

(For those in attendance on 5/30/09 – You won’t recognize this! I changed directions! This piece is on “gifts.”)

As JustFaith graduates many of us are asking “Now what?”

What are meaningful next steps for me to take that will help heal the world?

I’m going to share my answer to that question in the hope that it helps us develop a communal response.

I’ll be speaking about the individual, the small group/community, the congregation, the diocese and “beyond.”

Let’s start with the individual...

I. Considering what I have to offer the world

A. In solitude, I’m reflecting on two concepts—my gifts and my vocation. Just who am I anyway? Questions about my gifts and vocation will help me form an early response to the JustFaith experience.

B. I engage with confidence that *who I am* matters to me, to God and to those I hope to serve.

C. I have resources to back up my belief that *who it is that serves* really matters.

1. Socrates advice – “Know thyself”

2. Shakespeare – “To thine own self be true”

3. Jesus (Gospel of Thomas) – One who knows everything else but does not know himself, knows nothing.

4. One day of humble self-knowledge is better than a thousand days of prayer. Teresa of Avila

5. The gift of self is, finally, the only gift we have to give... Our highest calling is to grow into our own authentic selfhood. —Parker J. Palmer

6. ...this is the great Western truth: ...that each of us is a completely unique creature and that, if we are ever to give any gift to the world, it will have to come out of our own experience and fulfillment of our own potentialities, not someone else’s. —Joseph Campbell

Identifying my vocation and gifts comes from listening and reflecting. The task is not to pursue the highest truths and values I can think of. The task is to ask myself what truths and values have I embodied all along. What’s my fundamental nature? As one writer remarks, “Before I tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen for what my life wants to do with me.” (Parker J. Palmer) I must take my interior life seriously. I must do inner work.

II. The Challenge

Patience is called for because I’m up against my schooling, my workplace, the current culture and my ego. In a nutshell, few people want to know what my gifts are and what my vocation is. Most have plans for me. I’m seen as an object and a pawn. There are those that have understood this for decades, even centuries.

A. Arthur Miller and Ralph Mattson write about the workplace in *The Truth About You*. You enter the world of work...over a period of 40 to 45 years, we are given assignments, coached, appraised, trained, developed, promoted, transferred, given results/objectives to fulfill, put in work groups, exhorted to make a commitment, expected to align with group goals...without anybody at any time during near half a century spending a few hours to find out what we are good at and motivated to do.

B. The usual scenario is to abandon our sensitivity to our gifts over time and then, if we awaken, spend the last half trying to recover and reclaim them. —Parker J. Palmer

C. The 13th century poet Rumi describes what happens if you do not seek self-knowledge. “If you are here unfaithfully with us, you are causing terrible damage.”

D. Criticisms of education...

1. And we see the bright academics clamber on up the social ladder to become doctors, lawyers, junior executives; we see the nonacademics take jobs as plumbers, mechanics, typists...But now go back, all the way to the beginning. Suppose back there in kindergarten, in the first years of school, we could have known, before we turned them into what they became, that it was in these unexplored and unformed young to become very different human beings. This one an Emily Dickinson, this one a Nijinsky, this one a St. Francis...What would our “excellence” have gained us that was worth such a loss? —Theodore Roszak
2. The reading, writing, and arithmetic are not, after all, what they most need; it is all well and good for them to learn something, but the really important thing is for them to *be* something, – for them to become what they are meant to be... —Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi
3. What God will have a man do, He does not leave to the words of another man, He speaks Himself; His words are written in the secret heart. —Jean-Jacques Rousseau

E. Should we not avoid the following?

Rabbi Zusya, when he was an old man, said, “In the coming world, they will not ask me, ‘Why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me, ‘Why were you not Zusya?’” —Parker J. Palmer

III. Fruits

But the benefits of uncovering our true self far outweigh the number or strength of the barriers.

- A. We experience the joy of living congruently, having both identity and integrity.
- B. We sense a confidence that comes from clarity and direction.
- C. We serve more effectively. We serve as resource, not out of an unconscious need of our own.
- D. The search for self usually leads to embracing one’s shadow. We become whole.
- E. We become fit for community. We experience the oneness of Creation.
- F. We uncover the capacity to start and/or join movements (the Rosa Parks phenomenon)

IV. How does one identify vocation and gifts?

- A. Parker Palmer says the following about vocation: “Vocation is something I can’t not do, for reasons I’m unable to explain to anyone else and don’t fully understand myself but that are nonetheless compelling.” So, what calls to you? What do you do in spite of not wanting to do it?
- B. Be sensitive to doors opening and closing: “Two forms of external guidance include “way opens” and “way closes.” The pain experienced when way closes can often be linked to exceeding one’s limits, being too far removed from true self.” (Parker J. Palmer)
- C. Frederick Buechner defines vocation as “the place where your deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.” Vocation as intersection... What type of work brings you joy? When thinking about the pain in the world, what causes a deep sadness in you?
- D. Carefully consider and list three heroes of yours (people you deeply respect, living or dead). What traits do your heroes possess? Trust that you have the traits of your heroes.
- E. Fill in the blank. When I am at my best, I am like a/an _____. What would your metaphor do while being successful, when being challenged, while failing?
- F. Describe a “best day,” a time when you were successful, satisfied and happy. What gifts were present?
- G. Tell about an incident (possibly in your youth) when you were most like yourself. What does your behavior say about you?

- H. List ten activities/projects from the past that you enjoyed immensely and you thought were successful. (The opinions of others don't count.) What do these activities say about your gifts and conditions under which you use them?
- I. Some questions on which to reflect:
- When was a moment when I was authentic, gifts present?
 - What are the questions I want to live out?
 - What do I care most about?
 - To whom do I give life?
 - What is my pearl of great price?
 - What is homecoming like?
 - What needs to be nourished?
 - What is my gift to the world?
 - What word is becoming flesh?
 - What do I want to name and claim?
 - How do I intend to be intentional?
 - What do I believe is my nature?
 - What is of value to me?
 - What do I wish to celebrate about myself?
 - What are the dormant gifts in me?
 - What are my gifts?
 - What gives life to me?
 - What can I offer the world?
 - What am I here for?
 - What do I do that makes me feel most like myself?
 - What is my message to the world?
 - What work makes me feel whole?

While solitude is mandatory for this inner work, so is being in community. We are so close to our gifts that others are likely to see them more clearly than we do. Everyone should bring forth the gifts in others.

V. Summary

We can be living a life that is incongruent with our true self.

We are to intentionally seek our true identity in order to serve.

If we skirt this task of finding our true self, we will inevitably hurt others.

We seek not only our gifts, but also our shadow in order to become whole.

VI. Bibliography

Let Your Life Speak by Parker J. Palmer

Artful Work by Dick Richards

Journey Inward, Journey Outward and *Eighth Day of Creation*, both by Elizabeth O'Connor

Birthright Gifts Paradigm

1. Gifts are not acquired; they are abilities you are born with – your essence.
2. Everyone has a gift or gifts to share
3. No gift is greater than another
4. Gifts cover an extremely wide range of behaviors
5. Often, people do not believe that they have a special gift
6. Often, people don't know how to go about finding their gifts
7. Gifts are difficult to identify (they are so close to us, we can't see them)
8. Gifts are often "lost" in youth
9. Gifts can be dynamic – blossoming with recognition of a specific call
10. A gift can recede, allowing another gift to be activated by a new call
11. Gifts are more readily found with the help of a community
12. Gifts are often related to our passions
13. Using gifts rarely removes the necessity of work, conflict or responsibility

Calling Forth of Gifts

In a class in our School of Christian Living, Gordon Cosby was speaking on the subject of Christian vocation. He said in summarizing that the primary task and primary mission of the Christian is to call forth the gifts of others. “We are not sent into the world in order to make people good. We are not sent to encourage them to do their duty. The reason people have resisted the Gospel is that we have gone out to make people good, to help them do their duty, to impose new burdens on them, rather than calling forth the gift which is the essence of the person himself.” He then said that we are to let others know that God is for them and that they can “be.” “They can be what in their deepest hearts they know that they were intended to be, they can do what they were meant to do. As Christians, we are heralds of these good tidings.”

How do we do this? “We begin,” Gordon said, “by exercising our own gifts. The person who is having the time of his life doing what he is doing has a way of calling forth the depths of another. Such a person is Good News. He is not *saying* the good news. He *is* the good news. He is the embodiment of the freedom of the new humanity. The person who exercises his own gift in freedom can allow the Holy Spirit to do in others what He wants to do.”

The assignment given the class was for each person to reflect on what his gifts were and to answer the question, “Am I using my gifts?” When the class met again, they were asked to report on the assignment. Only a very few were able to say what his or her gifts were. Others, reflecting hard on what their special gift might be, found no answer. A few, of many talents, said that they had never been able to decide on a particular one, and had dabbled with one thing one year and another the next and never fully developed any. Others able to name a gift felt that it intensified their problem of ego and pride, and they expressed feelings of guilt or vague uneasiness, as though if they really let loose and spent themselves they would be in trouble. Then there were those who rejected the assignment altogether, feeling that it was much too concerned with self. For them there was no relationship between gifts and servanthood. It had never occurred to most of that class, reared in the churches of America, that their servanthood might take a form suitable to their particular individuality. It was not that they were unfamiliar with the emphasis that Christianity puts on personality—the “unrepeatable event” that is a person—but that it had come to them distorted or was mangled in the hearing, so that it always applied to the other person, the person “out there.” Even the whole concept of “calling” was difficult to grasp in terms of concrete life. Sure, God “calls.” It is not a mistake that the first speech recorded in the Bible’s account of mankind is God calling to Adam in the cool of the evening. The Bible story of God calling and sending is an abstract, biblical concept, quite different from believing that God might call me and might send me. This makes God personal. It means somehow I count—that it might be possible that within me is the image of God. It might mean that I can be in touch with this calling-sending God.

The discovery of the real self is the way to the treasure hidden in a field. The gift a person brings to another is the gift of himself. Talents are the expression of this self. It is the way the self is sent into the world to use the materials of the world, and to be the bearer of the spirit of God...

Journey Inward, Journey Outward
Elizabeth O’Connor