

Spiritual Gifts

What is a spiritual gift?

It is a piece of God's heart and power flowing through us. It is a gift from the Holy Spirit for us to offer to others. It is given because God chooses it for us. It is God's design to partner with God's people in transforming/redeeming the earth and all its peoples.

Our giftedness seems to be woven into the very fabric of our being. You can see it in small children. It is operative in folks who consider themselves religious and those who don't.

Observation would indicate that while everyone is gifted and are motivated by them in some fashion, the fullness of God's love and goodness becomes a life-giving, artesian spring flowing through us when we are aware and intentional about being connected with God's heart and Spirit. It is also my observation that giftedness can be used in service of both good or evil, used well or misused. This seems to be part of the truth expressed in Romans 11:29:

"God's gifts and God's call are under full warranty--never canceled, never rescinded."

The Message

"For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable."

NRSV

Most commonly, we are all a tangle of giftedness and coping mechanism, glory and brokenness. We all have the important task of Listening-past-and-through the human tangle to hear and see the fingerprint of God working through one another. It is one of the tasks of spiritual formation to increasingly remove from the barnacles of an encrusted life that obscures the Light and beauty of radiant faithfulness.

Do I have only one spiritual gift—or do all Christians have all the gifts?

We can see from Paul's conversation with the Corinthians in Romans 12 that there is no expectation that a person is supposed to have all the gifts. Nor that it is our responsibility to try to acquire giftedness we do not have. The Divine Design is that all of us hold a partial piece of the wholeness of God. Everyone matters. The small, weak, invisible members are just as important in creating the whole as the strong and visible. We all become whole as we connect our giftedness to that of others.

It also does not seem to be true that we have only one spiritual gift. We seem to have a cluster of giftedness that we use most of the time. There are clearly gifts that are not our forte. There are other gifts that we seem to have on the "shelf" and are used as circumstances require. It doesn't matter how many or how few gifts make up the cluster. There are infinite possibilities! All are wonderful and important!

Jesus often spoke of inaugurating the Kingdom of God/the Realm of God operative on earth just like it would be in heaven. He taught and modeled what that would look like--and the unfolding life of the church tried to put legs to Jesus' teachings. One radical part of the Kingdom was a reordering of community. No longer would communities be ruled by a leader who was entrusted to "rule" all others. Rather the communities of God would function with the interdependence and partnership with one another through their giftedness. Life in holy community is more like a kaleidoscope of ever changing configurations among the gifts. A line dance of continuously changing partners. Our incompleteness is not a flaw! It is part of a more wondrous design of respect and reliance on the other. We are knit together--not because we have a natural affinity of likeness--but because we need one another's "otherness."

Are the Biblical lists the only gifts that exist?

Probably not. The lists in Romans 12, I Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 seem to be suggestive of the various ways that people fit together in the Body of Christ. But they are a very useful place to start thinking about our own giftedness.

However, the biblical list can be misleading. For instance when we Americans hear the word "exhortation" we think of someone wagging their finger at another "exhorting" them to change. However in the biblical Greek, the root of the word exhortation is the same as the Holy Spirit--the comforter, the one that walks alongside with love and care. So in the gifts questionnaire that is included in this packet, I have renamed the exhortation gift to the "come alongside" gift so that it better expressed the true meaning.

In other cases, some gifts have been so stereotyped that we can't recognize ourselves in them. For instance, evangelism has become a word that often raises images of unpleasant pressure and imposition. So many folks refuse to even consider this a gift in themselves because of their fear and anger at its misuse. Yet the biblical gift of evangelism is the delight in sharing real answers with real expressed need. It is the "yesness" of answering those tender movements of God in another. It is one of the sweetest parts of reaching lovingly and respectfully into a broken and wounded world.

Are some gifts more important than others?

Absolutely not! Every gift is essential to the work of God. *Everyone* counts! If we refuse to be faithful with "the hand we were dealt" we are in rebellion against God and we are sabotaging the work of God on earth. The lowliest bolt or nut on an airplane is the difference between a successful flight and a crash.

What is the difference between a gift and a talent?

A talent is a natural ability that we were born with or trained into. We may be talented in music, manual dexterity, conceptual thinking, creativity, etc. A spiritual gift is the way that God reveals God's Love through us. Our ministries are the intertwining of our gifts and talents. Talents are often the vehicle we naturally use to "transport" our gifts of the Spirit.

You can see this when you think of several folks who love woodworking. The one with the gift of teaching will be thinking of ways that the Meeting/Church could teach woodworking to the young people so that they build skills and empowerment. If the woodworker has the gift of giving, friends and family will find themselves gifted with one of her/his creations. If the person has the gift of mercy, you wouldn't be surprised to see this person donating time restoring the woodwork of the older home that houses the women's shelter, etc.

We commonly talk about a person having a gift of music or a gift of art. In this paradigm, the musical and artistic ability is "the talent" and how it is shaped is determined by the giftedness of the person.

How does this work with my ministry?

Gift + Talent = Ministry.

All of us have ministry. On one level, it is the natural flow of our inherent giftedness working through our talents/abilities/expertise. *Our giftedness embedded in our talents and circumstances is our contribution to the outer world.* It forms the basic structure and context of our ministries. In each moment that we are connected to the heart and love of God, the fullness of God embodies our thought, action, prayer, glance. It communicates normally--but powerfully--to all we encounter. People. Nature. Interactions. Events. Even things. It is the normal, unconscious ministry that flows from faithfulness.

However, we often experience a Leading and/or an upwelling of desire to order our lives to be faithful to our ministry in specific ways. We often talk about this being a "call."

(Gift + Talent) + Call = "Focused Ministry"*

It is essential to have an awareness one's giftedness--and non-giftedness-- to be wise and effective in focused ministries. This is the core of your empowerment. If you attempt to operate out of your giftedness or overreach your giftedness, many a mess is made.

*[We haven't really developed a vocabulary for this focused ministry. Quakers talk about public ministry, and that accounts for some types of calls--but not all. Evangelicals talk about "full time Christian service", but that doesn't include those called to intentional ministries of availability or presence. We could talk about "intentional ministry" because this focused ministry *does* re-order our priorities and arrangement of our lives and finances. But that undercuts the truth that the "ministry of the normal" also is best lived with intentionality. So until we are given a better term, I'll just use "focused ministry."]

How do I recognize my spiritual gifts?

- By what games you played when you were a child
- By what you love to do
- By what you automatically do
- By what gives you energy
- By what is so natural you think everyone "should" do it/be it/know it
- By those things that seem to have surprisingly anointed results
- By those things that people feel touched by God through you
- By the mistakes you make

Our gift clusters feel like skin. They are so much a part of us, that not only do we not recognize them as gifts, we assume that everyone is wired like we are. The person who is given to know can't believe that others can't see what they see so clearly. The person who prays automatically can't believe that if you are a real Christian you wouldn't be praying all the time too. The mercy folks find it beyond the pale that everyone else has other Godly priorities for time and resources. Our giftedness is a lens through which we see and evaluate the world.

1. So the first step of gift recognition is to be aware of what gives you energy and what comes naturally to you. Taking the gifts questionnaire may help you with this awareness.
2. The second step is to get feedback about how others are impacted for good through you. At the very least it would be good to have someone who knows you well to also fill out a questionnaire answering from the ways they have experienced you.
3. A future step would be prayerful consideration of your gift with your anchor committee. It is often the case that others see things in you that you have not taken into account because it comes naturally to you and you didn't realize that others were touched by God through it. Sometimes we mis-identify the movement in us, and the group can help us be more clear about how God works through us--or doesn't work through us.

Using the questionnaire. . . .

My work with spiritual giftedness began over 30 years ago when my co-pastor, John Braun, and I had a vision of what it would be like to organize the church around folks giftedness. It was an amazing and fruitful experience. John, who has a strong gift of teaching, surveyed the literature on spiritual gifts. We were disappointed that all the material he found was filled with theological biases based on their church doctrine and practices. So John researched every gift mentioned in scripture--tracing every usage of it throughout the Bible. My descriptions in the questionnaire are based on his research and discoveries.

For years, I used the gifts questionnaires developed by others. But what caused me to develop my own was that most of the commercially developed tests required that a person have a history and service in a church. And thus it excluded youth who haven't been part of church structures yet, folks new to the faith, and folks who aren't in a faith community. I was finding that gift identification was alive and useful for young people, in college career centers as well as in human resource departments for companies. So I set about to create generic explanations based on how the gifts operate in people. On one occasion I was doing a gifts retreat with students at Guilford College, and the retreat sponsor, Sara Beth Terrell, transcribed phrases that I used as I was explaining the various gifts to the students. So this is how this became the Wood-Terrell Questionnaire. ☺

I had also observed that folks really didn't need a battery of questions to figure out if they experienced a gift or not. You could just ask a person if they experience this or not--and they can usually tell you. So this questionnaire does just this. It simply asks if you experience this regularly (YES). Or sometimes you have experienced it. Or not usually.

When you take the questionnaire, don't belabor your answers. First impressions are usually good indicators. Those gifts that are in your top cluster are usually an immediate recognition. And you will also be pretty clear about the ones that just aren't your cup of tea. If you really don't understand what the explanation is--you will be able to explore this with others and see if it indeed does fit you. Or I am always available at janwood@goodnewsassoc.org if you have questions about the meaning of the explanations.

Clusters

Gifts in the YES column

The gifts that you have marked "yes" are part of your working giftedness cluster. You can think of these like chromosomes. They combine in ways that equip you for your ministries. Perhaps a story will illustrate this easily. I was doing a retreat in a church that had a ministry with refugees. The refugee ministry was not going well. Though everyone was very supportive of the idea, it wasn't working very well in practice. When we were talking about how important it is to know the texture of your clusters, two women had a giant "aha." The woman who was tasked to run the refugee program had the gift of mercy. (Well matched) But that was coupled with the gift of service. She did not have leadership or administration in her cluster. Another woman who was active in the program taking folks to the agencies, medical care, etc was very dissatisfied with how the program was working. She too had the gift of mercy. But her cluster included administration--and no service. The two women looked at one another and laughed and said, "We are in the wrong jobs, aren't we?" The mercy-service woman loved to run errands, take folks to their appointment, to be the hands on do-er. She hated organizing things and delegating. The mercy-administration woman excelled in organization and delegation and hated doing the nitty gritty service tasks. And so they switched their jobs right there and then. It wasn't more than a week or so later that I got word that the program had really taken a turn and was running smoothly with both women in joy. The textures of your cluster really matter!

Gifts in the "Sometimes" column

These are the gifts that are available to you in service of your top cluster; but they wear you out/make you grumpy if you had to do them all the time. These are gifts that help you accomplish a task--but they are not your "main thing."

Gifts in the "Not, usually" column

These are gifts that may have happened in an unusual experience--or perhaps never. Unless this is a gift that you have ruled out because of anger, judgment, woundedness or theological bias--these are the places that you are to say your "no's." For instance, if gift of teaching is in this list, don't accept teaching a First Day or Sunday School class just because no one else will. This is not your to do. If all the gifts are working together there will be another way to love and educate the youth you all care about so much.

But "no" isn't the end of the sentence. These are the gifts that you need to seek out in others. They are important complements to your own strengths. Folks with gifts you don't have need to be on your speed dial. ☺

If a gift is on this list because you reject the way it has been mis-used in your experience, it is important to forgive and release those who have used their giftedness inappropriately. Folks often eschew healing because they are so disgusted with television healers. Or folks who reject leadership because of painful experiences of domination in the past. etc. Forgive, release and be open to new discoveries and learnings.

Gifts in community

Since spiritual gifts are God's design in every human, everyone counts. The life of the community really must prayerfully attend to what is offered by each person--without regard to age, gender, race, class, cultural differences. God speaks through the most surprising sources--and we need to be on tippy toes expecting the unexpected. What the community needs to hear the most may well come through the person who least want to hear it from. However, while every gift counts--all gifts aren't given the same weight and urgency at the same time. Gifted communities are not democracies based on making everyone happy or comfortable. They are more like an orchestra in which the instruments play at the direction of the conductor. The soloist in one movement may have rests in another. The unisons, the harmonies and even the dissonances are part of the symphonic whole.

Spiritual gifts are held in natural tension with one another. The design for the community of faith is not unanimity, but complementary perspectives and strengths united with a common Spirit. Our American form of Christianity has divided the family of God into smaller and smaller segments of folks who agree with one another. And concurrently decided that those who think and perceive like us are "right" and those who differ are "wrong." So it comes as a shock to our paradigm that God's design for communities is that there are distinct, God given and anointed difference that are make whole through cooperation, trust and partnership. It also comes as a surprise that this isn't some abstract concept. You *really don't understand* or even like folks that have gifts opposite from yours. Our giftedness shapes our personality. It may influence the way we look, the mannerisms we have, the way we act in groups. I actually think that 95% of the problems of Meetings and Churches are caused by folks not understanding one another giftedness--and consequently not knowing how to move from conflict to cooperation when the inevitable conflicts arise.

You will see on your questionnaire that the gifts are divided into three parts: gifts of perception, gifts focused toward the group, gifts focused outward. These gifts are designed to tend to different functions in the community. Those with perception gifts are the GPS, the guidance system of the group. Some of the gifts are hard-wired to care deeply and be empowered to create and maintain a healthy community. Other gifts are designed to reach outward to extend God's care into the world. Most of us have seen these differences in action! Consider the impassioned Monthly Meeting discussing budget were the mercy folks are critical and distrustful of those who think that a new copy machine is really important in light of the need for funds to create a homeless shelter. The mercy gift sees the administrative gift as organizationally self-absorbed and unfaithful. After all, didn't Jesus say to give away all we have and follow? Those gifted with upholding the community for the long run, thinks of the mercy gift as an unrealistic trouble maker. In our human brokenness, our usual default position is to judge one another, take sides and try to out maneuver the other--even in fine Quakerly ways. The Divine Design intends for us to listen deeply into what God may be communication through these two divergent perspectives. It is often given to the gift of wisdom or prophecy or leadership to help the group frame a way forward that honors all the ways that God is Leading.

Another tension among the gifts is that some are "being" gifts, others are "doing" gifts. Here again we are deeply influenced our culture that values doing over being. Doers are often

given high praise as the person who walks the walk and is the "real" person of God. Or, conversely, the Be-er may be put on a pedestal as "holier" than the regular person in the Meeting. Again, both Be-ers and Doers are essential to healthy community. The trick is to move past our own preferences into honest respect and dance to those different than ourselves.

Gifts and Roles are two different things. Every role can be fulfilled by a variety of gifts. A person's giftedness will change the texture of how the role is done, so the discernment is to match the giftedness of the person with the needs of the community. The role of pastor of a pastoral Meeting can be done through a variety of the gifts like leadership, administration, exhortation/come alongside, teaching, prophecy, etc. The happy match of pastor and Meeting comes when the pastor's gift cluster matches the needs of the congregation. For instance, if the Meeting is a small group of elderly adults, God's love for them may be to have a pastor who walks alongside them as they make the difficult life transitions of releasing and Listening with them about how to be extending their faithfulness for next generations. It might well be an unhappy match to call a person with prophetic and mercy gifts whose ministry naturally prods and pushes folks to be active in projects and activism for which the group has no energy.

The fact that roles can be fulfilled through a variety of giftedness is often the Way Forward in situations where resources are limited. We often get stuck in "the way it has always been done" and forget to ask God how we might configure ourselves differently to be faithful to our callings. There are infinite possibilities when we open ourselves to the wonder of all of our gift clusters moving together in harmony and openness of heart.