

StrengthsFinder: A TOOL FOR SELF-DISCOVERY, LIBERATION & JOY



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Several years ago, I was leading a multi-week series of gatherings in my parish focused on the Clifton StrengthsFinder. Everyone attending had taken the assessment and was now learning ways to apply the results to their lives. During the sessions, we covered many things, but it was the day that we discussed looking for key clues of talents and gifts in our lives that I remember most vividly.

We had finished talking about the fact that we are happiest when we do what we do best. I explained that we should want to use the gifts God gave us, and by doing so, we would not only feel most fulfilled, but we would uncover God's will for us.

The hand of one attendee, Janet, flew up into the air. Janet explained that for several years, she had been a lector. She chose to be a lector because her husband was a lector, and it was something they could do together in the parish. Most would have considered Janet a good lector; however, every morning when she was scheduled to read, she woke up with knots in her stomach. The anxiety never subsided until her ministry was over for the day. Now that she was learning about her strengths and how using them should lead to greater joy, Janet realized it was time to give up being a lector. She expressed that surely

there was something else God was calling her to in the parish. I was surprised by her certitude and questioned if she was sure. Janet said that she was certain and felt liberated already. Of course, Janet hadn't yet informed her husband of the change, but she knew he would see the wisdom in her decision.

Jump forward about two months ... I was walking up the side aisle in the church on a Sunday morning before Mass. Janet approached me and grabbed my arm tightly. I mean, really *tightly*. She asked if I knew why she was smiling. Of course, I did not. She informed me that today was her first day as an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion. That morning, she awoke with no knots in her stomach but, instead, with joy in her heart. She had found what God had been leading her towards all along. She wanted to thank me for the class and said without it, that morning would have been quite different. She then walked briskly toward the sacristy to prepare. It seemed like a little thing two months ago, but on that morning, I saw her life had changed. It wasn't because of me. It was because now her and her God were cooperating in a new and marvelous way. She had found out who God had created her to be.

CLUES OF GOD'S HANDIWORK

We often underestimate the toll it takes on a person to be stuck in a role that he or she is ill-equipped to handle. Somebody has to do it, right? If they don't like it or find it overly difficult, they can offer it up to God. But what God really wants is not the pain caused by choosing to do something He did not call us to do in the first place. God wants the gifts He gave the person in the first place to be cultivated and given back with increase. God wants the joy that results from becoming the person He created us to be.

The Clifton StrengthsFinder is one tool that helps us understand our self in terms of the person God created. In the story above, Janet caught a glimpse of what happens when we look for the clues of God's handiwork within ourselves. Her story highlights three key experiences we can lead people toward if we take them on a Strengthsfinder journey: self-discovery, liberation, and joy.

SELF-DISCOVERY: WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

When a person begins to understand he or she is not just like everybody else, then aha moments are possible. We live in a world where we expect internet searches to uncover what is wrong with us, what is the best thing to do, and literally how we should think. We have lost a sense of individuality to the point where it is assumed that if 10 people are in a room, there probably is a consensus of thinking and common experience in life.

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In fact, if 10 people are in the room, there are 10 different ways of seeing the world and 10 different life experiences. Even though there does exist truth that cannot be denied, it does not mean we all explain that truth or understand that truth in the same manner.

Strengthsfinder helps us to see how we are unique and why we react to things the way we do. We uncover explanations for our responses of emotion and action. We begin to see ourselves not through the lens that has been shaped by our own desires and wants, but through a lens that is clear enough to show us reality. If people are drawn to us for help, perhaps it is due to our empathy. If we react too strongly in certain situations, perhaps it is because we have the gift of command and struggle with a lack of control. Without these insights, we can find ourselves thinking about or saying to others, "Don't you get it? Why don't you see this situation as I do?" By understanding Strengthsfinder, we begin to see the complexity of many situations and understand why our reactions and thoughts seem to be so unique.

LIBERATION: ACCEPTING WHO WE WERE CREATED TO BE

I once had dinner with a friend soon after they had completed Strengthsfinder coach training with Gallup. They were overwhelmed with the depth of insight they had attained. My friend said to me, "I wish I had known this stuff 20 years ago. I spent 20 years trying to be someone I am not. Now I am free to be me. That was a lot of wasted time and energy." I wish I could have taken her back in time. However, at least finally, she had a weight lifted from her going forward.

Perhaps the aspect I enjoy the most from working with Strengthsfinder for the past 10 years is that I have seen burdens lifted from people's shoulders and the relief that comes from realizing you only must be the person God created you to be, no one else. In a word, I have seen the power of liberation. I have witnessed people being set free from the expectations of their parents, spouses, or co-workers. I have watched people cry as they gave themselves permission to stop trying to fit into a life that never seemed right. I have also rejoiced with some who felt vindicated after years of trying to explain themselves to others. Now they had a language to use that made sense. God does not want to control us and make us conform to His will for His sake.

God wants us to answer the call to be who we were created to be because that is where we find true freedom.

JOY: EMBRACING YOUR TRUE SELF

Once, when working with a group of teens on their Strengthsfinder, I encountered a shy, awkward adolescent whose peers either completely ignored her or teased her due to her lack of interest in doing anything with anyone. She was the typical loner. Relator was her top strength. In the group, we talked about how someone with this strength might be highly uncomfortable in social situations. We also talked about how someone with this strength might be more interested in only a few friends for life and how strong those relationships could be in the end. In a few words, this girl expressed what sounded just like her. Another teen asked her about the anxiety of being in a group. She answered that it was not easy, but she could be social if she wanted. She simply preferred to not use so much energy being social. Suddenly, the shy, misunderstood girl was seen very differently. Because of this, the girl who never smiled had a big grin on her face.

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From Janet to this teenage girl, I have witnessed so much joy when people embrace their true selves. Research shows that we are happiest when we do what we do best. As Christians, we take that to mean we are happiest when we are good stewards of the gifts and talents God has given to each of us. There were teens in the room that day who may have looked at that shy girl as now having a friendship superpower. That made her very happy and just may have changed her life. Our success in life is directly tied to how well we utilize our gifts and talents. This is a success not measured by money, fame, or power, but instead by true happiness.



In the end, Janet is still in her ministry, my friend still coaches people on their strengths, and that girl is now in her late 20s. Imagine if everyone had the chance to gain similar insight like these three women. What if all your parishioners gained that insight? What successes could your community achieve if people understood their gifts, were liberated to use them in a meaningful way, and found joy living out God's call?

You may never find out if that vision of possibility is not embraced. Jesus came to set all captives free. There are those in your parish right now who need to be set free. All you would be doing is providing truth to them. Jesus will do the rest.

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