

**Scottish National Prayer Breakfast June 1<sup>st</sup> 2005**

**Jill Garrett**

**Good morning.**

**It's a privilege to be with you today to share some thoughts about the importance of using our strengths to serve God**

**I have been fortunate to have spent my entire working life studying and nurturing human talent, for many years in Education, and now in the church, in government, and in the business world.**

**One of my former roles was MD of Gallup in the UK, and a real advantage in that role was that you could ask any question you wanted of the UK population and within a week you had a response.**

**In 1990's Gallup asked parents across the world, when your child brings home their school report, do you spend most time talking about what they have done well or about what they have done badly, and parents the world over said ... what they have done badly.**

**If the people who love you most spend most time focusing on what have done badly. It's hardly surprising that that another national poll showed that adults are 7 times more likely to be able to articulate their weaknesses than their strengths.**

**Yet research from business, science, sports and the Arts shows that people are happier, healthier, more productive and give a better quality of service when they work with their strengths – with the “grain of who they are” rather than when they work against that grain.**

**Our Strengths come in a number of forms, some of which can be learned and acquired, and others which are innate and which do not transfer easily from teacher to pupil.**

**Our knowledge & experience are a type of strength: Things like Health and Safety procedures, the fastest route between two points, the procedures for dealing with a customer who complains,**

**Our skills are another form of strengths – how to wire a plug, give an injection, parallel park.**

**Knowledge and skills can be learned and passed from one person to another. Yet the most impactful aspect of our strengths – what I call Talent or Personality, is not easily learned or acquired once we pass a certain phase in our development.**

**Talent refers to the innate dispositions we have, the things we can't help but do in certain situations: things like always looking on the bright side of things, or like enjoying negotiation or debate, or like wanting to move to action quickly, or the innate need to be neat and tidy and timely : often these are things where we have never been on courses to learn how to do them, they are just “who we are”. For others, these will be the things they hate doing- the things that go against the grain of who they are.**

**On Sunday – my mother in law is 98. She has just finished organising the Christian aid collection in her road. She will have thrilled in adding up the money, recording it accurately and getting everything back to the organisers on the right date. She has always been timely, neat and accurate. 33 years ago when as a young bride I asked her how she got milk that had boiled over off a stove – she said she had never had milk boil over. No one had ever taught her**

**to be like that – it is just who she is – how God has made her! At 98 she can use her strengths to serve God in Christian Aid administration!**

**We don't even think about using our talent – it just kicks in and, because we have only ever been us, we tend to think that all “normal” people behave as we do... and then we are surprised or annoyed when they don't behave like this. The fact that these are strengths means that they are NOT normal – and recognising that we are not “normal” but have unique strengths goes some way to help us recognise that other people are not being deliberately awkward; God has just made them different!**

**You may have the knowledge of the procedures for dealing with customer complaints – but some people just have the natural ability or talent to deal with these complaints brilliantly and whilst training helps people to improve – some will never be very good at it and others the talented, are super stars and just get better and better with practice.**

**You may know the 7 steps for closing a sale – yet some people just move straight from step 2 to step 7 effortlessly get the sale quickly and brilliantly – and no amount of training will make you as good or naturally talented as them. In the words of a famous psychologist, “You can teach a turkey to climb a tree, but it's cheaper to hire a squirrel.”**

**Some of you will be brilliant at walking up to strangers and initiating conversations – I love it when people come and talk to me – but I have really struggle when I am the one who has to start the conversation with the stranger. I can remember as a young Christian going on a course on how to initiate conversations about Jesus with strangers. I was never good at it; – but I have always found it easy and natural to share my faith with people I have had the time to get to know better. I am not a natural street evangelist- yet a number of my**

friends and colleagues at work have become Christians- because I have had the chance to get to know them first.

God has equipped each of us with a deep reservoir of talent with which we can serve Him and others.

The science which explains talent development indicates that these Talents really are “knitted into our brains” from the womb- just as the psalmist says, and that they are determined in part by our genetic make up and then by early life experiences, so that God does the brain wiring and then shapes our life curriculum such that, we are the Uniquely Gifted, Designer Creations He intends us to be, equipped to carry out the works of service He has planned for us to do.!

People have often asked me, “Do you think God rewires our brains when we become Christians?”

In response I have encouraged them to look at the apostle Paul who was determined, single minded, fast moving and forceful to destroy the church: he has an encounter with Jesus and is determined, single minded, fast moving and forceful to build up the church. Conversion changed his values and focus, but not his personality or talent.

Of course God could rewire our brains if He wanted to, but why would an all knowing God get the brain wiring wrong in the first place?

In my experience, when someone becomes a Christian God works with the person He has made and uses the power of the Holy Spirit to transform the way they use who they are, changing their human nature and values, (rather

than their personality) so that they use their abilities to serve God and others and not to serve self. Indeed in Romans. Paul himself speaks of the battle that he senses going on inside himself as he strives to do the things that go against the grain of his Human Nature, of his desire to serve self rather than serving God or others.

It is now quite popular in the business world to see the value of working with the strengths people bring – working with the grain of the person – rather than against the grain. However what is less often recognised is that our biggest opportunities to sin and to frustrate others are around the misuse of our strengths, using them to serve our own ends rather than using them to serve God and others.

Time after time, when I am asked to work with dysfunctional teams, the issues are around strengths that have been misused and the failure to recognise the damaging effect these have on others.

The world's best bank robbers will be wonderful strategists- they would not be successful bank robbers if they were not.

The world's greatest con artists – are wonderfully empathetic – it would be hard to be a great con artist if you were not empathetic.

The lines between decisiveness and bossiness, between pro-activity and impatience, are thin.

If using our talent or personality is about going with the grain of who we are, building character and becoming mature, is about modifying our natural inclination, sometimes going against the grain to serve others, to serve God – because we know that in that situation , that is the right thing to do.

The word Character comes from the word “to engrave”; (that is why letters are sometimes called characters), and our characters develop when we choose to go against the grain of who God has made us to be, because we know that is the right thing to do.

What is character building differs from person to person, depending on our talent. For some it is character building to speak out against what we disapprove of; for others the character building thing to do is to keep our mouths shut, or at least to say what we have to say with grace so that the other person is left with a feeling of dignity and self respect!

The reading from 1 Corinthians chapter 12 reminds us that we all need other people if we are to be effective in our work for God. My work over a number of years, has involved the in depth study of over 800 leaders. I have yet never met a leader who has all the strengths they need to be effective in their role. God has made us so that we are interdependent, so that we need to use and to value the strengths of others. In the church – I believe this involves valuing other individuals and other denominations.

On Sunday I was reading some of A.W. Tozer’s writing on diversity. He said, “We should thank God for giving us our individual personality’s temperaments and abilities. We should never waste time and energy trying to fashion ourselves after someone else, no matter how much we admire that person. God does not expect us to become copies of our spiritual heroes. In only these respects should we all try to be alike; we should love God more than anything or anyone else; we should hate sin and iniquity even as Jesus hated them; and we should be always willing to obey God through the leading of his Word and Spirit.

**Apart from that, it is perfectly natural to be ourselves, that is, different from each other.**

**I'd like to close by sharing a family example to illustrate. how we as church, need to work together, using our God given strengths and valuing diversity as the opportunities arise to serve Him together.**

**Story about Laura and Sam and the Aids Education Programme**

**I leave you with these 6 words**

**“Be yourself, with God, serving others”.**

**Each one of us is a valuable, designer creation, called to use our strengths, with Him, in His service, in His work of restoring the whole world to Himself.**

**Thank you**