

In What Way Are You A Genius?

I doubt my wife knows the names of the two men who ran for the open Alabama Senate seat back in November. I'd be surprised if she could name even half of the sports teams that won major championships in 2017. I'm positive that she doesn't know who is nominated for what at the Oscars this year.

Yet, if you ask my wife about Guided Reading, or Classroom Management, or the names, personalities, and personal struggles of her 29 third grade students, she could talk all day. And you'd probably be blown away by how developed her thoughts are, how deeply she thinks and how passionate she is about it. I know I am. When it comes to what my wife does for a living, she sounds brilliant when she speaks. She comes across as an expert in it, even though she is young.

To say it another way, she sounds like a genius. And at least by one broad definition, she is.

It's a funny thing about our culture that we tend to reserve the highest semantical praise for those whose intelligence is in specialized academic areas like math or science. When in reality there is an abundance of other topics that serve our world in crucial ways and in which people are educated and constantly learning, all the while in the trenches of the practical reality of using their knowledge. They're out there doing it. Their specialized intelligence, creativity, and passion make them geniuses to my mind. Even if they don't know much about math or science.

I think most of us (all of us?) have an area or two in which we can accomplish the same thing my wife does with teaching. I think we all can sound like a genius on a given topic.

Why do I write about this? Because I think one of the greatest parts of the Christian life is finding these passions and using them to serve God's kingdom. When I give devotions to

teenagers I always talk to them about this. I do not think or try to teach them that they have to figure out their lives before they are 18 years old. Or that God's will is some mysterious super specific thing they have to do when it comes to college major career. I simply teach them that God inspires us to be passionate about particular subjects and that can guide us in decision making. And there are few things I am convinced we are created for more than to throw our lives into the things that matter to us, constantly learning about them, figuring out how to use them practically and communicating their importance to others in an appropriate way.

Some people find passions at an early age. My brother Jeremy loved farming from the time he was old enough to pick up a tobacco leaf. Others find passion based on life circumstances. I know parents with children with special needs who hold what I would call "life doctorates" on those needs because they have poured their minds and energies into them on behalf of their kids, learning and doing everything they can. Other passions come with time and very gradually, as I would say happened to me and the bilingual ministry of my church. I didn't move to Chicago with that focus in mind and other than a brief time of working with migrant workers on Cannon Farms in the '90s, it was never something I felt strongly about. But at about 29 years old and over the span of several years, God stirred my heart about it and now between language learning, reading books, teaching/preaching and living out church community, I spend dozens of hours a week in the messiness of it. I know little about science. I know nothing about several political issues. But when people ask me about my church ministry, I can talk for hours.

With that in mind, here are a few things I think Christians should keep in mind about the passions that can make them sound like a genius on a given topic:

Creatively Use Them To Love God and Love People

As I mentioned, my brother Jeremy is a farmer but he is not just knowledgeable about crops. Because of this job and his natural bend as an extrovert he interacts regularly with hundreds of people. Every time I'm home he blows me away when I ask about someone we went to high school with twenty years ago and he knows what they are doing today. Not because of Facebook, but because he saw them last week. And all of those people know him as a man of integrity and hard work ethic. He touches more lives every week as a farmer than I do as a pastor. And he has used his job to witness to people, including Spanish-speaking workers in their heart language.

It would be easy for him to think he's "just a farmer". But he uses that genius-level passion to love God and love others.

Never Stop Being a Student About Them

Life changes quickly. Culture changes without us realizing it. And a good steward of passion and knowledge will keep up. My senior pastor, David Potete, is a marvelous example of this. He is a genius at servant leadership in our Chicago neighborhood. You can't be around him for two seconds without feeling his passion for it. And the amount of knowledge he has is vast. Yet he is constantly reading articles about our neighborhood and city, getting involved in the community and figuring out new ways our church can serve people based on what the needs are. Our church is not doing ministry the same way we did in 1998, or 2008 or even 2013. He is exceptional at keeping us on our toes and being learned and willing to adapt. As a church, we are intent on reflecting our neighborhood even as it changes and his passion and knowledge drive that. We no doubt believe truth is absolute and Christ never changes. But how we do ministry does.

Be Humble

Passion can come across as arrogance if not presented correctly. I'll never forget getting an email from Dr. Robert Picirilli once after I asked a question about a passage in Revelation. Dr. Picirilli, who sounds like a genius based on his knowledge of Greek and the New Testament, told me that the more he studies Revelation, the less he feels like he understands it well. I was stunned by that. It was a humble statement.

Sometimes when you are passionate, even if you are humble about it, it still can make people uncomfortable. Maybe out of insecurity on their part or just because they misunderstand. We need to risk that for the sake of communicating what God has blessed us to know in important areas of life, but we still must be actively fighting against human haughtiness. The Bible does warn that knowledge puffs up. And it helps to remember that there is a great big world outside of what we are doing with our lives.

Do Not Be Afraid to Take Risks or Think Outside the Box

In a recent phone conversation with a friend, he was dealing with a huge decision about where to live with his family. One of the choices meant doing something extremely out of the common way for Americans. As he talked about it, I could feel his passion for the reason he would consider an outrageous change in lifestyle radiating through the phone. The more he talked, the more genius he sounded on the topic. When he asked me what I thought, I could not help but wonder how much he would have to offer his own family and others by taking the crazy step. He would have a platform to really challenge how we think through Christianity in America, and how comfortable we get sometimes in how we live. I could not make the decision

for him, but I think risks are definitely worth exploring when you are a follower of Jesus Christ. And not just random, foolish risks, but those that fit our creative genius passions.

I've heard of churches having small groups where some members were passionate about running, so they ran three miles during the group together and then talked about the Bible. I've heard of churches with members passionate about filtering movies through their Christian worldview and using that as a topic for a Wednesday night class. If there is anything the church needs more of, it's people willing to shake up the status quo and question why we do church community or home life the way we do them. And to challenge the reasons—again, not randomly, but based how our passions can be used most effectively and wisely to help disciple God's people.

One of our favorite phrases at my church is "This is the hill that I'm willing to die on." I want all of our people to be willing to die for Christ, but on a secondary level, I want all of our people to find their subject that they are so passionate about it that when they speak, they sound like a genius. And that they will charge that hill with everything they've got as well, until the day they die. I am quite proud that my wife spends far more time studying learning disabilities and working on pronouncing her students' names than she does thinking about the Twitter outrage of the week. God wants us to use our minds and our behaviors to glorify him and serve his church. I'm willing to die on the hill where English and Spanish speakers come together in worship and community every day. And I want to laser focus a huge part of my life on it because God has called me to love it with my whole heart. But I also want to encourage others to do the same, in their own unique way that God has gifted them to be a genius.

Comments are welcomed.