



FAQ: The Most Common Questions About Gifts From Helping Professionals

“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.”

Parker Palmer

We Come Bearing Gifts

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

by Bruce Anderson

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

Gifts is an old idea, rooted in cultures around the world, which says that each person comes into this world with the capacity and innate desire to make a certain kinds of contribution to the world around him/her. If we take the opportunity to identify and contribute our gifts, we unlock significant authority and capacity for change inside of us and also in the world around us. Old community language says that our gifts form the most important seeds from which our life unfolds. There are many different kinds of gifts, and ways to discover gifts.

Many indigenous cultures began as “gift cultures,” using complex systems for reciprocal giving and receiving of both human abilities and resources such as food, tools, and other supplies.

In older times, elders in communities guided youth through initiation processes that were designed to help a young person identify his/her gifts. The public acknowledgment of the young person’s gifts 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 gifts, learn about how to use them wisely, and be mentored by others with similar gifts. As youth initiation processes began to disappear from many cultures, there also 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 is a growing trend in the helping professions to find out the strengths of people asking for help, in addition to describing the difficulties they are facing. This has resulted in 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 affects a person’s desire to take action that will change his/her life. However, when a person is aware of his/her gifts, they will often be highly motivated to give them in ways that will help reshape their lives and reduce reliance on social service systems for help.

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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 problems they face. When a person believes that they have significant gifts 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 gifts 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 to me? 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?

There are two primary kinds of ability in a person—skills and gifts. There are no abilities that are always a skill or always a gift. It depends on the unique attributes and story in each of us. Let’s use the situation of “being in a conflict” to clarify the differences between skills and 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.”*

Gifts are divided into three different categories. **Gifts of Talent** 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, and they provide you a feeling of pleasure to be engaged in. *Example: “I have a talent for helping resolve conflicts. I feel like I have a natural ability to help others get along, and I remember doing it at an early age. I enjoy learning about different ways people can resolve conflict, and look forward to opportunities where I can be a mediator.”*

Gifts of Wisdom are powerful learning moments. They can be identified because you get an “ah-ha!” either at that moment or sometime in the future when you think about that experience. Gifts of Wisdom “stick”: they become an important part of who you are. They cause you to see things differently and/or act differently. It is common to receive Gifts of Wisdom through influential mentors and teachers, spiritual sources and practices,

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.**

***Gifts of Talent* are things you have an innate capacity for at birth, feel natural to you, and you are motivated to give.**

***Gifts of Wisdom* are the “ah-ha” learning moments we encounter that change our way of thinking and acting in the world.**

***Gifts of Passage* are abilities you develop as a result of difficult life situations, feel deeply connected to, compelled to learn about, and eager to give.**

Your *Core Gift* is the primary passage gift resulting from the most difficult situation you have faced in your life.

powerful moments when you are alone, and AA or other support group kinds of activities. *Example: "I saw my friend John arguing with his Dad, but his Dad was very patient and asked John lots of questions. I could see that really calmed John down and helped resolve their differences. From now on, I'm going to be sure to ask more questions when I get upset with somebody."*

Gifts of Passage are the abilities we get from going through difficult events (a passage) in our lives. A passage gift can be an ability we had to use in order to get through this life event, or it can be what should have happened to us instead of what did happen to us. (Examples include being respected, not giving up, digging a ditch, being trustworthy, fixing engines, maintaining physical health, being loving to other people.... it can be anything, as long as the gift is the result of the difficulty you went through. Passage gifts are always positive abilities. *Example: "When I was young, my parents used to fight all the time. I'd go in my bedroom to get away from it. I just wanted them to work it out, but they never did. Now 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. I just want things to be peaceful."*

Does a person have one gift that is more important than all his or her other gifts?

Yes, everyone has many gifts, but one gift that we call the **Core Gift**. Your Core Gift is the Passage Gift that resulted from going through your most difficult life experience. Because the gift was developed out of a suffering experience, it is very important to you. Because the

Core Gift is a positive result of going through that difficult experience, each time you give that gift, you heal a little more. Because you value this gift so much, you tend to rely on it to help you get through many situations you encounter. It becomes your "go to" gift, so you get very good at using it and giving it to others. It

also is the gift which you are most motivated to learn about. Remember, in addition to this one Core Gift, you have other gifts, multiple talents, and many 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 passage gift for motivating others does not necessarily mean I am better at this than others. Instead, it means that I have had struggles with motivation in my own life, 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

...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 affects a person's desire to take action that will change his/her life.

talent. Implied in this is that each of us has the responsibility to bring our talents to the world.

Does everyone have gifts?

Yes, everyone has gifts. You may not have taken the time to identify them, but they are active and being used by you in your daily life. Each of us uses our gifts, along with our many skills, to make decisions and get through each day. By taking the time to identify and acknowledge your gifts, you can tap their power more fully in all areas of your life and also focus on learning more about how to use them.

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

No! Remember, everyone has gifts. In that way, you have nothing to brag about! For instance, Gifts of Talent are innate capacities 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 is a natural feeling of “being at home” when you are giving it, not the attention you receive from others.

...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.

How can knowing your gifts be useful to you?

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

1. When we know our gifts, 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 gifts 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 gifts, 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 gifts 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 gifts 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, gifts provide 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 gifts 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 gifts within the activities of the group. Because you have an ability in this area, and you feel motivated to give it, it's likely others will see you as useful and welcome you in.
7. Gifts can be a touchstone for you...a feeling of security and comfort in times of trouble or confusion. You can come back to them when you are at any transition point in your life, considering how your gifts can help you in this situation. Because a gift can cause trouble in your life when you give it too much or unwisely, you may also reflect on how your gifts have influenced the current situation in ways that may not be helpful.

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

There are many practical advantages to

knowing a person's gifts. 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 gifts, and helping them find ways to use them, 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 for and confidence in the person.
2. Because a person's gifts are central to who they are, they value them and are very motivated to learn about it and give them. When a person is frustrated or stuck, supporting them in finding ways to give their gifts will often get the person moving again.
3. If you help a person discover their gifts, your 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 gifts can be the ticket into less isolation. When you know someone's gifts, you can connect them with others who have similar gifts, find mentors, locate community activities where the person's gifts 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, gifts are 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 gifts 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 gifts will often re-orient 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 rise and they will become willing to change their life.

Do a person's gifts change over time?

The person's gifts do not change, but their understanding of it and ability to use them can change dramatically. This is particularly true for those of us who take the time to identify

...according to many cultural and spiritual traditions, passage gifts are connected to a person's 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 creative thinking to others. A person whose family held the secret of abuse or alcoholism may bring the gift of telling the truth.

our core gift and seek to bring it more fully into our life. For instance, if your core gift is “to motivate others,” then your core gift will always be “to motivate others.” However, you will continue to increase your ability to motivate others. By remembering experiences from your own life when others did not provide motivation or encouragement, 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 gifts and spends the time in between understanding and giving them.

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

You can help a person to identify their *Gifts of Talent* by helping them to see the themes that have recurred throughout their life that fall into the category of “what I have contributed to situations I have been in.” If the 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. As you help the person recall their stories, talent themes will begin to emerge.

Gifts of Wisdom become evident with the same kind of “life-remembering” that help to identify talents. Ask the person to recall different people who have been influential, and what they learned from that person. They will begin to have memories of certain people they encountered when they were very young, when

they were in school and community activities, and also people in their friend and family circles. They may not have realized it at the time, but each of those influential people brought a specific teaching that has stuck with them.

Third, according to many cultural and spiritual traditions, a person’s *Passage Gifts* are 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 name the significant

suffering they have experienced, they will often be able to identify their passage gifts and further understand why it is so important to give these gifts to others. Always use compassion and caution when helping another person to name passage gifts. It may not be the right time.

If you want to help a person identify his/her *Core Gift*, there is an interview process, called Core Gift Identification, frequently used by social service and other professions, that reveals this one, most important, gift. Developed over the past fifteen years by people working in helping professions, it takes about an hour and results in a person being able to state their core gift and also their primary talents. These abilities, which the person highly values, can then be utilized to help 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.

The idea of the gifts informs us that, regardless of degrees and training, some people will have a gift for helping others to know their gifts. Some people struggle with the task while others feel immediately comfortable, engaged, and able.

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

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

The ability to help another know his/her gifts 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 them begin to notice their gifts.

Organizations that 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 acknowledging their gifts to each other.

Can knowing your gifts have any negative consequences?

When you know your gifts, you realize you have a very powerful capacities inside you. The choices you make about how and when to use your gifts 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 harmful 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 gifts.

Giving your gifts will bring great joy into your life, but also can bring difficulty. Sometimes another person will react strongly to you when you are giving one of your gifts. They may be challenged by your wisdom and strength in this area, or react because you gave your gift in a way that was seen as not helpful for some reason...maybe it was the way you said

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something or the forcefulness with which you entered the situation. When you are giving your gifts, 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 gifts 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 gifts?

Yes, however it is important not to make assumptions about a person's ability to know or use their gifts 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 gifts* from helping them *to use them in their life*. A person who is experiencing severe emotional trauma, a psychotic break, or other kinds of disorientation may not be able to identify his/her gifts. 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 abilities 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 gifts and use them to help you find your way.

Learning how to give your gifts in a way that finds acceptance is one of the challenges of life.