

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - BRUCE ANDERSON

(Katie Elliott & Bruce Anderson)

My guest today is Bruce Anderson, Executive Director of the Core Gift Institute in Washington . Bruce is an author, speaker and leadership coach who has spent nearly 30 years helping people all over the world to identify and use the gifts they have.

.....

Welcome, Bruce Anderson. Thank you for joining me.

Well, I'm glad to be here. It's a beautiful day in Seattle, Washington. And I'm hoping it's the same where you are?

Yes it is, it's a beautiful, sunny day here in the UK. So Bruce, I've been wanting to talk with you for - literally - years. I first came across your work a few years ago when I was very actively involved in community work where I live and what intrigued me was the way that you talk about people's gifts and how those gifts have a really important role to play. Can you tell me a little bit about the work that you do around gifts?

So, our organisation has done a lot of community development work, a lot of work with helping professionals and tested out a lot of techniques and strategies for trying to support people who are at some serious fork in the road in their life. And one of the things we learned early is the usual way that helping organisations try and help people is to make a long list of their strengths. But, as is often the case, there's no connection between what you call, Katie, a strength in your life and whether you're actually motivated to do it and stick with it. So just making a list of what people can do, we found wasn't really very useful. And so we started meeting different people and we got way more interested in this idea of how you distinguish between what people can do and what they can do they're likely to stick with. And one of the things that we settled on was this idea of the difference between gifts and skills. And so we've been on that train for a couple of decades now trying to figure that out, and there's lots more to learn, but we've settled on a few things that we think really matter in our understanding of that distinction.

So if I were to ask you, in a nutshell, how you see the difference between a skill that someone has and a gift that they have, what would be at the heart of that difference?

The heart of the difference is, first of all, with a gift, you are motivated to give it even at great peril to yourself. When people may not like you for doing it, when you don't feel like you're very good at doing it - gifts are highly motivating and people give them at great cost. Whereas a skill, when it gets hard, people often give it up and they're willing to do it later. But gifts have a very attractive quality to them and they require being seen. And so there's many ways to know your gifts, but that's the fundamental distinction, it's the driving force that's underneath this desire to give a gift.

Mm.

There's three basic kinds of gifts. There's the gift of presence, where I'm just with you, I'm standing by you, I don't need to do anything. It's one human offering themselves to another: the gift of presence. The second kind of gift is stuff. I'm going to loan you my shovel, I'm going to drive you to the doctor, I'm going to give you things. So material goods is the second kind of gift. And the third kind of gift is when you're giving a gift of yourself, you're doing something for or with another person or on behalf of another person and within this third kind of gift of offering yourself to another person there's also three sub-gifts within that. The first is a gift of wisdom, where you're offering something that you know about to another person and it's powerful enough that it changes how they look at the world. And the second kind of gift within offering yourself is a gift of your talent. And we think of talents as genetic gifts, things you can do because of the way you came into the world. Some people can do math, some people can run, some people can problem solve - these genetic gifts that we have that we offer to other people that we tend to be pretty good at. And the third kind of gift is the 'passage gift'. And it's the idea that it's not possible to go through a difficult experience in your life without receiving a gift. You may die never knowing what it was. You may not want to take the time to discern it, but out of every struggle comes increased capacity. And that's a hard thing to buy sometimes because in a lot of the struggles in our life, we feel like we lose a lot, and so the idea that you're actually increasing your capacity in a difficult time in your life is a bit hard to wrap your brain around for many of us. I remember when my wife was pretty ill, she had a couple of things happen to her during that time, a couple of awakenings, and she said to me, "You know, the best thing that ever happened to me was that illness". And it's a common thing for people with life-threatening illnesses to say too because it causes people to wake up and question why they're in the world, and that's the level we have to get to to really change things in our life.

Yes, it's strange that at those moments when we are pushed hardest and find ourselves most at what we think are our limits, we seem to unlock something that we didn't have before.

Yeah, it goes back to an even deeper idea that the seeds of who we are come into the world with us and that it takes trouble to unlock those. You know, at some point I think every human decides whether they kind of start with a blank slate at birth, that old idea, or whether they come into the world as something. And if you believe you come the world as something then the seeds of who you are are already inside of you when you're born and they're locked away and they don't come out easily, necessarily. And so one of the ways that these seeds get broken open and start to grow is through difficult experiences when we really have to question and discern who we are. And it takes us to a deeper place in our lives. When everything's going well we don't tend to think about why we're in the world as much, but when things aren't going well, we tend to think about it a lot. And so there's a real opportunity in difficult times to remember who you are - is the way that I like to think about it. Rather than discover something new, you're really remembering something that's been inside you all along.

I've just come back from an event in Florida and a lot of people at the event were sharing personal stories and a lot of those were stories of extraordinary adversity of one kind or another, some kind of loss or illness or poverty, whatever it might be. But the thing that really struck me was that every single person who spoke wanted to take that experience and what they'd learned from it and they were trying in their own unique way to make something beautiful out of it, something useful that they could then contribute to other people. So I guess that's a kind of passage gift experience, isn't it?

Yeah, it is. Let me ask you. Think of two stories from your life that had some difficulty in them that you successfully navigated and got through at any age. Two stories and let me know when you've got those stories in your memory bank.

Okay.

So for the first story, be really specific now, tell me what you can do better now or care about more now specifically as a result of going through that first story.

So what I can do better now is, well it's the work I'm doing today actually. It's open up inclusive conversations that enable us to share with one another what we know and we often don't talk about, because I know that there was a time in my life where I didn't feel included and so I always have a real soft spot and a concern for people who might be suffering alone. And I like the idea of us all sharing what we know together, because one thing I'm pretty sure of is that on the inside, everybody's experience of being human is a bit messier and a bit more painful and a bit more confusing than we tend to let on. And I think there's great comfort in sharing stories of that.

Yeah, you can be sure you're not alone in that.

Thank you.

So my guess is that 'to open up and talk about things we don't usually talk about' - that's the passage gift. That's really the nugget in that story for you. So the second story...

Yeah.

See if you can see if you can get it down to a phrase or a sentence - the most essential thing you can do better now or you care about more now.

In that experience, the thing that I can do better now is be clear about why I'm doing things and doing things for reasons that mean something to me rather than trying to please or impress other people.

That's great. So in the language of passage gifts, those are two of your passage gifts: to be clear why you're doing things and doing them for yourself and not just to please the others, and then opening up and helping people be in conversations about things people don't usually talk about. So those passage gifts then do something that the other two

kinds of gifts I mentioned, the wisdom gifts and the talent gifts, don't do. So the idea is that if you're with me somewhere and you can tell I'm reticent to speak up, but you think I really have something to say and I'm just lacking a little bit of courage, then using that passage gift of helping to open up conversations would be something that you do with me. You would likely try and nudge me and speak to me softly and say, "Hey Bruce, you know, this could really be worth it here". And when you do that, when you help someone else, when you give that gift to me, your psyche is what neuroscientists call 'indexing' that story in your life when you couldn't do that. And what that means practically is, every time you help me do that, you heal a little bit from that story in your life.

Yeah.

So there is a reciprocity to gift-giving that's an essential definition of a gift: you get as much as you give. And that also separates a gift from a skill.

That makes absolute sense, but I didn't know that before. So I've felt it in the experience of doing the thing that I've been compelled to do that's come from a painful learning, but I didn't realise that that's what was going on in my brain.

Yeah. It's the reciprocity of it that's healing, because you know what it's like not to have it and so you more urgently want to help someone else be able to do that. And at the same time your story is getting more reconciled and you're more at peace with it in your own life.

That's so beautiful, isn't it?

Oh man, it is such a beautiful idea. And you know what I love about it is this is not a modern psychological discovery. This pattern of passage gifts and the reciprocity and the healing that happens between people is a multicultural idea, you know, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years old. It really has a depth of beauty in terms of an idea that's just very profound in my own life.

I'm just remembering that when I first came across the concept of gifts like this, I was at quite a vulnerable place in my own life and I don't think I felt that I had much to give. And what made such an impression on me was the idea that everybody has gifts, everybody has something to contribute.

Yeah. I've done a lot of work with people who are at pretty serious forks in the road in their life and, you know, 20 years ago I used to walk up to a person and what I was thinking was, "You're in trouble, let me see if I can help fix what's wrong with you". And once you get into the idea of gifts, you realise that everybody has their ups and downs, but that when I walk towards a person now what I think first is, "You have magnificent gifts waiting to be unlocked and can I help you do that in some way?" So I'm not just seeing what the person isn't capable of in the moment, I'm really seeing a future picture of themselves in all their glory doing what they're supposed to be doing. Because the idea of gifts includes the idea of - you have some strengths, Katie, but you also have purpose to

your life. And so you can't think of one of those without thinking about the other. We really lost this idea of purpose as the world got more and more industrialised. And it's really quite sad to me because we are all parts of cultures which have long histories of thinking about purpose of life. A lot of youth initiation rituals helped young people discover the purpose of their life and now it seems like we're a bit more interested in, you know, people doing well in school and going and getting a job and making money and being the kind of success description that we use in industrialised nations. And that's really less than a hundred years old in the world. We used to really be concerned that young people knew what the purpose of their life was and they were acting in good faith with each other in community.

Mmm.

When people get that opportunity, it's really quite remarkable. I was up around Toronto and I was meeting with representatives from six different high schools. I think there were teams of eight or 10 students from six or eight high schools and I took them through a really brief activity where they were interviewing each other and each team of eight was coming up with what they thought was their collection of gifts, and each person came up with four or five gifts. And then I asked them to do a very simple planning task. I asked them to imagine that they all lived in the same neighborhood and there was woman who was older who lived in the neighbourhood who was quite lonely and she had said she wanted a dog. And so I gave them the task of, from start to finish, only using the list of gifts that they had assembled in the previous few minutes together, to plan out how they would go talk to the woman, who would approach the woman, who would buy the lumber for the dog house, who would get the fence repaired in the yard, who would organise the party to welcome the new puppy into the neighbourhood, and start to finish everything they would do and they couldn't do anything they thought they should do, they could only do things that were related to their gifts. And all eight of the teams were easily able to plan out how to do that task, only using their gifts. And at the end, one of the comments that a lot of the students had was, "I know I could have done a lot of the tasks that my classmates did, but it felt really good just to offer my gifts and not think that I had to do more things just because I could. And I felt really energised by the possibility of offering only what I was meant to offer". So they'd never really considered the idea of gifts before getting into that room in the morning, and I was just struck by how easily young people gravitate towards the idea of gifts and how much they're yearning to make meaning and do the things that matter to them, rather than the usual kinds of things that society might expect of them.

That's very beautiful. And it really reminds me of something I read just a little while ago about the fact that we spend a lot of time talking about and, in some cases chasing, happiness, but that happiness is only ever a by-product of living a meaningful life and doing something that matters to us, which I guess in this language is giving our gift.

Mmhm.

So are there ways that we can help ourselves to recognise what those gifts are?

Yeah, I think there's many ways to know your gifts. Three or four things off the top of my head. Just think about 10 different events in your life that have mattered to you and what you really tried to bring. Think back into the story and think what you really tried to bring to those events. So when you were in classes at school, in a meaningful relationship you had with a partner, in your family or at a job, just think about different stories from your life and what were you really trying to bring in each of those situations? And you'll notice what are called 'threads'. You'll be able to see that you are trying to bring the same thing across many of those different life stages and stories. And so that's a clue that it's a gift. William Stafford has a great poem. The first line of it is: 'There's a thread you follow. It goes amongst things that change, but it never changes.' And so I like that idea that it's a weaving together of threads and seeing these same things crop up. So that's one way, is to notice what keeps cropping up. The second way, which is a little dangerous, is to ask people in your life their experience of you and what is it that you bring most of the time to the relationship? The thing you have to be careful of with that is oftentimes people will notice you doing things you're good at that aren't your gifts. People would say, 'I'm good at managing money. It is so far from a gift in my life, I couldn't have less interest in doing that, but I have the skill to do it. And so people will say, "Gee Bruce, you pretty good at managing money". And my immediate response to that is feeling, "Oh, somebody just complimented me!" But then I have to catch myself and say, "No, is that a skill or is it a gift? Is it really why I think that I'm in the world or is it something I do that enables other things to happen?" So that's another way is to ask friends. Another way is silence. You know, you just cannot overstate the importance of walking slowly on the beach or in the woods or sitting in a chair and looking out the window. All of these things that I'm mentioning involve nature because there's something about being in nature that helps people to understand themselves better. And so this idea of being in nature and reflecting on your life and just being silent and focused on your breathing often produces genuine perceptions of who you are. The Core Gift Institute has a process called a Core Gift Discovery Interview that we've been working on for a couple of decades now. It takes about an hour. But if I was doing it with you after about an hour, you would tell me what you thought the main path of your life was. That's been quite powerful and quite effective for a lot of people. So there's many ways to know your gifts. We're not hung up on the method. All we care about is that people are on a path. Being on a path and having a focus seems really important and I think it's a really good thing. It's been a really good thing in my life.

I so enjoy listening to you talk about it. Thank you for that, Bruce, it's wonderful to hear it in your words. So with all of that in mind, I was wondering if you could suggest a 'Little Challenge' for us?

Well, sure.

A gift-related 'Little Challenge' we could try?

So gifts are large things, but the way that we get better at them is through the practice of giving them. So it's easy to come up with a 'Little Challenge' around gifts. So I think that

the one that I use the most, that's a little challenge is, I just call it the 'Second Why'. And what I mean by that is when I'm going to enter a room or I'm going to do something that matters to me I always ask myself why I'm doing it, and then I ask myself, why am I doing that? There's a second level of knowing that gets closer to your gift and keeps you centred in your gift. So for instance, you sent me an email and asked me to be on this call. So I said, yeah, and on the surface level, it's because I'm interested in spreading the idea of gifts in the world. But if I ask myself why I'm interested in spreading the idea of gifts in the world, the answer would be that I'm interested in my own healing and I'm interested in how you heal, Katie, and how our gifts can aid in that process for both of us, so we both feel a little more healed as a result of being in a relationship with each other. So it quickly deepens the reason why you say yes to being on a podcast. And I think that that's important for people to do and it's an easy thing to do. Everyone can do the 'Second Why' and it helps you when you enter a situation to be grounded because you know really why you're there. And when people really feel grounded in the reason that they're there, they tend to have more courage, they speak more strongly, they sit up in their chair taller, all kinds of things happen when people are standing on solid ground. The 'Second Why'. I think it's really important for humans to know why.

That's such a great, and such a simple, thing to do, but I can see how powerful that is. And we can just practise doing it a little bit every day if we want to.

Yeah, you can, you can. And I'm not saying, you know, when you brush your teeth, you have to have a 'Second Why'. But you know, it happens with me, I'll sit down at my desk or... I really dread the idea of public speaking and it takes quite a bit for me to to fly somewhere and do that and I end up quite frequently talking to large rooms of people and I'm just really terrified of doing it. And so I really have to do the 'Second Why' right before I walk out on the stage. And I just noticed when I do that, I start breathing slower, I can remember what I need to say, all kinds of things happen to who I am when I ground myself in the real reason I'm doing it. So it is an immensely simple thing. You could think of it as some kind of pop psychology trick, but it really grounds you in optimism and a hopeful view of yourself in any situation.

I'm just going to start doing that now. I love that idea. Thank you. What a fantastic 'Little Challenge'! Bruce, if people would like to find out more about your work with Core Gifts, where should they look?

So two places. The first is CoreGift.org and the second one is CommunityActivators.com

Thank you so much for your time today, Bruce. I've so enjoyed talking with you.

It's just great talking to you, Katie. I have more energy than when I pushed the button to connect the call. That's always a good sign, that kind of connection with another person, so thanks Katie for the work you're doing.

Thank you.