

Message: The Soul-Affirming Satisfaction of Skill Acquisition and Utilization

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Annabeth and Christel, thank you so much for your music this morning. How wonderful it is to play music with you – and how beautiful the music sounds in this amazing sanctuary.

It is great to see everyone here either in-person or virtually on this snowy Maine morning. I had thought that winter was winding down a couple of weeks ago, but it seems that Mother Nature has other ideas.

Today's message is about how soul-affirming it feels to learn a new skill and then to use that skill. The title of today's message is The Soul-Affirming Satisfaction of Skill Acquisition and Utilization. I could have chosen a simple title, but I spent 7 and a half years getting a PhD in industrial and organizational psychology, so I decided to use the words that an I/O psychologist would use if they were writing this message. I/O psychologists like to use four and five syllable words so that everything sounds more complicated than it really is.

Today's Thought for Contemplation comes from the famous German author and poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who wrote that: "The person born with a talent they are meant to use will find their greatest happiness in using it." That is such a simple idea. We are meant to use our talents and when we do so, it makes us happy. There is something innately human about learning skills and talents, and then actually using them. One of the most discouraging things in life is when we let them go to waste by not using them.

Learning a skill is transforming and empowering. One day you are unable to complete a task or accomplish a goal, but once you learn a skill then you can do it. A long time ago, I gave a message about the spirituality of fixing things. I think that there is something deeply satisfying about learning how to fix things. The other day I replaced an electrical outlet in our kitchen that had been dead for months. Every day I would stand in my kitchen and stare at this electrical outlet wishing that I could plug something into it, like my phone charger, or the rice cooker, or the blender, or whatever electronic device happened to need power at that moment. I didn't know how to replace an electrical outlet and the task felt overwhelming. Last week, I finally bit the bullet and got down to it. I watched YouTube videos and read my Black and Decker Home Wiring book and I learned how to replace an electrical outlet. I fixed that kitchen outlet and now sometimes when I'm in the kitchen, I just stare at the little green illuminated light on the electrical outlet that tells me that it's working, and that makes me smile.

It soothes my soul to know that I learned something and I used that knowledge to fix something. I know that the next time that I encounter a dead electrical outlet, I'll be able to fix it. That feels good. It feels good for the soul. Now that I know how to fix an electrical outlet, I kind of want to do it again. I took the time to learn how to do it, and it would be kind of a waste if I never replaced another outlet in my life. So if anyone here has a dead electrical outlet that they need to bring back to life, call me.

When my family moved to Waterville five and a half years ago, my wife and I decided that she'd work and that I'd be the primary care-giver for the kids, who were two and four at the time. I was the primary care-giver for our first two years in Waterville and I'm going to be honest with you, I almost lost it. There is only so much time that I could spend talking to a three-year-old before I thought that I was going to go crazy. In the big picture, I knew taking care of the kids while my wife worked was the right decision for our family, but that was still a hard time for me and I often felt rudderless and a little bit depressed. I'd spent 7 and a half years getting a PhD and now I was home changing diapers and trying to maintain my sanity while I spent most of my daylight hours talking to a three-year-old. I felt like I had more to give. I had crawled across red-hot coals for years so that I could get a PhD and I wondered what the point of that was if my life now consisted of changing diapers and praying for that my kid would fall asleep at naptime. For the record, I didn't literally crawl across red-hot coals to get a PhD, but it often felt that way. I'd spent so long getting a PhD and made so many sacrifices to get it that not using that education was giving me an identity crisis.

I experienced how soul-crushing it can be when we don't have the opportunity to use our skills. Has anyone here ever had a boring, dead-end job where you felt completely and totally under-utilized? Lack of opportunity to use your skills is one reason why these jobs are so demoralizing.

I'm stating the obvious when I tell you that many jobs are monotonous, repetitive and boring. I used to think that these jobs were easy and low-stress. But it turns out according to lots of research in I/O psychology that monotonous and repetitive jobs are extremely stressful. They are stressful because you don't have any control over your work, you do the same thing over and over, and you use very few skills. These kinds of jobs are stressful because we can't tap into our human ingenuity, creativity and skills in order to perform them. Monotonous, repetitive jobs are soul-crushing.

There is a work motivation theory in I/O psychology called job characteristics theory. This theory states that there are certain aspects of a job that affect our critical psychological states, which in turn affect our motivation and job performance. The idea is that if employers want happier, more productive workers, then they can design jobs in such a way that will cause employees to be happier and more productive.

According to job characteristics theory, one of the most important job characteristics is something called skill variety. Skill variety is the extent to which a job requires you to do lots of different things, which means that you need to use a variety of skills and talents in order to perform the job successfully. It is a truism of humankind that people like jobs that tap into multiple skills. People find these jobs more fulfilling, rewarding and meaningful. We all have skills that we have developed over many years or that are brand-new. We learn new skills all the time too. Few things are more demotivating than not being able to use your skills. Few things are more soul-crushing than knowing that you have a skill but that you never have the opportunity to use it.

An example of the empowering and transformative effects of learning a new skill comes from today's reading. Today's reading was an excerpt from Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave*. In this excerpt, Frederick Douglass explains how he knew that learning

how to read was his ticket to freedom. In subsequent passages of the book, Frederick Douglas goes on to explain how reading and writing helped him. Learning a new skill is good for the soul, and for some people, learning a skill is their ticket to freedom.

Today is the first time in 28 years that I've performed on the trumpet. My trumpet case has sat in the corner of a room somewhere collecting dust. All these years, I've looked at it but rarely opened the case. About a month ago, I was sitting at my desk and my eyes wandered over my trumpet case, which was standing next to a bookshelf collecting dust. I don't know what moved me, but I got up and pulled my trumpet out. The silver was tarnished and neglected. In high school, I had spent a summer mowing lawns to earn money to put toward my trumpet. I felt sad seeing this silver-plated trumpet in its tarnished state that I had worked so hard for. When I was a kid, I took private trumpet lessons and I was in every musical ensemble at the high school. I sat there holding my tarnished silver-plated trumpet on my lap and I thought to myself, "What a waste not to play this instrument that I'd worked so hard to get and that I'd spent so much time learning how to play."

A few YouTube videos and lots of Amazon purchases later, I got my trumpet back in shape. I've spent the last month trying to get my chops back in shape. It's not easy after a 28 year break and I have a long way to go!

As I've been practicing, I've been reminded of a part of me that I've ignored for 28 years. I've thought a lot about my old trumpet teacher. I've thought about the music I used to like to play and how the trumpet sounds. I've been reminded of the hard notes and the easy notes and of little technical aspects of playing. I've been reminded of how hard I worked to learn how to play this thing.

Today is also the first day that I've ever performed with my wife, Christel. Even my parents are here today, and I presume it's because I told them I'd be playing trumpet for the first time in 28 years. They spent an awful lot of money on trumpet lessons, so maybe they finally want to see a return on their investment! I wish that I could unveil a new skill every Sunday morning that would bring them to our church!

As I wrap up this message, I want to give you a homework assignment. Think of a skill or a talent that you haven't used for a long time. Maybe you have a sewing machine that has been collecting dust in the corner of a room for the past 10 years. Maybe you have yarn and knitting needles stowed away in a drawer somewhere. Maybe you enjoyed woodworking but have let your tools gather dust for the past few decades. Maybe you have a musical instrument that is dusty and out of tune that is tucked away in some corner. Maybe there is something that you used to cook or bake that you love but that you haven't made in years. Maybe you used to love to play tennis or table tennis or basketball. Maybe you have a camera and you used to get up early to take pictures of the sunrise. Maybe you used to speak French.

Whatever this skill or talent is that you haven't used in a long time, your homework assignment for next week is to use that skill or talent again. Some of you might be thinking, "Well, I don't have any skills or talents, so I don't have to do this homework assignment. Ha!" The bad news for you is that there is another part to this homework assignment. For those who claim that they

don't have any skills or talents, your homework assignment is to start learning a new skill. Maybe in the back of your mind there is something that you've always wanted to learn. Maybe you've always been interested in learning how to make wine or brew beer. Maybe you've always wanted to learn how to build a remote-control airplane. Maybe you have always wanted to write a poem. Maybe you've always wanted to learn how to replace an electrical outlet. Now is the time to learn this skill. You can blame me for forcing you to do it.

For those who'd like to share what they did and how it made them feel, come back here next Sunday at 10am and let us know during Joys & Concerns how it went!

There is something truly soul-affirming about using our skills and developing new skills. I have a hard time putting that feeling into words. All I know is that it makes me feel good. It makes me feel like I am capable and empowered. When I learn a new skill, I feel like I've transformed myself into someone else who can do more and accomplish more. Humans succeeded on this planet because of their intelligence, not because of their physical attributes. There were always bigger, faster, fiercer and tougher animals. I think that learning and using skills is baked into our DNA and into our evolution. Skills reflect the human spirit. Acquiring new skills and using them is validation that we have souls.