

We Come Bearing Gifts

...the most frequently asked questions about using core gifts to navigate change.

by Bruce Anderson

What is a core gift and where does the idea come from?

Core gifts is an old idea, rooted in cultures around the world, which says that each person comes into this world with the capacity and desire to make a certain kind of contribution to the world around him/her. This contribution is called the person's "gift". The idea of the gift includes the acknowledgment that, in addition to this gift, each of us also has many other talents and skills. If we take the opportunity to identify this core gift we will unlock significant authority and capacity for change inside of us and in the world around us. Old community language says that our core gift forms the most important seed from which our life unfolds.

In older times, elders in communities guided youth through initiation processes that were designed to help a young person name his/her gift. The public acknowledgment of the young person's gift then formed the basic relationship between that young person and the community around him/her. Throughout that person's life, they would be offered opportunities to give their gift, learn about how to use it wisely, and be mentored by others with a similar gift. As youth initiation processes began to disappear from many cultures, there began a slow decline in the understanding and usage of gifts as one of the most powerful and universal tools for personal and community growth and healing. In addition to the disappearance of youth initiation practices, the gradual breakdown of community life illustrated by the increasing isolation of neighbors from each other and the

growing divide between the haves and the have-nots, has further contributed to the disappearance of the idea of gifts from our modern life.

We are in a unique position now to reclaim this powerful idea and bring it back within the context of helping citizens who are in the margins of community to find acceptance and purpose, and heal the wounds that exist whenever broken relationships and broken dreams occur.

Why is the idea of gifts becoming more common now in helping professions?

First, there has been a growing trend in the past decade for social service programs to find out the strengths of people asking for help in addition to describing the difficulties they are facing. This trend has resulted in social service programs creating a list of a person's strengths, but these strength lists fail to distinguish between "things a person can do" and "things they have a passion for and are likely to stick with". This is a critical distinction for both service users and service systems, since it is a primary basis for sustaining a person's hope

and dramatically effects a person's desire to take action that will change his/her life. When a person is aware of his/her gift, they will often be highly motivated to give it in ways that will help reshape their lives and reduce reliance on social service systems. In this way, it is identified as the person's primary strength.

Second, many of the people who come to social service programs looking for help have begun to define their life solely in terms of the

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problems they face. When a person believes that they have a significant gift to offer others, they often feel motivated to not only change their life, but also begin to see themselves as someone worthy of respect, love, and acceptance. To be acknowledged for your gift can result in deep feelings of having been seen for who you really are.

Third, many of the people who use social service systems are in a struggle to figure out what the purpose of their life is. Why is all this happening? Why is my life so hard right now? This kind of deep questioning can be aided by the idea that the person really does have a purpose to their life, and that the problems they are facing are worth getting through in order to get back to what is important to them about living. For most of us, knowing we have skills is not much of a “reason to live”. But believing you have a unique and worthwhile gift to contribute can be a significant reason to keep moving forward. It is a foundation for hope.

What is the difference between skills, talents, and gifts?

The differences between skills, talents, and gifts are significant, and form a basis for establishing the importance of gifts. **Skills** are things you have learned how to do and may or may not enjoy or feel motivated to do. *Example: “I have learned the skills of helping resolve conflicts between people, but I don’t want to do it and I don’t enjoy doing it. I don’t really like conflict.”* **Talents** are things you have an innate capacity for at birth. You are drawn towards opportunities to learn about and engage in a talent throughout the course of your life. *Example: “I have learned the skills of helping resolve conflicts, and felt like I had a natural ability to learn about it. I enjoy learning about different ways people can resolve conflict, and look forward to opportunities where I can be mediator.”* Out of your list of talents, your **Gift** is the talent which you feel the deepest connection to, most compelled to learn about, and eager to do. In addition, you also have some first hand knowledge of the suffering that can result when this gift is not given. *Example: “I have the gift of helping others resolve conflicts. All my life I have been interested in why people sometimes can’t get along and how to help them come to peaceful agreements. When I see a situation where people are not getting along, I feel compelled to get involved. Last year, I became a volunteer mediator in my spare time because I was so interested in it. In my early life, my parents used to fight a lot, and now I just want things to be peaceful.”*

Can a person have more than one gift?

If you use the framework of skills, talents, and gifts as the way to understand the different levels of capacity in humans,

Levels of Capacity: What is the difference?

Skills are things you have learned how to do and may or may not enjoy or feel motivated to do.

Talents are things you have an innate capacity for at birth and may or may not choose to engage with, develop, and give.

Your **Gift** is the talent which you feel the deepest connection to, most compelled to learn about, and eager to give.

then everyone has one gift. Your gift is the talent which you are most motivated to learn about and use in your daily life. Remember, in addition to this one gift, you have multiple talents and skills that make you an enormously capable, complex, and valuable individual.

Does having a gift or talent mean I am better than others at doing these things?

No, not necessarily. It can be confusing to understand the idea of gifts because modern culture has changed the original meanings of the words *gift* and *talent*. The new meanings of “gifted” or “talented” are most often reserved for people whose abilities far exceed the usual. The original meanings did not imply extraordinary ability, but rather were meant to describe the primary contributions that a person wanted to make to those around them. Most importantly, in the older definitions, every person was “gifted”. For example, having a gift for motivating others does not necessarily mean I am better at this than others. Instead, it means that I have a strong desire to learn about motivation, a natural inclination towards it, and an interest in helping to encourage and motivate others.

The word *talent* goes back to the German word for weighing the currency of gold. Talent, in the context of human ability, also has in it the idea of weight or responsibility. Just as you would not waste gold, you would not waste talent. Implied in this is that each of us has the responsibility to bring our talents to the world.

Does everyone have a gift?

Yes, everyone has a gift. You may not

have taken the time to identify it, but it is active and being used by you in your daily life. Each of us uses our gift, along with our many skills and talents, to make decisions and get through each day. By taking the time to identify and acknowledge your gift, you can tap the power of it more fully in all areas of your life and also focus on learning more about how to use it.

...simply listing a person's skills fails to make the distinction between “things a person can do” and “things they can do, have a passion for, and are likely to stick with”. This is a critical distinction since it is a primary basis for sustaining a person's hope and also dramatically effects a persons desire to take action that will change his/her life.

Isn't it bragging to say you have a core gift?

No! Remember, everyone has a gift. In that way, you have nothing to brag about! But more importantly, this core gift is an innate capacity you were born with — it was given freely to you, and didn't have to be earned. Although you may work hard to understand and give this gift, the original seed of it was a gift to you. Thus, it is important to feel humble about your gift — no matter if it appears small or large to you or others. The primary reward you will receive are natural feelings of “being at home” when you are giving it, not the attention you receive from others.

How can knowing your gift be useful to you?

Knowing our gift can increase our willingness to engage with ourselves and others in the following ways:

1. When we know our gift it strengthens our confidence and feelings of self-worth. It can help to change our orientation from despair to hope when we are in the midst of difficult times.
2. When we believe we have a gift it tells us that we have a value to our community and an important contribution to make. We have an increased desire to act.
3. When others acknowledge our gift, it provides an opportunity to feel deeply honored

and seen. Some individuals with severe experiences of feeling unwanted and rejected have said that discovering their gift in the presence of others was the first time they felt like they had been seen for who they “really” were.

4. Knowing you have a gift reconfirms that the fundamental descriptor of who you are is a gift, not a deficit or the current difficulties you are facing. In this way, the gift provides a counterbalance to the suffering and hard times we all have faced.
5. Similarly gifted individuals can develop strong bonds, mentor each other, and feel compelled to stand by each other in times of trouble. Knowing your gift helps you to know who your allies are and develop friendships that are deeply rooted.
6. If you are tentative about joining a group or becoming involved in an activity, you can get engaged by finding ways to give your gift within the activities of the group. Because you have a talent in this area, and you feel motivated to give it, it is likely others will see you as useful and welcome you in.
7. The gift can be a touchstone for you...a feeling of security and comfort in times of trouble or confusion. You can come back to it when you are at any transition point in your life, considering how your gift can help you in this situation. Because your gift can cause trouble in your life when you give it too much or unwisely, you may also reflect on how your gift has influenced the current situation in ways that may not be helpful.

How can knowing a person’s gift be useful to a helping professional, family member, or other interested person?

There are many practical advantages to knowing a person’s gift. Most of the advantages

are tied to increasing motivation for change, having increased hope, and having specific information which can help the person to move forward in his/her life.

1. When people are facing some kind of difficulty or hard time, they have a deep desire to be seen and acknowledged for “all” of who they are, not just this current situation they are in. By acknowledging the person for their gift, and helping them find ways to use it, you are making a concrete statement that you believe this person is more than the current situation they are facing. It is a way to reveal your hope and confidence in the person.
2. Because a person’s gift is central to who they are, they value it and are very motivated to learn about it and give it. When a person is frustrated or stuck, supporting them in finding ways to give their gift will often get the person moving again.
3. If you help a person discover their gift, your

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relationship with that person will deepen because you have seen and acknowledged them in the most important way they want to be seen in the world. Relationships often become more trusting, and the person will often have increased confidence in your ability to be helpful in other areas.

4. For individuals who are facing loneliness, knowing his/her gift can be the ticket into less isolation. When you know someone’s gift, you can connect them with others who have similar gifts, find mentors, locate community activities where the person’s gift will be valued, and have a specific positive way to introduce a person into situations where they want to be welcome and accepted.
5. For individuals who want to find jobs, the gift is a specific description of something the person wants to be engaged with and do.

When you help a person get a job where they can give their gift during part of their workday, they are highly motivated to be in that workplace and be successful.

6. When you are helping a person who has little confidence and low feelings of self-worth, reminding them about or helping them to find their gift will often reorient the person to think of themselves as someone with valuable contributions to make and worthy of respect and love. Their courage and confidence in themselves often rises and they will become willing to change their life.

Does a person's gift change over time?

The person's gift does not change, but their understanding of it and ability to use it can change dramatically. This is particularly true for those of us who take the time to identify our gift and seek to bring it more fully into our life. For instance, if your gift is "to motivate others", then your gift will always be "to motivate others". However, you will continue to learn skills throughout your life that will increase your ability to motivate others. By remembering experiences from your own life when others did not provide help by motivating or encouraging you may also increase your understanding of why it is so important to give this gift to others. You also will begin to notice other people who are good at motivation, and will have a desire to spend time with those individuals so you can learn from each other. Old stories from cultures around the world tell us that each of us comes into this life and leaves this life with a gift and spends the time in between understanding and giving it.

How do you help a person identify his/her gift?

There are three primary ways to help a person identify his/her gift.

First, there are social service programs in California and elsewhere using an interview method called *Core Gift Identification*. This process, developed over the past five years by people working in helping professions, takes about an hour and results in a person being able to state their gift and also their primary talents. The core gift and talents can then be utilized as primary strengths towards helping the person make changes in their life. This process has been used successfully across a wide span of youth and family, mental health, employment, homeless, and welfare to work programs.

Second, you can help a person to identify the general area of his/her gift by helping them to see the themes that have kept reoccurring throughout their life that fall into the category of "what I have contributed to situations I have been in." If the

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person can recall a wide variety of situations, and identify what he/she has brought to those situations, patterns will emerge. It is important to help the person remember family memories, school and work experiences, friends, and community volunteer work. With each experience, ask the person to tell you what they contributed, more than anything else, to that situation. Often times, one theme keeps recurring which is in the general area of the person's gift.

Third, according to many cultural and spiritual traditions, a person's gift is connected to their wounds. A person who has suffered in some significant way will feel compelled to bring the opposite experience to others. For instance, a person who was rejected by their family or significant people in their life may have a gift for bringing unconditional love to others. A person who was discouraged from using their imagination may bring the gift of ideas and creative thinking to others. A person who was part of a chaotic family may bring a gift of structure and organization to others. A person whose family held the secret of abuse or alcoholism may bring the gift of telling the truth. By helping a person to understand the significant suffering they have experienced, they will often be able to identify their gift and further understand why it is so important to give this gift to others.

Who is qualified to help a person identify his/her gift?

In older times, village elders were often responsible for helping a young person to identify his/her gift. The idea of the gift itself informs us that, regardless of degrees and training, some people will have the gift of helping others to know their gift. Some people struggle with the task while others feel immediately comfortable, engaged, and talented.

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The ability to help another know his/her gift does not require traditional social service training or degrees. Community organizers, mentors, family members, friends, employment providers, therapists, youth workers, spiritual advisors, case managers, ...almost any person with strong interest and a desire to build their communication craft in this area can learn the basic skills of gift identification. As a start, all of us, by reflecting back to a person when we have seen them do something powerful or particularly meaningful, can help a person begin to notice their talents and gift.

Organizations who have gained proficiency in gift identification have the common threads of 1) having an intense interest in learning about the history of gifts from multiple cultural perspectives, 2) designating a small group of employees to experiment with gift identification methods and gain proficiency, 3) encouraging and supporting those employees to meet with each other and share what they are learning on a regular basis, 4) finding ways to bring the ideas and stories about gifts into the everyday conversation of the workplace, and 5) employees being aware of and having acknowledged their gifts to each other.

Can knowing your gift have any negative consequences?

When you know your gift, you realize you have a very powerful capacity inside you. The choices you make about how and when to use it determine whether or not it is helpful or not helpful to you and others around you. For instance, again using the gift of motivation as an example, a person could choose to use this gift to try and manipulate or control a person for his or her own selfish benefit. On the other hand, the same person could use this same gift of motivation to help a person decide to stop using harm-

ful drugs. Using your gift wisely requires being attentive to your values and what you believe is important as you make decisions about how to use your gift.

Giving your gift will bring great joy into your life, but also can bring difficulty. Sometimes another person will react strongly to you when you are giving your gift. They may be challenged by your wisdom and strength in this area, or because you gave your gift in a way that was seen as not helpful for some reason...maybe it was the way you said something or the forcefulness with which you entered the situation. When you are giving your gift, others will often see you as powerful, and that can cause conflict as well as the possibility for making a significant contribution. Learning how to give your gift in a way that finds acceptance is one of the challenges of life.

Can a person be too fragile to be able to identify and use his/her gift?

Yes, however it is important not to make assumptions about a person's ability to know or use their gift based on traditional stereotypes that have been a part of having a disability, being homeless, facing addictions, lacking significant schooling, being too young or too old, or not being able to "think clearly".

It is also important to separate out the process of helping a person *to identify their gift* from helping them to *use it in their life*. A person who is experiencing severe emotional trauma, a psychotic break, or other kinds of disorientation is probably not in a state where they could identify their gift. The questions or the process might prove too difficult, or might raise strong feelings that are not helpful in their current condition. On the other hand, a person who is in this same condition may benefit from being reminded about the gifts, talents, and skills they possess as a way of helping them to reclaim feelings of self-worth and identify which of those attributes might be helpful in their current situation. Traditional wisdom from many cultures teaches that, when you are in some kind of trouble in your life, you go back to your gift and use it to help you find your way.

The *Core Gift Identification* interviewing process has been used successfully across a wide span of youth and family, mental health, employment, homeless, and welfare to work programs. You can get further information about this method by using the contact information on the bottom of the page.

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