How Can We Allow Character to Matter?

By Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman

“Friends don’t count in fair weather. It is when trouble comes that friends count.”

- Harry S. Truman

The men and women who successfully mounted the World War II effort are spoken of as the best generation in the 20th century. Faced with a terrible crisis from which they could have turned, they instead embraced the occasion. The Allies worked together not only to help win the war, but also to usher in an era of unprecedented progress, prosperity and innovation. Now, in the tragic events of September 11 and their aftermath, people worldwide face another terrible crisis. This one is difficult to ignore, but we might be tempted to turn from it psychologically by letting “them” (elected officials, diplomats, members of the armed forces, the police, NATO, the UN, the CDC, the USPS, the FBI and the CIA) handle matters while we get back to business as usual. Feeling powerless as individuals and trusting to the acronymed powers-that-be to win the war against terrorism may or may not be effective in resolving the immediate crisis. But it is a certainty that if we return to our obsessions with reality TV, the WWF and Britney Spears, no one will speak of us as the best generation of the 21st century, or even as a fair to middling generation.

Times of Trouble Can Evoke Character

Muscle physiology distinguishes between tonic activity—the baseline electrical activity when muscles are idle—and phasic activity—the burst of electrical activity that occurs when muscles are challenged and contract. Most psychology is about tonic activity. Introversion, intelligence, depression and anger, for example, are all measured in the absence of any real-world challenge, in the hope these characteristics will predict what a person actually does when challenged. How well do tonic measures fare? Does IQ predict a truly canny response to a customer saying no? Does tonic depression predict collapse when a person is fired? “Moderately well, but imperfectly” is the best general answer. Tonic measures are only moderate predictors of phasic action. We call this imperfect prediction the Harry Truman effect. After a largely undistinguished life, Truman, to almost everyone’s surprise, rose to the occasion upon the death of FDR, and became one of the great Presidents of the United States.

We need a psychology of rising to the occasion. Evolution has probably been very interested in rising to the occasion. In the struggle for winning a mate or surviving a predator’s attack, those of our ancestors who rose to the occasion passed on their genes. The losers did not. Their tonic characteristics—depression, waist circumference, sleep patterns—probably did not count for much, except insofar as they contributed to the Harry Truman effect. We all possess strengths that we may not display until we are truly challenged. Why were those who won World War II a great generation? Not because they were made of different stuff than we are. Rather, they faced a time of trouble that evoked their internal strengths of character, and the larger world allowed these strengths to matter.

Crises may not forge character, but they reveal it; and a science of character is necessarily a phasic psychology. The purpose of this essay is to suggest there are things we can do so the character revealed in the wake of September 11 will be a strong one, a good one and an enduring one. Not too long ago, it would have been hopelessly passé if not downright reactionary to speak about good character. But this essay coincides with heightened societal concern about character, a concern underscored by September 11 and its aftermath.

Character Is Plural

What does character mean? So long as we fail to identify the specifics, different groups—despite a now common concern for human goodness—will simply talk past one another when attempting to address the issue. The emerging psychology of character approaches the topic by assuming that good character is composed of a variety of strengths that people possess to varying degrees. That is, different people have different profiles of character strengths. Some of us are wise, and others courageous. Some of us are zestful and humorous, others prudent and self-controlled. Kindness is the hallmark of some folks, whereas creativity is the defining feature of others. Character strengths can be learned,
although different people acquire different ones in accordance with their idiosyncratic histories. Regardless, once learned, character strengths can be deliberately enabled. So the task that now faces us is twofold:

- As individuals, we need to look within ourselves to identify the signature strengths we already possess.
- As members of groups and organizations, especially if we are in positions of leadership and influence, we need to do everything possible to arrange situations to allow the signature strengths of individuals to matter.

These recommendations may sound clichéd, but they are at odds with typical assumptions and practices, especially in the United States. Americans are fascinated by the remediation of weaknesses and shortcomings, devoting huge amounts of time, effort and money to identifying them, decrying them (at least in others) and trying to change them (if only during the first week of January). But in a time of crisis, the world cannot afford the luxury of focusing on what people do poorly if it means neglecting what people already do well. Surely, most of us have noticed the once-looming flaws of New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani or United States President George W. Bush have faded to insignificance as these leaders have risen to the occasion marked by the tragedy of September 11.

Our thinking here has been shaped by the philosophy of the Gallup Organization. In its consulting role to businesses around the world, Gallup helps work organizations identify what workers already do well and then urges these organizations to put people in positions that capitalize on their strengths. Indeed, Gallup has discovered the answer to a very simple question, "Does your job allow you to do every day what you do best?" provides rather remarkable information. Workers who can answer this question in the affirmative are more productive, have better morale and are less likely to quit. And workplaces in which a large number of individuals can answer this question in the affirmative are excellent organizations by any and all criteria.

### Table 1. Ubiquitous Strengths of Character

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Wisdom and Knowledge</td>
<td>curiosity/interest/fascination with the world, love of learning, judgment/critical thinking/open-mindedness, practical intelligence/creativity/originality/ingenuity, perspective</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Courage</td>
<td>valor, industry/perseverance, integrity/honest/authenticity, zest/enthusiasm/vitality</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Love</td>
<td>intimacy/reciprocal attachment/capacity to love and be loved, kindness/generosity/nurturance, social intelligence/personal intelligence/emotional intelligence</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Justice</td>
<td>citizenship/duty/loyalty/teamwork, equity/fairness, leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Temperance</td>
<td>forgiveness/mercy/tolerance, modesty/humility, prudence/caution, self-control/self-regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Transcendence</td>
<td>awe/wonder/appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope/optimism/future-mindedness, playfulness/humor, spirituality/sense of purposefaith/religiousness</td>
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A One-Size-Fits-All Approach to Good Character Does Not Work

In this time of crisis, the Gallup philosophy deserves wide implementation. Those with the character strength of ingenuity should be asked to devise new ways of doing old things in light of the changed world, and we should follow their advice. Those with the character strength of fairness should be asked to mediate among quarreling parties, and we should endorse their solutions. Those with the character strength of courage should be asked to do things in which danger is a possibility, and we should thank them for so doing, even if their courageous act is simply taking a flight or opening mail. And, of course, those with the character strength of leadership should lead. One of the most important tasks of leadership is getting out of the way of people with other strengths of character. People should be allowed to do what they do best.

Surprisingly to those of us steeped in cultural relativism, there is great consensus across history and culture in what are regarded as character strengths. Table 1, right, presents our attempt to classify, drawing on numerous sources, such ubiquitous strengths under six broad categories corresponding to what we believe to be universal moral virtues.

Signature Strengths Are Not a Mystery to Those Who Possess Them
We have found individuals can speak with fidelity, candor and sophistication about what they do well. Furthermore, people's signature strengths are not a mystery to those of us in their vicinity, as long as the setting in which we have observed them has allowed them to be evident. We have found teachers can report most accurately on strengths related to a student's academic performance, like curiosity and love of learning. And we have found friends and family members can report most accurately on strengths related to a loved one's interpersonal functioning, like intimacy and forgiveness. If you suspect you have not had the opportunity to observe the full range of someone's strengths, ask him or her and listen seriously to what is said.

The Situation Matters

Character strengths do not exist in a vacuum, and one's setting determines whether a strength is transformed from a potentiality to an actuality.

- Groups, organizations and institutions that desire given strengths to be shown by their members must establish norms and values that legitimize and reward the display of these strengths.
- We need to hear stories about individuals who embody given strengths. With all apologies to Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan, athletes are not the heroes we now require. Their feats conflate character with exceptional talent in such a way to inspire only our awe. Instead, we must find heroes in our own group and let their examples elevate us to do our best.
- Accordingly, groups, organizations and institutions need to establish ceremonies and rituals that recognize and celebrate desired strengths. Such ceremonies need not be expensive or time-consuming to let people know that what they do well has been recognized and valued.
- Merely naming a strength in someone seems to have the benefit of amplifying it, and thus we alert you to a face-valid questionnaire that we have placed online that identifies a person's signature strengths: http://www.positivemind.org/strengths. You might ask the people with whom you associate to take the survey and report the results to you. Then you can all decide how to allow everyone's strengths to matter.

Organizational Practices Set the Stage

Finally, we should recognize that groups also have good or bad character. "Good" organizations enable "good" actions on the part of their members. Indeed, it is not realistic to expect individuals to deploy their character strengths if their social setting works against so doing. Here we are speculating, but we strongly suspect that various organizational-level practices set the stage for good character of all stripes:

- freedom
- democracy
- equity
- courtesy
- generosity
- clemency

How these practices are instantiated within given groups will of course vary with local textures and cultures, but leaders must ask themselves (and others) if these practices really prevail in their organizations. If not, they need to change matters so that they do.

Acknowledgment

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Suggested Reading

