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# Awakening Your Strength Journey: Discovering Happiness in Ministry

by Rev. Hugh Lagan, SMA, Psy.D.

Most of us have less of a sense of our talents and strengths than we should, much less of our ability to build our lives around these strengths. Instead, guided over the years by our parents, teachers and sometimes even by psychology's emphasis on pathology, we can easily become experts in our weaknesses and spend our lives trying to repair these flaws, while our strengths lie dormant and neglected.

Yet, focusing on our strengths in life and ministry, rather than our weaknesses, has been shown to promote greater well-being and life satisfaction.

This approach is best known as positive psychology, a concept developed and popularized by Martin Seligman, a psychology professor at

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the University of Pennsylvania and now best-selling author. Seligman was motivated by the conviction that mental health is much more than the absence of mental illness and that the potential

for human growth is more than we ever imagined it could be. He is part of a movement to help shift psychology's traditional focus on pathology and illness to include the study of optimal human functioning and what enables people and communities to thrive.

Studies (Lyubomirsky & King, 2005) have shown that people who are considerate of and helpful toward others are happier, more emotionally resilient, have fewer psychological problems and boost their physical health and longevity. They also are more likely to be promoted in work while experiencing less stress and risk for burn-out.

Persons engaged in ministry have a great opportunity to live and work out of their deepest convictions, often in the midst of communities of faith who share their concern for meaning, compassion and justice. Lives built around service, meaning and community provide a distinct advantage for happiness and work satisfaction. These life values enable resiliency in times of challenge and fulfillment in times of purposeful living.

They also speak to God's words to Jeremiah: "For I know well the plans I have in mind for you...plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope." (Jeremiah, 29:11)

In fact, studies of clergy have indicated that despite mounting administrative responsibilities, an aging demographic and perceived low morale,

clergy enjoy some of the highest rates of personal well-being and work satisfaction of any profession. Intuitively, this makes sense. Individuals who dedicate their lives to helping others tend to have better outcomes of health and happiness.

Clergy who are afforded opportunities to express their strengths in ministry report being more effective and fulfilled. They report increased engagement, work performance and goal achievement in ministry. Furthermore, a strength-based model of ministry promoted improved confidence, direction, hope and capacity for kindness toward others.

## Factors that Enhance Ministry

Factors that enhance ministry for clergy and religious include an active prayer life, strong relationships, good self-esteem, leadership support, service to others, realistic optimism, meaning, accomplishment, resiliency and commitment.

In his study on priests, Msgr. Stephen Rossetti (2011) found the strongest predictor of clergy happiness was the priest's relationship with God. A strong relational network of support from church leaders, other priests, family, friends and parishioners further strengthens this spiritual core.

On the other side, vulnerabilities for ministry are created through

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# Case Study Father Will

by Rev. Bryan Silva, OMI, Psy.D., and Sheila Harron, Ph.D.

**F**r. Will just celebrated six years as a priest. When he was a child, he received a great deal of verbal affirmation and praise from his parents for even small things done well. They also shielded him from failure and disappointment as much as possible. He internalized the high regard they, his teachers and peers had for him. As an adult he became a respected member of the community and had a successful technology career before entering the seminary. His strong spiritual life and involvement in parish ministry was a source of affirmation and contributed to his sense of self esteem.

At his first parish assignment, near his home town, Fr. Will was admired for his knowledge of the town's history. Parishioners appreciated his youth and enthusiasm. His pastor loved Fr. Will's work ethic and success in engaging

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## He began to feel disconnected from his parishioners and other relationships.

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young adults and in supporting the parish school. His parish bible study group became extremely popular. Everything he turned his hand to appeared to flourish.

Within five years he was appointed pastor of a rural ethnic parish on the other side of the diocese. The culture, and educational and socio-economic status of his parishioners, was very different. Parishioners were geographically spread out and interpersonally distant. He no longer experienced the recognition and praise which used to feed him.



Fr. Will began to lose his self confidence. He encountered difficulty in his prayer life and stopped exercising regularly. He began to feel disconnected from his parishioners and other relationships, no longer meeting friends for dinner or attending priest gatherings. He blamed his parishioners for the lack of vibrant parish ministries, while also feeling an unfamiliar sense of being inadequate. He became curt, took on more and more responsibilities himself and seldom held staff meetings. His homilies slipped into harangues. He stopped visiting the regional Catholic school, something he used to enjoy.

One bright spot was his relationship with Sr. Janice, the principal, who recognized his good will and the difficulties he was having. She tried to encourage him. She spoke with him about his apparent unhappiness and the alienation some people were feeling. She also spoke with the director of priest personnel. The parish staff was on edge and parishioners were increasingly upset.

The director of priest personnel and Fr. Will together decided that he would participate in a psychological evaluation. The evaluation process helped

Fr. Will realize how unhappy he was, although neither seriously depressed nor anxious. The evaluation team gave him positive feedback about his assets, but also helped him recognize how he floundered without skills to deal with failure and/or adversity. He accepted a recommendation for outpatient therapy.

With his therapist, Fr. Will explored his challenges. When being affirmed, he was confident and positive. Without that familiar affirmation, he doubted himself, worked harder to try to make up for his perceived failures and let go of a balanced life style. He was chronically irritated by challenges he did not know how to overcome.

Through therapy, Fr. Will gained insight into how much his early childhood shaped him to depend on external validation for his sense of self. He used this insight to make behavioral changes. He re-connected with friends and family and when he caught himself looking for validation from parishioners that was not forthcoming, he reminded himself of the love of people close to him.

His spiritual director helped him to

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### Father Will, *continued*

consider his “failure” to get affirmation from his parishioners as an opportunity to deepen his motivation for ministry. His director suggested Scripture passages and prayer exercises that helped him open up to the experience of knowing how much God loves him as he is.

With his therapist he explored the concepts of positive psychology, focusing on identifying and building strengths. Fr. Will did the homework of listing his gifts of mind, body, personality and spirit. They explored how he could capitalize on these gifts

in his ministry. The therapist recommended that he engage a job coach to help him develop strategies that would build upon his skills and help him feel more in control of his ministry and staff responsibilities.

With the support of his counselor and coach, Fr. Will put more structure into place. He created a flexible weekly schedule with time for prayer, work, exercise, recreation, friends, study and reading.

He left the rectory on his days off and gave the staff more responsibility. He also developed a practice of daily reviewing the things for which he was

grateful. Growing more and more aware of life’s gifts, his irritation melted away.

Over time, the parishioners began to seem less taciturn to Fr. Will. It wasn’t so much that they changed as his perception of them did. He eventually became a beloved pastor as his parishioners responded to his positive approach to them. The crisis of his unhappy period helped him mature into a better human being and priest.

*Rev. Bryan Silva, OMI, Psy.D., is on the clinical staff of Saint Luke Institute. Sheila Harron, Ph.D., is chief operating officer.*

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### Strength Journey, *continued* from page 1

burnout, loneliness, intimacy deficits, unintegrated sexuality and the misuse of power.

When clients come to Saint Luke Institute, they often show signs of burnout and are frustrated over what they see as personal failure or an inability to meet everyone’s expectations. This frustration often plays itself out through isolation or inappropriate behaviors with staff and colleagues. The clinical staff works with them to identify and build upon their strengths. This in turn builds resiliency, promotes well-being and can lead to more effective and happier ministry – for them and their parishioners. Our work focuses on new behaviors and strengths, and supporting the development of a deeper sense of spiritual fulfillment.

### Getting Started

Individuals can identify their strengths through assessment tools, and begin

on a path toward a more fulfilling life and ministry with simple changes. Two Seligman has identified are:

- **Count your blessings:** Every evening for one week, write down three things that went well during the day. This can help refocus your thoughts on the positive, rather than the negative, and enhance your well-being.
- **Make a gratitude visit:** Identify someone from your past who did or said something that changed your life, but whom you never thanked. Write a letter of gratitude, being specific about what the person did and the impact on

you, then visit the person and read it to him or her.

The search for a life worth living invites each person to rediscover the ancient Christian values of wonder, gratitude, joy, hope, compassion, commitment, accomplishment, meaning, resiliency and faith. In choosing the courage to authentically live these values, we encounter God and discover the timeless truth that “I have the strength for everything through him who empowers me.” (Philippians 4:13)

*Rev. Hugh Lagan, SMA, Psy.D., is on the clinical staff of Saint Luke Institute.*

### Learn more: Strength Journey webinar series

- Explore the factors that enhance ministry for clergy and religious
- Understand the impact of stress on clergy and religious, and how to develop a plan for self care
- Learn how to productively engage the challenges and joys of ministry

This 4-part webinar series begins Nov. 15, 2012. Learn more at [SLIconnect.org](http://SLIconnect.org).

## Saint Luke Institute's expertise is now online at SLIconnect.org

Saint Luke Institute's expert knowledge is now online, with practical tools for a healthy life and ministry, experienced presenters in psychological and spiritual health, and programs designed for individual skill-building and group learning and discussion. SLIconnect.org will offer webinars, on-demand programs and additional educational resources for clergy, consecrated religious and lay leaders. Upcoming programs include:

- *Strength Journey Webinar Series*  
This four-part series will focus on how to maximize meaning and personal fulfillment in ministry. Starts Nov. 15, 2012.
- *Bridge to Christ Webinar Series*  
Each session will cover a different topic such as navigating challenging personalities, nurturing spiritual health, managing emotions, embracing transition and establishing good boundaries for ministerial effectiveness. Starts Jan. 24, 2013.



**SLIconnect**  
Connect. Grow. Renew.

### Fr. Quinn Conners rejoins clinical staff

Rev. Quinn Conners, O.Carm., Ph.D., has returned to the clinical staff of Saint Luke Institute after completing a term as provincial and director of formation at Whitefriars Hall, Washington, DC. He holds a doctorate in clinical psychology and is a sought-after presenter in the areas of psychology and spirituality, sexuality and vocational discernment. He originally served on the Institute's staff from 1997-2004.

### Support our ministry

"My residential treatment at SLI and the continuing care visits have made me a better person and therefore a better servant as a Catholic priest." - former client

Please consider making a gift in honor of a priest, consecrated sister or brother who made a positive difference in your life. Donate online at [www.sli.org](http://www.sli.org).

## Thank you!

Saint Luke Institute was proud to honor Most Reverend Paul S. Loverde, Bishop of Arlington, with the 2012 Saint Luke Award. The award was presented during the the Saint Luke Institute Annual Benefit on Oct. 15 in Washington, DC.

Rev. Monsignor Edward J. Arsenault, the President/CEO of Saint Luke Institute, noted Bishop Loverde's support and advocacy on behalf of healthy ministry for clergy and religious. The \$350,000 raised during the evening will support the Institute's scholarship fund. This fund helps to ensure that no priest or religious is turned away from needed care because of an inability to pay.

To learn more the Annual Benefit or how to support the scholarship fund, please contact Carolyn Boyle at 301-445-7970.



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