

Does Everyone Have A Gift?

Every human being is born with some sort of gift, an inclination or an instinct that can become a full-blown mastery. We may not see our gift for what it is. Having seen it we may choose not to accept the gift and its consequences for our life. Or, having claimed our gift, we may not be willing to do the hard work necessary to nurture it. But none of these evasions can alter the fact that the gift is ours. Each of us is a master at something, and part of becoming fully alive is to discover and develop our birthright competence.

Discerning our native gifts is difficult for many reasons. We live in a culture that tells us there is no such thing as a gift, that we must earn or make everything we get. Social forces such as racism, sexism, and ageism press poor self-images upon us. Various inner pathologies may lead us to embrace those images despite the obvious damage they do. But the most subtle barrier to the discernment of our native gifts is in the gifts themselves. They are so central to us, so integral to who we are, that we take them for granted and are often utterly unaware of the mastery they give us.

The skills we are most aware of possessing are often those we have acquired only through long hours of study and practice, at considerable financial or personal cost. Precisely because these skills once cost us effort to acquire, and still cost us effort to employ, we are acutely aware of owning them. Ironically, these self-conscious skills are often not our leading strengths; if they were, they would not be so effortful. But they are the strengths upon which we sometimes build our identities and our careers—though we build on an anxious, uncertain foundation. Meanwhile, our native, instinctive gifts either languish unused and unappreciated or get used unconsciously without being named and claimed. Some readers may remain unconvinced that everyone is born with some gift, some mastery. For them—wounded perhaps by an ego or a culture that says people are incompetent without training—the notion that we are all given expertise at birth may sound like the largest illusion of all.

So when we seek our birthright gifts, it is important not to equate them with the techniques our society names as skills. Our gifts may be as simple as a real interest in other people, a quiet and caring manner, an eye for beauty, a love of rhythm and sound. But in these simple personal gifts the seeds of vocation are often found, if we are willing to do the inner and outer work necessary to cultivate our mastery.

Excerpted from:

The Active Life
Parker Palmer

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