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The Mentoring Series

Nancy
Ortberg



The Mentoring Series

Nancy Ortberg



Click on an article you'd like to read:

- 3** INTRODUCTION
NANCY ORTBERG:
A Woman Who Has a Way
with Words—and Work
By Caryn Rivadeneira
- 5** GIFTED WOMEN
**HOW DO I UNCOVER MY
SPIRITUAL GIFTS?**
3 ways to discern how
God wired you
By Nancy Ortberg
- 9** PRACTICALLY SPEAKING
**MINISTRY TEAM
DIAGNOSTICS**
How to avoid the 5 most
common dysfunctions of
a ministry team
By Nancy Ortberg
- 22** WORK LIFE
WORK IS A SACRED TRUST
What work does for us
By Nancy Ortberg
- 27** TRANSFORMED LIFE
SEEDS OF CHANGE
Growth and transformation
happen more powerfully in
the midst of transition.
By Nancy Ortberg
- 31** DISCERNING
HEARING GOD'S CALL
How can I figure out
what God wants me to
do with my life?
By Nancy Ortberg
- 35** ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
Books to help you further.



Introduction

Nancy Ortberg

A Woman Who Has a Way
with Words—and Work

By Caryn Rivadeneira

Ever have those moments when you read something by someone and feel a near-kinship? When you come across a line or phrase and think, *You mean, I'm not the only one who feels this way?*

That's how I felt when I read "Work Is a Sacred Trust" by Nancy Ortberg. She had written it for Gifted for Leadership in 2007—just after GFL launched as a website and just after I had delivered my third child. It was a weird time of my life—one during which I struggled with my identity and my love of work (the kind for pay, that is) and my continued struggle with balancing that work with my growing family.



GFL Mentor Series: Nancy Ortberg

A Woman Who Has a Way with Words—and Work

While her post certainly didn't make all things in my life fall into perfect balance—work-, family-, and ministry-wise—her words did make me realize that my love of work wasn't selfish or self-centered, but a gift from God. Which is how I came to view that article—as a gift God used to speak directly to my confusion.

Since then, I've continued to find that Nancy Ortberg's words speak clearly and directly to my life. She has so much wisdom to offer those of us who work in ministry—in any role. For good reason. She's a former teaching pastor at Willow Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois, and a founding partner of **Teamworx2**, a consulting firm that works with organizations, helping leaders overcome the team dysfunctions that are obstacles to high performance and work enjoyment. She's also an author, a pastor's wife, and a mother of three. All this to say, she gets the ministry life of today's women and speaks it to it well.

Which is why I'm excited about this Mentor Series Pack featuring Nancy Ortberg. The following articles are great not only for any leader personally, but great tools to use with a team. I hope her words and wisdom speak to you and your team as much as they do to me.

Hope you enjoy them.

Caryn Rivadeneira

Contributing Editor, KYRIA downloads,
Christianity Today International



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Gifted Women



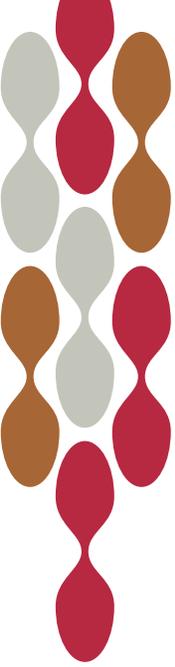
How Do I Uncover My Spiritual Gifts?

3 ways to discern how God wired you

By Nancy Ortberg

Discovering and utilizing your spiritual gifts is one of the most exciting adventures a person can have with God. The Bible says spiritual gifts are abilities God bestows on every believer for the common good of the body of Christ. They're a large part of the answer to the question, "What should I do with the life God gave me?"





GFL Mentor Series: Nancy Ortberg

How Do I Uncover My Spiritual Gifts?

Passages like 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and 1 Peter 4 go into specific detail about what these gifts are and how they should be used. It's clear every spiritual gift is a reflection of God's nature that you carry within you. And because your spiritual gift reflects God's design and direction for your life, you'll find great passion, joy, and satisfaction in expressing it. Your spiritual gift also will be a place of deep spiritual formation in your life, as God uses it both to powerfully connect you to him and to expose areas of your soul that need his forgiveness and redemption.

So here's a process to start:

Pay attention. Notice the things that energize you and seem to come naturally. Remember the quote from the movie *Chariots of Fire* when Eric Liddell explained to his sister why he was postponing his return to the mission field in order to race in the Olympics? "Because when I run, I feel the pleasure of God."

Every spiritual gift gives off clues. Your spiritual gift will cause you to react a certain way in a given situation. If there's a problem, people with the spiritual gift of shepherding will be immediately concerned that people are cared for and growing in Christlikeness as a result of the issue. Those with the gift of intercession (prayer) will immediately say, "We need to pray about this," while those with a leadership gift will begin looking at solutions for the problem.

Try. Once you've gathered enough information to create a list of some possible gifts (perhaps gifts of mercy, evangelism, encouragement, or hospitality), exercise your options. A great place to start would be a volunteer position at your church.





GFL Mentor Series: Nancy Ortberg
How Do I Uncover My Spiritual Gifts?

While you're trying it out, you'll start to discern whether you're good at it or not. Also, others will tell you!

When my kids were young, our church needed help in the nursery during the worship services. I volunteered for a three-month opening. I didn't feel the pleasure of God; the children didn't feel the pleasure of God. It was so not my spiritual gift. Part of learning what you're good at is having to go through the pain of learning what you're not good at. As you try different things, you'll eventually find yourself engaged in something during which time flies and you find a deep sense of connection to God. Pick that road to continue your adventure.

Develop. In 2 Timothy 1:6, the apostle Paul encourages Timothy to "fan into flame the gift of God." We're responsible to develop our gifts. Perhaps one of the best ways to do that is to mentor someone who's just starting on this discovery process. People with the spiritual gift of wisdom are probably the best people to develop someone else with the spiritual gift of wisdom, and so on for each of the gifts.

It's remarkable how you can deepen your relationship with God as you uncover and live out the spiritual gifts he's bestowed on you. What could the church and our world look like if each of us used the gift God's given us?

This article first appeared in TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.



Reflect

- *What do you do in which you feel the "pleasure of God"? How often do you get to do those things? How might you be able to do them more often?*
- *Nancy ends the article with, "What could the church and our world look like if each of us used the gift God's given us?" What's your answer to that?*



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Leadership Tools

Ministry Team Diagnostics

How to avoid the 5 most common
dysfunctions of a ministry team

By Nancy Ortberg

I work with lots of teams that are either in crisis or transition. But I rarely hear of teams that are both achieving results and are a pleasure to be a part of. This is due, in part, to a misunderstanding of the "team."

Simply put, "team" is just business language for "community"—the glorious intersection of task and people. For thousands of years, the Bible has spoken of using our giftedness in community. Strong leadership emerges in biblically functioning, God-honoring, Christ-forming community. On the other hand, since community is made of people, you can be sure every community is susceptible to dysfunction. So how do we develop and sustain a group that doesn't simply tout the buzzword of teamwork, but is actually the real deal—a healthy, high-performing team?





My introduction to Patrick Lencioni's work on leadership came when my boss at Willow Creek Community Church assigned us to read the first 30 pages of *The Four Obsessions of an Extraordinary Executive* (Jossey-Bass, 2000) by our next meeting. I had been inoculated enough times to be skeptical of "the next best leadership book." So I took the book, nodded my head, and left with absolutely no intention of reading it.

The night before the meeting, a sliver of guilt prompted me, begrudgingly, to crack open the book so I could at least participate in a cursory discussion the next day. I read the book cover to cover—couldn't put it down—captivated by Patrick's leadership principles and his view of the dignity of people. I sensed I had just read one of those rare books that, if I could implement its ideas, would transform my leadership for years to come. Patrick's later book, however, may be his hallmark work: *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* (Jossey-Bass, 2002). Focused on the leader's role in helping a team do its best work by overcoming common dysfunctions (I learned I was guilty of all five), the book is an excellent ministry resource. The result is a team that is aligned with their gifts, makes good decisions, gets great results, and loves working together. Let me explain how we applied his insights to our ministry teams.

I. Absence of Trust

Trust forms the foundation for everything else that happens on a team. Interestingly, though, I think ministry teams assume trust rather than work on building trust. Stop for a minute and think: can you name five things you have intentionally done in the last month to build trust on your team?



Trust takes time, but it doesn't take years. Trust can be broken, but it can also be repaired.

Conflict isn't pleasant, but it's your necessary friend. Don't avoid it. Insist on it.

Most of what has been written about trust focuses on character and competency, two key components of trust, to be sure. But Patrick pushes us to think of trust that's based on vulnerability. Vulnerability-based trust makes a team great; without it, people position themselves, and teams become what Patrick calls a "Petri dish for politics." Imagine, politics in a church?

When a leader admits to his or her weaknesses, they are inviting others to participate in leadership to fill the gap of what the leader cannot do. No one can do everything, and this kind of vulnerability allows for everyone on a team to contribute in meaningful ways.

I have worked for leaders who led from a façade of omniscience, and the best I could hope for was to be an implementer of their vision and their decisions. I have also worked for leaders who, because of their appropriate admission of weakness, have invited me to participate as a peer and really lead. I'll take the latter any day.

Vulnerability-based leadership invites others to initiate, innovate, and take ownership of the ministry by making significant contributions. In this way, energy is generated throughout the team and not only by the strong central leader. Our churches are hungry for this kind of leadership.



We recently spent two days with a church leadership team that, by all accounts, got along well but felt "stuck." They were a collection of well-run but very individual areas without much collective direction.

Well into the second day, while we were talking about vision and strategy, the senior pastor interrupted and tentatively said, "I think I need to go back to yesterday when we were talking about trust. This is very hard for me to talk about, but ..."

For the next 30 minutes or so, he poured out his heart. He explained how this had been the most difficult 6-month period of leadership in his 20-year career. He admitted that as it got more and more difficult, he hid more and more behind the façade of "I've got it under control." This invisible barrier created distance between him and others. He avoided the difficult conversations as well as the honesty and vulnerability his staff needed, and they responded in kind by doing their work on the surface and ignoring the deeper issues that threatened to derail the church.

After he finished speaking, the staff responded in remarkable ways. The first person said how good it felt to get those words said aloud, where they could all respond to them. All of them said his words helped them understand what it would mean to really be a team that supported each other and had the courage to tackle the real issues they were all facing in the church.

Sometimes trust starts with just such a conversation, not a one-time conversation, but ongoing vulnerability that connects people in ways that produce significant results, both interpersonally and corporately.





Another significant thing that vulnerability does is cause our teams to be places where Christ is deeply formed in us. Church staffs and key volunteers ought to be the people who are the most "transformed into Christ-likeness." Our teams ought to be places of deep community where there is encouragement, challenge, prayer, and honesty. That can only happen when there are deep levels of trust.

This isn't just some touchy-feely concept; it is a practical component of leadership that allows teams to make better decisions, directly affecting results. If any teams ought to be building and maintaining trust, it is church leadership teams. The kind of community and leadership that exists at that level will inevitably replicate itself, in time, throughout the church.

2. Fear of Conflict

Of all the organizations we work with, churches tend to be the worst at engaging in conflict in an open and honest way. Somehow we've gotten the idea that Jesus was a Mr. Rogers character who just walked around with beautifully permed hair, blessing everyone. One look at the gospels will tell you that Jesus was a walking defining moment. His call for transformation was often imbedded in rather terse and direct language.

Les and Leslie Parrot, Christian psychologists who work primarily in the area of marriage, insist, "Conflict is the only way to intimacy." That startling claim has enormous implications for teams as well as marriages.

Avoiding conflict almost guarantees that we will fail to build relationally deep teams, and that we will be unable to make the best decisions for the organization. When teams don't





engage in healthy, passionate, unfiltered debate around the most important issues, they inject more politics into the organization and make mediocre decisions that will deliver mediocre results.

A number of years ago, we worked with a ministry team that found itself stuck in a number of areas. During our second day with them, some interpersonal conflict emerged that apparently had been simmering under the surface for years.

At the break, four or five members of the team found my partner and me and told us how glad they were that we were able to surface this issue, because it had frustrated them for such a long time. I was amazed that they had been wasting all of this time hoping someone else would talk about it. That team learned a lot that day about the value of honest, direct conversations versus languishing for months or years in chronic avoidance mode.

In another situation, one staff member had strong feelings about someone who had been fired five years previous. Interestingly, he had sort of held the rest of the team hostage since then by connecting almost every issue that came up for discussion back to this incident, which he perceived to have been terribly unfair.

At literally every break, someone on the team would corner my partner and me and tell us we had to confront this guy about his behavior—that it was the major obstacle to the team's functioning well. It was pretty telling that they thought this was our job after they had been allowing this to go on for years.





It was apparent that although his behavior certainly added to the dysfunction of the team, the rest of the team, by allowing him to get away with it, was no less dysfunctional.

When he finally brought the issue up one more time, I found myself exasperated and said, "Okay, let's assume that firing five years ago was the worst firing in the history of the church. And just for the sake of argument, I mean the Church Universal. Now, does there ever come a time, after discussion and process, that letting it go becomes the healthiest thing to do?"

The guy in question looked at me for about 20 seconds and then said, "I think I can do that. No one has asked me to do that before."

Everyone else on the team breathed a sigh of relief that someone had finally said it out loud, but I directed my next sentence to them: "You realize that by allowing this behavior to go on for five years without asking for a change, you have facilitated the problem."

A very interesting conversation ensued, and I could almost see the repair work being done on that team.

It's not always as simple as a conversation, but a conversation is almost always the starting point.

One of the biggest challenges a leader faces in helping the team get better in this is that you have to allow yourselves to do it poorly in order to learn to do it well. This isn't the kind of thing that you just read about, tell your team about, and then expect to do it well. It takes practice, sometimes painful practice.





But it is one of the most profound ways to grow a team. If one of the ways we can understand our ability to love is by our capacity to forgive, then conflict gives us a great arena in which to practice.

Conflict is basically energy, and when it is not dealt with directly, it goes somewhere else. Unaired conflict goes into the parking lot or behind closed doors. It becomes "malicious compliance" and results in artificial harmony, not deep community. Conflict isn't pleasant, but it's your necessary friend. Do not avoid it; insist on it.

3. Inability to Make a Commitment

Ever left a meeting wondering what, if anything, was actually decided? Ever lead one of those meetings? Healthy teams know when it is time to make a commitment, and they do it. There are no perfect decisions, but there are good and great ones. At the end of an appropriate amount of debate, there comes a time to decide and to plant the flag.

Different decisions require different amounts of time to debate before commitment. Great leaders help their teams calibrate the importance and time needed and then move the discussions toward that end. Once a decision has been given an appropriate amount of time, research, discussion, and input, great teams make commitments based on what emerges as the best decision possible.

Then, there is consistent execution based on that decision, rather than continual debate, second-guessing, or sabotaging the original decision. Doing the hard work before the decision allows you to release your full energies toward implementing the decision.





One team we are currently working with has just made some significant breakthroughs in this area. For years they had been operating in such a culture of fear that even when they made a decision, people were so afraid of making mistakes that they actually avoided the work that needed to be done.

They would end a meeting with a decision, and then the next week come back, either acting like they didn't know a decision had been made, or so overwhelmed with the work they already had on their plate that they came with a boatload of reasons why they hadn't gotten the work done.

Some of them didn't like the decision, so they were subtly sabotaging it by neglect, and others were just waiting to see if anyone really expected anything to change. It wasn't until the senior leader began, at every meeting, reviewing the decisions that had been made and the resulting changes required that people on the team began to actually believe that they needed to implement the changes they'd decided on.

He started going around the team before the meeting ended and asking for a verbal "buy-in" to the decisions they had just made. Slowly—imperceptibly, at first—they began to gain momentum toward their ministry goals. Soon areas like evangelism and service to the poor began showing life.

Leadership is, at its heart, about the promises we make and the promises we keep.

4. Avoidance of Accountability

Holding people accountable is hard work, and it's not usually fun. In fact, I worry a bit about people who enjoy it too





much. But we need it. And you don't have community or leadership without it.

In fact, most of us who have been leading for very long will have memories of a time when a leader we respected held us accountable. What might have been an awkward and embarrassing conversation, in retrospect, was a turning point in our development. Everyone needs that, and community is obligated to do that.

I have had ministry leaders tell me about talks I gave that needed more work, leadership decisions that were not well thought through, and interpersonal relationships that could have been handled more honestly or kindly. In the moment, I did not like any of those discussions. I was embarrassed and hoped they would just go away. But they didn't, and now I am glad.

I delivered my fourth or fifth sermon as a staff member at Willow Creek when our senior pastor, Bill, was out of town. The previous sermons had been debriefed and coached through with him, and when he returned from his trip, he called me into his office to do the same with this sermon.

I had my pad of paper with me to take notes. Then he asked me, "What were you thinking?" I began to explain the structure of my talk.

"No, Nancy, that was a rhetorical question," he said. "When I listened to this sermon, I had no clear sense of what you were saying, and it felt to me like you had not given it the work it needed to be a good talk."





Now, at that moment I was wishing that the ground would simply open up and swallow one of us. I was just still debating which one of us. I was mortified, embarrassed, defensive, and mad.

Oh, and one more thing. He was right.

I'm not sure if it was because my first few sermons had gone well that I figured I didn't have to work as hard, or what. But he was right. I had not done the kind of diligent work on that talk that I owed the congregation. Not only was he right about my failure, but he was right, too, to hold me accountable.

Great teams get to the point where the members hold each other accountable. Failing to live up to group commitments does not result in private, one-on-one talks about the failure but to team discussions of accountability. Teams do this so they can pursue the cause about which they feel so deeply, and so that they are involved in helping each other learn and grow.

5. Inattention to Results

Here is the tension that we all live with in ministry leadership: the results are not completely in our hands, and we are to work with all of our efforts to accomplish the results. Much of leadership is about managing tensions, and this is a big one.

In the Book of Joshua, the nation of Israel stood poised on the east side of Jordan, waiting to cross. This moment was the culmination of over 400 years of captivity in Egypt and 40 years wandering in the desert. Generations had gathered





their children by the fire and told of the coming day when they would be in the land that God had promised them: a land whose trees groaned under the burden of the abundant fruit they bore.

Repeated 14 times in the Book of Joshua was the phrase "the Lord has given you the land." Sounds easy enough. We have waited for hundreds of years, and God promised, so let's go.

The second most repeated phrase in Joshua is "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid." You see, Israel, even in the face of the promise, still had a lot of battles to fight. And for us, there's a tension between what only God can do and what he expects us to do to allow him to do his work.

As leaders in the church, we understand that results are not completely in our hands. We are not ultimately responsible for everything. However that is very different from saying that it is okay to rationalize the fact that the ministry is not moving forward because of our poor or misguided efforts.

Great leaders perform autopsies on poor results. They are constant learners and listen to God, as best they can, and relentlessly pursue doing things better and more effectively. They are passionate about results, because results affect people. Sometimes results are people.

Even in churches, it is possible to get our eyes off of people and onto the wrong things. People in teams should be transformed, and the people with whom we are doing ministry should be transformed. The work we do should result in the grace of God pouring out into his beautiful and broken world.





What could we have done differently? What did we learn from this, for future decisions? Has this ministry been allowed to go past its prime, and is there, perhaps, a new and better way? These are the questions of a team that build great ministries that deeply impact people for Christ.

As leaders it is great to see clearly what dysfunctions can derail a team and put our best efforts toward overcoming them. It will take courage and perseverance, but it will be worth it. It will create a culture in your churches in which teams become a place where people can come and do what they do best with people they love being with. What a great picture of the Kingdom.

This article first appeared in the Spring 2008 issue of LEADERSHIP JOURNAL.

Reflect

- *Which of these five dysfunctions do you think your team wrestles with most? Which do you wrestle with the least? Why?*
- *Nancy writes, "Conflict isn't pleasant, but it's your necessary friend." Have you ever experienced this to be true? If yes, when? If not, how might you need this "friend" in your ministry now?*



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Work Life

Work Is a Sacred Trust



How we view what we do makes all the difference.

By Nancy Ortberg

The summer I was 15, I locked myself in the bathroom. Not for the typical reasons. There was no fight with my parents or disappointing love interest. I wasn't trying to hide tears or cool down a temper. I had just received my first paycheck.

It wasn't just the paycheck I loved. That was just symbolic. It was work I loved. I loved the feeling of doing something that mattered, something that helped other people, something that I could accomplish.





Growing up, I awoke each morning to the smell of coffee and the sight of my dad in his crisp white shirt and tie, sitting at the breakfast table reading the newspaper. His aftershave gently filled the room and there was a sense of anticipation in him as he readied to start the workday. My dad loved what he did, and he was good at it. That was a dynamic combination.

Every morning my mother drove me to school. After she dropped me off, she continued on the few more miles to her workplace. In the 1960s, I had one of the very few moms who worked. She was always dressed up for work and her mood seemed to match. My mother loved what she did, and she was good at it. That is a dynamic combination.

"Thank God it's Friday."

"I hate my job."

"Can't wait until I retire; then I can start living."

I don't get that.

I love to work. I love getting up in the morning and getting dressed for work. I love looking over my calendar for the day and seeing what lies ahead. I love working with a team to make things happen. I love the relationships at work; I love the tasks. I love dreaming and imagining what might be, what the future could look like, how we could make a difference. I love starting to change things, and setting things in motion that might make those changes happen. I love celebrating the wins along the way and learning from





the losses. I love watching the team getting healthier and happier as it gets better and better at the work it does.

I love how when people are led well not only do they accomplish great things, but they become better people in the process. There is that kind of redemption in work. God gave work to Adam and Eve before the fall. Work was not the result of sin; it is another way of working out the image of God that resides in all of us.

Work is a sacred trust and there are a few things you can do to treat it as such in your role as a leader:

1. Yourself. I first heard the concept of "self-leadership" when I was on staff at a church. Here's the main idea: You are responsible for carving out a life that has a rhythm that renews you. It is not anybody else's job. As a leader you take responsibility for your own self-renewal, which includes things like reading, planning alone time to do thinking and processing, and maintaining a schedule that allows you to keep your promises, which is one of the key jobs of a leader. Self-leadership not only increases your leadership capacity and skills but also works to prevent burnout.

2. Others. Leadership is the promise of development. People need three things to grow: opportunities, challenges, and relationship. It is your job as a leader to be sure, over time, that your people are getting all three. They need opportunities to use their abilities to make a difference, challenges that stretch them without breaking them, and relationships in which they are known and celebrated and told the truth about themselves.





One of my most memorable moments working on staff at a large hospital was when I was speaking for the first time to one of the top executives. I introduced myself and she immediately said, "I know who you are." I was 22 years old. I have never forgotten that phrase. It was powerful to be noticed and made me want to do a good job.

3. The Organization. Organizations—not just individual people—are important. Organizations, as a collection of people, allow us to accomplish things we could not do on our own. As a leader it is your responsibility to make sure that meetings are compelling, that they are places where collaborative (not consensus, which Patrick Lencioni defines as "mutually agreed upon mediocrity") decisions are processed and made, a place where goals are set and people are held accountable for those, where short-term and long-term gains are celebrated and lack of success is autopsied and learned from.

Leadership is a sacred trust.

This post first appeared at [Gifted for Leadership](#) on March 22, 2007.

Reflect

- *How do you feel about work? What do you think shaped your view?*
- *Ortberg says she loves when people are led well because they not only "accomplish great things, but they become better people in the process." How have you experienced this in your own life—either as you've led or been led?*

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Transformed Life

Seeds of Change



Growth and transformation happen more powerfully in the midst of transition.

By Nancy Ortberg

I love change. I like to be on the front end of new and fresh things. But there's always a part of change that's difficult. Moving to Chicago from California was tough because my roots were deep. And the primary ways that I experience God are through activism, relationships, and nature. I got ripped out of all three. I didn't have a job. My kids were starting school. I had no friends. And to this California girl, Chicago is not a hotbed of nature.





I told my husband, John, "I can't find God here." And his immediate response was, "Maybe we made a mistake. Maybe we should move back."

I said, "No. I don't think this is a problem we need to fix. I think I just need to live with a part of change that's hard."

My experience has been that the difficult parts of change are most often where God lives. I learn a little in the easy things, but the deep epicenter change, where foundations and paradigms shift in my soul, happens when my life is hard. I become aware not just of my need for God, but what I really believe about him. All the things that I glibly say, in change I have to live out.

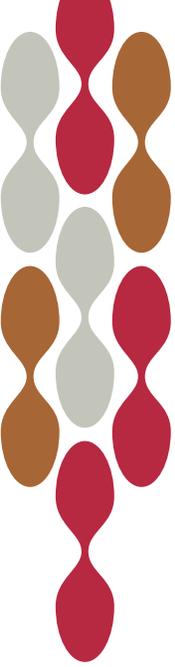
If I push through, on the other side of change is something deeper, richer, and more purified.

Most of us, though, cling to the safe side and go kicking and screaming into change. We fight it instead of moving into it quietly with an assuredness that not only is God on the other side but new facets of him that we have heretofore not understood are also there.

Change includes loss. And any loss that we experience moves our hearts closer to surrender. It prepares the soil and softens the heart to get it ready for the new seed God needs to put in there.

I discovered that truth almost a decade later when my family and I moved back to California. Even though I was going back "home," I was still starting over. It took me a year to make good, close friends. I had to start a whole





new job. My kids were in a different place in their lives and didn't really need me as much. But through all that, I felt an increasing awareness of the goodness and richness I found in God in Chicago. I was pleasantly surprised that the same good God who lives in Chicago lives in California. God is everywhere and he's good; I don't have to be afraid. My life slowly began to recapture that. I gradually realized, *Oh, life's good here, too, and there are people to serve and love, and difficult situations to work through.*

We have to grow in our ability to trust that there's nowhere in the world we can turn where God is not. And that goodness is going to be waiting for me in that new place, because God's there. But it will take time.

Much of my life has been about change and much of it has also been a journey to understand that God is good. If he's not, nothing else matters. Our obedience and his holiness are outcomes of his goodness. Dallas Willard says that an acid test of any theology is: Is there a good God at the center? If there's not, we've gone the wrong way.

Whatever the change—whether it's the death of a loved one, a job loss, a move across country, becoming an empty nester—if we allow ourselves to push through the difficult parts, we'll discover that God is there too, and he is good. Entirely, wonderfully, amazingly good.

This article first appeared in TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.



Reflect

- *What's your view of "change"? Do you like it or hate it? Why?*
- *Nancy writes that if God is not good, "nothing else matters." When have you felt that God was not good—and that perhaps nothing else mattered? How did you get through that period? Or, what are you doing now if you're in that season?*



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Discerning

Hearing God's Call

How can I figure out what God
wants me to do with my life?

By Nancy Ortberg



There are few things more attractive, more noticeable, than someone who's pursuing an activity he or she loves and is good at. We've all had the remarkable experience of sitting in a classroom listening to a teacher who engages and awakens the deepest parts of who we are. I have a friend who runs a gardening service, and as I listen to him talk about keeping a family's yard looking nice, the joy and skill he brings to what he does are obvious.





It's an amazing and fulfilling thing to live life in line with God's design and calling on your life. But it can seem difficult and overwhelming to discover it. Here is my suggestion: Pay attention to who God made you to be.

What gives you life? What are you good at? What do you love to do? What consistent patterns are noticeable in you that may be clues to your design and calling? Before he met Christ, the apostle Paul was an activist and a zealot—an articulate opponent of the church. When he met Christ, he continued to be an activist and a zealot, but he changed for whom he worked. Acts 9:20 says he at once began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. He didn't change who he was by design, but he did change the Lordship in his life.

Noticing what you're not good at is also valuable information. We only have so many "yeses" we can give, so don't spend them on what you don't do well. After having spent years paying attention to who God made me to be, I know I shouldn't say yes to volunteering in the church nursery. The kids in the nursery agree with me. But there are people who really love that work, and the church nursery is a remarkable place when they're the ones in it.

We each have a unique design. You may be able to learn by watching someone else, but your calling isn't her calling. Don't get caught in the comparison trap like the apostle Peter. In John 21, right after Jesus says three times to Peter, "Take care of my sheep," Peter looks at John the disciple and says to Jesus, "Lord, what about him?" (v. 21). It's as if he's saying, "Yeah, I heard what your calling for me is, but before I decide, I'd like to hear about John, compare the callings, and then decide."



Jesus replies to Peter in words that are pretty direct and a bit harsh: "What is that to you? You must follow me" (v. 22).

So, while I'm no help in the nursery, I've found things I am good at—things that make me feel alive, that others notice I do well. When I'm teaching a group of people or leading a meeting, good things often result, and I get the sense this is what I was made to do. Teaching and leading—these are my spiritual gifts and a large part of my calling.

Finally, remember that God's calling for your life goes way beyond what you do. It's who you are, where you belong, who and how you love. In our culture's preoccupation with success and celebrity, it's easy to approach calling in a way that's not much more than those two things covered by a thin veneer of spirituality. Parker Palmer wrote a wonderful book called **Let Your Life Speak** that directs us to discover and live a life wherein our God-given design intersects with what the world needs. I think a life lived operating in the gifts God has given us—and mindful of meeting the needs of others—is a life that beautifully reflects the person of God. The world could use more people like that.

This article first appeared in TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

- *How would you answer these questions that Nancy asks: What gives you life? What are you good at? What do you love to do? What consistent patterns are noticeable in you that may be clues to your design and calling?*
- *What words would you say your life speaks?*

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Additional Resources

Books to help you further.

Looking for God: An Unexpected Journey Through Tattoos, Tofu, and Pronouns, by Nancy Ortberg. In this book, Nancy explores the traditional and nontraditional places where we find God. Her gift for storytelling makes deep truths of the Christian faith accessible.

Unleashing the Power of Rubber Bands: Lessons in Non-linear Leadership, by Nancy Ortberg. In this book, Nancy offers an insightful look at the qualities, attributes, and practices that turn ordinary leaders into extraordinary ones! Her unique perspective on vision casting; managing tensions; nurturing healthy conflict; motivating others; and fostering creativity, passion, and trust will bring out the best in even the most seasoned leaders.





GFL Mentor Series: Nancy Ortberg

Additional Resources

Having Quiet Time with God, by John and Nancy Ortberg. With profound transparency, John and Nancy Ortberg share with you the insights, resources, and benefits they've discovered through the spiritual discipline and transformation of regular quiet times with God.



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