case study based on a content analysis of biographical sources was the adopted research method. The context of the research is interest in Adrienne von Speyr as a woman endowed with unique qualities and a unique mission in the Church. This general interest inspired the research into her childhood and youth, when some of these qualities were already present. The argumentation process involved analyzing sources and citing content relevant to the theoretical framework. The research confirms von Speyr's giftedness in her childhood and youth and delineates its characteristics. We can conclude that her early talents and gifts are in themselves worthy of interest and that they may inspire further research on her life and work in general.

Keywords: Adrienne von Speyr, giftedness, childhood, youth, the three-ring conception of giftedness, Renzulli

Introduction

Adrienne von Speyr was an accomplished Swiss physician and a Christian mystic. After meeting Hans Urs von Balthasar, she converted to Catholicism at the age of 38. She later founded Saint John's Community, which, at the time of its foundation, was a new form of Catholic life. She published 60 books. In 1985, a symposium dedicated to von Speyr and her mission was organized in Rome with the support of Pope John Paul II, who was personally interested in her theology and who delivered a speech to the symposium's participants (von Balthasar et al., 1986, pp. 12, 181–182). Another, more recent Vatican Symposium entitled "Adrienne von Speyr: A Woman at the Heart of the Twentieth Century" was held in 2017 (Servais, 2021; Woźniak, 2017).

Today, Casa Balthasar in Rome is the center of formation and academic research inspired by the work of Adrienne von Speyr, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Henri de Lubac. It was founded and is directed by Father Jacques Servais SJ, who himself had been deeply affected by Adrienne von Speyr's writings (Servais, 2022).

In keeping with the leading theme of this issue, I focus on delineating Adrienne von Speyr's special profile of giftedness in childhood and youth, as it emerges principally from her biography *My Early Years*, depicting her life from her birth until the age of 26 years, when she passed her medical state exams and became a physician. However, I start by providing a general portrait of von Speyr to explain the interest in her in the first place.

The method selected for this study is a content analysis of the existing biographical texts from the perspective of the three-ring conception of giftedness. The texts were either written by von Speyr at the behest of von Balthasar or were obtained as a result of the specific interviews von Balthasar conducted with her. From this vantage point, the paper is a biographical case study which aspires to profile Adrienne's giftedness. As an example of life story research, it is specific rather than general, idiographic rather than nomothetic, hermeneutic rather than positivist, and qualitative rather than quantitative (Goodley et al., 2004).

The primary sources regarding von Speyr's childhood and youth were produced in her mature adulthood, after she converted to Catholicism in 1940 under the influence of von Balthasar, who became her confessor and spiritual director. He insisted that she write a memoir covering her early years. Adrienne actually wrote a partial autobiography between 1945 and the early 1950s, called *My Early Years* (von Speyr, 1995), which encompassed her childhood and young adulthood up to the age of 24 (1902–1926).

The second basic primary source is von Speyr's second partial autobiography, *Geheimnis der Jugend* [The Mystery of Youth] (Speyr, 1966). This autobiography itself was written in 1947 and covers the period until 1940. The memoir in question is unique in terms of the method in which the interviews were conducted. Hans Urs von Balthasar, as von Speyr's confessor, ordered her under obedience to return to the various stages of her earlier life, such as childhood and adolescence; he thus managed to receive a firsthand, immediate report of her past experiences. In this way, he also became a companion of her youthful Protestant years. The most striking discovery which this method produced was the fact that as a child Adrienne communicated daily with an angel, which she had not recalled when writing her conventional autobiography (*My Early Years*). Thanks to von Speyr's more immediate contact with the earlier periods, the accounts obtained through these interviews are, in some aspects at least, far more detailed than her autobiography.

Another primary source is von Balthasar's *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr* (1986), where, in Part I – in the chapters from “Early Youth” through “Study of Medicine” – he summarizes von Speyr's memoirs pertaining to her childhood and youth. Part II of the very same volume contains “Statements of Adrienne von Speyr About Herself,” valuable additional autobiographical material that is arranged thematically rather than chronologically (von Balthasar, 1986).

As for secondary sources, most texts on Adrienne von Speyr begin with a brief biographical section (Sutton, 2014; Żyła, 2021). There are also some biographies of her available (e.g., Bagnoud, 2018).

1. General Portrait of Adrienne von Speyr and Her Early Years

1.1. von Speyr's Character and Mission

Hans Urs von Balthasar, the most privileged witness of von Speyr's external and internal life, who collaborated with her for 20 years and shared a house with her for 15 years, highlights three dominant features of her personality. He claims that Adrienne's joyousness, cheerfulness, and outstanding sense of humor meant that she loved surprises and adventure. She had a vivacious temperament, a great interest in everything, and unceasing enthusiasm. Her second feature was her courage: She did not fear other people and was ready to confront them when necessary. In her relationship with God, she offered herself to Him courageously, without fear or reservations, even if it meant suffering Christ's passion and descent to hell. Thirdly, she always remained a child, full of memories from her early life. In dealing with God and her confessor, she was invariably sincere and trusting, though when she was responsible for others she sometimes needed to be firm or even manly (von Balthasar, 1986, Part I, "Life, Mission and Work ...," "I. The Life, Her Character," paras. 2–4).

A crucial aspect of Adrienne's personality and mission was her mystical graces. They included contact with the saints – first of all Mary, then Saint Ignatius Loyola, John Apostle, little Therese, John Mary Vianney and others – who provided her with a sense of direction. She was also "transported" to various places, where her imperceptible presence was needed. Some of her patients were miraculously cured due to her intercession. The other side of the coin was her connection with Christ's suffering, which included visible stigmata. This phenomenon occurred regularly on Good Friday and Holy Saturday (von Balthasar, 1986, Part I, "Life, Mission and Work ...," "The Life, The New Graces," paras. 1–4). Apart from her mystical sufferings, von Speyr suffered greatly from various natural illnesses throughout her entire life: tuberculosis, heart attack, diabetes, arthritis, and blindness. She also often did penance for others, which was sometimes excessive and had to be mitigated by her spiritual director.

Adrienne was able to integrate her rich mystical world with her intense professional activity. Her work as a doctor was at its peak in the 1930s

(lasting until 1954) and was enormously fruitful. As far as her family life is concerned, Adrienne was married twice, first to Emil Dürr (1927–1934) and then to Werner Kaegi (1936–1967), who outlived her. During her first marriage, she suffered three miscarriages and had no children of her own, but she became a mother to Emil Dürr's two sons.

Her main mission, however, was to found (together with von Balthasar) Saint John's Community, a secular institute based on evangelical counsels, which she called her "Child" (von Balthasar, 1994, "B. Our Common ...," "1: Adrienne's Early View ...," para. 3). The institute came into being in 1945 and is comprised of three branches: one for priests and two for laypeople engaged in secular professions – with separate branches for men and women. The Community has two patrons: Mary and John the Apostle, whose mutual relationship is at the core of its spirituality (von Balthasar et al., 1986). As von Balthasar (1994) put it, "the community ... was meant to be guided into this primordial cell of the Church, the unity of Mary and John" ("B. Our Common ...," "1: Adrienne's Themes," para. 2).

Adrienne dictated her 60 books to Hans Urs, who took the dictation in shorthand before transcribing the books and seeing to their publication in Johannes Verlag, a publishing house created specifically for this purpose. The majority of Adrienne's oeuvre is formed by biblical commentaries. The 12 volumes of the more obviously charismatic works were titled *Nachlasswerke* [Posthumous Works]; access to them is still partly restricted. To provide an overview of the thematic scope of her books, von Balthasar singles out eleven fundamental themes in them: 1) obedience, 2) incarnation, 3) confession, 4) childhood, 5) theology of mysticism, 6) apocalypse, 7) prayer, 8) primary numbers, and three that form the heart of the mission: 9) passions, 10) descent into hell, and 11) the doctrine of the Trinity (von Balthasar, 2008). All in all, Adrienne's work has a breathtaking range and depth.

1.2. von Speyr's Childhood and Youth

In response to von Balthasar's query (1986) about the greatest mysteries in her life, Adrienne first mentions "the great mystery of childhood and youth" ("Statements ... About Herself," "The Three Great Graces ...," para. 1). In *Handmaid of the Lord*, von Speyr (2017) states that "childhood

is always a preparatory gathering up of the self for the decisive engagement that will come later" ("The Light of Assent," para. 2). To fit the journal's thematic line, this paper focuses on Adrienne's childhood and youth. Drawing chiefly on her *My Early Years*, von Balthasar's *First Glance ...* (1986), and the chronological table provided by Magdalena Żyła (2017), I present a succinct account of Adrienne's childhood and youth.

Adrienne von Speyr was born on September 20, 1902 in La Chaux-de-Fonds in the Swiss Jura Mountains. Her father, Theodor von Speyr, was an ophthalmologist; her mother, Laure Girard, came from a family of watchmakers and jewelers. Adrienne's father sometimes took her to the hospital with him so that she could visit sick children. She had an older sister, Helen (born 1901), and two younger brothers, Wilhelm (born 1905) and Theodor (born 1913). She also spent a great deal of time with her grandmother in her villa, "The Lindens," until the grandmother's death on Christmas Day in 1913. Adrienne usually spent her vacations at the Waldau, a mental hospital near Bern, where her uncle, Professor Wilhelm von Speyr, was director and had an apartment. He allowed her, from her earliest years, to have contact with the patients in the asylum, seeing that she had a calming effect on them.

As for her institutional education, she started her preschool education in 1908 in Mademoiselle Robert's private school in La Chaux-de-Fonds. In 1910, she enrolled in the public primary school in La Chaux-de-Fonds, along with her sister Helen. She sometimes substituted for her teacher, Mademoiselle Hammel, who suffered from asthma. Since she decided very early on that she wanted to become a physician, after graduating from primary school in 1914, she went to the *Progymnasium* (secondary school) in La Chaux-de-Fonds, where she continued to be at the top of her class. However, two years later (in 1916), Adrienne's mother forced her to move to the advanced girl's school in La Chaux-de-Fonds, claiming that she was not fit for the profession of physician. It was actually very rare at that time for women to become medical doctors. In spite of this setback, Adrienne studied Greek at night in order to keep abreast with the material covered in the *Gymnasium*. When her father discovered that fact, he allowed her to return to the *Gymnasium*, starting in the spring of 1917.

Unfortunately, Theodor von Speyr died in February 1918. After her husband's death, Adrienne's mother dismissed the housemaid, meaning that Adrienne had to do all the housekeeping in addition to taking commercial courses in the business school – while also continuing with her *Gymnasium* studies. It turned out to be too great a burden and caused her health to break down: She developed tuberculosis in both lungs. In the summer of 1918, Adrienne was placed in a sanatorium in Langenbruck. Her doctor told her she would not live to the following spring. Having spent three months in Langenbruck, in October 1918 Adrienne was transferred to Leysin, a famous, modern sanatorium in the Alps, where her treatment was financed and supervised remotely by her cousin, Charlotte Oliver, a medical doctor herself. There she gradually recovered until she could leave the place in July 1920. Due to her poor health, a medical career seemed beyond her reach at that point. Consequently, in September 1920 she moved to Saint-Loup Hospital, which was run by deaconesses, to study nursing. In December 1920, she suffered another collapse and underwent treatment at the Waldau until August 1921, supervised by her uncle Wilhelm. This finally cured her of tuberculosis.

In the meantime, her family moved to Basel, which meant a change from a French-speaking area to a German-speaking one. In August 1921, Adrienne – who barely spoke German – started the girls' *Gymnasium* in Basel. After she graduated in 1923, she started studying medicine against her mother's will. Her uncle refused to pay her tuition, so she had to teach up to 20 lessons per week to pay for her studies. In 1927, she married Professor Emil Dürr, a widower with two sons. In 1928, she passed her government board certification exams, and finally began her own medical practice in Basel in 1931.

2. The Question of Adrienne's Giftedness

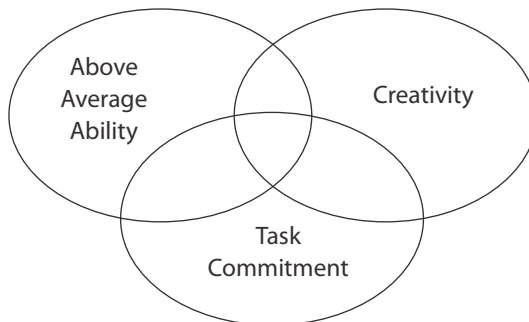
2.1. The Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness

The literature on giftedness research is copious and constantly growing. However, we can single out some popular theoretical models of giftedness, such as Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences,

Francoys Gagné's (1985) differentiated model of giftedness and talent, Robert J. Sternberg's pentagonal implicit theory of giftedness (Sternberg & Zhang, 1995), his later theory of successful intelligence (Sternberg, 2011), and Joseph Renzulli's three-ring conception of giftedness (Renzulli, 1978, 2010, 2011; Renzulli & Reis, 1997, 2014, 2018), which has become extremely popular and widely used among both theorists and practitioners in the field. In comparison with other theories, Renzulli's model is less technical and more humanistic. He does not identify giftedness with high IQ scores, instead taking it as a broader concept and preferring to speak of gifted behavior rather than gifted individuals. The starting point of his conception is the following definition and its accompanying graphic illustration:

Gifted behavior consists of behaviors that reflect an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits – above-average ability, high levels of task commitments, and high levels of creativity. Individuals capable of developing this composite set of gifted behaviors are those possessing or capable of developing this composite set of traits and applying them to any potential valuable area of human performance. (Renzulli & Reis, 1997, p. 8)

Figure 1. Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness



According to Renzulli (1978), research shows that no single cluster of traits is sufficient to ensure giftedness; what is necessary for creative or productive performance is the interaction between the three clusters

depicted in Figure 1: above-average ability, task commitment, and creativity. Renzulli also highlights the equal status of each respective cluster of traits.

To make the three rings more concrete, let us also cite Renzulli's taxonomy of behaviors:

Taxonomy of Behavioral Manifestations of Giftedness According to Renzulli's Three-Ring Definition of Gifted Behaviors:

Above-average ability, General

- High levels of abstract thought
- Adaptation to novel situations
- Rapid and accurate retrieval of information

Above-average ability, Specific

- Applying general abilities to a specific area of knowledge
- Capacity to sort relevant from irrelevant information
- Capacity to acquire and use advanced knowledge and strategies while pursuing a problem

Task commitment

- Capacity for high levels of interest/enthusiasm
- Hard work and determination in a particular area
- Self-confidence and drive to achieve
- Ability to identify significant problems within an area of study
- Setting high standards for one's work

Creativity

- Fluency, flexibility, and originality of thought
- Openness to new experiences and ideas
- Curiosity
- Willingness to take risks
- Sensitivity to aesthetics (Renzulli, 2002, p. 70)

In this model, above-average ability, which includes both general and specific ability, refers to the top 15% to 20% of performance in various areas of human endeavor. Task commitment signifies energy focused

on a particular problem or performance area. Creativity represents a talent for generating interesting and practical ideas (Renzulli, 2002, p. 72).

I decided to use Renzulli's three-ring model of giftedness to explore von Speyr's case. The research questions were 1) Can giftedness be attributed to Adrienne? and 2) If so, what is the particular profile of Adrienne's giftedness? First, we need to establish whether Adrienne as a child and as a young person displayed the three kinds of traits. As we know, the interplay of these three qualities produces giftedness. We will seek evidence of these traits in the (auto)biographical sources mentioned in the Introduction.

2.2. Above-Average Ability

Let us begin with Adrienne's above-average ability. Her autobiography, *My Early Years*, provides abundant evidence to corroborate the hypothesis that she possessed it. The opening sentences of the chapter entitled "Primary School" is a fascinating read: "School never brought me anything but joy. I do not believe I was ever bored there; I loved the lessons as much as recess; it all enchanted me, I went from discovery to discovery" (von Speyr, 1995, Part I, "Primary School," para. 1). As we can see, Adrienne was very enthusiastic about school and had an open, inquiring mind. She already knew how to read and write when she started, so she directed her thirst for knowledge towards her schoolmates; she had to know everything about their likes and dislikes, as well as about their siblings. She helped her asthmatic teacher by reading aloud to the class, giving dictations, and correcting the slates (von Speyr, 1995, Part I, "Primary School," para. 7). However, in describing her last two years of primary school, Adrienne claims that the curriculum was too easy for her and she started to get bored (von Speyr, 1995, Part I, "The Last Two Years ...," para. 1).

The next step of Adrienne's education was the *Progymnasium*, starting in 1914. This was a two-year preparatory program that led to the *Gymnasium*, which ended in the *Matura* exam needed to enter medical studies. The school was very formal; most of the students were boys. Every subject was taught by a different teacher. Here again, we can read about Adrienne's enthusiastic reaction to her first day in a new school:

“That morning, I went from discovery to discovery, I mean, from delight to delight. It seemed to me that I was starting a whole new life” (von Speyr, 1995, Part I, “The *Progymnasium*,” para. 2). Due to Adrienne’s illness, she started school two weeks later than the other students. With the help of her classmate Charles Wolf, by the end of the first week Adrienne already had top marks in both German and Latin. She writes: “I considered everything to be fabulously interesting. I had a real joy, almost a fever for learning. I also began to read a lot, and again it was Charles who helped me in my choice of reading” (von Speyr, 1995, Part I, “The *Progymnasium*,” para. 3).

Adrienne’s friendship with her classmates, Charles Wolf and Charles-Henri Barbier, proved to be very inspiring: they kept discussing ideas and were always at the top of their class. Adrienne is even more specific here, explaining that Charles-Henri was always third, while she and Charles alternated as first and second (von Speyr, 1995, Part I, “The *Progymnasium*,” paras. 8–9). Her favorite subjects were Latin, French, and mathematics.

When Adrienne resumed studying in the Basel girls’ secondary school after her serious health troubles (including tuberculosis), she was a year older than her classmates and she lavished them with maternal affection. She was struck with the difference between the *Gymnasium* in La Chaux-de-Fonds, where students were treated like adults, and the girls’ school, which was based on strict discipline and whose students had no opportunity to demonstrate their maturity to their teachers. Adrienne also found a lack of cohesion in the curriculum. Since her English classes were badly taught, she asked a teacher friend of the family to tutor her and studied very hard for three weeks. The six-week probation period concluded successfully. Then Adrienne signed up for piano lessons with a famous director, Munch, committing herself to practicing three hours a day. She also missed philosophy and religion classes, which would help her overcome the overall disconnectedness between the various subjects. She tried to read some philosophy on her own, but to little effect. However, she attended a lecture on Plato which impressed her and she later discussed it with the speaker, Heinrich Barth. As a result, they became friends (von Speyr, 1995, Part II, “The Basel Girls’ Secondary School ...,” para. 8.)

I believe that these examples form a compelling case for von Speyr's above-average ability. The *Progymnasium's* system of ranking the students on a weekly basis and the fact that Adrienne consistently placed first or second can be treated as the equivalent of an IQ test which regularly placed Adrienne in the top 4% (since there were 51 students in her class). The fact that she readily substituted for her teacher, with joy instead of stress, also confirms that she surpassed her peers in ability. She was able to catch up with the backlog caused by her severe and prolonged illnesses and she was able to simultaneously study and work.

2.3. Task Commitment

Adrienne had a very clear purpose from a very early age: She was determined to become a doctor. As a child, she pretended to be a surgeon with her dolls. At the age of 12, after graduating from primary school, Adrienne's future professional career required concrete educational decisions. The ordinary path for girls, one that Adrienne's mother envisaged for her as well, was to go to the secondary school for girls and become a teacher. However, in order to become a doctor – an almost exclusively male profession at the time – Adrienne had to attend *Gymnasium* (starting from *Progymnasium*), which was essentially only for boys. This was already an act of courage and a very serious commitment on her part. Fortunately, her father, a doctor himself, understood and supported her desire. He even invited a medical student to give Adrienne an opportunity to talk with and learn from, which proved a momentous experience for Adrienne, as she understood that medicine is living science, that is to say living in God (von Speyr, 1995, Part I, "The Last Two Years ...," paras. 27–29, 34).

Following through on this initial decision required great commitment, considering all the adversity she faced on her way. Consequently, task commitment is the quality in which Adrienne probably excelled the most. In 1916, at the end of the *Progymnasium*, her mother succeeded in manipulating her to move to the advanced girls' school instead of continuing with the *Gymnasium*. However, her father promised her that he would move her back to the *Gymnasium* if she felt unhappy (von Speyr, 1995, Part I, "The Second Year ...," last para.).

The quality of teaching at the girls' school was much poorer, so Adrienne was terribly bored there. However, after consulting with the school director, her father decided to leave Adrienne there for a year on a trial basis and on account of her health problems. At Christmastime in 1916, she bought a Greek grammar book and started studying Greek and Latin at night to keep up with her *Gymnasium* classmates. When her father discovered this, his decision came quickly: Adrienne would return to the *Gymnasium* starting from the next semester (February 1917).

Adrienne's return to the *Gymnasium* was triumphant: She was now the only girl to survive up to that point. However, not everything was so glorious:

I had to begin to work seriously, for the year spent with the girls had taught me no mathematics, no Greek, no Latin, no literature. I had indeed theoretically caught up on Greek in a way; however, I had missed the drills, and for the first time I knew at close hand what hard work means: but the boys really helped me. (von Speyr, 1995, Part I, "The Fourth Year . . .," para. 1)

The Greek teacher, Detling, helped her by devoting her some extra time after each lesson. Monsieur Rossel, the French and Latin teacher, was the best Adrienne had ever had, which motivated her and her classmates to work hard. They read a lot of classics at school and wrote fairly good compositions on abstract subjects.

This happy time was soon marred by the death of Adrienne's father, which not only meant losing an understanding soul, but also undermined her family's financial security. Adrienne was forced by her mother to do all the housekeeping in addition to studying, as well as taking business courses to be able to make a living.

I always got up before 4:00 A.M.; when the lights in the post office were lit at four, I was cleaning the dining room, in which I slept; the next room was a sort of living room; Mama and the baby slept next to the courtyard. In the evenings, I did homework until very late; besides French, German, Greek,

and Latin, I now had English, Italian, and Hebrew; and a lot of mathematics (von Speyr, 1995, Part I, "Tuberculosis ...," para. 1)

Adrienne did not give up her *Gymnasium* in spite of this excessive workload, but as we already know from Section 2, it eventually ended with a serious case of tuberculosis, which was at first treated in Langenbruck, and then in the alpine sanatorium in Leysin. Here is her short account of the education she got there:

I spent ten months at the Chalet Espérance; they figured among the loveliest months of my youth. As a rule, every morning from eight until noon, I went to the Vermont clinic, where I followed a sort of *Gymnasium* course with Max and Mé-Li Bouët. Our instructor, an Alsatian named Monsieur Graf, taught us all the subjects, from Greek to mathematics, going through philosophy, geography, history, Latin, and I don't know what else; he was very conscientious and always very well prepared. I was a dreadful student, because the fever very often kept me from going out in the mornings. (von Speyr, 1995, Part I, "Back in Leysin," para. 4)

At the end of the spring, her cousin Charlotte, a medical doctor, visited Adrienne and examined her thoroughly. Charlotte concluded that she was not well enough to continue with the plan of becoming a doctor. Therefore, Adrienne decided to become a nurse, keeping as close to her original intention as possible. This was one of the toughest moments in her youth, in which her plans seemed to have been thwarted. She responded in the most tenacious and resilient way possible under the circumstances: by engaging all the physical strength she still had to help the patients.

In September 1920, she arrived at Saint-Loup Hospital, where she was meant to study nursing. It was a religious institution, run by deaconesses. Adrienne was there as a volunteer, but the order of the day for her was the same as for the novices – and it was absolutely exhausting.

She fell ill again and again, and soon left the place altogether. So it seemed that she would not be a nurse, either. It took another eight months, from December 1920 until August 1921, to recover from her illness at the Waldau. Then she was ready to resume her plan of becoming a Christian doctor.

Her family moved to Basel, where her father's family had lived. Adrienne enrolled there in the girls' secondary school, although she spoke little German. Due to her prolonged illness, she had serious gaps in her knowledge, but she was provisionally accepted. The rector was impressed by her courage and by the fact that she had come to the school all by herself (von Speyr, 1995, Part II, "The Basel Girls' Secondary School . . .," para. 4).

Adrienne loved music, languages, mathematics, and history, taught by Rector Barth. However, as the final exams were nearing, she understood that she had to give up music to focus on medicine. This readiness to give up valuable but distracting activities in order to focus on the principal task is also a clear sign of a high level of task commitment.

After unsuccessful attempts to elicit her uncle's support for her medical studies, she nevertheless registered at the university of Basel and asked her friend – Georgine Gerhard, a secretary at the school – to find her students for private lessons. This demonstrates her resilience and creativity in problem-solving. Her aunt Jeanne put it aptly: "I think you are tenacious enough to succeed" (von Speyr, 1995, Part II, "The Beginning of Medical School . . .," para. 14).

Adrienne was very disciplined in her self-study, which took up most of her time in the course of medical studies. She imposed on herself a fixed schedule. In the morning, she went to the library and started with a physiology textbook:

I read without a break, line for line, page by page; made supplementary drawings, calculated calories, and composed chemical equations. After finishing the physiology text, I moved on to Corning, with its splendid and illuminating pictures and concise, very clear text. In the afternoons I regularly worked two hours at home with my microscope and also went to the anatomy

demonstration room, where skeletons and portions of skeletons were available for students to study. (von Speyr, 1995, Part II, "The Second *Prope Nears ...*," para. 2)

In spite of her efforts, she noticed that she would retain little of what she studied in the morning, as she was overtired from tutoring. This discouraged her, but she continued, not knowing any better solution. It was only when she went to the holiday chalet "Naz" in the vicinity of Klosters and revised anatomy, topography of the brain and the nervous system, and embryology that she found the material cohesive, logical, and easy to retain. So she observed aptly that studying in nature, "under the firs" is the best way to learn. In spite of the overwhelming amount of information she had to absorb, she finally passed her exams in September, although her grades were not impressive. To sum up, Adrienne's task commitment was demonstrated by her disciplined study despite opposition from her mother, the lack of support from her uncle, and her own poor health.

2.4. Creativity

The third "ring" in Renzulli's conception of giftedness is creativity. It is demonstrated by fluency, flexibility, originality of thought, openness to new experiences and ideas, curiosity, willingness to take risks, and sensitivity to aesthetics (Renzulli, 2002, p. 70). We can add a rich imagination to the list. Let us now look for these traits in Adrienne's life.

In early childhood, creativity is best measured by the games the child plays. Adrienne was not very fond of family games with her mother and her father; she preferred playing with her dolls or reading. Her grandmother's house and garden, called Les Tilleuls [The Lindens], was a paradise for Adrienne. There she played hide-and-seek with other children, but was also able to enjoy silence, watching the snowflakes fall. Adrienne played a lot with her siblings: She and her sister Helen played with dolls, when her younger brother Willy had to act as the father of their dolls. The elder sisters competed for the privilege of having him as a husband by giving him erasers, sharpened pencils, or pictures. Then, Adrienne withdrew from these competitions and went on to simply play with her dolls.

She cared especially for her older, damaged dolls, which she tended, bandaged, and operated on. She was a surgeon, so she needed an anesthesiologist, and Willy voluntarily acted as one (von Speyr, 1995, Part I, "Les Tilleuls," paras. 1–3; "Willy," para. 1). Later, she would perform "operations" on her cousins instead of on her dolls, with the help of her elder sister (von Speyr, 1995, Part I, "Bellevue," para. 8).

She compares herself to her sister, recognizing that her own life was somehow richer (more gifted) than her sister's:

My life had a kind of richness and hers, a kind of poverty (to express this in the words of grownups). It was as though less were given to Helen. When we were playing with the cow or the horse, for instance, or even with two little stones or blades of grass, I was always completely occupied, never bored. I would braid a crown, for example, from the grass: it was the crown of my God. Or the winner would get the crown when we played "war" with the little stones clashing against each other in battle. Or the blades of grass would become the food for the Lord's sheep. And you had to consider into how many parts to divide it so that all of them would receive something. Or you made soup for everybody out of it. This is how it was. But Helen was invariably finished with the game and needed something more, something new. She was helpless. Everything had to be explained to her: "No, a stone really isn't a king," she would say. (von Balthasar, 1986, Part II: "Statements ... About Herself," 7, para. 1)

This sense of richness is a sign of Adrienne's deeper, more sustained imagination, greater creativity, and ability to conjure up an imaginary, fanciful world. One surprising case of Adrienne's creativity was a talk on the Jesuits and the value of truth and mental reservation, which she delivered as a nine-year-old to some older schoolmates in her primary school. It is surprising because she did not have any books on saints or any materials on Catholic theology (von Speyr, 1995, Part I, "Year 1911," para. 10). As von Balthasar explains in an endnote:

When Adrienne wrote this autobiography, she no longer had a vivid recollection of her meeting with Saint Ignatius at Christmas in 1908 (an account of which has been inserted above). It was only at the time she wrote her second autobiography – since she was transported, by virtue of obedience, to the days of her youth – that she recalled this meeting and put it in writing, as reproduced here. For the same reason, the present autobiography contains no mention of the little girl's encounters with the angel. (von Speyr, 1995, Part I, "Year 1911," para. 10, endnote 1)

In other words, this mysterious event is explained by the knowledge Adrienne acquired in her mystical contact with Saint Ignatius or with her angel.

Another event in the religious domain took place at the beginning of her secondary school, when she wrote an essay entitled "Les Préjugés" [Prejudices]. It included criticism of the way religion lessons were taught, particularly the lack of discussion of other religions, which narrowed the students' purview (von Balthasar, 1986, Part I, "Life, Mission and Work ...," "I. The Life, Early Youth," para. 4). We can call it creative because it was not inspired by any social influence she experienced.

There are more examples of Adrienne's creativity expressed in talking with her peers. While she was staying in the alpine sanatorium in Leysin, she was invited by the girl patients from the convalescent home "Esperance" to give weekly lectures and bring some life into their monotonous daily routine. Adrienne accepted this invitation with pleasure and went there six or eight times. Some of her talks were titled "Obedience and Freedom," "Truth and Its Degrees," "The Right to Think," "Dostoyevski," and "Raison d'être." Apart from the girls, her listeners also included some workers, young nurses, and students (von Speyr, 1995, Part I, "Leysin ...," para. 5).

Renzulli mentions flexibility as a trait that belongs to the creativity cluster. The best example of this quality in Adrienne was her decision to become a nurse when becoming a doctor seemed out of her reach (von Speyr, 1995, Part I, "Back in Leysin," para. 13). As we already know, there was another twist of fate in Adrienne's life and it turned out that she was

able to start her medical studies after all. Adrienne's ability to find a source of income when her uncle refused to cover her university fees also bears witness to her creativity. She got the idea to ask her friend, Georgine Gerhard, a secretary at the school, to find her students for private lessons. This successful idea provided her with 15 to 20 lessons each week (von Speyr, 1995, Part II, "The Beginning of Medical School ...," para. 14). Adrienne's memoirs contain more similar examples, but those cited above provide enough evidence of her creativity.

Conclusion

The above analysis of biographical sources on Adrienne von Speyr's childhood and youth demonstrates that she was characterized by above-average abilities, task commitment, and creativity. Therefore, she can be credited with giftedness according to Renzulli's model. However, the model itself does not explain what was the driving force behind her commitment to become a doctor or why she became a sought-after and respected doctor in the end.

Adrienne herself claims that she was moved by the helplessness of others: her father's ophthalmic patients, those who limped or used a cane, or psychiatric patients in her uncle's clinic. She had great role models in her father, her uncle, and De Quervain – all three medical doctors – who instilled in her a love for the sick (von Balthasar, 1986, Part II, "Statements ... About Herself," 7).

Her motivation also had a strong religious foundation: She wanted to devote herself to God and to people by taking on their suffering. Moreover, she understood her determination to become a doctor as an act of obedience to God (von Balthasar, 1994, "I, Report," "A. The Ways of Access," "1. Adrienne's Path ...," para. 3). As we can see, the unique profile of Adrienne's giftedness is shaped by her human compassion and its underlying religious motivation. She became a compassionate doctor, focused entirely on the good of her patients. This compassion was obviously deepened by her own experience of natural and mystical suffering.

Giftedness is an important concept in contemporary pedagogical research. The historical case study we offer here is a modest contribution to the field. Many aspects of Adrienne's richly endowed personality remain relevant despite the passage of a century. At the same time, we need to keep in mind that the concept of "giftedness" is far from encompassing the richness of Adrienne von Speyr's personality. Therefore, it is definitely worth undertaking further research into the life and works of this fascinating woman in order to paint a richer, more holistic portrait of her – one that would not be reduced to only the dimension of her talent or to only her childhood and youth.

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