

# EXISTENTIAL

To be concerned with ultimate issues of life

## Main Features described by Howard Gardner, 1999

...an intelligence that explores the nature of existence in its multifarious guises. Thus, an explicit concern with spiritual or religious matters would be one variety – often the most important variety – of an existential intelligence.

To be concerned with "ultimate" issues of life and to engage in transcendental concerns. The capacity to locate oneself with respect to the furthest reaches of the cosmos--the infinite no less than the infinitesimal--and the related capacity to locate oneself with respect to the most existential features of the human condition--the significance of life, the meaning of death, the ultimate fate of the physical and the psychological worlds, such profound experiences as love of another human being or total immersion in a work of art."

A better marker for later existential excellence might be as early-emerging concern for cosmic issues, of the sort reported for religious leaders like Gandhi or for physicists like Albert Einstein.

While hints of ritualistic and symbolic experiences have been found in higher primates and in the precursors of modern humans (like Neanderthal who marked a grave with flowers), explicit existential concerns probably gained ascendancy in the Stone Age. At this point in evolution humans clearly possessed a brain capable of imagining the infinite and the ineffable and of considering the cosmological issues central to existential intelligence. ... major cognitive activities among early humans was a grappling with these existential issues and that much early art, dance, myth, and drama dealt with implicitly or explicitly with cosmic themes.

Thoughts about existential issues may well have evolved as responses to necessarily occurring pain, or perhaps as a way of reducing pain or of better equipping people to cope with it. It is thus at least imaginable that ultimate concerns have some adaptive significance.

Existential intelligence can be manifested by anyone who exhibits facility, clarity, or depth in thinking about 'ultimate' issues, whether the thoughts are positive or negative, moral or immoral, open ended or conclusive.

With the seven original intelligences, the ability to judge people's possession of intelligences proved to be relatively uncontroversial. . . people can be readily arrayed with respect to their computational powers. . . Such evidence is not yet available, however, for existential intelligence. . .

Howard Gardner, *Intelligence Reframed*, 1999, p. 60 – 75

### - Religious

### - Philosophical

### - Artistic

### - Scientific

#### Careers:

\_\_ Theologian

\_\_ Rabbi

\_\_ Philosopher

\_\_ Poet

\_\_ Counselor

\_\_ Artist

\_\_ Teacher

\_\_ Clergy, nun

\_\_ Theoretical Scientist

\_\_ Writer/ story teller

## Functions:

- **Religious:** to consider the meaning of life and one's relationship to death, God, faith and purpose
- **Philosophical:** to contemplate fundamental issues and questions about existence and reality
- **Artistic:** to explore themes and issues regarding the meaning of life in a work of art
- **Scientific:** to use scientific methods and perspective on issues fundamental to human life

## Thinking Skills

- Visual art, sculpture, architecture, sacred space, zen gardens, labyrinths (Visual-spatial)
- Contemplation, meditation, prayer, insight (Intrapersonal)
- Poetry, short stories, novels, essays, sacred texts, lyrics, storytelling (Linguistic)
- Sacred dance & movement, labyrinths, drama, prayer, yoga (Kinesthetic)
- Singing, experiencing sacred/cosmic sounds, rhythms (Musical)
- Explanatory /cause /effect /complex reasoning, mathematical, scientific models (Math/logic)
- Relating to animals, ecological systems, (Naturalist)
- Immersion in a relationship to a person or a people (Interpersonal)

## Educational Applications

### How to Study:

"I can use my **Existential thinking** to help me learn anything! My existential thinking allows me to see the **meaning** of this small bit of information / skill in the context of my whole life. I can prepare myself to learn through **prayer, meditation or contemplation**. I can minimize my stress and fear of failure when I see the place of this new learning experience in the wider context of my life. I can study at my best when I fully understand how new information / skills are related to my **ultimate purpose**. My understanding will be maximized when I am able to fit the new information into the **grand scheme** of my **educational-career-life plan**. I will be most relaxed and comfortable when I see how it fits naturally as the **next step** in all my previous life experiences. I will be most stimulated and energized when I see the connection between what I need to learn and how it will allow me to fulfill **my life's mission**. I will better **grasp the importance** of what I am learning when I understand the **theory** and **philosophy** behind it. I will learn more effectively when I stop to compare and contrast my **personal philosophy-of-life** with that of my teacher and his/her discipline. I will strive to understand how the discipline that I am studying contributes to the health, well-being and **survival of my community** and the **world**."

### *In My Classroom*

**Ohio History . . .**"Imagine you are an Ohio pioneer in a covered wagon traveling to the western part of the state in 1800. You are excited by this great adventure to settle in a new land with your family and to establish your own 'homestead'. You expect that it will be the fulfillment of your and your family's dreams after having almost starved as poor immigrants on the boat sailing to America from Europe. You come to the tattered remains of an Indian village and you meet a boy who is dying of the measles. You hear the boy's sad prayers to the Father Spirit begging to know why he allowed white people to bring this plague to him and his people. You are amazed to hear the boy ask the Father Spirit not to punish those people in the afterlife but instead to forgive them for their ignorance because he has forgiven them. How is his philosophy of life the same or different than yours? How do you suppose this boy became so wise and generous? How might you feel in his situation? How might this affect how you think and live your life?"

### Materials to Engage Existential Awareness. . .

- \_\_\_ probing questions
- \_\_\_ philosophical essays
- \_\_\_ mythology
- \_\_\_ poetry
- \_\_\_ religious books and stories
- \_\_\_ private reflection time
- \_\_\_ autobiographies
- \_\_\_ diaries

