SUICIDE AND THE GIFTED ADOLESCENT:

A PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSY

by

LAURIE ALISON HYATT

(Under the Direction of Bonnie Cramond)

ABSTRACT

In this qualitative case study focusing on a gifted adolescent female who took her life at the age of 18 using a firearm, the researcher investigated the personal, environmental, and cultural variables that may have contributed to her suicide. Data was collected from interviews, documents, and other artifacts, including a videotape which was a compilation of events throughout Amber's life. This was a psychological autopsy in which the thoughts, feelings, and actions of a brilliant yet tormented young female were studied after her death by suicide. The purpose was to determine what factors led her to end her pain by choosing death over life. Some of the findings were similar to previous research findings on 1) the etiology of suicide in major theories, 2) the social and emotioinal issues faced by gifted adolescents, and 3) the findings of previous psychological autopsies of gifted adolescents. Themes discovered from this research study were crystallized into five major themes, including bullying, nonconformity, lack of trust, fears, and low self-esteem. Within these major themes, specific findings concerned individual traits, environmental factors, and the historical and cultural context. Individual characteristics such as high intelligence, creativity, unconventionality, perfectionism, and idealism were described. Environmental factors including being bullied, relationship difficulties leading to

feelings of alienation, and lack of trust in adults seemed to be contributors to the suicide of this gifted female. Cultural influences, including the stresses of having high achievement goals, the pressure to conform, and some of the music of the 70's, 80's, and 90's were considered in the overall description of Amber's life and the formulation of her perceptions. Arranging life events in chronological order added to the clarity of the findings. Implications include recommendations for further research on traits and cultural messages which increase vulnerability to suicide in gifted adolescents.

INDEX WORDS: Suicide, Gifted, Adolescents, Adolescent females, Perfectionism, Bullying, High Achievement, Psychological Autopsy, Case Study, Stress, Vulnerability.

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DEDICATION

To Amber.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My work has been supported by many. Thank you to my committee chair, Bonnie Cramond. You not only were a mentor and a zealous editor, but also brought nurturance by preparing delicious meals to accompany long strategy sessions. I have also been blessed with committee members, Thomas Hebert, Elizabeth St.Pierre, and Tracy Cross. All of my committee members are true scholars themselves. You have been positive, inspiring guides who I knew really cared about the excellence of the finished product and also led me through the research process as well. You all bring gifts and talents to the table, but most important of all, you bring warm and caring hearts. Many times as I immersed myself in the joy of discovery, I thought of how fortunate I am to have you pushing me forward.

I was also fortunate to work with Amber's parents who deeply love their daughter and have worked alongside me to give Amber a voice. I was welcomed into their home and had the privilege of access to documents and other artifacts which had been carefully stored. Not only do Amber's parents yearn to understand their daughter's death, but they are committed to suicide prevention and to the support of grieving families.

My family and friends have been interested in my work and have patiently understood my frequent periods of isolation when I was behind closed doors with stacks of papers and my computer rather than spending time with them. You have been my cheerleaders and for that I am grateful. I am truly blessed.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There are men too gentle to live among wolves
Who devour them with eager appetite and search
For other men to prey upon and suck their childhood dry.
There are men too gentle for an accountant's world
Who dream instead of Easter eggs and fragrant grass
And search for beauty in the mystery of the sky.
James Kavanaugh, 1970.

The issue of suicide is personal for me. On March 15, 1999, my son, Trey, took

his life. He was only thirteen years old and in the eighth grade. Trey was intellectually

and artistically gifted. An analytical thinker, he often made sophisticated philosophical

statements and asked penetrating questions. He attended gifted classes. He played first

chair saxophone in the band at his middle school. He went to state finals in math. Yet I

cannot tell you how many times he told me that he hated school. On the day that he died,

he was making jokes about the television program South Park and working on his

drawings between classes at school. That afternoon, he got off the school bus, walked his

dog, brought the mail in the house, and then shot himself in the head.

My world came crashing down that day. In the next weeks and months I searched

Internet sites for clues that might explain the meaning of Trey's suicide. Since my son

spent a great deal of time on the computer, I attended a presentation at Georgia State

University in Atlanta, Georgia, by an attorney who specialized in the possible elimination

of Internet sites that may have negative effects on children. I read Iris Bolton's book, *My*

*Son, My Son (*1994*),* which she wrote following the suicide of her son. Iris was the

director of The Link counseling center in Sandy Springs, Georgia, when her son died. Since I was a counselor when my son took his life, I could relate to her confusion and feelings of failure to detect any warning signs. I put messages on an Internet site asking questions to try to solve the puzzle of my son's suicide note and received a few replies.

I really did not know how to go any farther with my research until I entered the doctoral program in Educational Psychology at the University of Georgia in the fall of 2003. What began as a personal quest to find answers to my son's tragic death has also become a professional commitment to understand and to help to prevent suicide. As I read the statistics as part of my research, I was shocked to learn that the rate of suicide among young people in the United States has increased dramatically since 1955 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2006). In addition, younger and younger children are taking their lives.

In 2005, following my presentation on suicide at the Social and Emotional Needs of Gifted (SENG) annual conference, a young woman approached me with tears in her eyes. She told me that she was a second grade teacher and that in the previous year two of her seven-year-old students had planned to kill themselves. She said that she had been at a loss for what to do. I have heard many stories about suicidal youngsters since then. In addition, the Center for Disease Control, which compiles the national data on suicide in the United States, has added age ranges of 5-9 years and 10-14 to their data base in addition to the current 5-14 age bracket. Even though only asterisks appear in those age ranges, it seems that the statisticians at the CDC are modifying their tables to indicate more specific data on the trend of younger children taking their lives.

Suicide among adolescents in the United States is such a serious problem that the Surgeon General has announced that suicide prevention should be a priority in this country. In terms of causes of death among young people, suicide is second only to accidental injury (National Center for Health Statistics, 2006). The suicide rates may be even higher than reported because many accidental deaths among young children may really be suicides (Pfeffer, 1986).

In addition to the research on suicide among adolescents in general, some researchers have focused on suicide among gifted adolescents (Cross, 2004; Delisle, 1996; Lester, 1999). Lester wrote, "The academically gifted have been thought to be more susceptible to depression and suicide, not only because of the typical suicidogenic risk factors (such as psychiatric disturbance, drug and alcohol abuse, and dysfunctional family backgrounds), but also because of factors associated with their giftedness" (1999, p. 587). Sargent (1984), after analyzing 1,500 suicide completions, concluded that adolescents who complete suicide were more intelligent than those who attempt but do not succeed. Studies have considered whether students who completed suicide attended more selective schools or schools for the highly gifted. Several studies analyzing suicide rates at various educational institutions have concluded that suicide rates were higher at the more competitive schools (Lester & Lester, 1971; Ross, 1969; Seiden, 1969). However, "No major theory of suicide includes high ability as a contributor…"(Lajoie & Shore, 1981, p. 141).

In addition to the many possible reasons for suicide, my eyes have been opened to the seriousness of the incidence of suicide among children and adolescents in this country. I noticed that many researchers have focused on the quantitative variable, the

rate of suicide. Not many researchers, however, have conducted in-depth qualitative

research studies to try to understand the reasons why young people are taking their lives

in greater numbers. In addition, it seemed to me that the impersonal reporting of data,

while indicating the alarming numbers, resulted in little interest in the prevention of

suicide on the part of the general public. I thought that if more people knew more about

the person who completed suicide, it would be more relevant and meaningful and they

would be more likely to feel the urgency to protect lives.

Thus, I planned to conduct a case study, an intimate portrait of a human being

who completed suicide. Because of my interest in the seemingly unique social and

emotional challenges faced by gifted adolescents, my research focus was narrowed to a

gifted adolescent. Four psychological autopsies of gifted adolescent males have been

conducted (Cross, Cook, & Dixon, 1996; Cross, Gust-Brey, & Ball, 2002) and I found no

psychological autopsies of a gifted, adolescent female which focused on giftedness as a

variable. In *Katie's Diary: Unlocking the mystery of a suicide* (Lester, 2004), even

though it was mentioned that "Katie," who took her life at age 20, had a 3.6 GPA, there

was no discussion of possible giftedness and only her diary was used as data. I was

fortunate to have numerous sources of data to analyze for my research study. My hope is

that my case study of a gifted adolescent female who took her life with a gun will add to

the body of knowledge on suicide in a significant way.

There are limitations to this study. This is a case study of one person. Therefore

the findings cannot be generalized. Many variables were unique to the young woman who

has been the focus of my study. She lived in a certain demographic area, was a certain

age, and a certain gender. She was from a middle class family background and attended

public schools. All of these factors were unique to her and may have framed her perceptions of life. In addition, even though I was fortunate to be provided with a great deal of data of many kinds, all of the data could not be used because of the enormity of the task for one researcher. For example, this young woman was a prolific writer. Of all her writings, 45 were chosen to be analyzed. Perhaps some of the additional data will be used for further research studies.

The purpose of this study was to gain insight regarding the life experiences of this young woman and the factors that caused her such unbearable pain that she chose death over life. In this interpretive study, I have interviewed family members and analyzed documents and artifacts in order to understand the dynamics that seem to have led a gifted adolescent female to take her life. After considering what I wanted to learn as a result of this research, I formulated the following research questions:

1) What individual characteristics may have increased this young gifted woman's vulnerability to suicide?
2) What influences or experiences with her environment may have contributed to her decision to take her life?
3) What factors or events in the cultural and historical context in which she lived may have contributed to her decision to take her life?

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Suicide has been a focus of research for sociologists, psychologists, educators and others who have been interested for years in the incidence and etiology of this self-destructive act. The French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, sparked interest in suicide when he quantified demographic data among populations in his book, *Le Suicide (*1897, 1951). Quantitative research has included statistics on the incidence of suicide, including the numbers of suicide completions in the United States by age group per year (National Center for Health Statistics, 2006). Specific demographic data concerning methods, seasonal occurrence, and most frequent time of day that suicide has occurred in the United States have been documented (Berman & Jobes, 1991). The dramatically increasing suicide rate among the young in the United States, as noted by some researchers (Cross, Gust-Brey, & Ball, 2002; Delisle, 1986), has brought the topic to the forefront of the American public's awareness again.

In addition to interest in demographic and statistical data, the search for causes of suicide has led some researchers to develop multi-causal theories (Shneidman, 1985; Stillion & McDowell, 1996). Individual factors such as anger (Dixon & Scheckel, 1996), perfectionism (Delisle, 1986), and social isolation (Kaiser & Berndt, 1985) have been noted. Other possible influences on the increasing rate of suicide among the young include negative effects of media such as television and video games (Irwin & Gross, 1995; Mishara, 1999).

Some researchers have analyzed surveys and interview data in order to understand the particular challenges of gifted adolescents (Kerr, 1994; Lovecky, 1993; Roeper,

1995). Whether or not gifted individuals are more prone to complete suicide than those of average abilities has been another area of interest (Delisle, 1986; Kerr, 2001; Neihart, 1998). Research studies have not resulted in a deep understanding of the motivating factors in suicide among gifted adolescents (Gust-Brey & Cross, 1998).

We begin this chapter with a review of the literature on suicide in the general population, including statistical data on rates of suicide and literature concerning the causes of suicide, including two currently recognized multi-causal theories. Next, an overview of the research concerning the social and emotional challenges faced by gifted adolescents is included because it seems that an inability to meet those challenges has, in some cases, led to suicide. Finally, literature addressing the question of proneness to suicide among gifted young people will be reviewed. Few studies have addressed the vulnerabilities of gifted adolescents.

<div align="center">Suicide in the General Population</div>

Demographic and Statistical Data

Most of the research that has been conducted on suicide in the United States has dealt with suicide, in general. Journals such as *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior* and associations such as *The American Association of Suicidology* have been created in response to a concern about the incidence of suicide. Suicide among adolescents has been a rather recent concern. Much research has addressed the dramatically increasing suicide rate among the young, but few have focused their research on the possible reasons that might explain why young people take their lives. No studies were found that would give conclusive evidence that could lead to prediction and prevention.

In 2004, the most recent year for which final data were available, suicide was the third leading cause of death for those ages 15-24, following unintentional injuries and homicide, and the sixth leading cause of death for those ages 5-14 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2006). Although the average rate of suicide has remained fairly stable since 1955 (10 to 12/100,000), the suicide rate in the younger age groups has tripled (Dixon & Scheckel, 1996; Jamison, 1999). Even more alarming is the possibility that many of the reported "accidents" might have, in fact, been suicides that were not reported as such for personal or insurance reasons (Dixon & Scheckel, 1996; Pfeffer, 1986). At least ten percent of young people attempt suicide (Dixon & Scheckel, 1996; National Center for Health Statistics, 2006). Teens attempt suicide ten times more frequently than adults (Maine, Shute, & Martin, 2001). Data from the Centers for Disease Control listed 31,484 deaths by suicide in 2003 and 32, 439 deaths by suicide in 2004 in the United States for all age groups combined (National Center for Health Statistics, 2006).

The statistical data that is available through the national records on vital statistics validates the concern about suicide rates among the young. For example, of the 32, 439 completed suicides in the United States in 2004, those among young people ages 5-14 numbered 285 and completed suicides among young people ages 15-24 numbered 4,319 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2006). Obtaining statistics on adolescent suicide was more difficult prior to 1995 because the records were compiled in age ranges 5-14 and 15-24 rather than by specific chronological ages by year or even in ten-year increments. New tables are beginning to list age ranges 15-19 and 20-24 as well as the previous 15-24. This change will make it easier to figure suicide rates during adolescence, a period which is usually thought to include ages 10-19.

When completed suicides were viewed as a distribution among school levels at the time of the completion of suicide, three percent occurred while in elementary school, eleven percent while in secondary school, and seventeen percent while in college (Maine, Shute, & Martin, 2001). Pfeffer (1986) stated that ten percent of children with no clinical diagnosis such as major depression, report suicidal ideation. Two studies of American high school students confirmed that suicidal ideation was not uncommon. More than fifteen percent of New York high school students reported that they had "thought about killing themselves" and twenty percent of Oregon high school students also described suicidal ideation (Jamison, 1999).

Looking at U.S. statistics, we can examine the suicide rate broken down by race and gender in addition to age. In 2004, per 100,000 population, White males had the highest suicide rate (19.6), followed by American Indians and Alaskan natives (12.9), Black males (9.0), Asian/ Pacific islanders (5.6), and Hispanic (5.3), (National Center for Health Statistics, 2006). There was an increase in the rate of suicide among Black males ages fifteen to twenty-four from 4.9 in 1950 to 14.2 in 2000 ((Maris, Canetto, McIntosh, & Silverman, 2000; National Center for Health Statistics, 2002). American males exceed females by four to one in suicide completions, although females make more non-lethal attempts, often taking an overdose of barbiturates (Maris, Berman, & Silverman, 2000). More males complete suicide, due largely to the fact that they use more lethal means, such as firearms. Guns were used in 51.6% of completed suicides in the United States in 2004, followed by 22.6% by suffocation/hanging, 17% by poisoning, 1.8% by cutting, and 11.1% by drowning (National Center for Health Statistics, 2006).

There was a 240% increase in the rate of suicide among young people from 1955 to 1995 (See Table 1). After a slight decline in 1999, suicide rates among the young have oscillated between 0.6 and 0.7 per 100,000 population. They remain unacceptably high. The reasons for the changes and the effectiveness of prevention strategies were unclear (National Center for Health Statistics, 2004).

Analyzing the data by age groups clarified the trend. The rate among ages 5-14, 15-24, 25-34, and, to a degree, 35-44 rose through 1995, while the rates for those over age 45 decreased. Younger children are completing suicide at unacceptably high rates. Many have noted the increased rate of suicide among adolescents (Dixon & Scheckel, 1996; Gust-Brey & Cross, 1998; Jamison, 1999; Maris, Berman, & Silverman, 2000).

A table containing suicide rates from 1979 to 1998 in five-year increments for ages five to forty-four made the upward trend among the young more obvious. Beginning in 1982, statistics were available for suicides of children ages 10-14, which would be roughly equivalent to the middle school years. For the years 1979 through 1981, an asterisk appears for ages 10-14, but in 1982, the rate for ages 10-14 was recorded as 0.9. In 1998, the rate was 1.1 for ages 10-14 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2006). The increase in rates and the fact that statistics have been reported for five-year age groups for those under 45 clarifies the trend that suicides have been increasing among the young and that younger children have been completing suicide, while rates seem to be decreasing for those over forty-five. A startling observation was that in the age range 5 to 9 years, which had not been recognized previously, asterisks were marked as if researchers expected to be reporting statistics in that age range in the near future.

Suicides in the United States have occurred most often in the spring in the months of March, April, May, and June. Suicides were usually completed on Mondays and least often on the weekends (Berman & Jobes, 1991). They have usually occurred in the late afternoon or evening. The home has been the site of most suicides (Berman & Jobes, 1991; National Center for Health Statistics, 2006).

Literature on the Causes and Warning Signs of Suicide

Emile Durkheim, the French sociologist, pointed out that suicide must be considered in cultural and historical contexts (Durkheim, 1897, 1951). Rather than viewing suicide as a sin or morally as something either to be revered or judged, Durkheim noted the differences in rates of suicides in many cultures and countries and attempted explanations for those differences. His conclusion was that suicide occurs more frequently in societies where people feel isolated and alone, with no sense of community.

Others have posited alternative reasons for the increase in suicide rates among the young. Lester stated that adolescents have "no meaningful rites of passage and few wise elders or mentors to shepherd them" (Lester, 1999, p. 587). Hopelessness, sadness, and anger might be felt by many due to family conflicts and a higher rate of divorce with its loyalty issues and movement back and forth between households (Dixon & Scheckel, 1996). Increasing pressure to perform well, whether externally or self-imposed, may create perfectionism, which results in guilt and over-responsibility (Lester, 1999). Some young people have felt socially isolated, partly because they prefer solitary or single-friend activities to group activities and partly because no one seems to understand their concerns and values in a world that is increasingly materialistic and violent (Lester, 1999; Torrance, 1997).

Bullying has become recognized as a contributing factor in some suicides (Hazler & Denham, 2002; Ross, 1996). The bullying issue came to the attention of the American public after the school shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999. The two young males who murdered classmates and killed themselves complained of being bullied and feeling alienated from others. As Hazler and Denham (2002) noted, "Peer-on-peer abuse has been recognized as a precursor to potential youth suicides…" (p. 403).

Exposure to the violence seen on television, even during the earlier hours when children are usually watching, has been a concern for years. A study by Mishara (1999) however, focused on how young children know about suicide. Interviews with children in grades 1-5 were conducted. The responses showed that by the third grade, most of the 65 children in the study had "an elaborate understanding of suicide" (p. 105). Mishara stated, "Children learn about suicide from television and discussions with other children, but they rarely discuss suicide with adults" (1999, p. 105). Some researchers have raised questions about the interest by some young males in music, books, movies, or video games with "dark themes" or asocial characters (Cross, Cook, & Dixon, 1996; Delisle, 1986).

Recently, more research has been focused on violent video games (Griffiths & Hunt, 1998; Irwin & Gross, 1995). Video games came on the market around 1972 and have become a multi-billion dollar industry. On March 21, 2000, the United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation conducted a "Hearing on the Impact of Interactive Violence on Children." At the hearings, David Walsh, Ph.D., President, National Institute on Media and the Family gave testimony titled, "Interactive

Violence and Children" (Walsh, 2001). Lt. Colonel Dave Grossman, former professor of psychology at the University of Arkansas, professor at West Point, former Army Ranger and author of *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Grossman, 1996) attested that video games, such as Doom, which was a favorite of the two young men who killed others and themselves at Columbine High School, are similar to simulators used by the military to condition soldiers to kill.

Factors that seem to correlate with or be associated with suicide may, according to some, serve as warning signs. A family history of suicide, an experience of loss, and a family environment marked by conflictual relationships or poor communication also seem to contribute to a higher risk (Ayyash-Abdo, 2002). Another correlate may be extreme introversion leading to social isolation (Kaiser & Berndt, 1985). A sudden decrease in academic performance or sudden mood or behavioral changes may be warnings of potential suicide (Lajoie & Shore, 1981).

Two Recent Theories of Suicide

The Suicide Trajectory Model.

The complexity and multi-causal nature of suicide was emphasized in The Suicide Trajectory Model, which first appeared in the book, *Suicide Across the Life Span* (Stillion, McDowell, & May, 1989). The authors divided the factors into four categories: Biological

1. genetic bases

2. brain functioning

3. gender-male

Psychological

1. depressed mood

2. poor self-concept, poor self-esteem

3. lack of coping strategies

4. existential questions

Cognitive

1. level of cognition

2. negative self talk

3. rigidity of thought

Environmental

1. family discord

2. negative life events, especially loss

3. availability of firearms

The researchers looked at the cultural and historical influences on human behavior, as well, noting that today's young people have been exposed to violence and to suicide through the media to a far greater extent than the Boomer generation, for example. In addition, they looked at oscillating cultural and religious views across generations. An important point was that some factors interact with each other. For example, when an individual is biologically predisposed for depression and is in an environment with a great deal of relationship conflicts, loyalty issues, and discord, the interaction of those factors is more powerful than one factor alone.

In terms of the biological factors, according to this theory, not only a genetic predisposition, but the actual flow of neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, affect mood

and, consequently, proneness to suicide. Also, the fact that in most countries males complete suicide three to four times more frequently than females puts males at a higher risk. In addition to being more aggressive, in general, than females, males are expected in our society to meet certain stereotypical expectations in their behavior, such as playing sports and achieving material success.

Psychologically, the most important risk factor, according to Stillion, McDowell, & May, was a feeling of hopelessness which, when combined with feelings of helplessness, increases the suicide risk. Those who admit to suicidal ideation also seemed to judge themselves harshly and often labeled themselves negatively, with words such as "failure." A lack of effective coping strategies put the individual at great risk for developing symptoms of depression, which has often been associated with suicide. Another apparent commonality of those who develop suicidal ideation is a focus on existential questions such as, "What is the meaning of life?" or "What is the meaning or purpose of my life?"

All humans are influenced by their environment, which can be looked at in various levels of systems, from the family of origin to the neighborhood to the region of the country to the country in which one lives. A family environment that is marked by negativity, loyalty issues, and poor communication is not fertile ground for a healthy developing mind. Negative life events, such as the loss of a loved one through death or rejection, can add to the stresses that affect a person's well-being. Also, since firearms are used in most suicides in the United States, the availability of these potentially lethal weapons has contributed to the risk of suicide.

Stillion and McDowell followed up with a second edition of their book, *Suicide Across the Life Span,* in 1996 in order to expand on the applicability of The Suicide Trajectory Model. In summation, The Suicide Trajectory Model is an inclusive paradigm which considers the biological, psychological, cognitive, and environmental factors, the possible interactions of these factors, and the cultural and historical context in which an individual has lived.

Shneidman's Theory.

In his book, *Definition of Suicide (*Shneidman, 1985), Shneidman discussed ten characteristics of suicide, which he divided into six categories:

Situational aspects

1.   The common stimulus in suicide is unendurable psychological pain.

2.   The common stressor in suicide is frustrated psychological needs.

Willing and striving (conation)

3.   The common purpose of suicide is to seek a solution.

4.   The common goal of suicide is cessation of consciousness.

Affective aspects

5.   The common emotion in suicide is hopelessness-helplessness.

6.   The common internal attitude toward suicide is ambivalence.

Cognitive aspects

7.   The common cognitive state in suicide is constriction.

Relational aspects

8.   The common interpersonal act in suicide is communication of intention.

9.   The common action in suicide is egression.

Serial aspects

    10. The common consistency in suicide is with life-long coping patterns.

     Situational aspects include the desire to escape a situation in which unbearable psychological pain is being experienced and in which basic psychological needs are not being met. Shneidman noted that the term "unendurable" is an evaluation of a situation. In other words, what one person considers "unendurable" might be considered relatively unimportant or certainly bearable by another. Some examples of psychological needs would include the need not to be humiliated, shamed, blamed, or criticized and the need to feel a sense of accomplishment and a sense of connectedness or relatedness.

     The conative aspects of suicide, according to Shneidman, include the purpose of the suicide and the achievement of cessation of consciousness. As Shneidman pointed out, suicide is purposeful (Shneidman, 1985). It serves as the solution to a perceived problem or problems or as a resolution to an issue or an answer to a question. Also, suicide serves as an escape from unbearable stress.

      Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness and an attitude of ambivalence comprise the affective dimension of suicide. When one feels as if there is no hope that life circumstances will improve and that one is helpless to effect a change, the risk of suicide is greatly magnified. Shneidman thought that those who take their lives want to die on the one hand and want to be rescued on the other. He referred to Freud's ideas concerning the life instinct and the death wish and the struggle between the id and the superego. Both can be experienced at once.

     Constriction, or narrowed thinking, is the primary factor operating in the thinking processes of someone who is suicidal, according to Shneidman. The inability to perceive

many options to solve problems, for example, might result in thinking that taking one's life is the only solution.

Relational factors of suicide include intentions to communicate by actions, including the suicide itself, and in a relatively small percentage of cases, also through a suicide note. Many times a person who is contemplating suicide gives cues or warnings in an attempt to relate the intention to complete suicide. The action of leaving, departing, escaping relationships, whether with family members, friends, or co-workers, communicates something about the person.

Shneidman also concluded that suicide is a culmination is a life-long pattern of coping strategies, albeit ineffective, for survival. In the 1920's Terman began a 40 year longitudinal study of over 1,500 children with I.Q's over 140 to assess personal and professional achievement (Terman, 1925). When Shneidman accurately guessed five of the first six of thirty suicides among the "Terman Kids," he said that the clues that he examined which helped him to guess those who eventually completed suicide were largely connected to patterns of reacting to perceived threats, losses, and failures (Shneidman, 1996).

Shneidman's Theory is also a multi-faceted approach to delineating risk factors for suicide in the hope of prediction and prevention. Similar to The Suicide Trajectory Model, many factors were considered and also life long patterns were studied. This is also a rather comprehensive paradigm for theorizing about the etiology of suicide. A person's level of perturbation and lethality must also be considered when assessing suicide risk, according to Shneidman (1996). How perturbed one gets in response to life

events and how dangerous a person is to himself or herself must also be taken into account.

In terms of explaining the factors that contribute to suicide, both theories' approaches make them powerful paradigms. They both look at developmental patterns. Shneidman's theory seemed to focus more on the role of motivational factors and temperament when he discussed the need to escape pain, for example, and the degree to which an individual can become perturbed about a certain situation. He made it clear that different people respond to the same situation in different ways. This certainly adds to the explanatory power of the theory. Stillion and McDowell also emphasized that a person's responses to life events, be it stoicism or rage, depend, to a degree, on the political and economic climate in which they were raised (Stillion & McDowell, 1996).

Complementing these two broad theories with more in-depth case studies would add much to the body of knowledge about suicide and to the ability to be able to predict and to prevent suicide. Shneidman mentioned this need as he alluded to cases in which people who attempted suicide but did not complete and lived to be interviewed later recounted what they were thinking and what goals they were attempting to accomplish. Also, emphasis on possible systemic as well as individual changes would be powerful additions to the research. The explanatory power of a theory or model of suicide is determined by its catalyzing effect on individual and systemic changes that promote well-being and resilience. For example, Freud's theory that talking with people about their problems could help alleviate symptoms such as depression or hysteria, served as a catalyst for the popularity and success of "talk therapy."

Proneness to Suicide among Gifted Youth

Social and Emotional Issues and Challenges of Gifted Adolescents

"Being different is painful."

(Balto, character in the movie, *Balto II,* Ross, 2002).

Another area of research that is related to suicide among gifted adolescents centered on the social and emotional issues and challenges faced by gifted children and adolescents (Cross, 1996; Coleman & Cross, 2005). Gifted adolescents seem to have some unique emotional needs and issues due to the fact that they are different. In this section, the literature concerning some of the issues and challenges of being gifted and adolescent will be reviewed. After reviewing the literature pertaining to the social and emotional issues which seem to be faced by gifted adolescents regardless of gender, the needs and challenges associated with being adolescent, gifted, and male will be discussed, followed by a discussion of the needs and challenges associated with being adolescent, gifted, and female.

Many researchers have stated that being both adolescent and gifted has often resulted in a unique set of problems and that the social and emotional issues and challenges are in some ways quite difficult (Buescher, 1985; Delisle, 1992; Hollingworth, 1931; Roeper, 1995). For example, Buescher commented, "In many ways, though, being both gifted and adolescent means learning to understand and cope with a unique set of developmental circumstances that can reach beyond the normal dimensions of adolescence" (Buescher, 1985, p. 11). He went on to add that adolescents between the ages of eleven and fifteen "seem to be particularly vulnerable to the confusion and misinterpretation precipitated by their outstanding abilities" (p. 11).

Gifted adolescents may be more vulnerable to the pressures of establishing a sense of identity and also establishing meaningful relationships (Hollingworth, 1942; Torrance, 1962). Hollingworth highlighted the social and emotional issues of being gifted when she noted that gifted adolescents may have "the intelligence of an adult and the emotions of a child" (Hollingworth, 1942, p. 282).

Difficulties can result from the unique perceptions and experiences of being gifted. In 2003, Annemarie Roeper emphasized to an audience at the National Association of Gifted Children annual conference that there were unique social and emotional difficulties faced by the gifted child. She expanded on some of the points that she had addressed in 1995 which included, "Gifted children's thoughts and emotions differ from those of other children and, as a result, they perceive and react to their world differently" (Roeper, 1995, p. 74).

When identifying some of the critical dynamics of being adolescent and gifted, it becomes important to realize that the social and emotional issues and challenges are related to cultural values and to historical context (Buescher, 1985; Cross, 2004). In many cases, a young person's experiences in today's schools are painful. Addressing the dynamics involved in the school shootings at Columbine High School in 1999, Cross noted, "The lessons we should have learned were that our children's experiences in high school (middle and elementary school) cause them to suffer" (Cross, 2004, p. 111). Many of the issues that affect both males and females include establishing a sense of identity and forming supportive and meaningful relationships. When you are adolescent and gifted, however, these are very difficult social and emotional challenges. As the movie

character, Balto, sorrowfully stated in reference to his daughter, who was a gifted leader, "Being different is painful" (Ross, 2002).

Some of the social and emotional issues and challenges associated with being adolescent and gifted include boredom (Gross, 2004; Hébert & Speirs Neumeister, 2002; Kerr & Cohn, 2001), establishing a sense of identity and a positive self-concept (Dixon, 1998; Gross, 1998; Hébert, 2000a; Kline & Short, 1991), perfectionistic tendencies (Buescher, 1985; Delisle, 1986; Speirs Neumeister, 2004), heightened sensitivity and intensity (Dabrowski, 1976; Lovecky, 1993; Silverman, 1994), and advanced moral development and global concerns (Cross, 2004; Hébert & Speirs Neumeister, 2002; Roeper, 1995). Many gifted adolescents experience discouragement, hopelessness, insecurity, and eventual suppressed feelings (Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Kline & Short, 1991), and a sense of meaninglessness (Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Roeper, 1995).

Social and Emotional Issues Common to Both Genders

Boredom and frustration.

In 1942, Hollingworth remarked, "In the ordinary elementary school situation, children of I.Q.140 waste half their time. Those above I.Q. 170 waste practically all their time. With little to do, how can these children develop power of sustained effort, respect for the task, or habits of steady work?" (Hollingworth, 1942, p.299). Young people report being bored and frustrated in school with content that is not challenging or relevant (Egan, 1998). Discussing the plight of a gifted male who was in a heterogeneous classroom, Gross remarked, "Requiring Ian to undertake all his school work with age peers of average ability was rather like requiring a child of average intelligence to spend

six hours a day, five days a week, interacting solely with children who were profoundly intellectually disabled" (Gross, 2004, p. 4).

Kerr has authored books on the social and emotional issues faced by gifted children and adolescents (Kerr, 1994; Kerr & Cohn, 2001). When she was an adolescent, the Russians sent Sputnik into space, and, as a result, the United States began to single out gifted young people for advanced educational opportunities and "gifted" became a category. Kerr was in a gifted cohort, which included seventeen males. She and Tom Anderson, a graduate student in counseling psychology, interviewed most of the group members as adults to collect data about their school experiences. They were able to directly interview thirteen of the original seventeen, obtained second hand information about three, and were not able to locate a young man who was a creative artist while in school. At the time of the follow up, participants were about fifty years of age. All responded to interview questions by stating that they had been bored in school and that relationships were awkward or painful (and still were, in many cases). One man would have liked to have had exposure to subjects other than English, French, math and the other academic subjects included for the cohort. He asked, "Why didn't we get any shop classes?" Curriculum was determined by the school system, with little or no input from the students concerning their individual interests. Kerr and Cohn (2001) noted that the gifted males were "bored in school, socially awkward, and somehow disconnected from others at a young age." Gifted adolescents are intensely fascinated with learning (Lovecky, 1993). In their 2002 article, Hébert and Speirs Neumeister noted the frustration, boredom, and feelings of alienation experienced by bright young students.

Halstead also addressed the issue in the introduction to her book of resources (Halstead, 2002).

Julian Stanley was successful in being a catalyst for grade-skipping for many young gifted students (Stanley, 2000). He helped seventh graders, for example, go directly into college. Since Stanley passed away, programs that he began, such as the Talent Identification Program, continue to accelerate the pace and enrich the curriculum of learning for bright young minds. One of his favorite stories involved a middle school male who was not allowed into an algebra I class due to his age. Stanley encouraged the teacher to at least let the boy take a test to see if he could solve the problems. When the boy made 100% on the test, the teacher invited the student into the class, at which point the student declined, asking why he would want to take a class on material that he already knew (Stanley, 2004).

Perfectionism.

Many researchers have studied the negative effects of perfectionism (Hill, 1995; Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Roeper, 1995; Silverman, 1993; Spiers Neumeister, 2004).While striving for perfection would seem an admirable trait, for gifted adolescents perceived failure can lead to guilt, depression, anxiety, and even suicide (Hayes & Sloat, 1990). Many gifted adolescents do not give themselves permission to be less than perfect (Alvino, 1991). Roeper stated, "These children carry an enormous burden of imagined responsibility way beyond their years" (1995, p. 73). Their emotional need to be perfect is, of course, unrealistic, she added. When the prodigy Brandenn Bremmer was asked about his giftedness in an interview in 2004, less than a year before taking his life at age 14, he responded, "America is a society that demands perfection." The interviewer noted

that "it was interesting that I had asked him about giftedness, but the word *perfection* was

foremost in his mind" (Quart, 2006, p. 142).

Speirs Neumeister (2002) categorized perfectionism into two categories, socially

prescribed and self-oriented. Those with socially prescribed perfectionism are concerned

with the expectations of others. They evaluate their self-worth according to perceived

external standards which they are expected to meet. Those with self-oriented

perfectionism are motivated from within to reach self-imposed high standards. She

explored the anxiety and learned helplessness associated with expecting more of yourself

than is humanly possible. She interviewed extensively and also addressed her own

experiences with perfectionism. Her findings included many factors that seemed to

contribute to the participants' socially prescribed perfectionistic tendencies including

early awareness of intelligence and ability to meet high achievement standards of

perfectionistic parents. Speirs Neumeister noted that students with socially prescribed

perfectionistic tendencies feared failure and the disappointment of others. The

perfectionistic tendencies of those, like herself, with self-oriented perfectionism, seemed

to be linked to individual personality traits and intrinsic motivation. As Speirs

Neumeister (2002) concluded, perfectionism can be developed from the messages of

others or it can come from an inner driven extreme sense of responsibility to self and/or

others. Delisle observed that "a number of gifted students with records of impeccable

academic performance have been preoccupied with suicidal thoughts…" (Delisle,1986,

p.64).

When singer Judy Collins was fifteen years old, she attempted suicide because of

her fear of not being good enough, of not pleasing her father. Her father asked her to

play the piano at an organized event in Denver. She related being so terrified that her performance would not be good enough, that, rather than sharing her fears with him, she took an overdose of aspirin in a suicide attempt. He later apologized for being a perfectionist himself and putting so much pressure on her. However, she noted that most of her pressure was self-imposed (Collins, 2003).

Sensitivity and intensity.

Researchers have addressed the apparent heightened emotional and moral sensitivity experienced by gifted youth (Cross, Cook, & Dixon, 1996; Dabrowski, 1964; Hébert, 2002; Nelson, 1989; Runco, 1998; Silverman, 2004; Tucker & Hafenstein, 1997). These characteristics seem to often result in self-criticism and cynicism (Dabrowski, 1976; Nelson, 1989). A challenge for sensitive gifted adolescents who experience life intensely is to find avenues for emotional expression (Hébert, 2000a). The gifted males in Hébert's urban high school study embraced their sensitivity, which seemed to contribute to their belief in self.

The sensitivities would fit with the emotional over-excitabilities in Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration (Dabrowski, 1964). Dabrowski's over-excitabilities, or intensities, in the intellectual, emotional, psychomotor, sensual, and imaginational areas, explained in his Theory of Positive Disintegration, have been mentioned by some researchers as being associated with risk of suicide (Cross, Cook, & Dixon, 1996; Dabrowski, 1964; Delisle, 1992; Nelson, 1989). As young people evolve from Level II, in which they look to those outside of themselves for answers and validation, to Level III, in which they become more introspective, self-blame and self-criticism sometimes occur. This may be a time of increased risk of suicide. Often gifted children and adolescents feel

as if they are too much. They think too much, talk too much, feel too much. Something must be wrong with me, they may conclude (Roeper, 1995). Life was not easy for the gifted male described by Lovecky who "took every fallen bird into his heart" (1993, p. 37).

In addition, the sensitivity and introspective nature of the INFP personality may increase vulnerability to suicide (Cross, Cassady, & Miller, 2006; Piirto, 2004). The INFP is one of 16 personality types described by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1962). This is the personality type of writers. Personality traits of the INFP include introversion, which is the tendency to get energy from within and to prefer isolated or one on one activities. Also, INFP types are intuitive, make decisions largely from an emotional base, and are perceptive and spontaneous (Piirto, 2004). "Highly verbal, highly conceptual, highly opinionated, often nonconforming, frank, highly driven writers, it seems, are prone to self-abusive and self-destructive behaviors…." (Piirto, 2004, p. 198). In a 2006 study, Cross, Cassady, & Miller found that "female students exhibiting introversion-perceiving (IP) types held higher levels of suicidal ideation than those with other types" (2006, p. 295). In addition, they found that those with the perceiving trait had higher levels of suicidal ideation than judging types.

Morality, justice, and global concerns.

Gifted youth worry about global concerns and experience existential dread (Ellsworth, 2003; Kerr, 2001; Nelson, 1989). Issues of social justice and being treated fairly are important to many gifted adolescents. "Researchers studying the highly and exceptionally gifted have noted that these children are frequently found to have unusually accelerated levels of moral development" (Gross, 2004). Gifted children are often

worried about problems in the world such as hunger or war that other children do not think about (Roeper, 2003). At the same time, young people feel helpless to effect change in the world (Hollingworth, 1942). While they are aware of the devastation of war or hunger, they are not able to solve global situations. A heightened sense of responsibility coupled with a heightened awareness of the troubles in the world produces guilt and depression. Similarly, gifted children and adolescents have a deep sense of justice. Being treated unfairly or with insensitivity or witnessing the unfair treatment of others, while upsetting to most, can be devastating to a gifted child (Roeper, 2003).

Social isolation and being bullied.

Social isolation and feelings of alienation have been addressed by many researchers (Hazler & Denham, 2002; Hollingworth, 1942; Torrance, 1962). The tragic results of being different, not fitting in, having different interests, concerns, and values, dressing differently, and not meeting the cultural expectations for normality often include social isolation and being bullied. Torrance wrote that "in most classrooms the child runs a calculated risk every time he asks an unusual question or advances a new idea for fear of the ridicule by his classmates and perhaps his teacher" (Torrance, 1962, p. 74). Being bullied and harassed is a frequent occurrence for gifted adolescents (Cross, 2001; Graham, 2003; Gross, 1998; Kerr & Cohn, 2001). Today, in addition to being bullied at school, adolescents are bullied online and by cell phone text messaging, a problem termed cyberbullying (Belsey, 2005; Willard, 2006).

Paul Graham, author of, *Why Nerds are Unpopular*, talked of his own experiences with bullying and harassment as well as his observations. He stated, "For me, the worst stretch was junior high…Nearly everyone I've talked to agrees" (Graham, 2003, p. 5).

"In our school it was eighth grade," he added, when children separate themselves from each other in cliques.

"The difficulty of the gifted child forming friendships is largely a result of the infrequency of persons who are like minded." (Hollingworth, 1942, p.262). In addition, Hollingworth noted that it is not easy for a gifted student to "suffer fools gladly." In an interview study by Gross, many gifted males responded that they had difficulty being accepted in school. One young man stated, "You've got to have mates and there's nobody round here who's anything like me, so they're all I've got. But I don't know how long I'm going to be able to keep going" (1998). She added that "the need to escape from such bewilderment, frustration, and loneliness may become a compelling force" (p. 7).

The more highly gifted the child, the more likely the child will experience social isolation. Graham noted that "Nerds are unpopular because they're distracted. There are other kids who deliberately opt out because they're so disgusted with the whole process" (2003, p.11). Being smart doesn't make you an outcast in elementary school, but it can in middle school and high school. He began his article by stating that, "in a typical American secondary school, being smart is likely to make your life difficult" (p.1).

Being brilliant, studious, and nonathletic

Attitudes toward academically brilliant students have been the focus of some interesting studies (Cramond & Martin, 1987; Drews, 1972; Lee, Cramond, & Lee, 2004; Tannenbaum, 1962). Tannenbaum's classic study asked high school students to rate the likeability of hypothetical students according to academic brilliance, studiousness, and athleticism. His finding was that the students least liked by other students were academically brilliant, studious, and non-athletic (1962). Cramond and Martin (1987)

expanded Tannenbaum's research to include teachers' attitudes concerning the same three characteristics. "The brilliant-studious-non-athletic character, often the stereotype of the gifted student, was rated the lowest" (p. 17) they concluded. Their focus was on the need for effective teacher training. In 2004, Lee, Cramond, and Lee conducted a study in Korea which replicated the Tannenbaum study and the Cramond and Martin study. The fact that the results were similar was even more surprising in a country known for its emphasis on the value of education and effort. In this study, again, as in the two previous studies, the lowest rating was given to the academically brilliant, studious, non-athletic student (Lee, Cramond, & Lee, 2004). Another interesting finding was that the hypothetical students with that description were considered to be girls. Girls who were academically brilliant were the least popular, with boys being most popular. The authors concluded, "Psychologically safe environments are necessary for all children to thrive, and the more different a child is from his or her peers, the more vulnerable he or she is to peer sanctions" (Lee, Cramond, & Lee, 2004, p. 52).

Creativity misunderstood and unappreciated

In a similar study of gifted high school students which began in the 1950's, Drews categorized students as creative intellectual, studious, and social leader. She noted that creative intellectuals "were rated by their teachers as less creative than their social leader classmates whose attitudes and interests resembled those of bankers or undertakers" (1972, p. 36). Of the creative intellectuals, the social reformers and altruists were "most often condemned" (Drews, 1972, p. 37). She concluded that perhaps the low ratings could "best be explained by the fact that so many of these young people resist the usual school routines" (1972, p.36).

Much has been written about a possible correlation between creativity and propensity for suicide (Jamison, 1999; Piirto, 2004; Rothenberg, 1990; Runco, 1998; Slaby, 1992). Some have cited the high incidence of suicide among artists and writers, especially poets (Jamison, 1993; Ludwig, 1995; Richards & Kinney, 1990). A seeming correlation between "bipolar disorder" and the oscillation experienced by creative artists between the intense passion and enthusiasm of periods of creative expansion and the depths of darkness and tendencies toward unsociability and feelings of emptiness at the other end of the pendulum has been discussed (Jamison, 1993; Piirto, 2004; Richards & Kinney, 1990; Slaby, 1992). Briggs noted that "the excited and quiescent states that are a normal part of creative process" are often considered pathological (1990, p. 247). Creative artists often despise authoritarianism (Drews, 1972). Creative writers, for example, often attack society in their writings. This aspect of creativity may contribute to difficulties with life. Rothenberg stated, "Society and creative people are often antagonistic toward each other" (1990, p. 158).

Sylvia Plath, the writer of poetry and prose, who took her life at the age of thirty-one, described how she sometimes felt enthusiastic about writing and wrote prolifically and at other times experienced life as if she were in a bell jar, with its distortions and limitations (Plath, 1971). Rothenberg (1990) and Runco (1998) both discussed the creative artist's drives for destructiveness and creation that exemplify the Janusian paradox. Both researchers also noted the apparent inability of some writers to free themselves cathartically from their concerns and stressors through their writing (Rothenberg, 1990; Runco, 1988).

Torrance was concerned about what he called "the psychological estrangement of creative children" (Torrance, 1962, p. 121). Giftedness is often manifested in creative pursuits because gifted children often think "outside the box." Torrance realized that and incorporated opportunities for creative expression in his Torrance Test of Creative Thinking. Those with the most imagination make the highest scores. The point that Torrance was making was that in our society those who think differently are often ostracized. Briggs, also, referred to "our ancient aversion to things that are different" (1990, p. 247). Yet one of the traits that seem common to highly gifted, highly creative youth includes unconventionality (Hebert, 2004; Torrance, 1962). Examples would be a fascination with dark themes (Cross, 2004; Cross, Gust-Brey, & Ball, 2002) and an identification with negative or asocial characters (Delisle, 2000).

That fascination and identification were observed by Kerr and Cohn (2001). They stated that "there are particular subgroups within the population of gifted boys whose members are indeed at much higher risk for various self-destructive behaviors, including suicide" (p. 144). Kerr and Cohn and others have concluded that highly gifted, highly creative boys are at a higher risk of suicide (Delisle, 1986; Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Lester, 1999).

Highly gifted, highly creative young people are often thinking of new ideas. According to Torrance this has often resulted in a young person's perception of self as "a minority of one" (Torrance, 1961, p.31). They have difficulties finding common ground for establishing relationships. Their activities are not the same as those of the average adolescent. While most adolescent boys are interested in sports, cars, and girls and adolescent girls are interested in conforming behaviors that lead to popularity during the

adolescent years, the highly gifted, highly creative adolescent may be drawing or writing in a journal or composing song lyrics.

To summarize, there are many social and emotional challenges facing adolescents who are gifted. Finding meaningful relationships with adolescents and adults who seem to understand, appreciate and accept them and finding safe environments in which they can be their creative selves is a challenge. Reaching self-understanding and developing a sense of identity in a milieu of age peers who do not experience the world as intensely and deeply and who do not have the global concerns and ethical values of the gifted adolescent is difficult.

Being Adolescent, Gifted, and Male

Establishing a sense of identity.

Developing a sense of identity, including self-understanding, a sense of who one is, and developing a strong belief in self, are necessary for success personally and professionally (Hébert, 2000a). Following his study of six high ability urban males, Hébert concluded that a strong belief in self was the most important factor influencing the success of the urban males in his study (Hébert, 2000a). A sense of self-identity may include acceptance of self as an individual, establishing autonomy, forming relationships based on trust, openness and a similarity of values, and fulfilling the need to achieve, according to Gross (1998). One of the struggles for gifted male adolescents is reaching self-understanding (Hébert & Speirs Neumeister, 2002). Being different from the majority at school complicates identity formulation. According to Gross, "The process of identity development in intellectually gifted children and adolescents is complicated by their innate and acquired differences from age peers" (1998, p. 1).

Often, gifted boys experience loneliness and feelings of isolation when they perceive just how different they are from the majority (Kerr & Cohn, 2001). Delisle (1986) noted that gifted boys are often more popular in elementary school, but that this changes in middle school. He discussed the fact that gifted boys are often in accelerated or "gifted" classes which set them apart from most of their classmates. In addition, the focus of most adolescents' attention changes in the middle school years to what many gifted males would consider unimportant, superficial, absurd interests. Combine this difference with a gifted youngster's heightened concerns for global problems and the differences magnify. Frustration experienced by highly gifted adolescents who are bored and alienated can turn to anger (Cross, 2001; Dixon and Scheckel, 1996).

Cultural expectations to be the macho male.

Males in the United States are expected to pursue stereotypically masculine pursuits. The plight of the young gifted male is difficult, noted Hébert (2002), who referred to the blend of masculine and feminine interests that may be characteristic of some gifted boys. When a gifted adolescent male is not athletically inclined, he has a difficult time fitting in (Alvino, 1991; Hébert, 1995; Hébert, 2000b). Not only does being different from the majority at school make the process of identity development more complicated, but being popular is valued, especially between the ages of eleven and seventeen (Graham, 2003). Gifted males walk a tight rope, according to Dixon, often projecting several images to the world. Some do not try to put on a mask and are labeled "nerd" or "geek" while others try desperately to fit in. Social acceptance is highly valued in middle school and high school, and not fitting in can be particularly painful at this age (Dixon, 1998). Alvino (1991) added that self-concept problems are exacerbated by the

"traditional male ideal, on the one hand "(p. 177) and the need to be themselves on the other.

Being true to oneself in an anti-intellectual society is particularly tough for gifted boys (Cross, 2004). "Receiving so little validation for the self fosters a corresponding internal negative self-image," according to Silverman (1993, p. 33). Adolescents search for who they are, but the life experiences and issues faced by gifted students are different, stated Cross (2004). Young adolescents are very exclusionary, forming cliques, deciding who is popular, and emphasizing participation in athletics as something to be admired for males. Finding a safe environment in which to be creative, to be different, is a challenge (Torrance, 1997). Parents' expectations for their sons combined with the greater sensitivity and perceptiveness of gifted adolescents, make the sense of self, the ego, more vulnerable (Roeper, 2003).

In the United States, very few young men teach elementary school because it is thought to be a feminine profession with values such as nurturance emphasized. In a study of young gifted men who become elementary school teachers, Hébert (2000b) discovered that a combination of firm belief in self, appreciation for androgyny in terms of interests, and empathy gave these young men the self-confidence to break with tradition. Gifted young males are often less satisfied with themselves, with who they are, because of the pressures and expectations of society (Kline & Short, 1991). Kerr and Cohn pointed out that there were few initiations into manhood in our society (Kerr & Cohn, 2001). "Without these meaningful, symbolic ceremonies, today's young men are bereft of appropriate ways of establishing their identity as men," they added (p. 127).

In the book chapter entitled, "Gifted Males", Hébert remarked that it is a difficult time to be a boy in this country (2002). Gifted young males often struggle to see themselves in a positive light, especially because others criticize them if they do not meet the American cultural expectations of the masculine image (Hébert, 1995). The macho man is expected to be "tough, competitive, independent, aggressive, self-reliant, logical, non-emotional, and lacking in sensitivity" (Alvino, 1991, p. 175). American society has not changed its traditional expectations for males (Kline & Short, 1991), which include playing sports and being strong, silent, and stoic (Kerr & Cohn, 2001). Kerr and Cohn began their book, *Smart Boys,* by stating that "many gifted boys and men struggle throughout their lives to ignore the urgings of their intellectual and creative selves in order to fulfill socially ordained masculine roles" (p. 3). They added that it is particularly tragic for the gifted male who sees the superficiality and transitory nature of the masculine ideal, but feels that he must adhere to it in order to be accepted, to fit in. A boy who plays sports can get away with reading books or even asking an unusual question in class. But a gifted male who is not involved in athletic pursuits and has unusual pastimes or challenges the teacher may not be accepted by most of his schoolmates and even some of his teachers (Kerr & Cohn, 2001).

The challenges to gifted adolescents to be independent, strong, and competitive and to be able to prove their masculinity when their interests, ethical values, and dress differ markedly from the mainstream are sometimes insurmountable (Kerr & Cohn, 2001). Being highly intelligent is even seen as a threat in a dominator society that values power, violence, and exploitation (Silverman, 1994).

Being Adolescent, Gifted, and Female

Establishing a sense of identity.

"Rather than being able to focus on the adolescent identity questions of 'Who

am I' and 'Where am I going?' as teens always have, girls today are more

worried about 'Who am I supposed to be?' and in the process can disappear

as the person they are." (Machovian, 2005, p.8).

To understand the social and emotional issues and challenges faced by

adolescents who are gifted and female, it is necessary, as it was for males, to examine the

social context of our American culture (Cross, 2004; Kerr, 1994; Machoian, 2005).

Gifted adolescent females struggle to be accepted in a society that values their physical

appearance more than their intellectual ability (Gross, 1998; Machoian, 2005; Kerr,

1994). They are bored and frustrated in school, but often do not speak up or challenge the

system (Callahan, Cunningham, & Plucker, 1994). They are expected to be the

superwomen who are all things to all people, to be caring and nurturing (Callahan,

Cunningham, & Plucker, 1994; Roeper, 1995). In general, they do not aspire to the

professional success of men and often do not take the rigorous courses in school (Kerr,

1994). A conflict between their tendencies to be perfectionistic and the lower cultural

expectations of achievement for females (Reis & Callahan, 1989) leaves them with a

confused sense of identity and unfulfilled dreams (Hollinger, 1991; Tomchin, Callahan,

Sowa, & May, 1996).

In a twelve-month study of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade gifted females, which

included interviews and an analysis of school records, grades, and test scores,

Cunningham, Callahan, and Plucker (1994) observed many of the characteristics that

seem to prevent gifted females from attaining success commensurate with their

intellectual ability. Though they were bored, they did not complain or challenge the teacher, preferring just to get the high grades with less effort or "play the game" (Rizza, 1999).

Cultural expectations and stereotypes

"When I got to middle school, it changed. Everyone started to care about being popular, and I was into reading and stuff. It just hit me, 'Wow, everybody's changed,' and it really made me self-conscious to speak up in class to say what I thought." (Machoian, 2005, p. 43)

Roeper (1995) noted that "the manner in which the gifted girl is seen by society and how she herself reacts to this perception" (p. 58) determines her sense of self-esteem. Kerr began a study of the achievements of her gifted female classmates to determine the reasons that they, as a group, did not aspire to professional positions equivalent to the males. Out of twenty-four women, six attained no college degree, twelve attained bachelor's degrees, three attained master's degrees, one attained a medical degree, and one received a law degree. Years later, Kerr reassessed the women and found that many of them had gone on to higher educational and professional achievements while others were homemakers and mothers who had set aside their professional pursuits to be a wife and mother and adamantly claimed that they were happy and fulfilled in those roles. But why didn't more of the gifted women in the group achieve to their potential? Why had so many chosen vocations in education and nursing, rather than the hard sciences? (Kerr, 1994).

The conflict between career goals and the expectations of others partially explained the disparity (Horner, 1972). Hollinger stated, "Of all the existing barriers, sex-

role socialization's impact on the child's developing self-belief system is the most pervasive and limiting" (p. 136). A decline in self-esteem related to not giving themselves credit seemed to begin frequently somewhere in middle school or high school (Kerr, 1994).

In 1992, Hollinger conducted a study of the educational and career attainment of gifted young women. She stated that a "recurring theme of concern has been the degree to which gifted women have or have not realized their potential over the course of the lifespan" (p. 207). Dividing achievement responses into three categories, traditional, personal, and relational, Hollinger found that many gifted females responded that relational achievement was most important. Also, many females chose traditionally female occupations. She concluded that by adolescence, the young gifted female had already been exposed to years of sex-role socialization and societal stereotypes.

Horner framed this issue regarding females and achievement as a fear of success (Horner, 1970) when she concluded that females anticipate social rejection if they are successful. Thirty years later, Engle replicated Horner's study and found that the students in her study were concerned about the "psychological and social" barriers faced by females in non-traditional fields (Engle, 2003, p. 2).

Reis and Callahan (1989) analyzed data on female performance in professions, business, and financial status. After pointing out that less then two percent of American inventions were patented by females, for example, and that females were under-represented in high government positions, they concluded, "It is clear from the above statistics that bright women are clearly adult underachievers (p. 102). The challenge, then, is to encourage gifted adolescent females to achieve according to their potential

(Rizza, 1999). Also, Torrance found that the females in his longitudinal study were not as likely as the males to hold on to their childhood creativity and express it in adult creative products (Torrance, 1961).

Several researchers have noted the expectation to be caring that is directed to females (Callahan, Cunningham, & Plucker, 1994; Reis & Callahan, 1989; Roeper, 1995). Adolescent females make decisions more from an "ethic of caring" than from a sense of what is best for them (Callahan, Cunningham, & Plucker, 1994). Reis and Callahan (1989) posed the question of whether this difference in moral psychology in females should be addressed with some differences in curriculum.

Smutney (1999) noted that gifted girls often face a range of social pressures in schools, causing them to shift priorities. Smart girls may fear being shunned by other girls who may view them as showoffs or as too academically competitive (Dixon, 1998). Girls are likely to be rejected by peers for being smart (Machoian, 2005). As one gifted adolescent female replied in an interview, "I didn't want to be too much of a brain because I wanted guys to be attracted to me. If you're too smart or too successful, girls won't like you, either" (Machoian, 2005, p. 23). Machoian stated in her book, *The Disappearing Girl,* that high intelligence becomes a depression risk factor for girls during adolescence (2005). Relationships with others are defined by the gifted adolescent female as a source of personal satisfaction and a necessary contributor to happiness (Hollinger, 1991). If you're not accepted, you're alone (Machoian, 2005). As a result, many gifted females hide their intelligence for fear of losing relationships (Kerr, 1994).

To summarize, some of the challenges facing adolescents who are gifted and female include sex role stereotyping, harassment, lowered expectations, and loss of self-

esteem (Rizza, 1999). Developing confidence in herself and trusting her own internal voice was considered important (Hollinger, 1991).

<div align="center">Are gifted adolescents especially vulnerable to suicide?</div>

Addressing claims that gifted adolescents are more prone to suicide is particularly difficult because death certificates, which have a category for cause of death by suicide, do not contain information on whether the young person who completed suicide was gifted, in gifted classes, or had a high I.Q. It is, therefore, impossible at this time to compare national statistics for suicides among gifted adolescents with statistics for suicides among adolescents in general. Research on suicide among gifted adolescents is limited (Gust-Brey & Cross, 1998). However, some researchers have been interested in what they think may be a vulnerability for suicide by gifted young people.

Terman's conclusion following his well-known longitudinal study of 1, 528 young boys and girls (857 males, 671 females) with I.Q.'s of at least 140 was that gifted children become professionally successful and personally and mentally healthy adults (Oden, 1968; Terman, 1959). A finding that was not initially investigated was the relatively high incidence of suicide. By 1960, when the median age of the participants was 49.6 years, there were 146 known deaths, of which 110 were by natural causes, 24 related to accidents, and 22 by suicide (14 males, 8 females). By 1970, there had been a total of 28 suicides. This rate of 28/1,528 or 1/55 greatly exceeded the usual suicide rate of 12/100,000 or 1/8,333. Two of the participants completed suicide at ages 18 and 19 (Shneidman, 1996). This study was unusual in that data were collected frequently over many years. However, one of the drawbacks of the study was that giftedness was determined by I.Q. tests alone.

Other longitudinal studies of individuals with high IQ's were conducted by Subotnik, Karp, & Morgan (1989) and Subotnik, Kassan, Summers, & Wasser (1993). In these studies, researchers tracked the success of students with a mean IQ of 159 who had graduated from Hunter College Elementary School, a special school for gifted children, between 1948 and 1960. They then compared the data from the Hunter group with those obtained from the Terman group (1959).The results were comparable. For the most part, the subjects achieved success professionally, had stable interpersonal relationships and had good mental and physical health. Whereas in the Terman study, males far exceeded females in professional achievement, the difference was not as great with the Hunter females. The Hunter females, however, lived in an era in which more females achieved higher levels of education and more worked outside the home. The Hunter females reported greater satisfaction than did the Terman females.

In 1926, Catharine Cox published a work titled, *The Early Mental Traits of Three Hundred Geniuses.* This was a retrospective study of men born after 1450 who had achieved historical eminence. Of the 301 studied, only one, Thomas Chatterton, took his life, at age seventeen. Variables not considered in this study were other gifted men who did not achieve eminence, perhaps because of illness or suicide. By natural selection, if they achieved eminence, they lived for a period of years in order to accomplish their goals.

Several studies have purposively studied suicide among gifted adolescents. Seiden (1966) studied completed suicides at the University of California, Berkeley. His findings indicated that 67% of the students who completed suicide had above average grades among all students. Of undergraduates, 91% who completed suicide had grades that were

above average. These data are valuable, but the definition of "above average grades" at Berkeley is difficult to compare with other studies.

Sargent (1984), after analyzing 1,500 suicide completions, suggested that adolescents who completed suicide were more intelligent than adolescents who attempted. He stated that "better students made the most severe attempts" (Sargent, 1984, p. 50), adding that they used more lethal means such as guns. The problem in applying or generalizing these data, also, is the lack of a definition of intelligence or "better student."

Some studies have considered whether students who completed suicide attended more selective schools or schools for the highly talented. For example, several studies analyzing suicide rates at various educational institutions have concluded that suicide rates were higher at more competitive schools (Lester & Lester, 1971; Ross, 1969; Seiden, 1966). This may be due in part to the pressure at the selective schools. This would seem to indicate a higher prevalence of suicide among gifted young people. However, Harvard University reported a 50% decrease in suicide incidence between 1949 and 1965 (Farnsworth, 1972). Many variables could account for the statistics in these studies. Whether or not the young person was gifted may or may not have been a contributing factor. The same can be said of studies comparing suicide rates among college students compared to non-college students. Mixed findings have been obtained.

Following a discussion of the representation of the gifted among dropouts, delinquents, and those who complete suicide, Lajoie and Shore stated, "Suicide statistics and theories about the causes of suicide are the most accommodating to the idea of overrepresentation of the gifted, especially at college age. No major theory of suicide includes high ability as a contributor…" (1981, p. 141). This raises an interesting

question regarding any possible correlation between giftedness and vulnerability to suicide. However, as stated, giftedness was not cited as an influence in any major theory of the contributors to suicide, including those of Stillion, McDowell, & May, 1989) and Shneidman (1985).

In response to a "marked increase in youth suicide rates over the last thirty years in a number of countries, including the United States, Great Britain, and Australia," Fergusson, Woodward, and Horwood (2000, p. 23) conducted a longitudinal study concerning risk factors for suicide in adolescents living in New Zealand. Even though the results may not be generalizable to the population of adolescents in the United States or elsewhere, it could be useful because it is a longitudinal study conducted over a period of twenty-one years with frequent data collections. A sample of 1,265 children (635 males, 630 females) born in New Zealand in a four-month period in 1977 were studied at birth, at four months of age, one year, and then annually up to age sixteen, again at age eighteen, and last at age twenty-one. Data consisted of parent interviews, teacher assessments, child interviews, psychometric tests, and medical records. Results indicated that by the age of twenty-one, 28.8% of the sample participants reported having suicidal ideation and 7.5% of the total had made an attempt. Participants took the WISC-R and the report concluded that no correlation between intelligence level and suicide was found. Reporting in terms of correlations to suicide was mainly on family background, SES, substance abuse, and parent-child attachment. This seemed to be an example of the common lack of particular attention to the variable of intelligence or attributes of the highly intelligent, as an independent variable(s) which might affect the decision to complete suicide.

In 1999, Lester commented, "The academically gifted have been thought to be more susceptible to depression and suicide, not only because of the typical suicidogenic risk factors (such as psychiatric disturbance, drug and alcohol abuse, and dysfunctional family backgrounds), but also because of factors associated with their giftedness" (p.587). He continued by listing specific factors that might contribute to this vulnerability, including perfectionism, sensitivity, boredom and alienation, frustration that they cannot achieve change in the world, and social isolation. He noted that gifted adolescents often prefer to be alone or engage in activities with one friend. His viewpoint apparently resulted from a review of the literature.

In an article titled, "The Impact of Giftedness on Psychological Well-being: What Does the Empirical Literature Say?", Neihart (1998) noted that there seemed to be evidence from previous studies that giftedness enhanced resiliency, on the one hand, and also evidence that giftedness increased vulnerability. Neihart pointed out that, though views concerning whether giftedness increased vulnerability have oscillated over the years, the 1981 suicide of Dallas Egbert, a gifted high school student, confirmed that gifted children do kill themselves, "that they are not immune to problems" (Neihart, 1998, p. 10).

Nail and Evans (1997) reported that they compared results on the Self-Report of Personality of the Behavioral Assessment System for Children between 115 gifted adolescents and 97 non-gifted students from high schools in Atlanta, Georgia. The gifted students were volunteers from the gifted programs. The non-gifted students were randomly assigned from English classes. Results indicated that the gifted showed fewer indicators of maladjustment, even though both groups scored generally within normal

limits. Neihart (1998) noted that the gifted participants may not have been representative of the population of identified gifted students. Even though the gifted students volunteered to participate, they may not have been truthful in their responses. The assumption that surveys such as this reveal accurate data is often erroneous. In-depth interviews following the scoring of the instrument would add to the strength of the findings. Another problem may be that many gifted students who have emotional problems may not be in gifted programs in high school.

This weakness of standardized measures of depression was also evidenced in the results of Neihart's study in which she compared gifted middle school students with students of average ability on "standardized, objective measures of depression" (Neihart, 1998, p. 12). Three groups of 30 adolescents responded to the Multiscore Depression Inventory (MDI). The groups were high ability students who were in gifted classes, high ability students who were not in gifted classes, and students of average ability. Neihart reported that none of the 30 students reported symptoms serious enough to cause concern and any differences in the groups' responses seemed to indicate more positive mental health for the high ability individuals. The results were questionable because they were dependent on the honestly of the participants and because of the small sample size.

Cross, Cook, and Dixon (1996) conducted psychological autopsies focusing on 3 adolescent males who had taken their lives while they were attending a residential high school for academically talented students. They found that all 3 young people exhibited symptoms of "depression, anger, mood swings, and confusion about the future" (p. 405). In addition, they demonstrated poor impulse control and substance use and abuse, relationship difficulties including "isolation from persons capable of disconfirming

irrational logic" (p. 405). All 3 exhibited an increase in behavioral difficulties and a change in their performance at school. Five of Dabrowski's (1976) overexcitabilities: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, emotional, and imaginational, were observed. The suicide of Kurt Cobain in addition to other cultural factors seemed to influence all three males. After the publication of the results of the psychological autopsies, Cross was contacted by the mother of Reed Ball, a gifted adolescent who had taken his life at age 21, with a request to conduct a psychological autopsy on her son (Cross, Gust-Brey, & Ball, 2002). Reed also had a history of mood swings. He exhibited erratic sleeping patterns as a very young child and was reportedly distractible in the classroom. He was bullied at school from as early as the second grade. On an achievement test in second grade Reed scored in the 98th and 99th percentile. One of the themes of his writing was existential angst. Concluding that more research is needed on the risk factors for gifted adolescents, the authors also noted the importance of providing a safe and supportive environment for gifted students. They noted that "communication and intervention are the key in preventing the loss of life to suicide (p. 258).

Hayes and Sloat (1990) gathered data from 69 schools and noted that 8 of 42 suicide attempts involved academically gifted students. The total number of suicide attempts reported seemed low, based on high estimates of the numbers of suicide attempts made by young people in the United States, so the validity of this study seems questionable. In a recent study looking into the factor structure of gifted adolescents' responses on the Suicide Ideation Questionnaire, Cassady & Cross (2006) concluded that a difference existed between the gifted sample and the normal group. They went on to

note that the difference suggests that gifted adolescents have a more multi-faceted conception of suicidal ideation.

Summary

None of the studies that have been reviewed have yielded firm evidence for a claim that gifted adolescents are more prone to suicide than other adolescents. Some of the factors that increase the difficulties with making conclusions based on research to this point include varied definitions of "gifted" or "academically talented." In some studies, I.Q. scores determined giftedness and in others, GPA's or participation in gifted classes were the determinants. In addition, the definition of "adolescence" is not only unclear in terms of age range, but the common age range of ten to twenty is not reflected in national statistics on suicide. Also, national data do not include an intelligence factor, since it is not included on death certificates. Other problems are that studies which focus on suicide attempts have sometimes been compared with studies that involve suicide completion or they depend upon responses on psychometric inventories of suicide risk or depression that may not be honest. Both factors affect the applicability of findings. Considering more than one type of data might increase the usefulness of findings, for example, utilizing in-depth interviews in addition to paper and pencil inventories. Perhaps, rather than asking whether gifted students are more prone to suicide than other adolescents, we could pursue the question, "Which, if any, attributes of giftedness seem to increase a young person's vulnerability to suicide?"

I hope that the case study that I have conducted will add to the body of knowledge on suicide among gifted adolescents. Because individual gifted adolescent males have been researched (Cross, Cook, & Dixon, 1996; Cross, Gust-Brey, & Ball, 2002), I

decided to focus on the life and death of a gifted adolescent female. To incorporate

important findings from previous research, attention was given to historical events,

cultural influences, effects of the immediate environment, as well as characteristics of the

individual self.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Theoretical Framework

The perspective of a constructionist epistemological stance is that individual human beings construct meanings as they interpret their experiences (Crotty, 1998; Collin, 1997). Collin stated that "social reality is generated by our interpretation of it" (1997, p. 2). Reality is dependent on the way we think about it. This is different from the position of positivism, for example, in which "truth and meaning reside in their objects independently of any conscious" (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Constructionists are interested in in-depth insight and understanding within a historical and cultural context. The emphasis is on how an individual's background and experiences affect how that person constructs knowledge (Patton, 2002).

Within this constructionist framework, symbolic interactionism is a theoretical perspective which seeks to understand experiences and behaviors by focusing on how individuals interpret their world through interaction with self and others (Crotty, 1998; Blumer, 1969). Humans communicate through symbols such as the language within a culture (Blumer, 1969). Through the interactions, individuals create perceptions, attitudes, values, and meanings (Crotty, 1998; Moustakas, 1990). Blumer emphasized the role of meaning in determining a person's behavior. He was concerned that many psychological and sociological explanations for human behavior omitted a consideration of the unique meaning attached to objects and experiences by the individual (Blumer,

1989). He stated that an individual "acts toward his world interpreting what confronts him and organizing his action on the basis of the interpretation" (Blumer, 1989, p.63).

<div align="center">Trustworthiness of the Data</div>

Researcher bias and subjectivity have been cited by some researchers as reasons for concern regarding the validity and usefulness of qualitative research. Some researchers have raised questions about the credibility and trustworthiness of research in which interactions between the investigator and the investigated may have occurred. Qualitative research has also been criticized because the researcher served as an interpreter of the data. Many qualitative researchers have addressed these concerns (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Glesne, 1999; Merriam, 1988; Ratcliffe, 1983). "Data do not speak for themselves; there is always an interpreter" (Ratcliffe, 1983, p. 33).

All research has biases, for the researcher decides what data to use and what to discard and even what topic to research (Merriam, 1988). The investigator is the instrument who gathers and analyzes data in a qualitative case study and, being human, may make mistakes and miss opportunities. (Glesne, 1999; Merriam, 1988). Questions have been raised. What constitutes "truth"? (Misher,1990; St. Pierre, 1997). Is knowledge found or constructed? (Lather, 1993). What are the forces that affect perception and how do we interrupt our perception, which may be distorted? (Barone, 2005). Underlying qualitative research is the assumption that there are many interpretations of reality (Merriam, 1988).

"The use of multiple data collection methods contributes to the trustworthiness of the data"(Glesne, 1999, p. 31). Caution has been urged to researchers who have personal

experience with an issue. Being aware of one's subjectivities is a necessary part of the process (Glesne, 1999; Peshkin, 1988). Feelings, when acknowledged, can give the researcher important information (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Verification procedures that have been suggested to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of data were employed in this research study including prolonged engagement and persistent observation, audiotaping, using three forms of data (triangulation), member checks, and thick description (Creswell, 2002; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Merriam, 1998; Seale, 1999; Silverman, 1993). From a constructivist perspective, adding to the credibility and dependability and confirmability of the data increases the ability to persuade an audience that the findings are worth their attention (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

I used data from interviews, documents and other archival materials, my journaling, and my emotions. I had frequent member checks with the participants. Member checks add to the validity of the data by adding another's thoughts about accuracy, what is relevant, and what might be included (Lather, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Research Design

I conducted one in-depth case study, according to the guidelines published by Stake (1995), focusing on the thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and values of a gifted adolescent female who took her life. I was interested in understanding the factors that may have contributed to her decision to die by suicide. This case study was a psychological autopsy (Ebert, 1987; Shneidman, 1993; Cross, Gust-Brey, & Ball, 2002; Cross, Cook, & Dixon, 1996). In a psychological autopsy, research focusing on individual and environmental factors is conducted following a death by suicide in order to understand what may have contributed to the decision to take one's own life.

Information from interviews and documents and other archival data are considered in a comprehensive study of an individual life (Cook, Cross, & Gust, 1996).

For this study, "gifted" was defined as achieving at a level intellectually and artistically which is advanced compared to most children in the same chronological age group. The data in this study were analyzed "to provide insight into an issue" (Stake, 1995, p. 437). I am seeking to gain insight into the suicide of a gifted adolescent female, while, at the same time, realizing that the data cannot be generalized. Peshkin (1976) noted that his intention in a case study was that it be read with interest in the case itself, but that he also intended to learn about a class of things.

<div align="center">Details of the Research Process</div>

The research process consisted of filing an application and obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my university, locating participants, collecting data, and analyzing the data. Immediately after my committee's approval of my prospectus on November 22, 2005, I physically took copies of my IRB application to the IRB office.

Obtaining Approval from the Institutional Review Board

On February 23, 2006, I was notified that my study would be reviewed at a meeting of the IRB on February 24, 2006 and that the review board hoped that I and/or my advisor could be present. Because I was out of state at the time and my advisor had other important appointments, neither of us could attend. I requested to be present at the meeting via telephone conferencing and received confirmation that this would be available. I was later informed that the meeting was held at the appointed time, but because of technical difficulties, I could not be included in the meeting by telephone.

On March 3, 2006, I was informed by email of the changes that would have to be made in my IRB application in order for approval to be granted. Because there was concern about the psychological and emotional risks and possible distress that might be experienced by the participants, I was required to specify that the suicide must have occurred at least one year prior to my study, to describe a procedure for referral to counseling services and to provide names, addresses, and phone numbers of local counseling centers, and to explain how I was qualified to interview participants who might be distressed. The second major issue, the confidentiality of the participants, focused particularly on the concern on the part of the IRB that the identity of participants might be inferred by other participants. I consulted with two of my committee members during this time to help me decide how to address this latter concern.

The first issue was relatively easy to address. I had been licensed as a Licensed Professional Counselor in my state and had maintained my own private counseling practice for ten years before entering the doctoral program at my university. In that capacity, I had worked with many individuals who were dealing with grief issues and who were obviously distressed during therapy sessions. As a result of my work as a counselor, I had established a network of professional relationships with counselors through the Licensed Professional Counselors Association. Therefore, I knew of many counselors who specialized in working with clients whose presenting problems involved the loss of a loved one.

The second issue, involving confidentiality, was more difficult to address. I had originally planned to interview family members, friends, and teachers of the gifted adolescent female who took her life. As a result of the IRB concerns that participants

might identify each other upon reading my dissertation or subsequent articles and that the involvement of teachers might involve academic records, I limited my participants to family members only. Also, my original plan of asking other researchers for referrals of possible candidates for participation in my study had to be changed. I finally decided that I would post my announcement on suicide survivor websites. I re-submitted my revised IRB application and received final approval on May 4, 2006, which was almost six months after the initial application.

Participant Selection and Ethical Concerns

A notice was posted on several Internet sites whose participants include family members of individuals who completed suicide. Several people responded that they would like to participate, but their child did not fit the criteria for the study. Then, on October 10, 2006, an email reply was received from a woman who wrote that she would like her daughter to be considered for the study. She told me that she thought that her daughter fit the criteria for the study and she suggested that I look at the website that she created in memory of her daughter.

As I studied the website and considered what her mother had said, I decided that this gifted adolescent female certainly fit the criteria for the study. Her daughter was eighteen years old at the time that she took her life in the mid 1990's. She was served by gifted classes in school. She was also a member of MENSA for which the criterion for membership is an I.Q. of at least 130. In addition, she had been recognized with many honors, including "Most Intelligent" by her senior classmates. This young woman fit the criteria of being in the adolescent age range, being female, being gifted, and having taken her life over one year ago. Her family was willing to participate in interviews and to

provide documents and other archival materials for analysis. After exchanging emails, I asked if I could call on the telephone to discuss the logistics of collecting the data. The mother suggested the name Amber as a pseudonym for her daughter's name to be used in this dissertation to protect confidentiality. A consent form was mailed and was returned on October 24, 2006, before data collection began. The mother signed a detailed consent form which stipulated that her participation was voluntary and that she knew that she could cease participation at any time.

Amber's mother invited me to attend a retreat at her home which she organized to aid parents whose children had died, though not necessarily by suicide, in their healing process. She remarked that she wished that we had talked earlier because she had facilitated a retreat for parents who were suicide survivors a couple of weeks before. I gladly accepted her invitation and drove to her home in a nearby state two weeks later, arriving on Thursday, October 27, 2006, and staying through Sunday, October 30, 2006. I was invited to stay in her home with the other retreat participants, and I stayed in Amber's room because documents were stored there.

Amber's father participated in informal conversations and her brother added information through an email to Amber's mother. In addition, after the interviews were conducted, transcripts were sent to the interviewee for review. This step increased the likelihood of accuracy and gave the participant the opportunity to correct or add to statements. Interviews were conducted in two sessions, allowing the researcher time to reflect on the responses and possibly formulate additional questions. This also allowed the participant time to add more pertinent information and to clarify responses.

Data Collection

Data was obtained from the conventional avenues, including interviews and document analysis (Glesne, 1999). I also considered my journals and the emotions experienced by Amber's family and myself which I recorded at the time as research notes as data to be analyzed (Richardson, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2004; Tomlinson, 1989).

Interviews. Through the interviews, I collected stories (deMarrais, 1998; Tomlinson, 1989). The interview data consisted of more than words that were spoken (Mishler, 1986; Scheurich, 1995). "The complex play of conscious and unconscious thoughts, feelings, fears, power, desires, and needs on the part of the interviewer and interviewee cannot be captured and categorized" (Mishler, 1986, p.249). Pauses and expressions and also a sigh, laughter, and tears gave information (St. Pierre, 1997). Mere words without these details lack the full depth of expression and meaning. In addition, the translating of experiences into words, into a verbal language, often is inadequate. "Some of what occurs in an interview is verbal. Some is nonverbal" (Scheurich, 1995, p.244).

The interviews for this study were semi-structured, with open-ended questions that gave the interviewee space to go in many directions and "carve out a space" of her own (Mishler, 1986, p. 247). As suggested by Patton (2002), I prepared the open-ended questions for the interviews carefully. I considered what I wanted to learn in the study while being aware that many kinds of knowledge may be acquired that were not anticipated. While I was prepared with an interview guide, I was flexible and open to whatever was presented in the interview. I audiotaped the interviews and I personally transcribed them. According to Silverman (1993) and Wolcott (1994), this procedure

assured more accuracy than merely taking notes. Since Amber's mother was sharing information through formal interviews, she was asked in advance for permission to audiotape the sessions. Amber's father and mother both shared information through informal conversations. I took notes during those conversations.

I made two trips to the home of Amber's parents to collect data. Their home is in a rural area where homes rest on many acres. As I drove on the road leading to their home, I noticed that houses were far apart, offering much privacy and a feeling of being in the country. A big wooden butterfly on a tree alerted me that I had reached my destination after an almost five hour drive. As I pulled into the long driveway, I noticed an open building which I learned later was used for meals for retreat participants in nice weather. At the back of this building was a memorial wall for many of the loved ones of retreat participants who died by suicide. To the right of the driveway, the large rustic home was reached by climbing some rock steps. Another set of steps led to a wooden deck with an entrance into the den with a welcoming fireplace. A large screened porch was to my right and a dining room and kitchen were to my left. Stairs near the door led upstairs to Amber's room and to her brother Ron's room. Even though Amber is deceased and Ron lives with his wife in another city, each has a room.

During the first visit from October 27-30, 2006, which was four days and three nights in length, I was with the parents in their home almost constantly. However, I was participating in a retreat with other parents during most of the days and for some time in the evenings. During this time, I had informal conversations with Amber's mother in the late evenings after the retreat activities for the day had ended and other parents had gone to bed. One night in particular we stayed up until late into the night talking while sitting

at the kitchen table. Another night we sat in the living room and talked. I took notes

during these conversations, but I did not audiotape them. This experience of initial

informal conversations contributed to a wonderful rapport between us. The fact that I had

lost a son to suicide obviously added to a bond of understanding and mutual respect.

When I made my second trip to the home on December 2 and 3, 2006, there was

not a retreat going on, so Amber's parents and I could talk freely throughout the days and

evenings. During this visit, Amber's mother and I sat in a cozy room dedicated to group

activities during retreats and spent a total of four and a half hours interviewing, one two

and a half hour interview and one two hour interview. I audiotaped these sessions.

I began by asking general questions about Amber's personality, activities, and

school experiences that were not emotionally loaded and obviously specific to her

suicide. During the second session, we talked specifically about the day that Amber died

and about her mother's recollections before and after her death. Because we had such a

good rapport, I felt comfortable asking her very difficult questions. For example, I asked

her what she would do differently if she had known that Amber was contemplating

suicide. Her answer was, "I would have listened more." She obviously felt comfortable

divulging very intimate details because she knew that I had experienced losing a child to

suicide, too. I have experienced similar agonizing pain and confusion. I felt tremendous

empathy with what Amber's mother was saying and experiencing. It felt as if we were

trying to put the puzzle pieces together as we talked.

Documents. In addition to interviews, numerous documents were provided by the

family including Amber's writings, which included poetry, prose, and journals (See Table

2). These documents as well as medical records, the autopsy report, a posthumous

psychiatric evaluation, report cards, an Iowa Test of Basic Skills report, Criterion

Referenced Test results, recommendation letters from teachers, letters from friends, and

newspapers clippings about her death were stored in folders on shelves in her room.

Artwork included drawings which I photographed and a ceramic piece.

Table 2

Sources of Data

Interviews	Documents	Artifacts
Mother	Amber's writings:	Photographs
Father	Poetry, prose, journals, Novel chapters High school graduation speech	Videotape of Amber from early years and including high school graduation speech
	Test profiles	Drawings, pottery
	Medical records, including the autopsy report	Trophies
	Letters from friends Letters of recommendation from teachers	
	Posthumous psychiatric evaluation	
	Mother's writings about Amber	

I spent hours during breaks and late at night during my first visit copying Amber's

writings and making notes from all of the documents that were provided. This process

continued during my second visit. Making two visits was helpful because I had time to

think about further questions that I had and Amber's parents had time to think about

further information that they wanted to share. An example was the realization by

Amber's mother that they had a videotape of Amber and that it would be helpful to me to

see and hear Amber when she was alive.

Amber's father located the video during my second visit and the viewing of this

video was a tremendous help to me in visualizing Amber and developing a sense of her

uniqueness. The video which was a compilation of videotaped events in Amber's life

throughout her life, including her high school graduation speech. Amber's mother and I

sat next to each other and her dad sat behind us as we watched Amber from her early

years singing for family and friends, performing at various competitions, playing dress up

with her friends, at birthday parties, on a trip to the Cabbage Patch hospital in North

Georgia, eating in a restaurant with a boy before a school dance, and riding in the car and

walking through a store with her boyfriend. Amber's mother and I both had tears in our

eyes. Amber's composure and stage presence as she delivered her high school graduation

speech just two months before she took her life really mesmerized me. Her mother

commented to me that she thought that very few people at the graduation understood

what Amber was saying in her philosophical presentation (See Appendix B).

In addition, the mother's writings had been filed, including the eulogy that she

gave at the funeral, an article published in a professional journal, a list of descriptive

words about Amber, a recollection of the last day of Amber's life and a separate, more

inclusive recollection of the last days of her life. I was also given my own copy of a

bound collection of selected poetry and prose written by Amber. This collection was

chosen and edited by a friend who also wrote a dedication to Amber as an introduction.

A room filled with memorabilia including photographs, trophies, and her high chair was still dedicated to Amber, even though the family had moved since her death. Even though the room contained a bed, dresser, desk, shelves, and a high chair filled with stuffed animals, I was told that the high chair was the only piece of furniture that was actually Amber's while she was living. The room had a theme of butterflies, which were a favorite of Amber's, as evidenced by a butterfly that she had tattooed on her ankle. The curtains had butterflies and many plaques given as gifts to the family after Amber's death had butterfly themes. I spent many hours working at the desk in one corner of the room. Photographs on shelves offered me snapshots of Amber in various events and activities throughout her life. To the right of the door, many shelves were filled with folders containing Amber's writings, letters, and her mother's writings and next to the shelves was a closet with some of Amber's clothing.

Journaling. I kept a journal throughout the research process. Writing is considered by many to be a method of data collection and can also play an important role in the analysis of data (Charmaz, 1995; Richardson, 2000). Writing helps me think. Through my journaling, I gained insight, detected patterns, and formulated ideas. In reflecting on writing as a method of inquiry, Richardson wrote that "Writing is also a way of knowing—a method of discovery and analysis" (2000. p.923). By taking time frequently for introspection, I considered the data, gave ideas time to incubate, revisited the data, and then wrote some more. Extensive amounts of thick, rich data can be obtained from writing as a data source (Charmaz, 1995). Writing was an integral part of the non-linear process of collecting and analyzing data (St. Pierre, 1997).

Emotions. The consideration of emotions as data may be perceived by some as too subjective to contribute to the body of knowledge. Even in ethnographies in which the researcher spent a great deal of time in a culture sharing daily experiences and learning intimate details about the lives of those being studied and sharing daily experiences, emotions were noted in personal diaries or journals, apart from the research data until recently (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1992). In 1997, Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillman-Healy, noted that identifying with the characters of the study and having an appreciation for emotions, intuition, and personal experience added meaning to the work. Others have posited that emotions should be counted as data to be analyzed (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Kleinman & Copp, 1993; St. Pierre, 1997).

The tragedy of the suicide of this adolescent was reflected in the depth and range of emotions experienced by her family. Without that sensitivity to their emotions and my own, including grief and sadness, I would be merely intellectually citing events and words and the meaning would not have been captured. As I realize my own vulnerability and my own deep emotions in relation to the life experiences of Amber and her family (Behar, 1996), I have worked even harder to understand and to share this life as accurately as is humanly possible (St. Pierre, 1997).

Data Analysis

I was immersed in the process of my research from October 27, 2006, when data collection began until the end of February, 2007, when I completed the data analysis and the final writing. Moustakas (1990) cited the stages of research data analysis as initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, and creative synthesis. As I collected data, I took time to reflect by writing thoughts and questions in my journal. Then I would

collect more data, analyze, and write some more. This was an intense and consuming activity which was complex and multi-dimensional. In answer to bell hooks' (1989) question, "do we have to go that deep?" (p.1), I answer emphatically, "Yes, I must."

The purpose of analyzing data in qualitative research is to understand and make sense of what it means (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2004). In this interpretive case study, I was on a quest to discover the meanings of Amber's life experiences. I was reaching deeply in order to understand (Lather, 1993; Richardson, 2000).

The difficulties involved were many. The task was multi-dimensional, complex, and nonlinear (Barone, 2005; Derrida, 1974). Connections were made. Emotions were touched (Barone, 2005). The context in which Amber's life was lived had to be considered in the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 2004). Many sources of data were examined (Creswell, 2002). The analysis of this qualitative data was a difficult, time and energy consuming task. I was actually preoccupied with the process of data collection and analysis for five months, often finding it difficult to concentrate on anything else.

Analyzing the interview data. Some specific steps were taken as I analyzed the data. I read and re-read the transcription, underlining key words and phrases and writing in the margins. The double-spaced transcription of the four and a half hours of interview data was 88 pages in length. This inductive analysis began by initially noting experiences, events, feelings, and descriptions. As I worked and worked with the data, the separate words and phrases were condensed into main points and themes. Each time I read the transcription, I noticed more details. For example, a few times during the interviews after Amber's mother responded to a question, she would ask me questions about my own recollections of my son's life and my experiences of his suicide. For

example, she asked, "Laurie, did Trey do that?" and "Do you remember everything about the last day of his life?"

Member checking. After I finished typing the transcript of the interviews, I sent it to Amber's mother so that she could check for accuracy and perhaps think of additional topics that she would like to add or clarify. This member check was fruitful because it reminded her mother of additional conversations or situations. An example was a recollection of Amber's frustration with the school system after she learned that the elimination of honors or gifted classes was being discussed. Amber's mother had not remembered this when I was at her home, but a review of the transcript brought it to her consciousness. I continued to ask questions through emails with Amber's mother that led to an on-going exchange of questions and opportunities for further recollections or clarifications.

Creative synthesis. I do some of my best thinking while I am walking or jogging. Many days I would pour through the data and then go for a jog. Leaving the rest of the world behind opened my mind to new ways of looking at the data. I often came back eager to journal my ideas or to work at my computer after raising more questions in my mind or even experiencing what I considered to be an insight. I would read some of Amber's poetry or study some of my notes before leaving for a walk so that the data would be fresh in my awareness.

Another vehicle that helped me synthesize the data was a 3' by 4' dry erase board that I purchased. I realized that I needed a large surface to frequently record my thoughts and ideas. I put it in the dining room so that every time I walked from the kitchen to the living room I could write new thoughts or re-work ideas. Most days the board was full of

words representing themes, questions, and ideas for organizing the presentation of the data, especially for the findings and implications of the study. For example, I wrote "Individual," "Environment," and "Culture" at the top of the board one day. Then as ideas developed I would work and re-work how and what to include in each of the categories. Written vertically along the left hand margin for several days was "Who am I and what is my place in society?" which I thought about as I re-visited Thomas Moore's book, *Care of the Soul (1992).* In the beginning of his book, Moore discussed meaningless and emptiness and other existential themes experienced by some of his clients when he was a therapist.

As I worked with the data, I reflected on what I was learning and began to make connections and discover patterns. I was in frequent email contact with Amber's mother. I realized that I wanted to include the words to Amber's high school graduation speech in the appendices. When I mentioned in an email that perhaps I needed to make a third trip to record the words, her mother was gracious enough to type the words in an email. She also sent me the text of one of Amber's writings, the *Christmas Stor,y* when I realized that I had not copied the words.

Another aid is analyzing the data came from my experience as a counselor. One of the techniques that I used to help people gain insight into their patterns and priorities was the development of a personal life line of key events. I thought that if I organized the data chronologically as well as by themes, I could discover trends in Amber's behavior and thoughts. I was particularly interested in what she was experiencing and writing about in the first eleven years of her life, since her first suicide gesture was in the fifth grade. Even though I agreed with Amber's mother that the date rape in high school was

probably a catalyst to her suicide, I continued to ask her and myself, "What happened before or during the fifth grade to cause her to be suicidal at age eleven?"

Through this creative process, the whole picture of Amber and her life was scrutinized, including her views, values, beliefs, and situations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994). "Part of interpretive work is gaining a sense of the whole—the whole interview, the whole story, the whole body of data" (Charmaz, 1995, p. 520). Most of the time, we tend to look only at slices of someone's life. In this case study, I was immersing myself in her entire life, a process which came with a great deal of responsibility (Barone, 2005).

<div align="center">Summary</div>

The adolescent who was the focus of my interest and my research constructed knowledge based on her experience of life and her perceptions of those life experiences. The participants who were interviewed constructed knowledge based on information that they hold and were willing to share. I, the researcher, constructed knowledge as I sought to understand, to interpret, and to make meaning. The selection of participants, the methods of data collection, and the analysis of the data have been products of hours, days, weeks, and months of immersing myself in the data, reflecting through journaling, letting ideas incubate, creating ideas, and developing themes which represented the main points.

Crotty noted that "to understand and explain human and social reality" (1998, p. 66) consideration of the cultural and historical contexts in which the life was lived as well as specific statements made, events attended, and products created must be considered. I researched many aspects of Amber's environment and also delved into the

historical and cultural events and influences during her lifetime from the late 70's to the mid 90's. To dig for deep understanding as I considered the whole person within her environment and culture was the intent of this case study research.

Finally, the data analysis involved a process of deconstructing and reconstructing ideas about all aspects of the research process. The methodological approach used in this research may be revised before the next research study is undertaken. Bringing to consciousness different ways of looking at the data by going back to the data again and again and continuing to utilize peer review will add to the usefulness of my research. I undertook an in-depth and detailed analysis of Amber's life using numerous methods and the intense analysis of a large amount of data.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The findings have been organized into three sections. First, a general description of Amber, her environment, and her culture was discussed to provide a background. Next, the discussion was organized by major findings which included bullying, nonconformity, trust, fear, and low self-esteem. Finally, through a chronological time line of her life the changes in Amber, indicators of distress, and turning points were the focus. I viewed Amber as the five-year-old who was bullied in kindergarten to the fifth grader who contemplated suicide to the anguished 18-year-old who took her life. Trends such as bullying and her mounting rage were prominent through this lifeline.

A Description of Amber, her environment, and historical cultural context

Amber

Amber was a highly intelligent, creative, and sensitive young woman who was conflicted about conforming to society's expectations, frustrated with cultural norms, concerned about the state of the world, and definitely marched to the beat of a different drummer. She lived from the late 1970's to the mid 1990's. She read "constantly" according to her mother and she was a prolific writer of poetry and prose. Many years of lessons resulted in a fair competence on the piano and a beautiful singing voice. One of her two guitars was an almost constant companion the last two years of her life. Her love of the outdoors and her concern for the environment were reflected in many of her writings and by the vegetarian lifestyle that she followed for several years in high school. According to medical records, she was physically healthy. In terms of roles that she

played throughout her life, she was a daughter, a sister, a student, a debater, a part-time employee, a friend, and, as far as is known, a girlfriend in two relationships.

Physically, Amber was an attractive young woman. She was tall and slender, with an athletic build. She had long, naturally wavy hair, expressive blue-green eyes, and full lips. Her clothing choices were blouses and slacks, shorts or skirts, and dresses. She never wore blue jeans, which was probably a nonconformist statement. The only part of her anatomy that was troubling to her was her large foot size. She wore a size 11 shoe that made buying attractive shoes a frustrating experience. Her favorite color was green and she wore green frequently the last few years of her life because it brought out the greenish-blue colors of her eyes. She loved to eat, especially strawberry cakes which she requested for birthdays, but she was an average weight.

As a young child she sucked her thumb, even resorting to hiding her habit in elementary school by going to the bathroom. She was so energetic as a young child that her mother was concerned when, late at night after everyone had gone to bed, she would get up and run up and down the living room floor. Babysitters and teachers complained about her restlessness. At a young age, her mother suspected a milk allergy, so with the doctor's approval, she eliminated milk and mild products from her diet. There was a remarkable change in Amber's behavior. She seemed much calmer and better able to focus without milk.

She wrote about using alcohol in an attempt to lessen emotional pain. In addition, her mother shared with me that she used marijuana. In one of her writings, an inference was made to her perception that drug laws were unfair.

When looking at Amber through Dabrowski's lens, she exhibited intellectual, emotional, sensual, and imaginational overexcitabilities. Her intellectual overexcitability was evidenced by her I.Q. score of 140, her pursuit of intellectual activities such as the debate team, and the intellectual level in her writings. Her intense emotionality is reflected in her poetry and in her emotional laden arguments with school administrators and with her mother. References to the beauty of nature in her writings indicate a sensually sensitive person who appreciated the beauty of the sky, the moon, the trees, and other aspects of nature. Her fear of boogie monsters that she actually drew in pictures and the gargoyles mentioned in her writings were examples of imaginational overexcitability. Her vivid imagination was seen in her writings, also. Running in the living room in the middle of the night as a young child and being restless in elementary school class may have been evidence of psychomotor overexcitability, as well.

Personality. Amber exhibited traits of both introversion and extroversion. She was reflective and introspective, as evidenced by her writings. In the writings that I used as data, she referenced "mirror" several times. Examples include references from the poems "Counterpart," "Living mirror in different light," and the poem "Constance" when she wrote, "In a puddle of mirror called reality." In her writings, she is drawing her energy from within yet she exhibited extroversion in her leadership ability, for example. When Amber was still in high school she had the idea to form a philosophy club. She enlisted the cooperation of a professor at the local community college and the meetings were held there. This seemed to be another attempt to draw intelligent people into her life.

Although she exhibited extroverted tendencies such as leadership, she was probably an INFP personality type, which means that she was introverted, intuitive, feelings-driven, and perceptive. I am familiar with the Jungian typology from my ten year experience as a mental health counselor in private practice. After the first session with a client, I would guess the person's personality type and write it in the folder. Then, after they took the Myers-Briggs, I would compare types and my guess was usually accurate. Amber's introversion and introspection, her metaphysical view of life in which she invoked information from more than the five senses, her emotional decision-making process, and her perceptiveness and resistance to rigid rules all indicatethe INFP type.

Her sense of humor was seen in practical jokes such as the time she reversed all of the framed photographs in the home of her boyfriend's family before anyone returned home. It was also evidenced in some of her writings such as the "Meal Poem":

Meal Poem

Clean your plate

Masticate

Urinate

Regurgitate

Micturate

Defecate

Eliminate

What you ate.

Perception of self. In response to an assignment to write an autobiographical poem in a freshman honors English class, Amber wrote:

Amber—

Energetic, carefree, idealistic and open-minded

Sister of Ron

Lover of excitement, dreams, the moon

Who feels joy at the sight of nature,

Happy while dozing, wonder while thinking

Who needs love, outdoors, food,

Who gives heartaches, happiness and counseling,

Who fears pain, loneliness and failure

Who would like to see Pluto and the stars,

World peace, and a waterfall,

Who lives in an old church in the middle of

Nowhere, Ga.

        -(her last name)

The autobiographical poem reflected how Amber perceived herself. Many attributes combined to make Amber who she was.

Intelligence. Amber's intelligence was assessed by the school system and she was placed in gifted and honors classes. She scored in the 98th and 99th percentiles in the math and language portions on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills taken in second grade. Her I.Q. was measured at 140 on the Stanford-Binet. At the age of 16, Amber herself initiated an application for membership in MENSA, the high I.Q society. She explained to her mother that she hoped to find people on her intellectual level with whom to connect. Even though she was accepted into MENSA, Amber was disappointed that no meetings were held in

her area. In her senior year in high school, she was voted "Most Intelligent" by her classmates. As some of her writings (see Appendix A) clearly indicate, she had high verbal intelligence with a large vocabulary and the ability to utilize metaphors, personification, and other abstractions to express her thoughts.

Creativity. In addition to writing, her creativity was expressed in many ways. She played the guitar and the piano and she sang her renditions of many songs. Her writings (See Appendix A), both poetry and prose, reflect her unique view of her world. Seemingly driven to write, she wrote her views and feelings prolifically. Writing was also an attempt at catharsis in some cases, but to no avail, she noted, after writing pages and pages venting her anger and frustration in one 20-page piece. She sometimes wrote in mirror image. Amber loved costumes and accumulated many so that her friends could come over and dress up. She kept them over the years. One day when Amber was a junior or senior in high school, a participant in a domestic violence class that her mother facilitated shared with the group that a funny thing had happened that day. She had seen a tall girl with long brown hair running across her yard wearing angel wings. Amber's mother thought that was something her daughter would do so she asked her that evening, "Amber, were you wearing angel wings today?" Amber looked at her and said, "Yeah, how did you know?" When asked why she had on angel wings, Amber replied, "I just felt like it."

Sensitivity. As her mother stated, Amber "had that sensitivity that other people in the world needed some things." She worried about her friends' success, for example. When some of her friends wanted to form a rock band, she encouraged and guided them, but was disappointed when they did not follow through and succeed. In a letter that

Amber wrote in a leadership award application, she characterized herself as having

"sensitivity and concern for others." Amber went on to write:

> I am provided opportunities to express sensitivity and concern for others
>
> at church where I am an acolyte. One Sunday each month, I assist the
>
> priest with preparation for the service and the Holy Eucharist. In addition,
>
> I am a team leader at church and help the children in my team perennially.
>
> Also, my concern for others is expressed when I tutor my peers in Algebra II
>
> and Honors English: I do not want them to do badly!

She would sometimes give friends rides to school to make sure they attended. In addition, she frequently visited her elderly grandmother who lived down the street and she also visited an elderly neighbor. She joined her mother in "adopting" a woman in a nursing home and made frequent visits. When her mother started an organization to build a local battered women's shelter, Amber accompanied her mother to required domestic violence classes. Amber's writings (see Appendix A) also reflect her concern for the environment and those who are hungry and living in poverty.

Love of the outdoors. The outdoors were important to Amber and she referenced nature numerous times in writings from looking forward to going fishing and exploring the old creek with her dad to six references just to the sky in her poems. In the 5th grade she wrote about looking forward to spring break, "Dad said we can go fishing and I'll be able to go bike riding, walking, tree climbing, exploring, and maybe even see where the reedy creek leads to." The sky seems to exemplify the connection with nature which was a refuge for her. For example, in a poem, "Cleansing," that she wrote two years before

her death, she stated, "Close your eyes to see the skies and forget that everybody dies." In her poem "Another Town," which she wrote just 11 days before she took her life, she said, "Lift my hopes all higher just by glancing at the skies."

Amber and her Immediate Environment

Family. The family consisted of her father, mother, a brother who is almost four years older than Amber, and Amber. They lived in a rural town in the southeastern United States in a lovely home on five acres. Her mother and father both worked outside the home, the mother as a school teacher and the dad with the state prison system. Family values included education, a work ethic, helping others, and a love of nature, which included having a big garden. The parents appear to be happily married. I spent about six days with the mother and father in their current home, one visit lasting 4 days and nights and the other a weekend. Amber's parents are loving and considerate to each other and were very gracious to me. As previously mentioned, they moved to another state about two years ago, many years after Amber died in the mid 1990's. Their present home is very roomy and feels warm and cozy, and the 18 acres allow room for a big garden and a natural, woodsy backyard.

In addition to attending church together and participating in other local activities, the family took many vacations together. They went to Disney World at Orlando several times and to the Florida beaches. For four days on another trip they toured all the major attractions in Washington, D.C. When they went to New York City, they saw the Empire State Building and the Twin Towers. On yet another trip, they went to the Kolomoki Indian Grounds in Georgia.

Amber's brother lives with his wife in the same state but in another city from his parents. He works in the music industry and his responsibilities require him to travel all over the world. Therefore, he was not interviewed but communicated through email with his mother about this study. In school, the brother was also identified as gifted. He excelled on the debate team and was also in the chorus. He plays the guitar and the piano. He has never been suicidal. An ironic story about his audition for the chorus involved his choice of music to sing, the theme song from the movie, MASH. The title to the song is Suicide is Painless (See Appendix C). Although he did not consider any possible repercussions from his choice, his teacher was upset. In any event, the sheet music was in the house. Years later, during the week before taking her life, Amber's father said that she was playing Suicide is Painless on the piano every night. Looking back, the perception of her parents is that she was bolstering her courage, although at the time her "practice" of this song did not seem unusual.

Sibling rivalry on Amber's part was evident, according to Amber's mother. Amber was constantly competing with her older brother. She felt as if he was shown favoritism, although her mother's perception is that she got much more attention because she demanded it. Her brother did not seem to need that much attention. Amber competed, at least in her mind, with her brother in debate. She joined the debate team in the eighth grade, the only eighth grader on the team. All other debaters were in at least the ninth grade. She participated through the tenth grade. For each debate, students were awarded so many points, based on how well they did in each debate. It took so many points to achieve national recognition by the National Forensics League as an outstanding debater. Her brother earned the required number of points, so he was awarded the national

recognition. According to her mother, Amber was a passionate and knowledgeable debater, and she accumulated many points, but she left the debate team before reaching the number required for national status. Amber's mother accompanied the groups out of town for debates until she felt as if Amber resented her being there all the time. However, shortly after her mother stopped accompanying her on debate trips, Amber quit the debate team. Her only reason was a disagreement with the debate coach. However, Amber's boyfriend was also on the debate team, and her mother thinks that may have played a part in the difficulty which led to her quitting. As her mother told me even though Amber was an outstanding debater her quitting meant that, "She never did out-do Ron."

In terms of family history of suicide, the mother learned after Amber's suicide that Amber's father's aunt, his mother's sister, had taken her life years before. The suicide had never been discussed before Amber's death to her mother's recollection and so her mother does not think that Amber knew about it. Amber's mother sees her own mother as being depressed. Many years ago, Amber's maternal grandmother did attempt suicide. However, Amber was not aware of it because it was never discussed and very few people knew about it. Although Amber's parents certainly have suffered with grief and sadness since the death of their daughter, they do not report feeling depressed except in connection with Amber's death. Both are presently retired, but lead very busy, productive lives.

Her family was supportive in ways other than transporting her to events and sometimes chaperoning. Her mother typed her high school papers for her when Amber would procrastinate about finishing. Her parents also helped her find financial resources to pay college tuition and fees and they established and contributed to a savings account

for spending money. Her mother told me that she would frequently put some of her earned income into this account.

School. Even in kindergarten, long before the eighth grade, Amber experienced difficulties with school. She put some of the teachers down in conversations with her mother. In some of her high school writing journal assignments, Amber's sarcasm was criticized as injecting humor into a serious subject. It was apparent that Amber saw the journal assignment as busy work that would not be really read when she wrote a short poem on suicide which received a red check. Yet, school provided a platform for her to excel. She wanted to be the best in school, the valedictorian. She enjoyed the debate team for years. She wrote in the letter applying for the Hugh O'Brien Youth Leadership Award referenced earler:

> School is the main activity that has allowed me to be a leader. I have a 3.7 GPA and feel that this makes me a good role model. I cooperate with my teachers and assist my peers that need tutoring whenever they need it….
>
> Finally, debate allows me to learn and share knowledge. Each weekend, I debate about a topic, this year, health care. The rest of the team and I do enormous amounts of research at Florida State University and Valdosta State University, keep up on current events, and devour many books, learning enormous amounts of knowledge in the process.

Relationships. All of Amber's friends were in gifted classes, her mother recalled. She had more male than female friends. In the ninth or tenth grade, a conversation between Amber and her mother went to the topic of girlfriends. Amber told her mother that the problem she had with the girls was that they just wanted to talk about makeup

and hair and that she was interested in more important things. So she sought out relationships through the philosophy club and debate.

In school and out of school activities. Amber had reciprocal relationships with many people through both school-sponsored and out-of-school activities and she won numerous awards for excellence. School-sponsored activities included math team, foreign language club, and a ten-day trip to Paris. Her participation with the debate team included attending debate camps during the summer, including one at Stamford University in Alabama and one at the University of Kentucky. Her mother remembered taking Amber and Ron to the camp and stopping along the way to tour and spend the night at a Shaker Village.

Amber was also an athlete. She ran track and cross country, lettered in track her senior year and she won a huge trophy for 'most improved in track and cross country.' Out of school activities included church, community theatre, voice and piano lessons, the Colloquium Philosophy Club, the domestic violence classes, her weekend work at a local restaurant, the Governors Honors Program, the Florida State University honors music camp, and an anti-violence organization. Amber took modeling lessons when she was middle school age for about a year. Then, in the 10th grade, she asked to take modeling again. She actually modeled a few places where the modeling class was recruited to model. She was recognized with highest grade average awards in Advanced chemistry, Algebra II, Advanced trigonometry, Advanced biology, English, French, and Physical Science.

Cultural and Historical Context

Amber's perceptions of historical events in the world and the customs, laws, and values of her country played a part in shaping her thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. She lived from the late 1970's until the mid 1990's. During those years as now, global conflicts resulted in wars. Poverty was widespread, as it is today, and many people in the world went to bed hungry. The rain forest was being destroyed, streams and rivers were being polluted, and global warming was becoming an issue. Assassinations occurred and terrorists hijacked airliners and cruise ships. Mass media provided almost instant access to the news.

Historical events. John Lennon was assassinated in 1980 and Indira Gandhi four years later. In 1985, terrorists captured a TWA airliner and an Egyptian Boeing airliner. In that same year, an opening in the ozone layer was reported by British scientists. In 1986 there was a major nuclear accident at Chernobyl and conflict in the Persian Gulf resulted in deaths. In 1988, a bomb exploded on a Pan American airliner. At that time, 98% of United States households had at least one television set. NASA scientists warned about global warming. A year later, thousands of demonstrators were killed in China. The first World Wide Web browser was developed.

In 1990, Nelson Mandela was freed after 27 years in captivity. The Persian Gulf War had ignited. The grunge band, Nirvana's, *Nevermind* CD with its microscopic look at the difficulty in coping with personal and global problems, hit the top of the charts. There was a nuclear accident in Japan. In 1992, an Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro addressed global climate change and the need to protect the environment. The Branch Davidian cult in Waco, Texas, lost 78 members in a standoff with authorities. Rodney

King was beaten. In the year 1994, the beautiful site of the Winter Olympics years before, Sarajevo, was the site of warfare. The massacre in Rwanda made the news. Nancy Kerrigan, the ice skater, was attacked by a jealous competitor, and the President of the United States was accused of sexual harassment. Kurt Cobain, the lead singer and songwriter of Nirvana, took his life in 1994. Following those events, a Tokyo subway was inundated with nerve gas, the Oklahoma federal building blew up, and the Grateful Dead member, Jerry Garcia, died.

Certainly Amber was aware of these events. She watched television and she read voraciously. She wrote about some of them. As early as the fifth grade, she indicated that she wished she had the money to feed the hungry. She wrote, "I'd give all the hungry people in the streets of New York watermelons so they don't starve to death." Inside a "time capsule" created in seventh grade was a multi-colored on black picture with PEACE written across it. Later, she made many references in her poem, "Cleansing," to the needless loss of human life in wars, "walking in massacres," and in late 1994 she wrote, "Titanic soldiers bearing crosses die in red coats." Hanging from the rear view mirror of her car when she died was a mouse trap with a toy soldier caught in its jaws. Her love of nature and the outdoors underscored her concern for the environment. In Trees, she wrote, "Society made manifest destroys Mother Nature's nest."

Music and literature. Music and literature affected her, too. She loved the rock band, Nirvana, which was especially popular in the early 90's. Her mother took her to one of their concerts. The lead singer, Kurt Cobain, was a gifted, sensitive young man who had experienced many difficulties and was infamous for his drug use. After Amber died, her father found a newspaper article on her bed about the death of Kurt Cobain. He

had taken his life as she did just two years later. Following his suicide, there were many copycat suicides among young people. Other musical influences that we know about include her enjoyment of the music of Nine Inch Nails, the Indigo Girls, and Enya.

For her freshman honors English class, Amber reported that she had read the following books, among others:

Fathers and Sons (Ivan Turgenev)

A Tale of Two Cities, Great Expectations (Charles Dickens)

*Call of the Wild (*Jack London)

1984 (George Orwell)

Fountainhead (Ayn Rand)

The Voice of the Night (Dean Koontz)

Amber was also required to choose works by writers that she liked and comment on them. One of the poems that she wrote down was Edgar Allen Poe's "Alone." The words are perhaps a reflection of Amber's feelings:

From childhood's hour I have never been

As others were—I have not seen

As others saw—I cannot bring

My passions from a common spring.

From the same source I have not taken

My sorrow—I could not awaken

My heart to joy at the same tone

And all I lov'd—I lov'd alone.

Major Themes

Being Bullied

Even in kindergarten, long before the eighth grade, Amber experienced difficulties with school. "I remember in kindergarten she came home crying that the other children called her ugly," her mother related. She was obviously not ugly and her mother tried to explain to her that they were just trying to bother her and to ignore them. Since her death, Amber's mother has worried that she was inadvertently giving her the message not to confide her feelings. Regardless, her mother and father both described Amber as being sensitive. "She got her feelings hurt very easily," her mother related.

Not only was Amber bullied by other children beginning in kindergarten, but she seemed to be bullied by some teachers and administrators, as well. In the high school writing assignments that I read, she was sometimes chastised for making light of a serious subject on one occasion. The teacher harassed her rather than trying to understand Amber's viewpoint. Amber's writings sometimes reflected that she viewed the assignment as absurd or when she was reviewing the work of a famous writer, she perceived the writer's position as obvious. On another occasion, a teacher wrote that Amber was not to write her own opinion or use the word "I" in her response to a piece of literature. Amber was being put down for being herself. This reminded me of Amber's poem "Inculcations" in which the teacher is always right and the student got in trouble for being creative.

Although Amber made mistakes in judgment in getting in trouble in the eleventh and twelfth grades, it seemed as if the rules that Amber had to adhere to did not apply to everyone. An example was the time the assistant principal threatened to have her

suspended for carrying a can of pepper spray to school. When Amber's mother, who was an elementary school teacher, talked with her own principal about the incident, he seemed incredulous that Amber would get in trouble for bringing pepper spray to school. He told Amber's mother that a lot of the teachers and some students brought pepper spray for protection. When her mother sought legal counsel, the suspension was dropped.

She was in line to be the valedictorian when she was suspended from school for 10 days in her senior year. In a chemistry or physics class, a substitute teacher put an educational video into the VCR and then left the room. After she was gone for some time, one of the boys in class announced that he had a video they could watch. According to the mother's recollection, even though some of the students wanted to see the video that the boy brought, no one had the nerve to change it---except Amber. She took the educational video out and played the student's video. Apparently, a parent complained that the video was "pornographic" and Amber was suspended. When the mother fought the ruling, the principal threatened to have Amber arrested for exposing minors to pornography. So the ruling stood and Amber's grades suffered because some of the teachers would not allow her to make up the work. An impulsive action cost her first place at graduation, a goal that she had worked for throughout high school in order to be accepted at a prestigious university. Her mother feels that she was extremely disappointed in herself. On a page in which Amber listed Reasons to Leave, Reasons to Stay (See Appendix A), she listed as one Reason to Leave, "Fear of further rejection: people, college, valedictorian."

Nonconformity

   "Amber was never part of the crowd," her mother told me as she shared many stories that reflected the nonconformity that was often apparent. For example, in the second grade, Amber's mother received a letter from the teacher expressing her concern about Amber's restlessness and spontaneous behavior in class. The teacher shared that during tests Amber would pull out her Princess of Power sunglasses and put them on. Although the teacher acknowledged that it was very funny, she also cautioned that the behavior was not appropriate during tests. In high school, Amber died her hair purple which resulted in the mother receiving many inquisitive phone calls from fellow church members following a Sunday service. At a high school awards ceremony, Amber appeared in a short skirt and combat boots, much to the chagrin of the principal.

   In the fifth grade, Amber began printing rather than writing cursive, apparently in response to teachers' criticisms of her handwriting. Not only did Amber feel as if she did not have enough friends on her level, but she felt that some of the teachers were not on her level. She also resented the attitude of some teachers that they were right and she was wrong. As she wrote in "Inculcations" two years before her death:

T=Teacher   S=Student

T: How do I teach? How do I preach?

How do I punish when my laws you breach?

S: You say, 'Be creative with all of your might,'

But if our thoughts differ, then I'm not right.

T: I'm older, I'm wiser, had more school than you;

Only I'm right, and this postulate's true:

Follow just old ways, reject all this new,

Jump on the bandwagon to be a Big Who.

S: A winner, alone, consists never of two.

To know I'm the best, to know that I've won,

Then I have to be in a group of just one.

"I hate eighth grade" was written on the cover of one of Amber's notebooks. She put some of the teachers down in conversations with her mother. In some of her high school writing journal assignments, Amber's sarcasm was criticized as injecting humor into a serious subject. It was apparent that Amber saw the journal assignment as busy work that would not be really read when she wrote a short poem on suicide which received a red check.

Anti-establishment views. The capitalistic economy in the United States in which citizens must work to survive apparently was seen as a loss of freedom to her. In "Big Brother," she lamented, "You have no will. Stuck in 'freedom's glue', free will erased by a dollar bill" and in "Journey," written less than a year before her death, "Be pupil of the triangle, the omniscient eye." She apparently believed that materialism was making people lose themselves as she stated "And for a chunk of fools gold their ideals will burn." The feeling that the wishes of the people were not represented by the government was expressed in "Cleansing," "For the people, by the people, THE PEOPLE (WE?)." One of the themes of her writings was the issue of who had the power and control so well expressed in "Conformity" and "Big Brother" (See Appendix A). She apparently did not agree with the drug laws in the United States. In her freshman year, she wrote:

The unfair justice of dear Sevart:

Thrown in jail for a mushroom part.

A harmless friend in calamity

While nasty thieves roam around free

But "Rules are rules" so they say

Hard as stone, but brittle as clay.

At two o'clock he's free in chains

I wonder if its worth his pains.

Enlightenment, but what a price

When the courts are cold as ice.

God forbid he learn from food

Because some fungus there was viewed.

Music. Lyrics in many of the songs written by artists in the grunge music era questioned the established values by voicing anti-war sentiment and and existential angst. Nirvana's song, "I Hate Myself and Want to Die," came out in the early 1990's as did Pearl Jam's song, "Jeremy," in which a young boy kills himself in front of his classmates. In addition, she was playing "Suicide is Painless" on the piano the week before her death.

Not internalizing cultural norms. During the eighteen years that Amber lived, wars were being fought in many countries. The United States had left Vietnam and there was much anti-war sentiment, especially among young people. Yet those who protested wars were branded as being anti-establishment and being on the fringe of society. Religious differences, competition for resources, and the desire for power and control

fueled many conflicts, ending in the loss of lives. Amber advocated peace. She drew

PEACE on a seventh grade piece of artwork and she referenced her desire for world

peace and her disdain for loss of life in wars in numerous writings (See Appendix A). In

addition, when she was about thirteen years old, she joined an organization for kids

against violence which provided her with a newsletter. She remained in the group for

most of her high school years. Ironically, she used violent means to end her own life.

    Meaninglessness. Amber was searching, as she wrote, to discover meaning in

life. The theme of a piece written two years before she died illustrates her despair:

    Blinded, selfless souls forlornly "trying" to learn

    So they can buy the little things for which the fools yearn.

    Always ever waiting for an undeserved turn

    And for a chunk of fools gold their ideals will burn.

    They watch, incomprehensively, classes, take notes,

    They eat Mike Jordan's cereal, bunches of oats,

    They go in packs and fake content, but in sinking boats.

    Titanic's soldiers bearing crosses die in red coats.

    Only the intelligent can comprehend why

    But all the others wonder, and they sociably cry.

    Before they do proclaim in eloquence their "goodbye"

    Their nonexistent God has them suddenly die.

Other references to meaninglessness include "inventing meaning" ("Falling"), "uselessly

passing their hours and days" ("Conformity"), "Why repetition?" ("Why Do I Do This"),

and the "pointless life cycle" referred to in a piece that she apparently wrote about a week before she took her life (See Appendix A).

A Lack of Trust

A perception that adults could not be trusted. Amber wrote in "Inculcations" about the message given by some of her teachers that they were always right. Adults made the rules and rigidly adhered to them. Amber's perception was that new, creative ideas from students would not be considered as having merit. In addition, she sometimes became angry with her mother when they disagreed on topics ranging from school teachers to relationships. She felt as if adults did not understand her feelings. Apparently, there was a belief among her peers that confiding in adults would only lead to being ignored, ridiculed, or punished. Her distrust of authority figures played a part in her refusing her mother's offer to take her to counseling following the incident that led to Amber wanting to be tested for AIDS and STD's. In addition, and more importantly, she did not confide her fears and her confusion and ultimately her plans to take her life to any adults.

Amber met her first boyfriend on the debate team. Her mother described him as artsy and very intelligent. They enjoyed studying and debating together and Amber was happy to have a boyfriend like the other girls. Amber's parents approved of her attending his family's church with him because he was from a nice family, and because they trusted her. She had always been very responsible. Before she went out the first time, she and her mother discussed sexual intimacy, and Amber assured her mother that she had no intention of being intimate with anyone until after she was married.

Amber and her boyfriend broke up after a while, but Amber did not discuss the reason at the time. A few months later, however, she asked her mother to take her to get tested for AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases. Amber had heard that the young man had many sexual partners. Her mother asked her if she had been raped. Amber insisted that she had not been raped and did not want to discuss it. Her mother suggested counseling, but Amber said she did not need counseling. When Amber's mother suggested going out of town for the tests in an effort to protect her reputation, Amber was upset and said, "You are ashamed of me." For years Amber denied that she was raped, but shortly before her death, she told her father that the incident was a case of date rape. Her parents learned later that Amber started using marijuana somewhere around the time of that breakup. The next boyfriend was also on the debate team. Her mother described him as gifted and intellectual, but also a negative influence on Amber. They worked on debate together, and Amber thrived on the intellectual connection, but his values and personal standards were different from those of Amber's family. He was two years older than Amber and left for college while she was a junior in high school. About a year after he left for college, the relationship ended.

After Amber died, her parents learned that this young man, her best female friend, and others knew of her suicidal thoughts. Amber's best friend was one of the first people that the mother called after Amber's death. The friend told Amber's mother that Amber had tried to kill herself a week before. When her mother asked, "Why didn't you tell me?" she replied that when Amber didn't go through with it she thought she had changed her mind. Also, after Amber's death, several friends told the parents that Amber wanted to be cremated. This was another indication that some of her friends were aware of her

plans to take her life. No one, however, said anything to an adult. When one reads the Plans portion of the "Reasons to Leave" paper (See Appendix A) it is clear that Amber had talked over specific suicide plans with friends. The last boyfriend discussed the best way to kill oneself with Amber in a letter he wrote to her from college.

Differences are pathologized. In Western culture differences are often pathologized. This is evidenced by the "gifted" label sometimes being viewed as elitist and by the huge number of labels and code numbers which categorize "disorders" in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Labels and numerical codes are given to diagnoses ranging from adolescent adjustment disorder to bipolar disorder to major depressive disorder. The number of disorders has increased exponentially since the 1970's when ADD and ADHD, for example, were not included in the DSM. If one's behavior is considered life-threatening, including suicidal or homicidal plans, involuntary hospitalization often is deemed necessary by the medical community. Amber was unwilling to consult with a counselor because, as she said, she could talk to her friends. Her perception, it seems, was that her friends would understand but a counselor would find something wrong with her. Amber was also afraid of being institutionalized, as she stated in "Reasons To Leave, Reasons to Stay." In her mind, that fear of being institutionalized justified her not divulging her suicidal plans to adults.

Difficulty being authentic. Amber felt as if she could not be her authentic self, that she could not reveal how she really thought and felt. For example, in "Awakening Love," she referred to letting others see her real self and that "few have made it." Not being authentic was reflected as she wrote, "Animals scared, with happy smiles" ("Gaia"). In

"The Journey" she asked, "How can a society make truth against the law?" Another twist of this would be feeling as if she was not given a voice when she wrote, "Your voice we cannot hear (Why? You are just a kid)" in "Big Brother" and in talking about school teachers in "Inculcations," she said, "You say, 'Be creative with all of your might' but if our thoughts differ, then I'm not right."

Her sensitivity was also expressed in her mother's observation and Amber's writings following one of her birthday parties. Amber was entertaining her guests by playing the piano. She wrote that she was playing her best that day, but when she looked up, everyone had gone into the kitchen where they were laughing and playing. She described the pain of her perceived rejection in her writing and her mother told me that her hurt was painful to watch.

Many fears

  Expression through writing. Fear appeared many, many times in her writings and through a few of her drawings. In a black spiral notebook kept in the 5th grade, Amber drew pictures of the "boogie monster." One version of the creature looked like an erect bird with a huge beak with teeth. Another looked more like a man with a triangular face. At around the same time she wrote a piece called "If I Could Be A Movie Star" in which she said that with this newfound power she would, "rid the world of cockroaches and boogy monsters." In the same notebook, she talked of having difficulty falling asleep for nine nights in a row and said, "I still have trouble sometimes." Her mother did not know that Amber was frightened in the night. Amber kept this to herself and fought her own private struggle with fears. As a matter of fact, her mother stated that Amber did not seem afraid of anything.

References to fears, including fear of failure, fear of loneliness, and fear of pain appear throughout her writings. For example, in "My Counterpart" she wrote "Oh, why does life make me think these phantoms, these tributes to fear" and "It keeps me hear entrenched with fear" in "Bad Day." In the 5th grade she wrote of her fear of others being hurt or killed in the future. "None of my friends will get hurt or killed, but my Mom will. That's what the ouija board said." After Amber died, a partially written novel was found in the car seat. She had completed two chapters and had begun the third. In the novel, whose themes were death and suicide, she wrote in chapter 1, "Is there really any action that's not truly caused by fear?" Before that sentence she had referred to "unintentionally self-imposed fear" as being the underlying reason that a character in the novel took his life.

Fear of instability. Mood swings from seemingly complacent to angry occurred at times. Arguments over cleaning her room, for example, might result in a show of anger. When Amber was 11 or 12 years old, she ran away from home. Her parents were frantic. She left a note saying that she was running away because she was tired of being fussed at about cleaning her room. Her mother got in her car following a tip from a neighbor and finally found Amber after she had been gone about four hours. After that, her mother "always had the fear that if Amber gets mad enough she'll run away again and next time I may not be able to find her." She continued. "I think I sensed that she's got a breaking point somewhere." Philosophically, her mother shared her thought that, "In suicide, she did run away."

Low Self-esteem

    Perfectionism. Amber's high expectations for herself were tied with her feelings of self-worth. Without achieving perfection, she felt as if she was a failure. In an elementary school assignment "If I Could Be Anyone for a Day" she wrote that she would be Donald Trump's lawyer and that Harvard and Yale would build statues dedicated to her. She continued, "They would read: This statue is dedicated to the rich, famous, and beautiful lawyer Amber _____ who got a doctorate here." Graduating from Harvard or Yale and being the valedictorian of her high school class was very important to her. She did not accomplish those goals, going to Harvard or Yale or being valedictorian.

    Mood swings. Perhaps her vacillations in moods resulted in her fears of being considered unstable such as what may be a reference to herself in her perception of the ouija board predictions in the 5th grade. She said that "My ouija board also said that the inventor of the board was insane. Ghosts drove him insane, and he died." A year before she died, in an assignment at the Governors Honors Program, she wrote of insanity being the only way to be happy. In the Reasons to Leave, Reasons to Live, she said that "Insane people should not live." It seems that her fears contributed to negative feelings about herself.

    Not having enough friends. In many writings, she refers to "I am the only one" ("Bad Day"), "loneliness," ("Fatal Fear"), "I have to be a group of just one" ("Inculcations"), "alone solitarily" ("Conformity"), and "discover it alone" ("The Journey"). She wanted to join MENSA because she wanted to find friends she could

relate to on an intellectual level and she wrote those words "not enough friends" in her Reasons to Leave.

That she would never be happy again. Her awareness of the passing of the lost innocence of her childhood is poignantly expressed as she felt as if there was no way to retrieve it and be happy again. Two examples of her wishing for the happiness found in her early childhood are in the poems "Me" which begins "Once I knew a little girl who was a lot like me. She skipped and sang and read outdoors and smiled happily" and also in "The Essence" which was written two years before her death in which she wrote, "As children, the microscope is focused, Yet age continues to turn the knob." (See Appendix A).

Her difficulty accepting the realities of life was reflected in one of two books that Amber wrote on her own, not as school assignments, when she was seven years old. Her parents had them bound for her. Perhaps she had heard from her peers that Santa Claus did not exist and was disturbed by this revelation. The little book titled *A Christmas Story* was about two sisters and their experience of Christmas:

A Christmas Story

Once upon a time, a girl named Mandy moved to a house on Christmas Eve. Mandy had fun with her sister Maria. Mandy and Maria played a lot. Mandy and Maria didn't think that Santa would come to their house. They thought Santa died. Mom, Dad, Maria and Mandy all went to sleep. But Santa came. He put presents under the tree. In the morning, Maria and Mandy went to the tree. They saw presents! They saw dolls and books. They were happy because Santa Claus didn't die.

A Timeline of Amber's Life

What were the turning points that changed a happy little girl to a fifth grader with suicidal ideation and then to the 18-year-old who took her life? This lifeline focused on vulnerabilities, painful life experiences, turning points, and changes in Amber's mood and in her behavior.

Developmental milestones by age

Age 2. Her mother and her babysitter were concerned about her high energy and restlessness. Amber's mother took her off milk when she suspected a milk allergy, with the doctor's approval. She seemed to calm down then. She sucked her thumb through the beginning of her school years. Her parents did not pressure her to stop sucking her thumb because they could see that it seemed to help her when she felt stressed. These seem to be signs of intensity and sensitivity.

Age 5. She sometimes came home crying from kindergarten because some of the other children were calling her names. Amber was upset about being bullied.

Age 6. Amber wrote two little books at home. In the *Christmas Story,* she feared that Santa had died and would not bring presents. However, she was happy because Santa brought dolls and books and had not died. This is a young age to be worried about death. Apparently, she had heard that there was no Santa Claus, but I found her fear that Santa may have died to be disturbing.

Age 7. In the second grade Amber got in trouble for wearing her sunglasses during standard test times. In addition, the teacher was concerned about her activity level and wanted to consult with the gifted teacher to see if this was usual behavior for a gifted child. She told Amber's parents in a letter that she hoped Amber was not bored and noted

that her work was great. That same year, she took the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and scored in the 98th and 99th percentile in language and math. This is an example of her creativity being misunderstood and unappreciated by her teacher who also criticized her as if she was misbehaving when she was apparently bored in class.

Age 10. I think that what Amber was experiencing prior to the fifth grade is very important because in the fifth grade she had suicidal ideation. What did she perceive as so painful in her first ten years of life that she thought of killing herself? In the fifth grade, Amber wrote about the following topics in a spiral notebook. These themes exemplify her emotional sensitivity, perfectionism, worries about people being hungry or needing other help, difficulty sleeping, thoughts of death, and fears of being unstable. At the same time that she would like to just relax and feel comfort in the outdoors, she had numerous stressors. Examples from her drawings and writings follow each theme:

1) fear: boogie monsters (3 pictures she drew, "If I Could Be a Movie Star") ; ouija board said Mom will get hurt or killed

2) high achievement: getting doctorates from Harvard and Yale; being rich, famous, and beautiful ("If I Could Be Anyone for a Day"); having fancy clothes, riding in a limousine.

3) global concerns: giving money and food to the hungry; feeding watermelons to the hungry (I'd give all the hungry people…)

4) helping others: the ways she could help if she were a tree ("I Would Come Back As A ????")

5) love of outdoors: wanted to spend spring break outdoors fishing, biking, walking, tree climbing, and exploring ("I Can't Wait for Spring Break")

6) relationships: girls who had a crush on boys (I'd give all the hungry people);
"people that I despise" and "make peace with people" ("Some Qualities of Mine
Worth Being Imitated")

7) relaxing and having fun: relaxing under a tree; relaxing and having fun, sleeping
late during spring break ("I Can't Wait for Spring Break"); "like to have fun"

8) death: "unless I was killed;" "if I was killed" ("I Would Come Back As A ????");
death of inventor of ouija board ("No One Asked Me, But….")

9) Insomnia: getting desperate to sleep (paraphrased Couldn't sleep on….)

10) Instability: inventor of ouija board goes insane and dies ("No One Asked Me,
But…."); referred to herself as Wacko _____(her last name)(same page as
picture of boogie monsters)

Age 10. My observations about Amber from her writings in the fifth grade include
the fact that she still had a sense of humor which is not seen in later writings. In
addition, as a result of being criticized for her handwriting, she began to print. Also,
expansiveness in one of her writings may suggest an emotional sensitivity as she
reflects on her positive traits, including her creativity.

1) Amber still showed sense of humor: freakie wife on TV and comments about her
mother's cooking ("If I Could Be a Movie Star"), exaggerating what she did to try
to fall asleep.

2) She began printing instead of writing cursive (began with Some Qualities of Mine
Worth Being Imitated)

3) The words she printed sometimes got significantly bigger and bigger ("Some
Qualities of Mine Worth Being Imitated")

4) Amber saw herself as creative: ("Some Qualities Of Mine Worth Being Imitated")

Age 12. In the seventh grade, Amber was concerned about world peace and had reacted to teachers' criticism by printing all her writings. Most troubling was that she saw herself as dead.

1) She wrote PEACE across the drawing with bright colors coming through black

2) She was printing consistently now rather than writing in cursive.

3) She wrote this verse: "Who Am I

Dead"

Age 13. In the eighth grade, she was a high achiever and wanted to be first in her class, a difficult goal to attain. We know from her later writings that her perception of attaining this goal is tied with her self-worth.

1) She joined the debate team as the youngest and only one in middle school.

2) Amber set a goal for herself to be the valedictorian of her high school class.

Age 14. In the ninth grade, she was able to write an insightful description of herself, but she was unable to trust her mother with the truth of being raped. She suffered in silence.

1) the autobiographical poem (Amber—Energetic, carefree…)

2) denied to her mother that she was date raped

Ages 15. While she related negative thoughts and feelings about society, she continued to try to comfort herself in nature.

1) In "Cleansing," Amber wrote about:

1. lack of representation in government

2. hatred

3. facades

4. conformity

5. death, war

6. trying to forget by connecting with nature

Age 16. Amber's writings in her tenth year in high school reflected many of the same topics from previous writings about her intense feelings, opinions, confusion, and continued concern about being unstable. In these writings, however, were new themes of meaninglessness and the hopeless statement that God does not exist.

1) negativity about war, terroristic reality (Blinded, selfless souls…; "The Essence;" "Falling")

2) facades ("fake content" in Blinded….)

3) meaninglessness (a theme in Blinded…..; Falling; "Blue Python;" "Conformity")

4) an existential theme that God does not exist (Blinded….)

5) disdain for materialism (Blinded; "Big Brother")

6) "Anger, desolation, sadness, cruelty, loneliness, fear" ("Fatal Fear")

7) clarity in childhood lost in adolescence ("The Essence")

8) not having a voice, not being heard, not having power and control, being harmed by society ("Inculcations;" "Big Brother;" "Conformity;" "Trees;" When demons fly…)

9) feeling alone, as if she is a minority of one ("Inculcations;" "Conformity"; "Trees")

10) environmental concern ("Conformity;" "Trees;" When demons fly….)

11) feeling unstable: a speck of insanity (When demons fly….)

Age 16. In the eleventh grade, Amber quit the debate team, stating that the coach was sexist. Her mother felt that Amber's perception was inaccurate, but, regardless, Amber gave up any hope of matching her brother's goal of national recognition. Debate had been extremely important to her up to this point and giving up this goal was a significant turning point, I believe.

Age 16. Amber started getting in trouble at school. As her mother explained, "Amber had never gotten in trouble before (except for the Princess of Power sunglasses situation in second grade) so this was surprising, but some of the situations seem to be blown out of proportion and some of them just did not make sense." This is a change in behavior pattern, which began with quitting the debate team. These were the incidents, not necessarily in order, as her mother recalled them:

1) Amber wrote an angry note to the school librarian in French, telling the librarian that she wished the librarian was dead. The assistant principal called her parents and said that Amber had made a threat against a teacher. She got three days in ISS as punishment. Even after her mother explained that an apology might make a difference in the way they treated her, Amber refused.

2) Amber had to go to detention hall because she would not stop laughing in class.

3) Amber went to detention for saying the word "hell" in class. Amber said that she could not understand why the teacher became upset because she was reading a piece of literature out loud that had that word in it during free time.

4) Amber was given ten days suspension for carrying a can of pepper spray to school. The assistant principal called the offense a "weapons violation." Amber's

mother had bought the pepper spray for her because she often left school for other activities such as debate practice and did not return home until after dark. Amber's parents consulted an attorney about the suspension. The attorney suggested talking with the school superintendent first. The superintendent said that he would check into it. He called later to say that they would not suspend Amber but that she could not bring pepper spray to school. A few weeks later, the rule was changed and students could bring pepper spray if they did not use it at school. Amber's parents learned that this was an odd coincidence because it had come out that the assistant principal's daughters carried pepper spray.

5) Amber left a class once. She said that her teacher took the class to the gym to decorate the homecoming float. She told her mother that she was in a mood to learn, not play, so she went to another class, quietly sitting in the back.

Age 17. At the end of eleventh grade, Amber and her second boyfriend broke up. When I saw Amber with her boyfriend on videotape, it was evident that even though he was inconsiderate of her feelings by expecting her to take him places and pay for meals when he did not reciprocate, she found some happiness with him. She did not share the nature of the breakup with her parents even though this must have been a traumatic event.

Age 17. Amber refused to buy her yearbook or class ring. Her mother finally went to the school herself and ordered the yearbook. Her mother's perception of Amber's refusal was that Amber was rejecting the school that she felt had rejected her. After years of hard work and high achievement, she shuns the school system.

Age 18. In the twelfth grade, topics and examples from her writings included familiar topics of fears, loneliness, and perceived inability to be truthful, but now she wrote of shutting herself off emotionally.

1) the emotional wall that she has put up ("Ode to a Russian Greek")

2) fear ("Ode to a Russian Greek;" "The Journey")

3) not being able to be authentic or truthful or being afraid ("Ode to a Russian Greek;" "The Journey")

4) disdain for materialism ("The Journey")

5) being alone ("The Journey")

6) attempt to find comfort ("The Journey")

Age 18. In the twelfth grade, Amber was suspended for ten days for the aforementioned video incident. She had worked her way up to first place in line to be valedictorian before the incident, and she had remained at the top for two years. When she graduated, she had moved down to sixth place, since some of her teachers would not allow her to make up the class work she missed while she was suspended. Her mother said, "I think this was definitely one of the big nails in Amber's coffin." She continued, "Amber lost her dream of being valedictorian, and from then on, she seemed to lose her spirit."

Age 18. Amber graduated from high school as sixth in her class. She gave a speech at the high school graduation ceremony (See Appendix B) that her mother noted was probably not understood by the majority of the audience. Even though she suffered bitter disappointment about not being valedictorian which was listed as a "Reason to Leave" (Appendix A), she delivered a very philosophical presentation. As

I watched Amber's presentation on videotape, I was impressed with her maturity, composure, stage presence, and her self-confidence.

Age 18. Within weeks of her suicide, Amber wrote about her hopelessness and her yearning for love.

1) struggling to find hope ("Another Town")

2) wishing for affection in a relationship, being deceived ("Another Town")

Age 18. One week before Amber took her life, she recorded a song by the Indigo Girls. I think that this song expresses her feelings about herself. At her funeral, a friend gave Amber's mother an audiotape of Amber singing the following lyrics in a song called "The Girl with the Weight of the World in Her Hands":

She won't recover from her losses. She's not chosen this path.

But she watches who it crosses, maybe move to the right, maybe move to the left.

So we can all see her pain she wears, like a banner on her chest

And we all say it's sad and we think it's a shame

And she's called to our attention, but we do not call her name

The girl with the weight of the world in her hands.

Cause we're busy with our happiness and busy with our plans

I wonder if alone she wants it taken from her hands.

But if things didn't keep getting harder, she might miss her sacred chance

To go a consecrated martyr

The girl with the weight of the world in her hands.

I wonder which saint that lives inside a bead

Will grant her consolation when she counts upon her need

It makes us all angry though we feign to care

But who will be the scale to weigh the cross she has to bear

The girl with the weight of the world in her hands.

Is the glass half full or empty I ask her as I fill it

She said it doesn't really matter, pretty soon you're bound to spill it

With the half logic language of the sermon she delivers

And the way she smiles so knowingly at me gives me the shivers.

I pull the blanket higher when I'm finally safe at home

And she'll take a hundred with her but she always sleeps alone

The girl with the weight of the world in her hands.

Age 18. Every day during the week before she took her life, Amber played the theme song of the movie MASH on the piano. The original title of the song is "Suicide is Painless." (see Appendix C). In looking back, her parents believe that she was getting the courage to take her life by playing this song.

Age 18. Some time during the week before Amber took her life, she wrote:

All I keep asking is why. For my entire life, all I have ever wanted was to

not be. Why didn't I swallow those pills then?! Why oh why did I not pull the

trigger last week as the cold, strong barrel rested poised between my teeth? Why

did I move from the car? After lying on the placid asphalt amidst oceanic

sufferings glittering in the moonlight? No, I never have the balls to make death

quick and sharp like I want, but to make life slow and agonizing. Rather than an

instant death, I choose painful lung cancer, skin cancer, narcotics, tiny cuts and

bruises, embarrassment, and somehow deceive myself into believing these slow

ends are less burdensome because I must endure the misery longer that way.

Patience, though. Patience. Soon, I will be back alone in the house, with the ever-

peaceful chance once more to complete the pointless life cycle. After all, I do not

intend to bear child so I am biologically useless. I have no goals except to die, so

why fuck around? Direction I will seek and soon. I do not desire to bite the bullet,

so by the next full moon, I shall swallow it.

Age 18. Close to the time of her death, Amber wrote:

Reasons to Leave	Reasons to Stay
Allison defies natural order	Mom and Dad
I am unhappy and depressed	Jason
I'm on top now and can only descend	music
I'm fucking crazy	Mandy would freak
Not enough friends	Institution if I fail--
Tired of life	–hope that I don't
It's my time	
Fear of further rejection:	
people, college, valedictorian	Plans
I accomplish nothing	
I'd only torture myself if I didn't	Something with Shawn
I've strongly considered it since	Blow car via Danny's
5th GRADE!!! I'm obviously serious.	instructions
It's inevitable anyway	Front of train and
No life means no pain ever again	lots of pills and liquor
God doesn't exist	
Nobody can handle me—	
unbearable loneliness	
Insane people should not live	
I would die before institutionalization	
Hell, I even shame my parents. I'd	
never do it again.	
I have no talents for future job	
Cannot deal with stress	
Won't go to a good college	
Prove to myself I can	

Age 18. Two weeks before she would have left for college, Amber took her life. She used an old hunting rifle of her father's that she found in the back of a closet at home. She had just had lunch with her parents, had gone to her room for a while, and then asked to go see some friends. After driving her car about three miles from home, she parked her car along a lonely country road. Her parents read in the newspaper that a man had seen her by her parked car and asked if she needed help. She responded negatively and he left to run his errands. On his return, he discovered her body.

- Following Amber's death, a posthumous psychiatric evaluation was done at the parents' request. The psychiatrist had not met Amber, but used her writings and information from the parents to reach his conclusions. He thought that Amber could be diagnosed as having bipolar disorder.

- Also following her death, it became apparent that some of her friends knew of her suicide plans because they told Amber's parents that Amber wanted to be cremated. Also, her best friend told Amber's mother after Amber's suicide that Amber planned to kill herself a week before. Friends initially blamed Amber's parents for her suicide. Later, her best friend apologized to Amber's mother about her unfair accusations and for her lack of support.

Summary of Findings

Amber's individual characteristics, aspects of her immediate environment, and some of the cultural norms and historical events during her lifetime, in interaction with each other, seem to have contributed to her decision to take her life. Amber constructed

beliefs and values based on her perceptions of herself and the world. Those perceptions were influenced by her family's values of working hard for what you get, being of service to others, the importance of education, and the beauty of nature. As she was exposed to school and attempted to form relationships and participated in extracurricular and out of school activities she was exposed to more people and ideas which influenced her perceptions. Her ability to comprehend world events and situations such as wars, environmental neglect, and poverty at an early age combined with her ethic of caring seemed to create frustration and anger. She constructed the idea that adults do not understand the problems of young people and do not want to listen to her viewpoint. She wrote that she perceived herself as unstable at times yet she did not reach out to adults for help. She constructed fears of failure, loneliness, and rejection as early as her elementary school years, according to her writings, as she had feared the boogie monster and other gargoyles in her dreams as a very young child. Music was probably an influence on her thinking and also a reflection of her feelings. In a culture whose leaders model a belief that conflicts can be resolved with violence, Amber ended her pain with a gun.

CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS

The implications from my research include correlations with previous research findings, the need for further research, and the need for changes that may decrease the incidence of suicide. The observation that many of the present research findings are similar to previous research findings not only strengthens the validity of my findings but also underscores the importance of studies whose focus is the etiology of suicide. The findings in the current study are compared with the trajectory model (Stillion, McDowell, & May, 1989; Stillion & McDowell, 1996) and Shneidman's theory (Shneidman, 1985), with the research on the social and emotional challenges and issues of gifted adolescents, and with the findings from the psychological autopsies conducted on gifted adolescents (Cross, Cook, & Dixon, 1996; Cross, Gust-Brey, & Ball, 2002). The major themes discovered in this research, which encompass cultural messages, provide insight into the "big picture" of the reasons why this gifted adolescent female took her life and may broaden the lens of researchers as they search for answers. Further qualitative research that focuses on understanding may serve as a catalyst for changes in attitudes toward the gifted in this country and will raise awareness about suicidal risk factors.

Comparison of Present Research with Previous Findings

Theories on the Etiology of Suicide

Many similarities were discovered between the current research findings and those in the two major theories discussed in the review of the literature. In Stillion and McDowell's theory (1996), causes were categorized as genetic, psychological, cognitive,

and environmental. Amber may have been affected by genetic factors since her family history included a suicide and a suicide attempt. Psychologically, Amber wrote that she was depressed. Her self-esteem was poor partly due to her evaluation of herself as having failed to get into Harvard and to be valedictorian. Her lack of coping strategies is apparent as she became more and more determined to take her life. Existential questions were prominent in her writings. Amber's thinking was rigidly focused on suicide to resolve her pain and she referred to herself and others with negativity. Environmental losses included not having enough friends, perhaps the painful ending of relationships with boyfriends, and not achieving her goals. In addition, the firearm was available although it was stored in the back of a closet in the home and had not been taken out for a year. However, Amber wrote of other ways that she planned to take her life.

Aspects of Amber's suicide also correlate with all ten characteristics described by Shneidman (1985). She perceived her pain to be unendurable. Frustrated psychological needs included the need: 1) for connection with more friends; 2) for a high level of accomplishment; 3) to be accepted for who she was; 4) to have a voice at school and in society; 5) and to feel good about herself. The only solution that she saw was cessation of consciousness. She felt hopeless and helpless to effect change that could lead to happiness. She wrote of her ambivalence when she asked herself why she did not follow through with her suicide plans earlier. Her thinking was narrowed and focused only on suicide. Her intention to end her pain was communicated through her suicide and her suicide offered an escape. Amber had a pattern of escaping unpleasant situations beginning as early as age eleven when she ran away from home.

Social and Emotional Challenges and Issues

The social and emotional issues and challenges discussed in the review of the literature which were faced by Amber could be summed up in Balto's refrain that "Being different is painful" (Ross, 2002). Specifically, Amber experienced boredom at school beginning at least as early as second grade. Boredom was identified as problematic by many researchers, including Hollingworth (1942), Gross (2004), and Kerr & Cohn (2001). She had perfectionistic tendencies exemplified by her extremely high expectations for herself in grades and in college admission. Speirs Neumeister (2002) discussed her own self-imposed perfectionism and the self-imposed and socially prescribed perfectionism of the participants in her study. Her parents described Amber as being very sensitive and intense. Descriptions of her behaviors and an analysis of her writings portrayed Amber as having the psychomotor, emotional, intellectual, sensual, and imaginational overexcitabilities discussed by Dabrowski (1964).

Amber had a high sense of morality and justice and she worried about global issues as early as fifth grade. This correlates with the findings of many researchers (Ellsworth, 2003; Kerr, 2001; Roeper, 2003). Social isolation and being bullied were extremely painful for Amber as evidenced by her crying to her mother after kindergarten and numerous writings about loneliness. Being bullied has been cited as a frequent occurrence for gifted youth by Cross (2001) and Graham (2003) and Belsey (2005), among others. Amber was brilliant and studious and accomplished at school, but not popular. This concurs with the research of Tannenbaum (1962), Cramond and Martin (1987), and Lee, Cramond, and Lee (2004). Perhaps she joined the cross country track team in high school to gain acceptance. Her creativity was misunderstood and

unappreciated by peers, teachers, and administrators. Torrance (1962), Piirto (2004), and

Rothenberg (1990) addressed this issue. Establishing a sense of identity was a struggle

for Amber, as we know from her writings (See Appendix A). Many researchers have

discussed the difficulties of gifted adolescents in forming a sense of who they are (Gross,

1998; Machovian, 2005). Amber talked with her mother about her difficulties meeting the

cultural expectations and stereotypes for females in American culture. For example, she

bemoaned the fact that other girls talked about makeup and hair, which she saw as

unimportant. Not fitting in with cultural expectations was discussed in the research of

Roeper (1995), Smutney (1999) and Machoian (2005).

Previous Psychological Autopsies

Commonalities were found between characteristics of Amber and the four gifted

adolescent males who were the focus of previous psychological autopsies (Cross, Cook,

& Dixon, 1996; Cross, Gust-Brey, & Ball, 2002). Similar to the males, Amber

experienced depression, existential despair, anger, mood swings, and confusion about her

future. She had been bullied at school. She also exhibited poor impulse control as she

began to get in trouble at school in the eleventh grade. She used marijuana and alcohol.

She talked about suicide with some of her peers. She exhibited Dabrowski's

overexcitabilities (1964) including intellectual, emotional, psychomotor, sensual, and

imaginational. She chose to be a vegetarian in high school, just as two of the males in the

previous psychological autopsy studies had been (Cross, Cook, & Dixon, 1996). She

exhibited anger at school and at home during her sophomore and junior years, but during

her senior year she appeared to be calmer. She was introspective as illustrated in her

writings. Kurt Cobain's suicide was a factor in Amber's suicide as it was in previous

psychological autopsies (Cross, Cook, & Dixon, 1996). She had attempted to escape from painful situations in the past. She had suicidal ideation for years before she took her life. For example, Amber planned to take her life as early as age eleven, taking her life at age eighteen and Reed Ball had experienced suicidal ideation from age thirteen , taking his life at age twenty (Cross, Gust-Brey, & Ball, 2002). Overall, a conclusion of my study which parallels a conclusion in the study of Reed Ball is "the importance of understanding the interaction between the psychological makeup of a person in interaction with his or her environment" (p. 258).

A difference with the findings of previous psychological autopsies focusing on males was that Amber did not artistically express demonic and vampiric themes, although Amber seemed at times to have "difficulty separating fact from fiction" (Cross, Cook, & Dixon, 1996, p. 408) and she did draw scarey boogie man figures. She also did not have a need, as did one of the males in previous studies, to have "an aggressive, supercool, worldly personal ('Gangsta')" (Cross, Cook, & Dixon, 1996, p. 406). Amber did not have a fascination with fire, as Reed Ball did, but she did fear that she was unstable (Cross, Gust-Brey, & Ball, 2002).

<center>The Need for Further Research</center>

Further qualitative research is needed to add to our ability to identify gifted adolescents who are at risk and to be able to prevent suicide among gifted adolescents.

1) More in-depth case study research is needed to identify the risk factors for gifted adolescents. Before we can prevent suicide, we must understand the combination of factors which increase gifted adolescents' vulnerability.

2) More research studies are needed that examine the pressures experienced by gifted adolescents and the problem solving strategies that are used. Understanding how gifted adolescents deal with stress would help us provide further training.

3) The attitudes of gifted students about suicide may be changing. Previous research seems to indicate an admirable view of suicide by some adolescents that must be changed.

4) We know from the findings in this case and from the previous psychological autopsies that authority figures were not trusted and that suicide plans were shared only with some of their peers. Perhaps other gifted adolescents do not trust adults and also fear being honest because adults are in control of the consequences. How do we provide a safe environment so that rapport can be established?

5) The equating of self worth with high levels of accomplishment was a distortion made by Amber that contributed to her feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Research on the cognitive processes of gifted adolescents might give more insight into the irrational thinking that contributes to suicide.

Recommendations Implied from the Findings

1) Teachers, administrators, parents, and the general public would benefit from an increased awareness of the characteristics of gifted adolescents, in general, and the warning signs of suicide, such as writing about death. An example of Amber's susceptibility was evidenced when she wrote about the desirability of suicide as a journal assignment and also when her pattern of behavior changed in the eleventh

grade. Both of these situations could have signaled school personnel to consult with the school counselor and with the parents.

2) Team meetings at least once a year for each student involving teachers, the school counselor, the school psychologist, and the principal would help to bring people together to share their observations and to identify possible problems. Otherwise, information remains with one or a few people in what seem to be isolated incidents, but are, in fact, patterns.

3) More counselors and psychologists in schools and in general practice who specialize in issues faced by gifted adolescents are needed. To establish a rapport with students, it would be helpful for school counselors to spend time in classrooms on a regular basis and also to meet with each child individually at least twice a year.

4) More education for the general public dispelling the myths about suicide and increasing the awareness of the high rate of suicide among young people. For example, a common myth is that when a young person writes about suicide or threatens suicide, then that means he or she is not serious but is just attention-seeking. In fact, this is a cry for help.

5) More ways to bring like-minded adolescents together so that they do not feel isolated and alone. This may require a cooperative venture between schools and communities.

6) Education for young people on the damaging effects of bullying perhaps through character education sessions beginning in kindergarten is needed. Combine education with measures to eliminate bullying at schools and in cyberspace.

7) Orientations for gifted students to discuss the difficulties of being gifted such as the tendency to be overly perfectionistic and the tendency to equate perfection with self-worth would take some pressure off gifted adolescents. Also, opportunities for gifted adolescents to be able to effect change through service projects in the community and globally would increase individuals' personal power and sense of accomplishment.

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APPENDIX A: AMBER'S WRITINGS INCLUDING POETRY AND PROSE FROM AGE 11 THROUGH AGE 18

If I Could Be A Movie Star   (age 11)

If I could be a movie star, I would be the joker from Batman!That's right! The Joker! I would turn Batman to smitherines and some of those toys he has would be real fun to blast Mom's eggs away. I could also rid the world of cockroaches and boogy monsters.

If I couldn't be Joker, I'd be the freakie wife from Married with Children. That's right, old red head. Whoever said blondes have more fun never saw her! Imagine…being the tackiest person on TV. And you could take oogles of money from your TV hubby. Plus you'd have to have a limo and fancy clothes everywhere you want, or someone might actually recognize you!

I Would Come Back As A ????   (age 11)

I would come back as a tree because it would probably be fun, I would live for a long time, and I'd be tall and beautiful, except in winter. I give a home to squirrels, birds, and other little critters. I'd get to see all the sights for centuries, unless I was killed. Many kids would learn from me, and would probably play games around me. I would be very relaxing sometimes, and I'd come in handy on a hot day. If I was killed, I'd have many uses. I'd build homes. And make school supplies. I'd make furniture and many decorations, too.

Some Qualities Of Mine Worth Being Imitated   (age 11)

Well, I know that I'm great, but I don't know why! It could be my wonderful looks, or my super personality. But I think it's mostly because….Well, I don't know. Maybe it is because I like to have fun. I always find something good in a situation. I also am very creative and I love to make peace with people. I try to be nice to everyone, even people that I despise. Although it's hard, I manage to stick it out. I love to make people laugh and I'm pretty good with pesty little kids. I can cook fairly well. Definitely much better than my Mom, and that's about all the qualities worth being imitated about me.

I Can't Wait for Spring Break   (age 11)

(paraphrased) I can't wait for spring break
I can sleep late and eat all I want-
Well not all I want.
Dad said we can go fishing and
I'll be able to go bike riding, walking,
Tree climbing, exploring, and maybe even see where the reedy creek leads to.

If I Could Be Anyone for a Day   (age 11)

If I could be anyone for a day, I'd be Donald Trump's lawyer…
Harvard and Yale would both build statues and dedicate them to me.
They would read: This statue is dedicated to the rich, famous, and beautiful lawyer
Amber ____ who got a doctorate here.

No One Asked Me, But…   (age 11)

(paraphrased beginning)—reference to oiuja board telling her that in three years there
will be an earthquake. "None of my friends will get hurt or killed, but my Mom will.
That's what the ouija board said. You see, I was talking to elries one night, and that's
what he said. My ouija board also said that the inventor of the board was insane. Ghosts
drove him insane, and he died.

Untitled   (age 11)

Couldn't sleep on Dec 26-Jan 4. I was getting desperate. Counted sheep to 9, 876. Then I
tried calling Chow Chung in Canton (Chan Cheeing) China. Did you know that the
countries area code in 86 cities is 20.
Drank 5 glasses of water
Listened to my dad's Japanese hard rock tape
Read 8 books
Watched 2 hours of TV
Ate 3 bowls of soup.
The next night I fell asleep, but I still have trouble sometimes.

Me   (age 14 or 15)

Amber-
Energetic, carefree, idealistic and open-minded
Sister of Ron
Lover of excitement, dreams, the moon
Who feels joy at the sight of nature,
Happy while dozing, wonder while thinking
Who needs love, outdoors, food,
Who gives heartaches, happiness and counseling,
Who fears pain, loneliness and failure
Who would like to see Pluto and the stars,
World peace, and a waterfall,
Who lives in an old church in the middle of
Nowhere, Ga.
          -last name
(Note: autobiographical poem assignment Freshman Honors English class)

Awakening Love   (not dated)

The sights fly by
The sounds whirr
The wind blows in
My sacred din
The cover charge
Is very large
To sit inside
My nuclide
Few have made it
Most give up
But will see
Inner sunup.

Meal Poem   (not dated)

Clean your plate
Masticate
Urinate
Regurgitate
Micturate
Defecate
Eliminate
What you ate.

Cleansing   (age 16)

Masks of colour
Hide the faces of people,
Masks of hatred
For the people, by the people
THE PEOPLE (WE?)
Massive, despised creators
Haunting, following
The ignorance.
Renaming the victims
All become shredded
Leaving none unscathed.
Walking on massacres,
Pretend the cotton is a cloud
And the thunderbolts not solaced.
Close your eyes
To see the skies
And forget
That everybody dies.

My Counterpart   (not dated)

Can there really be two of us,
So "unusual and impossible?"
Can two so different
Be so much the same?
Identical thoughts, just a different name.
Is it you or me (not neither, I hope).
Or is it both?
Unsurprisingly, I don't know.
So rarely we speak
What do we fear?
The differences
Or similarities?
Living mirror in different light;
Take out a pen, but really, you write
(Identity crisis again)
Oh, why does life
Make me think
These phantoms,
These tributes to fear
And I hold him near.
Attempt to ignore the questions,
The gargoyles guarding
My holy (wholly?) heart
It rips apart
And heals again
In the midst of sin
As love weaves in
And out,
About,
Again.

California   (not dated)

A land of gold,
Land of old
Immigrants, too.
Forgotten dreams
Opened there,
Remembered
Now and again,
In the Ocean's Arms,
Aloha reality.

Me   (not dated)

Once I knew a little girl who was a lot like me
She skipped and sang and read outdoors and smiled happily
Her distant glee
Replaced her reality
She
Too truthfully
Gave her love, loyally
To a powerful tapestry
Unravelled by a symphony of society
Sluggishly, she proceeded, almost reluctantly
Her gaze was no more sunnily
She lies in a coma, soundlessly,
Soullessly
She
Is me.

Bad Day   (not dated)

Spearhead claws ripping through my head
Dining on all that I was to be
No more divine, hell is my bed
At my funeral, nobody but me
(Oh, if only I were dead
To see the truth there is to see
But cowardliness is my bread)
A door without a lock or key
Yet as octopus tentacles
Suction my land away
Suddenly my spectacles
Turn everything grey
And I scream loudly, silently
But no one hears my agony
Heaving breath, or stifled cry
No one, no one sees me die
But this damned shell
It keeps me here
Living in hell
Entrenched with fear
If I could yell
Myself to peer
Out of this world
I would do it now
But it is too late
I forgot how

With my fingers curled
I pass through the gate
Fire unfurled
Serving as bait
I am the only one
And it has just begun
And I feel spearhead claws ripping through my head.

Heavenly Enlightenment or Benoit   (not dated)

Circular spirals
Downward forever
Searching and searching
And finding it never.
The seventh dimension
That ceases to be
The mystery of it
Is what's plaguing me.
The tiny discovery
A new explanation
That's not quite correct-
Is a new lamentation
The search never ceases
It's part of the plan,
Intriguing, confusing,
Yet explaining man…
And one day I'll see it
One day I'll know
But before that bright vision
Be six feet below.

Ah ha ha ha!

Untitled   (written less than 2 years before her death)

Blinded, selfless souls forlornly "trying" to learn
So they can buy the little things for which the fools yearn.
Always ever waiting for an undeserved turn
And for a chunk of fools gold their ideals will burn.
They watch, incomprehensively, classes, take notes,
They eat Mike Jordan's cereal, bunches of oats,
They go in packs and fake content, but in sinking boats.
Titanic's soldiers bearing crosses die in red coats.
Only the intelligent can comprehend why
But all the others wonder, and they sociably cry.
Before they do proclaim in eloquence their "goodbye"
Their non-existent God has them suddenly die.

Constance   (age 16)

Halcyonic Openings
Of sandman's land are
Spinning around in a crystal
But then it falls in Niagara droplets
In a puddle of mirror
Called reality.
What I see
Metamorphosises to be
A shatter of piled glass
Stacking up in the grass
Sparkling beautifully
Crimson and clear
In dreamland, cyclically.

Eldorado   (not dated)

Reminiscence
Delving into the box
Of memories
Of food
In solitude
Solace
Seeking to be reached
Searching to find
The impossible dream
To soothe my mind
Refrain
Life
What difference exists
When everybody resists?

The Essence   (age 16)

People searching, looking,
Running blindly,
Immaculately stumbling.
The tripper?
Unfathomable, impending
Canyons and mountains.
The form, yes; but nature: no.
Labelling, stapling, evermore;
Yet they miss.
The life force, the joy, the one-
People miss when they begin-
The search is the crime
One digression is murder,
The other is god.
The goal is so obvious
It is missed.
As children, the microscope is focused,
Yet age continues to turn the knob.
Perspicuity requires
Slight regression.
The natural knob
Is not ersatz.
The fertile cornucopia;
The answer chased,
But feebly;
The fountain of youth;
The essence sees society's runners
And laughs.
Don't forget to stop and smell,
Dirt to dirt,
Blatant but camouflaged,
The cycle is the essence.

Falling   (not dated)

Lucid ogive reality
Terroristic in nature
Beneath the wood I see
And fall for the lure
Running, panting, screaming
Never moving
Deciphering, inventing meaning
Mind behoving
A walk without poise
Devour the bloom
Fill the room
Inject instantly
The Lucid ogive reality.

Fatal Fear   (age 16)

Incessant is my amazement
        at the Princess and the Pea
An unignorable truth
        that is ignored so commonly.
It only takes a small seed
        of any genre of bed debris
For whatever ill may be
        to sprout and spread invisibly
Anger, desolation, sadness
        cruelty, loneliness, or fear-
To start enveloping floods,
        the requirement is but a tear,
Tiny as a micro-
        scroic speck, any flame can sear
Or start a disastrous bonfire;
        the potential exists here.
And all the world's goodness,
        priests or prophets cannot overcome
A tiny drop of poison,
        which stops the heartbeat's vibrant drum
Although we do not know
        from whence it's mystical powers come
It just takes a foreign grain
        to halt the swinging pendulum.

Gaia   (not dated)

Raindrops slowly dancing down
Colour peach, hope to drown.
Animals scared, with happy smiles
Follow you, haunt you, past the miles
Halos, horns, they're all the same
Pawns of a cruel game
And then the pieces disappear
Eaten by their worst fear
In this slime we all get wet
And then I see the sunset.

Giant Buddhism   (not dated)

If birds could swim, if frogs could fly
A flower's stem would be the sky.
If fairies sing, if peace is real
Then I am king without a seal.
If God and sea are both the same
Well, God then surely has no name.

Inculcations   (written 2 years before her death)

T=Teacher   S=Student

T: How do I teach? How do I preach?
How do I punish when my laws you breach?

S: You say, "Be creative with all of your might,"
But if our thoughts differ, then I'm not right.

T: I'm older, I'm wise, had more school than you;
Only I'm right, and this postulate's true:
Follow just old ways, reject all this new,
Jump on the bandwagon to be a Big Who.

S: A winner, alone, consists never of two.
To know I'm the best, to know that I've won,
Then I have to be in a group of just one.

Blue Python   (written less than 2 years before her death)

Blue Python, lying on the green
Two eyes (one contains a face,
The cheese of immortality
The other, eternal yoke)
Forced reproduction of this dead
Decorated, spakely snake
Utilitarian serpent,
With worm-like bridged swollen throats,
Of the nematode
Shards of glass scattered around
Are the stars immersing
The choking pendulum-home
Suffocated by the asphalt python
And its maker.

Untitled   (not dated)

I relax in the wind's embrace
And swim in her mirror.
The earth's tree-like eyebrows
Wiggle as she opens her eyes.
She opens her mouth,
In a yawn and devours
Mechanical trash, which she promptly spits out.
A smudge, however, of Californian molecules,
Is swallowed.
After slight mastication, she expels destroyed cities,
Mutilated by antibodies
Intended for her self-preservation.

Big Brother   (written 18 months before her death)

We are watching you
(but you don't know how).
We follow you too
(as you read this now).
Privacy we encrue
(Why? You have no will).
Stuck in "freedom's" glue
(free will erased by a dollar bill)
You voted us in here
(lest, you parents did;
They knew more anyway, dear)
Now that right we forbid.
Your voice we cannot hear
(Why? You are just a kid).
We cause fear to appear
(And scrap your ego, id)
You wonder who We are?
What is our goal?
Your mind we intend to bar
For power, and Control.

Conformity   (written 15 months before her death)

Everyone trying to be
Noticed, unnoticed; by everybody.
No matter how hard they try
Most of them fail and "uniquely" they cry
Alone solitarily
Still part of society
Trapped in their own fucking maze
Uselessly passing their hours and days
In themselves they lack belief;
Pitifully they die in grief
Ants struggling to their bed
Ignorantly; they tumble instead;
Upon reaching home, they will be dead.
All I see is the blood splattered red
The carcasses degenerate
Spoiling the scenery, slaughtering landscape.
They don't enjoy their land
But the happy ones, from it are banned.
 Hysterically, laughing emerges
Unknowingly revealing their urges.
All that they want to be

Is noticed, unnoticed by everybody.
No matter how hard they try
Most of them fail; grossly they cry
Alone, solitarily
I am still part of society.
Out of their fake maze,
Living invisible days;
Conformity?

                        Amber ____

              Trees   (written 13 months before her death)

Birds' harps intertwined
With Gollum's ring on the mountaintop;
Magically floats my mind-
Oblivious of the impending drop.
Society made manifest
Destroys Mother Nature's nest;
But sitting up here in the tree,
While all around I can see,
People cannot harm them
(Immune from society)
I know what it is to be
Alone and absolutely free.

              GHP   (written 13 months before her death)

When demons fly below the sky
And flowers frown or tumble down
Question why or hope to die
For life's gown will make a tie
To form a noose around your neck
That won't go loose without a speck
Of insanity (so people like me may be happy)!

(Note: Amber attended Governor's Honors Program (GHP) in 1995)

Ode to a Russian Greek   (written 10 months before her death)

Marble man not mine
Scared of the sunshine
Stone (only in my mind)
Tucked away, hard to find
Both of us entrenched with fear
(But when you see the truth appear
You must divorce it, so I hear)
Summarized by a tear
       I practice things that I should say
       But something takes my words away
       So I sit to write them out
       But something clogs my verbal spout
Language is impotent, words invalid
I don't want to hurt you; sadly, pallid
I recant my strength and curl up alone
Close my eyes, hold tight my stone
(Uncertainty's enveloping plague
Makes perspicuity turn vague)
Intensely scared of heart's egress
Should I be silent or profess
       And I notice unhappily
       The focus shifts from you to me
       And that makes me responsible
       For consequences dreadful.

The Journey   (written 9 months before her death)

Slowly, dissolution of reality takes place
Come and see the truth; see the life; touch the face.
Preach the noble gift-incomprehensible-you saw
How can a society make truth against the law?
Hear the music playing, the magic in the sky
Be pupil of the triangle, the omniscient eye.
Fuel the fire of wisdom; be introduced to you.
Delve into the depths of glory; look into your soul;
Absorb what you are able, and make yourself then whole.
Eat and go explore yourself; confront your greatest fear;
Open up your eyes and heart, and through your fingers hear.
The treasure is unsharable; discover it alone;
But once you have it in yourself, make anywhere your home.
Open the Pandora's box and learn what you can learn,
For if you do not catch it, this won't be your last turn.
In order to complete your life, true goodness you must find;
And if you can deliver it, give solace to your mind.
So smile, my sojourner, empty at your hand;
Join me in a walk among the Promised Land.

Why Do I Do This   (not dated)

Why do I do this
Why do I try
Why do I open
Why don't I die
When will the pain end
Where can I go
Why repetition?
You'd think I'd know
Why do I care still
Why can't I stop
Then turns the windmill
And I'm on the top.

Scent Of Death   (not dated)
Lilac's lovely bloom
Like a wave, embraces the room
The scent of death
Surrounds me
And I am overwhelmed
By its beauty.

When Diana Sleeps   (not dated)

As I ride the moonless sky
I realize that I should die.
So again for help I call
Because my end I want to stall
Underneath the starlight
Magic on a moonless night
Moth's wing and ant's bite
Two claps save my life tonight.
Guardian Angel in my seat
Send me chills, give me heat
Protect me from death's embrace,
Companion without a face
Underneath the owl's sight
Magic on a moonless night
Moth's wing and ant's bite
Two claps saved my life tonight.
Then I felt the smooth egress
Like a butterfly's caress
So I sigh a silent moan
And wonder if I am alone.
Underneath the stars, bright
Magic on a moonless night
Moth's wing and ant's bite
Two claps save my life tonight.
As Diana sleeps.

Before Funeral Time!   (not dated)

Danse, Flutter, laugh,
Enjoy my collapse:
The future dissolves
As all is absolved.
After the fun,
Justice is done.
Lying in peace
Beneath the tome
Atheistic feast
In a dirt room.
And the Christians, sad,
Fall in Fear,
Want heave, but dread
When the end is near
(relaxing hearse
For life's end).
But copulate first;
The cycle again!

DO THIS!

(Note: Where the word "hearse" appears, Amber had crossed out the word "embrace")

Another Town   (written 11 days before her death)

Push my paper forward
As a shield from spider string
Step on snakes among the grass
To hear the crickets sing.
Smoke my jealous fire
To match the summer flies
Life my hopes all higher
Just by glancing at the skies.
Writing now in darkness
Of familiar yet unknown
Begging for a prince's kiss
But no affection is shown.
Up above the tiny trees
Moonlight shimmers down
See the beauty if you please
Oh, in another town.

Here uncharted homeland
From the holidays
Shake a friendly stranger's hand
It is just a phase.
Hidden love soliloquy
While I'm far away
But when I see literate eyes
Mouth has none to say
As I think of you again
Soft hair and skin so brown
Pain bites like a bleeding sin
Oh—in another town.

(Untitled) (Not dated) All I keep asking is why. For my entire life, all I have ever wanted was to be dead, to not be. Why didn't I swallow those pills then?! Why oh why did I not pull the trigger last week as the cold, strong barrel rested poised between my teeth? Why did I move from the car? After lying on the placid asphalt amidst oceanic sufferings glittering in the moonlight? No, I never have the balls to make death quick and sharp like I want, but to make life slow and agonizing. Rather than an instant death, I choose painful lung cancer, skin cancer, narcotics, tiny cuts and bruises, embarrassment, and somehow deceive myself into believing these slow ends are less burdensome because I must endure the misery longer that way. Patience, though. Patience. Soon, I will be back alone in the house, with the ever-peaceful chance once more to complete the pointless life cycle. After all, I do not intend to bear child so I am biologically useless. I have no goals except to die, so why fuck around? Direction, I will seek and soon. I do not desire to bite the bullet, so by the next full moon, I shall swallow it.

Reasons to Leave	Reasons to Stay

Reasons to Leave

Allison defies natural order
I am unhappy and depressed
I'm on top now and can only descend
I'm fucking crazy
Not enough friends
Tired of life
It's my time
Fear of further rejection:
   people, college, valedictorian
I accomplish nothing
I'd only torture myself if I didn't

I've strongly considered it since
   5th GRADE!!! I'm
   obviously serious!
It's inevitable anyway
No life means no pain ever again
God doesn't exist
Nobody can handle me—
   Unbearable loneliness
Insane people should not live
I would die before institutionalization
Hell, I even shame my parents. I'd
   never do it again.
I have no talents for future job
Cannot deal with stress
Won't go to a good college
Prove to myself I can

Reasons to Stay

Mom and Dad
Jason
music
Mandy would freak.
Institution if I fail --
   hope that I don't have

Plans

Something with Shawn
Blow car via Danny's instructions
Front of train an
   lots of pills and liquor

APPENDIX B: AMBER'S HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION SPEECH
PRESENTED TWO MONTHS BEFORE HER DEATH

Tonight I would like to give you a dab of Chinese Wisdom from a little book called The Tao of Pooh by Benjamin Hoff. Chang Su was approached by 2 representatives of the Prince of Chu who often represented him at court. Chang Su remarked, "I am told that the prince has a tortoise over 2000 years old, kept in a box wrapped in silk and brocade."

"That is true," the officials replied. "If the tortoise had been given a choice," Chang Su answered, "do you think he would be better to have been alive in the mud, or to have been dead in the palace?"

"To be alive in the mud, of course," the man answered. "I, too, prefer the mud," replied Chang Su. "Goodbye." In other words, everything has its own place and function. This applies to people, although many don't seem to realize it. Such as they are: the wrong job, the wrong marriage, or the wrong house.

When you know and respect your own inner nature, you know where you belong, and you know where you don't belong. One man's food is another man's poison. And what is glamorous and exciting to some can often be a dangerous trap to others. A saying from the area of Chinese medicine will be appropriate to mention here. One disease, long life, no disease, short life.

In other words, those who know what's wrong with them can take care of themselves accordingly, and will tend to live longer than those who consider themselves perfectly healthy and neglect their weaknesses. So in that sense, at least, a weakness of some sort can do you a big favor if you acknowledge that it is there.

And the same goes for one's limitations. Once you face or understand your limitations, you can work with them instead of having them work against you and get in your way, which is what they do when you ignore them, whether you realize it or not. And then you will find that in many cases your limitations can become your strengths. Hoff recommends using your inner nature to discover your strengths.

This is best exemplified in a poem by Winnie the Pooh:

Cobblestone, cobblestone, cobblestone pie,

A fly can't bird, but a bird can fly.

Ask me a riddle and I reply,

Cobblestone, cobblestone, cobblestone pie.

Like a bird flies from instinct, Winnie the Pooh answers the riddle from his instinct, specifically, his hungry stomach calling for delicious cobblestone pie.

The truth is not merely on the outside shell, be it yellow skin, brown skin, or bizarre attire. The truth must be sought deep inside, because that is where it is potent. Or as transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself."

APPENDIX C: LYRICS TO THE MASH THEME SONG TITLED
SUICIDE IS PAINLESS

Through early morning fog I see,

Visions of the things to be,

The pains that are withheld from me,

I realize and I can see….

[refrain] That suicide is painless

      It brings on many changes

      And I can take or leave it if I please.

I try to find a way to make

All our little joys relate

With that ever-present hate,

But now I know that it's too late, and ….

[refrain}

The game of life is hard to play,

I'm gonna lose it anyway.

The losing card I'll someday lay

So this is all I have to say…

[refrain]

The only way to win is cheat

And lay it down before I'm beat,

And to another give my seat

For that's the only painless feat.

[refrain]

The sword of time will pierce our skins

It doesn't hurt when it begins

But as it works its way on in

The pain grows stronger….watch it grin, but….

[refrain]

A brave man once requested me

To answer questions that are key

Is it to be or not to be?

And I replied, 'Oh, why ask me?'

[refrain] Cause suicide is painless

It brings on many changes

And I can take or leave it if I please

….and you can do the same thing if you choose.

Table 1

Rates of suicide in the United States per 100,000 population

Age Range

Year	5-14	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75-84	85+	all ages
1955	0.1	4.1	8.4	12.3	19.6	24.8	25.0	27.5	27.9	10.2
1965	0.3	6.2	12.2	16.7	20.9	23.7	21.2	24.7	24.2	11.1
1975	0.4	11.7	16.1	17.4	20.1	19.8	19.6	19.7	18.6	12.6
1985	0.8	12.8	15.3	14.6	15.7	16.8	18.7	23.9	19.4	12.4
1995	0.9	13.3	15.4	15.2	14.6	13.3	15.8	20.7	21.6	11.9
1996	0.8	12.0	14.5	15.5	14.9	13.7	15.0	20.0	20.2	11.6
1997	0.8	11.4	14.3	15.3	14.7	13.5	14.4	19.3	20.8	11.4
1998	0.8	11.1	13.8	15.4	14.8	13.1	14.1	19.7	21.0	11.3
1999	0.6	10.3	13.5	14.4	14.2	12.4	13.6	18.3	19.2	10.7
2000	0.7	10.2	13.4	14.5	14.4	12.1	12.5	17.6	19.6	10.7
2001	0.7	9.9	12.8	14.7	15.2	13.1	13.3	17.4	17.5	10.8
2002	0.6	9.9	12.6	15.3	15.7	13.6	13.5	17.7	18.0	11.0
2003	0.6	9.7	12.7	14.9	15.9	13.8	12.7	16.4	16.9	10.8
2004	0.7	10.4	12.7	15.1	16.6	13.8	12.3	16.3	16.4	11.1

Table 2

<div align="center">Sources of Data</div>

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Interviews	Documents	Artifacts

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Interviews	Documents	Artifacts
Mother	Amber's writings:	Photographs
Father	Poetry, prose, journals, Novel chapters High school graduation speech	Videotape of Amber from early years and including high school graduation speech
	Test profiles	
	Medical records	Drawings, pottery
	Letters from friends	Trophies
	Letters of recommendation from teachers	
	Posthumous psychiatric evaluation	
	Autopsy report	
	Mother's writings about Amber	