

Opening Words: In A Dream (Margie Allen)

In a dream I caught
a robin's egg
as it fell from the nest
--sky blue boat
of breath and wings--

and it did not break
in the surprise of my palm.
It did not break
because as it dropped
I dropped
my hand,
so there was no
falling,
only coming to rest,
shell and skin,
on the thin
unlikely cushion
of, yes,
perfect
timing.

Chalice Lighting and Silence

[Covenant Review]

Check-in: Open check-in or optional topic: ‘Tis the season for philanthropy. What causes are closest to your heart?

Topic Introduction and Reflection

Talents may be artistic or technical, mental or physical, personal or social. You can be a talented introvert or a talented extrovert. A special talent, skill or ability need not be profitable, useful, or conventional to be praiseworthy or to have played its part in making you the unique and irreplaceable You you are.

Maybe you haven’t thought a lot about special abilities you might have. As you take a few minutes now to think about your life at every stage of your development, your responses to the following questions may help you reframe as real talents some abilities that have long flown under the radar of your self-esteem.

What comes naturally to you that may be challenging or impossible for others? What do you do easily and joyfully without thinking? What obsessions or persistent interests might hide a gift or developing skill? What activities so engage you that you have to tear yourself away in

order to eat or drink or go to the bathroom? Often other people have a keener sense of what you're good at than you will yourself. What are other people tired of hearing you talk about? What kinds of things do other people tell you, or tell others, that you seem to have an almost magical ability to do well?

Quotations

Activity: My Father the Forger (Sarah Kaminsky)

In a 13-minute video filmed at TEDxParis, Sarah Kaminsky tells the extraordinary story of the unusual talent her father Adolfo used to save many lives over many years.

http://www.ted.com/talks/sarah_kami

[Facilitators: Show this video to your group on a laptop or TV screen. The story is told in French with subtitles. If the subtitles are too small for people to see, we provide the transcript below. The wifi code for the Fellowship is: 9475F352.]

Questions for Group Reflection

1. Erica Jong wrote: "Everyone has talent. What is rare is the courage to follow the talent to the dark place where it leads." How would you apply her comment to Adolfo's life? Have you ever sacrificed anything to develop a talent? What made the sacrifice worth it for you?
2. When you were a child, what toy, game or activity excited and engaged you most fully? Among your childhood friends what special ability or talent were you known for? Have you ever wished that a capacity you exhibited in childhood could have been nurtured and developed?
3. Talk to us about one skill, talent or ability that you have that other people recognize and admire. Do you have some sort of ability that others may not know about? This could be even the smallest thing. Can you roll your tongue into a tube? Wiggle your ears? Do you have perfect pitch? Know the lyrics to nearly every Broadway song? Claim it!
4. Have your talents and skills intersected with your work life at all? If so, in what way?
5. Are there any particular abilities or skills that you have admired in others and wished you had yourself? Is there any possibility that you could acquire a coveted skill or ability if you devoted time, energy and focus to the project?
6. What effect have your talents and skills had on your relationships? How have other people's gifts and abilities affected your relationship with them?
7. There might be someone in the room whose skill or talent you have witnessed. If that special ability has not yet been mentioned, you could take this opportunity to describe your experience of it.

Likes and Wishes: Likes: celebrations, gratitudes, appreciations for needs met; and Wishes: mournings, requests, acknowledgements of needs not met.

Closing Words and Chalice Extinguishing: Talented Family
(Kenn Nesbitt, from *Kids Pick the Funniest Poems*, edited by Bruce Lansky (Minnetonka, Minn.: Meadowbrook Press, 1999)]

My family's very talented,
I'm certain you'll agree.
We each possess a special skill
that anyone can see.

My brother's good at burying
his finger up his nose.
My sister's good at covering
her room with dirty clothes.

My father's good at eating soup
in big, disgusting slurps.
My mother's good at cutting loose
with world-record burps.

Our dog is good at piddling
in the back seat of the car.
The baby's good at putting
Pop-Tarts in the VCR.

Myself I'm good at sleeping late
and making lots of noise,
and cluttering the living room
with comic books and toys.

So though we're very talented,
I'm sad to say it's true:
We're only good at doing things
we're not supposed to do.

Quotations

To find out what one is fitted to do, and to secure an opportunity to do it, is the key to happiness. ~John Dewey

A great deal of talent is lost to the world for the want of a little courage. ~Sydney Smith

Everyone has talent. What is rare is the courage to follow the talent to the dark place where it leads. ~Erica Jong

For some reason, ping pong came very natural to me. So I started playing it all the time. The hospital's people said it made me look like a duck in water ... whatever that means. ~Forest Gump

Work while you have light. You are responsible for the talent that has been entrusted to you. ~Henri Frederick Amiel

Genius is the gold in the mine; talent is the miner who works and brings it out. ~Lady Blessington

We are each gifted in a unique and important way. It is our privilege and our adventure to discover our own special light. ~Mary Dunbar

Hide not your talents, they for use were made. What's a sundial in the shade? ~Ben Franklin

Talent is an amalgam of high sensitivity; easy vulnerability; high sensory equipment (seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting—intensely); a vivid imagination as well as a grip on reality; the desire to communicate one's own experience and sensations, to make one's self heard and seen. ~Uta Hagen

The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift. ~Albert Einstein

E raka te mauï, e raka te katau: A community can use all the skills of its people. ~Maori

Use what talents you possess. The woods would be very silent if no birds sang there except those that sang best. ~Attributed to both William Blake and Henry Van Dyke

. . . talent is like electricity. We don't understand electricity. We use it. ~Maya Angelou

Great talents are the most lovely and often the most dangerous fruits on the tree of humanity. They hang upon the most slender twigs that are easily snapped off. ~C. G. Jung

Talents are like seed. Plant the seed and they multiply. Lay them on the shelf and eventually the life goes out of them. ~Charles L. Allen

Your vocation is where your greatest passion meets the world's greatest need. ~Frederick Boechner

Transcript: My Father the Forger (Sarah Kaminsky; transl. Federica Bonaldi)

0:12 I am the daughter of a forger, not just any forger ... When you hear the word "forger," you often understand "mercenary." You understand "forged currency," "forged pictures." My father is no such man. For 30 years of his life, he made false papers -- never for himself, always for other people, and to come to the aid of the persecuted and the oppressed. Let me introduce him. Here is my father at age 19. It all began for him during World War II, when at age 17 he found himself thrust into a forged documents workshop. He quickly became the false papers expert of the Resistance. And it's not a banal story -- after the liberation he continued to make false papers until the '70s.

1:00 When I was a child I knew nothing about this, of course. This is me in the middle making faces. I grew up in the Paris suburbs and I was the youngest of three children. I had a "normal" dad like everybody else, apart from the fact that he was 30 years older than ... well, he was basically old enough to be my grandfather. Anyway, he was a photographer and a street educator, and he always taught us to obey the law very strictly. And, of course, he never talked about his past life when he was a forger.

1:32 There was, however, an incident I'm going to tell you about, that perhaps could have led me suspect something. I was in high school and got a bad grade, a rare event for me, so I decided to hide it from my parents. In order to do that, I set out to forge their signature. I started working on my mother's signature, because my father's is absolutely impossible to forge. So, I got working. I took some sheets of paper and started practicing, practicing, practicing, until I reached what I thought was a steady hand, and went into action. Later, while checking my school bag, my mother got hold of my school assignment and immediately saw that the signature was forged. She yelled at me like she never had before. I went to hide in my bedroom, under the blankets, and then I waited for my father to come back from work with, one could say, much apprehension. I heard him come in. I remained under the blankets. He entered my room, sat on the corner of the bed, and he was silent, so I pulled the blanket from my head, and when he saw me he started laughing. He was laughing so hard, he could not stop and he was holding my assignment in his hand. Then he said, "But really, Sarah, you could have worked harder! Can't you see it's really too small?" Indeed, it's rather small.

2:48 I was born in Algeria. There I would hear people say my father was a "moudjahid" and that means "fighter." Later on, in France, I loved eavesdropping on grownups' conversations, and I would hear all sorts of stories about my father's previous life, especially that he had "done" World War II, that he had "done" the Algerian war. And in my head I would be thinking that "doing" a war meant being a soldier. But knowing my father, and how he kept saying that he was a pacifist and non-violent, I found it very hard to picture him with a helmet and gun. And indeed, I was very far from the mark.

3:19 One day, while my father was working on a file for us to obtain French nationality, I happened to see some documents that caught my attention. These are real! These are mine, I was born an Argentinean. But the document I happened to see that would help us build a case for the authorities was a document from the army that thanked my father for his work on behalf of the secret services. And then, suddenly, I went "wow!" My father, a secret agent? It was very James Bond. I wanted to ask him questions, which he didn't answer. And later, I told myself that one day I would have to question him. And then I became a mother and had a son,

and finally decided it was time -- that he absolutely had to talk to us. I had become a mother and he was celebrating his 77th birthday, and suddenly I was very, very afraid. I feared he'd go and take his silences with him, and take his secrets with him. I managed to convince him that it was important for us, but possibly also for other people that he shared his story. He decided to tell it to me and I made a book, from which I'm going to read you some excerpts later.

4:32 So, his story. My father was born in Argentina. His parents were of Russian descent. The whole family came to settle in France in the '30s. His parents were Jewish, Russian and above all, very poor. So at the age of 14 my father had to work. And with his only diploma, his primary education certificate, he found himself working at a dyer - dry cleaner. That's where he discovered something totally magical, and when he talks about it, it's fascinating -- it's the magic of dyeing chemistry. During that time the war was happening and his mother was killed when he was 15. This coincided with the time when he threw himself body and soul into chemistry because it was the only consolation for his sadness. All day he would ask many questions to his boss to learn, to accumulate more and more knowledge, and at night, when no one was looking, he'd put his experience to practice. He was mostly interested in ink bleaching.

5:28 All this to tell you that if my father became a forger, actually, it was almost by accident. His family was Jewish, so they were hounded. Finally they were all arrested and taken to the Drancy camp and they managed to get out at the last minute thanks to their Argentinean papers. Well, they were out, but they were always in danger. The big "Jew" stamp was still on their papers. It was my grandfather who decided they needed false documents. My father had been instilled with such respect for the law that although he was being persecuted, he'd never thought of false papers. But it was he who went to meet a man from the Resistance.

6:02 In those times documents had hard covers, they were filled in by hand, and they stated your job. In order to survive, he needed to be working. He asked the man to write "dyer." Suddenly the man looked very, very interested. As a "dyer," do you know how to bleach ink marks? Of course he knew. And suddenly the man started explaining that actually the whole Resistance had a huge problem: even the top experts could not manage to bleach an ink, called "indelible," the "Waterman" blue ink. And my father immediately replied that he knew exactly how to bleach it. Now, of course, the man was very impressed with this young man of 17 who could immediately give him the formula, so he recruited him. And actually, without knowing it, my father had invented something we can find in every schoolchild's pencil case: the so-called "correction pen." (Applause)

7:03 But it was only the beginning. That's my father. As soon as he got to the lab, even though he was the youngest, he immediately saw that there was a problem with the making of forged documents. All the movements stopped at falsifying. But demand was ever-growing and it was difficult to tamper with existing documents. He told himself it was necessary to make them from scratch. He started a press. He started photoengraving. He started making rubber stamps. He started inventing all kind of things -- with some materials he invented a centrifuge using a bicycle wheel. Anyway, he had to do all this because he was completely obsessed with output. He had made a simple calculation: In one hour he could make 30 forged documents. If he slept one hour, 30 people would die.

7:45 This sense of responsibility for other people's lives when he was just 17 -- and also his guilt for being a survivor, since he had escaped the camp when his friends had not -- stayed with him all his life. And this is maybe what explains why, for 30 years, he continued to make false papers at the expense of all kinds of sacrifices. I'd like to talk about those sacrifices, because there were many. There were obviously financial sacrifices because he always refused to be paid. To him, being paid would have meant being a mercenary. If he had accepted payment, he wouldn't be able to say "yes" or "no" depending on what he deemed a just or unjust cause. So he was a photographer by day, and a forger by night for 30 years. He was broke all of the time.

8:29 Then there were the emotional sacrifices: How can one live with a woman while having so many secrets? How can one explain what one does at night in the lab, every single night? Of course, there was another kind of sacrifice involving his family that I understood much later. One day my father introduced me to my sister. He also explained to me that I had a brother, too, and the first time I saw them I must have been three or four, and they were 30 years older than me. They are both in their sixties now.

9:06 In order to write the book, I asked my sister questions. I wanted to know who my father was, who was the father she had known. She explained that the father that she'd had would tell them he'd come and pick them up on Sunday to go for a walk. They would get all dressed up and wait for him, but he would almost never come. He'd say, "I'll call." He wouldn't call. And then he would not come. Then one day he totally disappeared. Time passed, and they thought he had surely forgotten them, at first. Then as time passed, at the end of almost two years, they thought, "Well, perhaps our father has died." And then I understood that asking my father so many questions was stirring up a whole past he probably didn't feel like talking about because it was painful. And while my half brother and sister thought they'd been abandoned, orphaned, my father was making false papers. And if he did not tell them, it was of course to protect them.

10:10 After the liberation he made false papers to allow the survivors of concentration camps to immigrate to Palestine before the creation of Israel. And then, as he was a staunch anti-colonialist, he made false papers for Algerians during the Algerian war. After the Algerian war, at the heart of the international resistance movements, his name circulated and the whole world came knocking at his door. In Africa there were countries fighting for their independence: Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Angola. And then my father connected with Nelson Mandela's anti-apartheid party. He made false papers for persecuted black South Africans.

10:46 There was also Latin America. My father helped those who resisted dictatorships in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and then it was the turn of Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Colombia, Peru, Uruguay, Chile and Mexico. Then there was the Vietnam War. My father made false papers for the American deserters who did not wish to take up arms against the Vietnamese. Europe was not spared either. My father made false papers for the dissidents against Franco in Spain, Salazar in Portugal, against the colonels' dictatorship in Greece, and even in France. There, just once, it happened in May of 1968. My father watched, benevolently, of course, the demonstrations of the month of May, but his heart was elsewhere, and so was his time because he had over 15 countries to serve.

11:41 Once, though, he agreed to make false papers for someone you might recognize. (Laughter) He was much younger in those days, and my father agreed to make false papers to enable him to come back and speak at a meeting. He told me that those false papers were the most media-relevant and the least useful he'd had to make in all his life. But, he agreed to do it, even though Daniel Cohn-Bendit's life was not in danger, just because it was a good opportunity to mock the authorities, and to show them that there's nothing more porous than borders -- and that ideas have no borders.

12:22 All my childhood, while my friends' dads would tell them Grimm's fairy tales, my father would tell me stories about very unassuming heroes with unshakeable utopias who managed to make miracles. And those heroes did not need an army behind them. Anyhow, nobody would have followed them, except for a handful [of] men and women of conviction and courage. I understood much later that actually it was his own story my father would tell me to get me to sleep. I asked him whether, considering the sacrifices he had to make, he ever had any regrets. He said no. He told me that he would have been unable to witness or submit to injustice without doing anything. He was persuaded, and he's still convinced that another world is possible -- a world where no one would ever need a forger. He's still dreaming about it. My father is here in the room today. His name is Adolfo Kaminsky and I'm going to ask him to stand up. (Applause) Thank you.