

Playing to Your Strengths: Using Spiritual Gifts to Care for the Soul

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November 5, 2017

Moment of Reflective Silence:

“The soul of man, left to its own natural level, is a potentially lucid crystal left in darkness. It is perfect in its own nature, but it lacks something that it can only receive from outside and above itself. But when the light shines in it, it becomes in a manner transformed into light and seems to lose its nature in the splendor of a higher nature, the nature of the light that is in it.” — **Thomas Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain**

Reading 1:

“If you want happiness for an hour, take a nap. If you want happiness for a day, go fishing. If you want happiness for a year, inherit a fortune. If you want happiness for a lifetime, help somebody.” -Chinese Proverb

Reading 2:

“Say not, “I have found the truth,” but rather, “I have found a truth.”

Say not, “I have found the path of the soul.” Say rather, “I have met the soul walking upon my path.”

For the soul walks upon all paths.

The soul walks not upon a line, neither does it grow like a reed.

The soul unfolds itself, like a lotus of countless petals.”

— **Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet**

What are your spiritual gifts? Or maybe you call them character strengths. Whatever terminology you use, put it into your mind. Close your eyes and for ten seconds imagine that gift, that strength, and imagine yourself using it. Imagine how it makes you feel to use it.

When I was a child, I learned about spiritual gifts. As a small member of a Christian gathering, I was indoctrinated early and often about the gifts given to me by God. The grown-ups told me I had a gift with God's creatures and could speak to animals and interpret tongues. I was told that these gifts had been specially chosen for me by God *himself*. I felt the appropriate awe at these ministrations. I pined over my sister's gift of unending faith and her "heart for service" that were so lauded by the adults. I felt relieved not to be the one called upon by God to do the babysitting and diaper changing. In this particular faith tradition, we lacked agency in the gifts we were given and we made do with what we had.

The passing of years, the development of cynicism, and some ongoing exploration of faith and spirit have had an effect on how I see spiritual gifts. While I love animals and have a great appreciation for the fragility of life, I am not particularly gifted in calming them or understanding their feelings. I've also come to regard speaking in tongues as both suspect and downright creepy. But I have not written off the idea of spiritual gifts. I recognize them in myself and I see them in others. I no longer think of my spiritual strengths as magical qualities bestowed upon me by an ethereal source, but instead more of a chance combination of my neurological wiring and the experiences I have had in my life. And, analytical as I may be, they are still things to be wondered at and to be taken seriously as they relate to the way I care for my soul and the souls of others. I still call them spiritual gifts for lack of a better phrase and I strive to see them in every person I get the chance to interact with.

The people in my family have gifts such as the ability to lead people, the gift of compassion, intuition, the ability to make others laugh even when they are sad, a tireless work ethic. The people in this congregation have the spiritual strengths of hospitality, consolation, ministry, empathy, music, a green thumb, sincerity, financial wherewithal, wicked handyman skills, and the ability to make really good food (some through the impossible alchemy of baking gluten-free desserts that don't taste like cardboard). These gifts are wonderful. In fact, many of them I envy and wish I could employ. Instead of pouting about it though, I can just reflect upon how blessed I am to be surrounded by the likes of you all who are so willing to enrich my life through sharing your gifts.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote a good number of quotable and remarkable things, but one of my favorites brought to my attention recently by a dear friend (who has the unique gift of being well-read and enriching every conversation with her wit and depth) is this: “The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.” Each of the people that I thought of while compiling that list of strengths I mentioned just moments ago only stuck out in my mind because they radiate with the joy that comes only by sharing one’s gifts. By being useful, honorable, compassionate. By living well.

But what happens if our spiritual gifts go unshared? To answer that question, I am going to use as an example a family member of mine. I have a dear cousin who I have always been quite close with. He is one of the most kind souls I have ever known. He is an avid outdoorsman, an intellectual, a gifted musician, and a handsome devil. He is also profoundly unhappy. His Instagram feed is littered with images of his world travels captioned by deep thoughts associated with his endless search for “who he is.” And though this may be the quintessential Millennial kid problem, his lost-ness is purely borne of his straight-up self-centeredness. He has spent so much time flying across the world to conquer high mountains in hopes that the next climax will make him feel whole. But the truth of the matter is that the only times I have seen my cousin happy and whole is when he is using his amazing gifts to enrich the lives of others.

There is an episode of *Friends* in which Joey tells Phoebe that there is no such thing as a selfless good deed. When she argues with him and provides examples, he always points out that no matter what good deed she tries, she always feels better in her own soul because of the deed. This storyline plays out in a classically comic *Friends*-like manner, but the point is actually really important; it does the soul a world of good to use our gifts in the service of others.

Now, I want you all to think back to your own spiritual strength that came to mind at the beginning of this presentation. You imagined yourself using that gift. How do you plan to share it with others this week? This month? This year?

I read a study in the Journal *Science* while I was in college that was about some undergraduates at Stanford who were asked to write a letter of encouragement to at-risk middle school students. In the letter, students were told to emphasize the importance of hard work over natural ability. The letter was never sent, but brain scans of the students who wrote the letters showed that they benefitted just from their expression of altruism. And that feeling proved to last throughout the entire semester. I want that for all of you. Maybe you won’t be writing letters of encouragement (or maybe you will), but I urge you to take care of *your* soul in one of the most sure-fire ways: play to your strengths and

use your spiritual gifts to enrich and improve the lives of others. Your soul will thank you for it.