**Standing Up Strong with Neal Mayerson Part 1 transcript**

**SPEAKERS**

**Jackie Congedo, Chief Community Engagement & External Relations Officer, the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center**

**Dr. Neal Mayerson, Founder, VIA Institute on Character**

**Jackie Congedo** 00:03

These are your superpowers positive character strengths. You have them, all of them some more than others.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 00:10

What we are best suited to do in our lives connects with who we are and our character strengths.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:19

Standing up strong, activating your superpowers is how you can change the

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 00:24

world. And you're pioneering the future of humanity.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:27

Let's start right now. I'm Jackie Congedo. And our guest today is Dr. Neal Mayerson, the founder of the VIA Institute on character, Neal holds a PhD in Clinical Psychology and practiced for over 15 years. In 1999, he collaborated with Dr. Martin Seligman, on the founding of the field of positive psychology and the VIA classification of character strengths and virtues was born. Neal is here to share his personal insights on this research, how we seen it, change lives, and how you can start putting it to use in your life right now to be an upstander. So, Neal, it's great to have you, it's, thank you for being here.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 01:04

It's great to be here.

**Jackie Congedo** 01:05

As I was sharing, when we thought about the seminal episode of this series, the standing up strong series, there really is no better person than you did help kind of anchor that for listeners and for our viewers. And I want to provide just a little background for folks about the collaboration and why, you know, why is a holocaust center talking about character strengths, right? So you know, we have this history that we tell at HHC at the center, and we invite people to think about folks who stood up in the face of this inhumanity and injustice and to think about, you know, what was it and I believe actually in, in the actual museum in the second film, and in that Points of Light film, which I know via, and you know, you and Donna, help collaborate on the questions posed, what was it about them? Is it just that they were extraordinary people? Or is that actually the potential for that lives in each of us in different ways? And in sort of different iterations? And so the answer is actually, that it does live inside each of us that it's not just that there are, you know, extraordinarily wonderful people, or extraordinarily horrible people in the world, it's that we all have this common humanity, and it lives in character strengths, right? That we can tap into the history, of course, Holocaust history helps us understand the need for upstanders, right, and we can use this language of character strengths as a way to talk about upstander behavior, and to kind of identify that in ourselves and leverage it. So as I mentioned, you and Donna, the Mayerson Foundation, VIA Institute on Character has been involved with HHC for a number of years, back to the foundations of of, of the work, and certainly our move to Union Terminal and helping to build the humanity gallery. But before we talk about that, I just wanted to take you sort of back to the beginning of the story, for those who are unfamiliar, unfamiliar with this framework of character strengths, help people kind of get an idea for what it is, how would you explain it? How do you describe it? Well,

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 03:08

the modern field of psychology was, was largely born from World War Two, and a lot of emotional problems that veterans were returning with. And that resulted in the government establishing the National Institute of Mental Health. So we could start doing research to really understand what was going on. What can go wrong and and how these people were suffering and of course, how other people who weren't at war, were suffering with depression and anxiety and a whole host of problems of living. Life's not easy. And so. And so the field of psychology up until our effort in 1999 2000, was really focused on what goes wrong in our lives. What things can we correct, in order to suffer less. As a practicing psychotherapist at the time I was seeing people who let's say were depressed. And if I got them less depressed, that was kind of considered successful, but I knew that that was only part of the story. The other part of the story was, what were they going to do with their lives now that they weren't being held back as much by depression? So then, you know, the so when the, when Marty Seligman, who was the president of the American Psychological Association at the time started talking about, oh, maybe the field should start shifting towards understanding the, the good side of our existence, things, the reasons that we live, our aspirations, our goals, our pleasures, our joys, all that part of life, the reason we want to get over depression and over anxiety, etc, so we can enjoy the, the good part of life. And so that's we decided, at the time, the main people who had been focusing on that had either been theologians, philosophers, or kind of modern pop psych people who weren't necessarily

**Jackie Congedo** 05:59

clinical, right, this one clinical wasn't grounded in a clinical.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 06:03

Yeah, you know, people kind of like personal growth gurus and stuff like that, who weren't necessarily committed and bound to having their work rooted in science, right. And so we decided back then, well, let's really try to shift some of the science in the field of social science shifted towards understanding what's best about human beings. How do we use those characteristics to build good lives for ourselves individually and collectively? Because you don't naturally, the answers to that don't naturally come? If the question you're posing is, how can I be less depressed? Yeah, you don't get to the same answer. Yes. So we decided, let's make an unprecedented effort that had never been made before. In really, the conversation started in 99, we really hit the ground running in 2000. And decided to create a new science, a new scientific effort to understand that question. And what we found, it happens to be 24 years ago, we started uncovering that there are 24, he said, and

**Jackie Congedo** 07:29

even think about that, but you're right, there's one for every year since Yeah, 24

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 07:33

essential parts of our psychological being that are really important. And our keys, our tools are levers that we can use, to build those good lives for ourselves individually, to become best versions of ourselves, and to help everyone around us do the same. And that's what we started 24 years ago, by bringing together the top scientists in the world, and top scholars in the world, over 50 of them. And we took three years to study that it doesn't seem

**Jackie Congedo** 08:12

like a very long time considering the fact that you were pioneering a whole new space of the science. I mean, it was something that was totally, it didn't exist before. Yeah, it was

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 08:21

three years really to, to just establish the two basic tools that any science needs. You need a good nomenclature. What is it that we're trying to understand? What are the things that's that? Are? That became the 24? Character Strengths? Yep. And so it's like, well, let's focus in on and define what are the things we're actually interested in learning about? It's these 24 things, right? And then any science needs to know, how do you measure those things. And so we created a scientifically valid measurement tools for measuring it in adults and in youth. And with those two tools in hand, scientists around the world could start studying these psychological characteristics and how they operate in our lives.

**Jackie Congedo** 09:18

And, and you're talking when you talk about the tools, you're talking about this the inventories, right, that's 24 character strengths. And the surveys that people can take are the measurements. Yes, yes. Which is really amazing. It's been easy to take and it's,

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 09:34

yeah, it's 15 Takes about 15 minutes, usually for somebody and it it gives you essential information about who you are as a person and and it's been taken by over 30 million people in every country.

**Jackie Congedo** 09:53

Wow. Yeah. Well, I can imagine that you probably never imagined when you approach Just, you know, Marty Seligman that this was going to transform humanity, arguably, in this way. And I mean, looking back at that we're talking this, you know, this month about this idea of the ripple effect, you know, one pebble in a pond ripples outwards. And so you don't know what one conversation in this case or what one idea can spark and what happens outwards. But looking back on that, I mean, you must just be kind of what an incredible example of that

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 10:31

it has been to refer back to the Beatles. It has been a magical mystery tour.

**Jackie Congedo** 10:38

Magical history, it's

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 10:41

probably in many ways. So time and time again, across the years, you're right. When we started off, we had no grandiose vision. I mean, I knew we were starting something that over time, would start to tip humanity towards its better nature. I knew that

**Jackie Congedo** 11:00

and how many people can say that, by the way, that that, that they've contributed in a way that's, that really allows people to live into the best of humanity. Right? And that's, I mean, that is remarkable.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 11:11

Well, this gets to the, to the ripple effect, right? Because actually, we all do that every day. So every day, things we do and say, in our lives, impact others, and our impact on others than ripples to how they impact with others. And so it's it's kind of just a difference of scale. But really, when you think about it, every day, which is a reason why it's good to have a consciousness, about how am I coming to the world? What am I bringing right today, to my life? And what am I putting out into the world? Am I putting out a lot of negativity? Am I putting out a lot of stuff that's going to create conflict and chaos and all of that? Or am I putting out into the world things that are going to make myself and others stronger, and more able to become best versions of themselves. And the Holocaust & Humanity Center became a perfect venue. Because the main story is, on the surface, the main story is about one of the darkest chapters in human history, yes, and how dark, how inhumane we can be to one another. And like you had said in your intro, we all have these 24 positive characteristics within us to build from and to build good lives. On the flip side, which is a lot of people don't like to recognize this. But there was over the last couple of years, I think it was I read a book and saw a documentary, I think it was called Ordinary Men. Yes. Have you seen that?

**Jackie Congedo** 13:15

I haven't seen the documentary I know of the work I so I now have the book.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 13:19

And it points out. How prior to the Nazi regime. Germans were just people like you and me. And the German man, I'll focus on the men because most of their army were were men. German men were just guys living their life. And then as a matter of circumstance, as that evolved, it pulled out the darkest part. That darkest part, we're also all capable of that. Yes. And that's why it's so important. Not that we just remember that something horrible happen, but that we start to learn. How did it happen? How did it happen? Because we don't want I don't want that to happen to me. I don't want to find myself all of a sudden, I shouldn't say all of a sudden, but in circumstances in which the very worst parts of me are being drawn out. And I become an abomination of myself. Yeah. I'm capable of that. And we all are capable of it to different degrees, right. And then what the Holocaust center also in that narrative, and in that story, it's not just about perpetrators. But as you say, it's also about upstanders. There are so many points of light in that darkness that kept light alive and kept people alive and kept hope alive, which ultimately resolved that darkest chapter, yes. And as the Holocaust &, Humanity Center and educators about the Holocaust emphasize never again. Well, that's an aspiration.

**Jackie Congedo** 15:29

Right? And it's not a promise. It's not I mean, it's not

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 15:33

pre we can promise that we will dedicate ourselves. That's right, that's figuring that out. But it can evitable it's not inevitable because we're all capable. That's something that's amazing about human beings. We have this incredible range of capacity within us from being a boy abhorrently. Violent, and aggressive and inhumane, to being full of amazing grace, and compassion, it's all within. We run the gamut in terms of what we're capable of our challenge now is how do we build a humanity that makes it less likely that the darkness prevails? And more likely that the lightness prevails? And one thing we know just from our common experience, and from physics is lightness and darkness, don't lightness crowds out darkness? That's right. If you put a light in a room, it doesn't coexist with darkness, right? This will either be light or dark, or Shades of Grey, 50 Shades of Grey, or in

**Jackie Congedo** 16:49

this case, maybe a little purple. So, okay, so yeah, so this tool, this framework around Character Strengths helps us, because I love what you say about the, you know, this, the way we think about what we're capable of right? What actually happens lives moment to moment. And it lives in the choices that we make about how we show up in the world, how we treat other people, and how we choose to actually see ourselves, right. So the beauty of this character strength framework is that it elevates for people and illuminates for people. What is naturally strong about them? In terms of the best of their humanity, right? Before we get too into it, I would I just would love to know, I don't know that I've ever asked you what your top character strength is, or maybe I haven't used to but I'm, I'm blanking on that. And I would love for our listeners to know. Yeah,

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 17:47

my top character strength, I've taken the, as you'd imagine the survey many times, yeah. And there is some variation. As circumstances in your life changes, certain characteristics tend to be more relevant, and therefore they get applied more. And therefore when they answer the survey, they come out with higher scores. So there's some variation that way. And, but every time I've taken it, creativity and perseverance, always show up in my top strengths.

**Jackie Congedo** 18:29

So that is so telling. Because when I think about the work that you did in this field to pioneer it, what were essential, right, creativity, and perseverance, which ultimately, is the drive it takes to build something completely new, right? So what a beautiful manifestation of those strengths, this work and this contribution to the field and to our world. Do you have a favorite strength?

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 18:58

Well, my favorite strength those are my favorite strengths, because those are my essence of being. And so you know, when people have asked me before, I'm of age where some people my age, have retired or ready or are retiring, and they go, are you gonna retire? And I'm like, what would you? What would you do if you retire? And like, the only thing I am certain of from knowing that those parts of myself yeah, is that I would I need to continue to create. Yeah, and I need to continue to work hard at something.

**Jackie Congedo** 19:45

And the great thing is that that's what you're doing now. What's there to change? Right.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 19:50

And in terms of a ripple effect? I think I think I'm more likely to get a ripple effect out of creating and working hard in this domain, then let's say on the golf course,

**Jackie Congedo** 20:06

it would be an unlikely scenario that you would have more of an impact on the golf course. I don't want to.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 20:10

There's not gonna be any ripple effect except people leaving the golf course.

**Jackie Congedo** 20:16

Well, there's too much to fit into one episode, so we're sharing the next half of our conversation with him in part two. Our thanks to the Mayerson Family Foundation and the VIA Institute on Character for supporting this series. Check out the show notes for a link to take the free character strengths survey. You'll also see our email address. Let us know how Character Strengths show up in your life. The Upstander Ripple Effect is a production of the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center. This series is part of the Cynthia & Harold Guttman Family Center for Storytelling. Visit us in person at historic Union Terminal in Cincinnati, Ohio or online at Holocaustandhumanity.org Listen anytime on iHeart, Spotify, Apple podcasts or you can visit Holocaust&humanity.org/podcast. You can also connect with us on Instagram and Tiktok @holocaust&humanity and X and Facebook @CincyHHC. Executive Producers are David Wise and Jackie Congedo. Managing producer is Anne Thompson. Consulting producer is Joyce Kamen. Technical producer is Ron Thomas and Technical Director is Ethan Spanja. Editing by Robert Mills. Opening sequence editor is Ken Furman. Theme music is generously provided by Kick Lee. Recorded at Technical Consulting Partners studios in Cincinnati, Ohio.