

Melva's Corner

Playing to Your Strengths

May 2, 2005

Bible Text: Roman 12:3-12, Matthew 25:21, 23

Central Truth: It's never too late to be what you might have been.

Too often weary people are working hard at what they are asked to do and doing a good job, but simply are not enjoying themselves.

Is that true of you? Is your daily work—whether at an office, in your home, or where you volunteer—just a set of tasks you grind out because you need to? You may be gratified by the praise of others or find a generic satisfaction in just getting the job done. But wouldn't it feel wonderful to love what you're doing—really love it? To be excited and energized and empowered by each task? That's what it feels like to live inside your strengths.

For many people this idea raises its own set of frustrations. Some aren't sure they have any strengths or gifts. ("I'm just not that good at anything.") Others can't believe they can reconcile their talents and desires with the life they've chosen. ("I'd like to do something else, but I can't let everyone down.") Some are good at what they do but feel drawn to something they've never tried. ("I love being a full-time mother, but I still dream of being a travel agent someday.")

In an ideal world, we'd all spend our working hours—whether at home or away—on pursuits that suit our talents and interests and reflect God's calling. It's not always that easy. But it's possible to adjust our lives to fit our God-given strengths more closely—and rediscover the joy and zest God intends for our lives.

What's My Gift?

If you're not sure where to focus, it might seem like they don't exist. Or maybe you know you have several strengths and talents, but you aren't sure which to develop. Finding your best abilities starts with answering a few easy questions.

What were your favorite subjects in school?

What do you enjoy doing in your free time?

In what areas do you get the most compliments?

What do you feel most comfortable and confident doing?

What things do your friends think you're best at?

What pursuits seem to come most naturally to you?

What do you have fun doing? (It's okay to consider this. Really!)

What activities keep calling to you strongly, even if you're not sure you'd be good at them?

I believe this last question is especially important. Your areas of strength often are those in which you're most talented or you're "good at." Or perhaps there are areas where you have (or think you have) limited talent or ability but have intense interest or passion. Or they may be areas to which God is calling you specifically and for which He will equip you.

What Are My Options?

The brilliant composer Ludwig Van Beethoven had difficulty solving the most elementary arithmetic problem. C. S. Lewis, Oxford professor and literary genius, was so nonmechanical that he couldn't figure out how to use a simple typewriter or almost any other mechanical device. Chances are, you too are great in some areas, competent in others, and a bit challenged (or very challenged) in others. It probably makes sense, then, to choose your greatest strengths and build on what you have, for now. If you have verbal strengths, you'll want to develop your public speaking or writing skills. If you are artistic, you can look for opportunities to practice and improve those mediums of expression in which God has gifted you.

God-given dreams, interests, and passions are all part of the equation. Often they will help you decide between options. You may have artistic talent, for instance, but the solitary, precarious

life of a painter just doesn't appeal to you. However you may thrive as an interior decorator or be completely energized helping a group of children paint murals on the walls of the church nursery.

Use What You've Been Given

Your gifts and abilities are part of God's purpose for your life. Not using them can lead to frustration, disappointment, and fatigue. So when you've pinpointed your strengths, it's important to look for opportunities and environments where you can use them.

Working with your strengths may mean adjusting your responsibilities at your current job or developing a hobby or volunteer position. Almost certainly it will mean you must jettison tasks from your schedule to make room for more appropriate ones. Whatever you do, you will live more joyfully and productively if you take some time to discover your strengths and use them in your life.

It's all right to take small steps, especially at first. If you are feeling overwhelmed by what you're already doing, you probably don't think you have time or energy to do much more. Start by writing down some ideas and possibilities that occur to you. Do a little research and ask advice. Pray for God to point you in the right direction, and watch for the opportunities He brings.

A Word About Spiritual Gifts

While you're trying to understand your strengths, of course, you'll want to consider another important area— your spiritual gifts. The Bible makes it clear that the Holy Spirit equips each member of the Body of Christ with specific abilities. In Romans 12, Paul mentions a number of spiritual gifts such as serving, teaching, encouragement, giving, leadership, and mercy. He makes it clear that these gifts are given for the express purpose of building up the Body of Christ and that the different spiritual gifts are to complement one another.

How do you determine your spiritual gifts? They will usually, but not always, be congruent with your natural abilities and strengths. A person with verbal talents, for instance, may also find he has the gift of teaching...or he may be surprised to discover a gift for

encouraging others. Finding your specific spiritual gifts and putting them to work for God's Kingdom is a matter for prayer and discernment, perhaps with the help of a mentor or your pastor. Choosing an area of service that uses your spiritual gifts will empower and energize you, for you will be working in the strength of the Spirit.

Living As a Faithful Servant

It's hard to underestimate the importance of finding your fit. When you discover your strengths and learn to work within them, those worn-out feelings will be replaced by a sense of joy and satisfaction that helps you realize what life is supposed to be like. Remember Jesus' words to those who used their talents: "Well done, good and faithful servant!" That's exactly the kind of joy and satisfaction my friend Jane S. received.

Jane didn't think she was brilliant or beautiful or talented. She stuttered slightly and therefore felt uncomfortable in front of more than a couple of people. She had a back-breaking job that paid twenty-five cents above minimum wage. Each night she came home exhausted to a small, mostly empty apartment. When she was younger she had been engaged, but two weeks before the wedding her fiancé found someone he liked better.

In a youth-oriented, fashion-conscious, high achievement culture, you'd think Jane wouldn't have a lot to offer. But you'd be terribly wrong!

Jane taught fourth graders in Sunday school for twenty years, and they loved her. When she walked into a room, every face would brighten as each child tried to get as close to her as possible. Every week her mailbox would hold wedding invitations, birth announcements, and letters of appreciation from past students. Jane responded to each one. On her fiftieth birthday she received nearly a hundred cards. Jane has gone home to be with the Lord now.

This woman didn't have a lot of showy abilities, but she made the most of the strengths she had. She had a gift for inspiring and motivating children. She loved them, and they knew it.

Jane was about as far from being an unfulfilled woman as possible because she was wise enough to invest her life in developing her strengths and furthering God's Kingdom.

Those who didn't know her well called her "Plain Jane." Everyone else called her a "good and faithful servant."

Memory Text:

“His master said to him, Well done, you upright (honorable, admirable) and faithful servant! You have been faithful and trustworthy over a little; I will put you in charge of much. Enter into and share the joy (the delight, the blessedness) which your master enjoys.” (Matthew 25:21)