**Standing Up Strong with Neal Mayerson Part 2 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 world.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 00:25

And you're pioneering the future of humanity.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:27

Let's start right now. I'm Jackie Congedo. And today we're bringing you the second part of our conversation with Dr. Neal Mayerson, founder of the VIA Institute on Character and one of the fathers of the field of positive psychology. Neal is an expert on the science of 24 positive character strengths that lie within each of us. When we learn what our top strengths are, and activate them, we can actually start ripples of positive change in our lives and the lives of everyone around us. So back to the specific strengths. And you know, we'll be sure in the show notes to share obviously, a lot of links, including the link to the to the inventory, the survey that you can take and a link to more about the character strengths, but one of the biggest. So the unique aspect, as you mentioned, are sort of hinted on about the collaboration between the center and VIA, is, you know, particularly this framework to understand upstander behavior, right, and we think about upstander behavior as people who stand up for themselves and others, right. It's not just an external thing, there's an internal mindfulness aspect to this important one actually a primary one, I would say. But, you know, I think a lot of people at first glance, say, alright, well, I'm looking at my top strengths, you know, the top five and bravery is and in my top five strengths and standing up, I actually in some, in some instances, you could say whether it's for myself or for other people requires that impetus, that bravery, that courage to summon to do it. So help people kind of understand why that's not what it seems.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 02:04

I think it's easy to point that out, yeah. If you conjure up the analogy of a mama bear.

**Jackie Congedo** 02:16

I don't have to conjure, I am one. But yes,

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 02:20

you know, mothers, whether, in general, they're brave or not. When it comes to their kids, they're going to do what it takes. And they'll muster up the courage and bravery to do what needs to be done, because it's important enough. And these character strengths, once we come to understand how important they are in our own life, and it's how important it is in defining what's essential about who we are our own personal identity, and then understand that other people have the same thing. Then it becomes a it's a different story.

**Jackie Congedo** 03:11

Right? Right. Well, it's as if it's, it's a, it's a coveted protected piece of your identity.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 03:17

Cherished, we value at very, its are high, and that's via right values and actions. I use an action originally. And so. So when the when the world violates things that are really, really important to us, whether it's our kids, whether it's our sense of fairness, whether it's our sense of people should be allowed to be creative. Whether it's, you know, people should be allowed to work hard at things and make progress in their lives. Whatever it is, these 24 Character Strengths represent the things that we care the most about. And when the world is acting against the things that are nearest and dearest to our heart. We tend to step up and do what needs to happen. What needs to get done more often to protect it.

**Jackie Congedo** 04:10

Yeah, we morph into mama bears. Yeah. And all of a sudden, the bravery is there. It's towed. Towed forward.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 04:16

It's, it's there. We don't think about it. How do I mean? Obviously, for somebody who's characteristically not very brave, or even, you know, my mom used to say to me, I didn't think she was right. But she used to say, I'm a coward. But no, because I've seen how much you're not. Yeah. So what's the pathway to really standing up against injustice. The pathway is knowing those things about yourself that are most important that you want to make sure is preserved for you. So you can be who you are in the world. And understanding that you're not the only I'm not the only person who cares about creativity and perseverance. It's really important to the world. And when you think about all these different profiles, right? If you think about how many different versions of 24 profiles can there be, there's billions and billions, more than there are people on earth. And so what nature has created in that regard, is we've heard the word biodiversity, we look out the world, and we see all this diversity of things that are living. Well, now we can look out in the world and see psycho diversity, all this diversity and psychological makeup of our identity. And just as in biodiversity, where every part plays a role, an essential role in essential role. So you pull out mosquitoes and stuff, you know, I don't know, I'm no expert in that. But like too much, you know, yes, everything falls apart, you know, and everything's connected to everything else. It's the psycho diversity that's defined by these character strengths, that allow us to operate to get all the things done. I mean, if, if you just think about the food you ate, for lunch, or breakfast today, right, just take one item, the bread, and you just think about all the pieces and parts to get the bread from the, from the seed to the farmer who planted it too, though, you know, the whole

**Jackie Congedo** 06:38

harvesting, the baking, the transport, the whole

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 06:41

bit, the distribution channels, the everything. It does take a diversity of you know, that's why, you know, when years ago, when the garbage collectors, trash collectors in New York City went on, strike, yep, everybody came to boldly to understand, thank God, there are people who are carved out to be to do that. We're all right and play this role in society. And it's true with everything. And what we are best suited to do in our lives, connects with who we are, and our character strengths.

**Jackie Congedo** 07:23

So it's, it's funny, I can imagine people who are discovering this for the first time in their later years, it probably is so illuminating. And in a way, reflective maybe of what they have already come to know. But the the ability to be able to, like you said, sit in front of a computer for 15 minutes and take this inventory and have these insights about what's important.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 07:43

What's important there, because I'm one of those people when I took the survey. And I got my results. I was like, Well, you know, it wasn't the like, wow, I had no idea. It's like, well, yeah, kinda. Yeah, it was like that. Yeah. But one of the things that really comes out of it, I describe my, those character strengths I mentioned to you. I described them as my wild horses. Right, because they are the things that are front and center, they're most likely to come out in situations in my life. It's what I'm most is what the characteristics that are most accessible to me. I have the most practice in using and what as a result, I'm prone to misuse them and overuse it. We call over you. Yeah, yes, yes, I miss you. So in other words, using it in the wrong situation, when it's not really called for using it at an intensity that is over the top and brings out negative results. So once one of the great things that I learned when I found I knew I was creative, but it really helps solidify. Oh, I see that what's that's what makes me tick. I can now look back on my life and look at the decisions I made, and see how it's connected to my need for creativity. But I also can no use it for planning forward. Like you were saying, Well, what if I retire? What would I do? I know I have to do something creative, or else I won't feel like I'm living my life. Right?

**Jackie Congedo** 09:23

Yeah, authentically. Yeah. Yeah. I think my, one of my number one, I think my number one character strength is actually judgment, which is an interesting one and not what you know, at first, I was like, wait a minute, I don't judge people, but it actually is about discernment. It's actually about, you know, it's

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 09:42

about critical thinking able to weigh it's about being able to weigh things dispassionately bring all points of view in and

**Jackie Congedo** 09:51

that probably has a lot to do with my background and, you know, news and journalism and, you know, into even some of the JCRC work that I did in the past and just having To, you know, reconcile differences and, and understand the intersection of things. So

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 10:05

when I would make a guess, if you knew and looked at your family history enough, but there's also a genetic component. Yeah. Have you done any research about that there has been research, that's an interesting thing, in general on psychological characteristics, and their genetic basis. And, and some research specifically around the character strengths, but you're

**Jackie Congedo** 10:31

only telling me you're talking about a field that's only 25 years old, 24 years old. And so there's not it's really only a generation that's been around, you know, that's existed or evolved since the foundations of the science, this framework. So while yes, there have been studies of that, I mean, you really are sitting so close to the origin of this new science that, you know, once generations have passed, you'll be able to look back and say, Oh, well, that person's grandchild and great grandchild, or whatever, you know, have the same profile. But we Yeah, at this point, you know, there aren't grandparents who've taken it, whose grandchildren have also or whose great grandchildren have also at this point, because it's only been around for 25 years.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 11:12

Yeah. But you can, you can kind of look back at people or you can, and you did this summer with the Humanity Center, of looking back to people who you couldn't talk to anymore. And if you're able to look at their story, or especially talk to people who knew them well, family members or friends or colleagues, can you start to discern? Yes, they had and what the results probably would look like if they had the privilege of having this available to them when they were alive. Yeah, yeah,

**Jackie Congedo** 11:45

it's a fascinating science. And the fact that it is a science, I think, is really important for people to know that, you know, it feels, I think, on the surface, people can say, Oh, well, that's just a fun little thing. People pick some, you know, character, these are, this is scientifically validated research, many years of which that went into codifying a real tool for for humanity, which is, which is amazing. We're almost at a time, which that went very quickly.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 12:14

But I wanted to point out one thing, which is, the other thing that's magical about the character strengths, is we have some personal qualities that are good for ourselves, and not necessarily good for others. Okay, so, you know, maybe we tend to be aggressive. And that aggression might help us accomplish some of our goals, and what we want to accomplish. But it might deprive people, other people from similar opportunities, and might be more of a win lose kind of characteristic. The amazing thing about the character strengths are they are win-win characteristics. So when you use them, you can use them to better yourself, while at the same time advancing the interests of others, or at least not getting in the way and hampering others from doing the same. That's pretty,

**Jackie Congedo** 13:26

That's really profound. I mean, and that's, so you're basically saying, it's not like we're all taking, it's not like it's part of one pie where, you know, you take a piece and there's less for other people or infringes on others. It's it's inherently, that when you lean into what's strong about you, and your strengths, and again, the ripple, right, that creates an environment where other people either aren't less likely to thrive, and in some cases more likely to thrive as well.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 13:55

Yes. There it's a it's kind of a apropos discovery, or I call it a discovery, the discovery of the 24 character strengths is an apropos response to what a often quoted famous quote from Rabbi Hillel, which is where he recognized if I'm not for myself, then who will be right so that's a recognition of, I need to look out for number one, I need to look out for myself. So, if I'm not for myself, who will be if I'm only for myself, then what am I? Right? And that's a rhetorical question because it's like, we are a social species. We're social animals. We have to look out for each other. Yeah. If we just make our existence a game of musical chairs where, where every rotation somebody drops, right? And then we're the last

**Jackie Congedo** 15:06

What are we? What have we become? Right? Yeah.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 15:08

I mean, are we?

**Jackie Congedo** 15:09

Are we

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 15:10

It's an apocalyptic movie?

**Jackie Congedo** 15:11

Yeah. Is this even humanity anymore that we're talking about? Right?

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 15:14

We'll stop to exist. So. So it's like, an if I'm only for myself, so the character and then if not now, then when that was the, the urgency of their part, the urgency. And that's kind of the character strengths or a an answer to that a tool that can be used to respond to the wisdom of that quote, which is, I can help myself, I can look out for myself advance my own interest, while at the same time doing this helping others do the same. And as the work you're doing at the Holocaust center, and I can do it now, not later. And it's nice moment right now, in this moment, right now, yeah, I can be putting my light out into the world. And in that little way, crowding out the darkness that might otherwise occupy that space.

**Jackie Congedo** 16:13

Absolutely. And we need all the light we can get right now and into the future. And those when you turn on your light, it also encourages others, as you were saying, to turn their lights. And that's that ripple that we, that we talked about. You know, I'm looking back at my questions, because you're such a wealth of information, I hate to leave anything on the table. But you don't actually I'd like to end with this. Talking about the ripple effect. And you know, when you think about it, this conversation is a stone that we're throwing into a pond, right, or light that we're turning on. And I don't know how many people are gonna listen to it. I hope a lot of people, I don't know who or where or when. And so I was thinking about the potential for this conversation to actually be the center of a ripple that hopefully touches people in a way. Who knows how, yeah, I mean, I guess, do you have a sort of a favorite example of that ripple inaction that people can either in the use of character strengths or in the use of your just your work is in psychology, or, you know, in your work in philanthropy? Is there is there an example that you think is particularly powerful of when you have we're talking about how sometimes you don't always get to see the ripple come back? You don't always know what's downstream? Right. But have you? Have you ever seen, I'm sure, many times or certainly sometimes. What's a favorite moment for you and seeing the way an action one action of yours is rippled out?

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 17:58

Yeah, I don't, I don't. A single instance doesn't come to mind. But many instances come to mind. I don't know if I don't have time to tell her a little story. Yeah. So people all around the world are using these character strengths as a result of our work. And so a first grade class in Shanghai was integrated the character strengths into the classroom. And they decided to share their experience with via, yep. And they went low tech and just use their phones to film video, and send us the video. And we could see firsthand what was going on now part of the video was they had asked, besides talking to the kids, they had asked the parents, what they were noticing. And I remember there was a mother, her son's name was Hudson. And she described Hudson at the beginning of the year as a very anxious child who was always afraid to try anything new. And he caused him to be kind of withdrawn, and to feel kind of bad about himself as he saw other kids doing things that he was too nervous to do. And then the mother said, as the year went on, and Hudson started learning about all these qualities that he had that everybody has including himself. And he came to understand that he actually possesses bravery.

**Jackie Congedo** 20:08

Wow. In his top strength?

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 20:12

No, not in its top strengths.

**Jackie Congedo** 20:14

Oh, but he, he saw that it was within him is what you're saying.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 20:16

He saw that had the capacity for bravery. And that his mother said, and then we went on, we went on a family trip. And there were all sorts of new experiences. And he went, after all those new experiences, he learned how to ski used to be afraid to pet a dog used to be afraid of animal he used to be an owl says, Now, he's opened himself up to new experience. And I was thinking, well, this kid's like, five years old, wow, the trajectory of his entire life has changed now. Because if he hadn't been exposed to that, at that early age, he would have continued to be anxious to avoid new experiences, and the ones that would have compounded, it would have become more cemented in his mind of who he was. And his life would have unfolded completely differently. And then I'm sitting here thinking like, wait a second, we started this thing in Philadelphia, and in Cincinnati. And now there's a kid and a family in Shanghai. whose life has changed as a result. And that's the kind of thing that like, it blows my mind. And there are many examples of that, that I can think of, I can't think that there's a favorite one, but I am. I've been amazed, kind of dumbfounded. Yeah, by how much that happens, because people are taking this knowledge. There. Another thing that this work does is it really is a counterbalance to this inner critic, that we all tend to carry around with ourselves and this inner critic causes such mayhem in our lives. It's telling us we can't do this, and we're not good enough. And we're not smart enough. And we're not pretty enough. And we're not talented enough. And we're not not not not not Yeah. And what this work does, is it helps make the transition of a approaching life, moving it from what's wrong to what's strong. And that makes, that makes a whole difference in how people are living their lives. So I know those ripples are happening. I can't keep up with 30 million people 30 million ripples anymore, and they don't, you know, very infrequently. Do you actually hear about the ripple that your impact has made in the world? But you know, it's there. So I don't, yeah, so I don't have a favorite but

**Jackie Congedo** 23:27

that well, that's a great example. It's a great example of just something on the other side of the world that you wouldn't otherwise even know about. Weren't not for, you know, Mom pulling out her cell phone and taking a video and thinking to share it with you. But to your point, how many of those are actually happening unbeknownst to any of us? And, and the limitless potential...

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 23:46

I'll give you one more example?

**Jackie Congedo** 23:47

Sure.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 23:47

Okay. One more example. There was a, there was a inner city school in Newark, New Jersey, that adopted this work. And I went up and I was interviewing the teachers and the students to see what impact Yeah, well, what was happening there. And there was this was a middle school, and so that it stopped after eighth grade, and I asked one of the eighth graders, I said, Well, you know, how sometimes, you know, school starts a program and then they drop it later and everything and so what do you think the impact would be? If your school decides to drop this program will be the impact? And he said, I feel bad for the all the kids who didn't get to experience what I've experienced. But for myself, he said, I will never be the same. I will never look at my friends the same. I will never look at my family the same. I will never look at myself the same because his consciousness was broadened in how he could look at himself and the judgments he would make about himself. Because one of the things he learned from taking the survey, that love of learning was top was an inner city kid in his environment. That was kind of something to be he was embarrassed about. But when he was in a school culture now, they called it a strength. Yeah. And an important strength. I said, Well, what impact did it have? He said, I used to always sit in the back of the room and never raise my hand. Now I sit in the front of the room and raise my hand all the time.

**Jackie Congedo** 25:35

Wow. Leaning,

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 25:37

Those are ripple effects.

**Jackie Congedo** 25:38

Yeah, powerful one. So and particularly anything about kids, because the potential for those lives, the people they're going to touch and the things they're going to do. I mean, it's Wow, remarkable. And I we are just tremendously grateful to you for joining us for the conversation for the work that you're doing for the ongoing partnership, you know, that you personally have with with us at the museum and you know, the via has with us. And I hope that this is a center of a ripple for a lot of people out there who are listening and thinking about how they can change the way they think about themselves the way they think about the world right now, in this moment.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 26:18

I know it will be and then you'll give them contacts and stuff where they can learn more of, well, what do I do? Or how can I do it?

**Jackie Congedo** 26:30

Yeah, right. Yeah, yeah, well, we'll have all that in the show notes. And also, you know, come down to the museum at Union Terminal. And you can see how we've used this in the museum and how we, how we use it to explore the humanity aspects of the work that we do. And also to understand, as you said, Neil, you know, the the whole concept of human nature, and the fact that we aren't we actually are in the driver's seat about the choices we make to lean into the greatest potential we have and the worst potential, right, well, making those choices to lean into our strengths and into the into the potential.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 27:01

You and your colleagues at the Holocaust center are pioneers.

**Jackie Congedo** 27:08

Wow.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 27:08

And you're pioneering the future of humanity. I appreciate that. I feel honored to know you.

**Jackie Congedo** 27:13

Oh, my gosh. Well, that's, that's that's a huge compliment coming from someone who is an actual pioneer of a whole field. Thank you. Well, thank you for saying that.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 27:23

Nothing happens without kindred spirits linking arms together. No person makes anything important happen. Anything big happen. It's only collectively we do that. So thank you for all you're doing.

**Jackie Congedo** 27:34

Absolutely. Absolutely. Our thanks to Neal, the Mayerson Family Foundation and the VIA Institute on Character for supporting this series. Check out the show notes for a link to take that free character strengths survey and find out what your superhero powers are. 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 Holocaustandhumanity.org/podcast. You can also connect with us on Instagram and Tiktok @holocaustandhumanity, 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. Opening theme music is generously provided by Kick Lee. Recorded at Technical Consulting Partner studios in Cincinnati, Ohio.