



Chapter I

THE NATURE OF STRENGTHS

GALLUP PRESS
1251 Avenue of the Americas
23rd Floor
New York, NY 10020

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Cover design by Chin-Yee Lai
Manufactured in the United States of America

First edition 2002
Second edition 2006

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

ISBN 10: 1-59562-011-7
ISBN 13: 978-1-59562-011-8

At the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, Kerri Strug was a gymnast on the United States women's gold-medal team. Her performance on the vault, as she nursed an injured ankle, remains one of the most memorable in Olympic history.

With 32,000 people in the Georgia Dome and millions watching her on television, Kerri fell on her first attempt at her most difficult twisting vault, severely spraining her left ankle. With less than a minute between vaults, and in great pain, she again attempted the vault, further injuring her ankle — but this time successfully landing on both feet. So she stood erect on one foot, raising both hands to salute the judges, then collapsed to her knees.

The crowd went wild. Kerri's vault earned a 9.712, and the U.S. women won the gold medal.

During that same year, Kerri was a freshman at UCLA. One of her classes required a research paper similar to a mini-doctoral dissertation. Students had to formulate their own research question and develop a questionnaire that was consistent with their research question. Then, the students would administer the questionnaire, collect and analyze the data, draw conclusions, and write a report that described the process. The written report was to be 35-40 pages long.

Taking the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment was one of the class requirements. When Kerri took it, she scored extremely high in the Focus theme. But doesn't that make sense? Who else but a person with tremendous Focus talents could concentrate on completing her most difficult vault on an injured ankle in front of 32,000 screaming fans while Olympic gold hung in the balance? Who else could block out all of those distractions and then land on one foot without falling?

While Kerri certainly had other talents that enabled her to succeed, her Focus talents played a critical role. Without them, she might never have enjoyed such stunning Olympic success.

But there's more to the story. Toward the end of the fall term, as research papers were coming due, Kerri turned her paper in three days early, before any of the other 300-plus UCLA students in the class. She did this while traveling nearly every weekend on a national tour with fellow Olympic medalists. Even more remarkable was the way that Kerri could go out on an arena floor, do a routine, and then go underneath the stands and work on the paper. She would then go back out on the floor and do another routine and return to do more homework.

You see, Kerri also applied her Focus talents to succeed in academics.

Kerri is a remarkable young woman. But the excellence she achieved wasn't due simply to the fact that she naturally possessed talents. She recognized her Focus talents and built on them by adding skills and knowledge to create strength — the ability to produce consistent, near-perfect performance. She obviously did so at the Olympics — even while in severe pain and under tremendous pressure — but she was also able to apply her Focus in academics, where she achieved despite rigorous assignments and the myriad pressures of her athletic career.

Kerri has presented each of us with more than a shared pride in her Olympic success. We can learn from her. You, too, have talents. And in those talents you have the ability to meet challenges and achieve just as surely as Kerri did.

The Basics of Strengths

Talent: The Beginning of Strength

What is a strength? That's a good question, but strength begins with talent, so let's start there. A talent is a naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied. A great number of talents naturally exist within you, and each of them is very specific. They are among the most real and most authentic aspects of your personhood. Your specific set of talents is a major part of what makes you a unique person, and that uniqueness holds great value for you and those around you. And your talents work in various combinations each time you do something very well, in your own unique way.

There is a direct connection between your talents and your achievements. Your talents empower you. They make it possible for you to move to higher levels of excellence and fulfill your potential. This is why it is so important for you to know, understand, and value your talents.

A talent represents a capacity to *do* something. In fact, when you are able to do something very well, you can be sure that at least one of your talents is involved. Just think about all the things you do very well. You'll realize that you have many talents!

And talents help you do something well not just once; they help you do it well over and over again. Because talents are naturally recurring patterns, they are "automatic," almost like breathing, so they repeatedly help you achieve.

That's not all, either. Each of your many talents can enable you to do more than one thing very well. We're not saying that each of your talents enables you to do *everything* very well, but know that each of them can be applied to multiple areas of achievement.

The great value in your talents is not merely that they help you achieve, but that they help you achieve at levels of *excellence*. Your greatest talents are inextricably linked to your top achievements and to what you do best. Your talents make you exceptional. Therefore, coming to know, understand, and value your talents is directly linked to achieving in classes, careers, and throughout your life.

Talent Versus Other Concepts of Ability

The concept of talent is more specific in terms of the quality it describes and the things that various types of talent help a person to do very well. Traditional concepts and measures of ability (for example, I.Q. and aptitude testing) are more global and are not designed to explain what a person can specifically do.

The concept of talent also goes beyond the limits of traditional concepts of academic abilities (for example, in the areas of reading, math, and composition) in that it also addresses the qualities that help a person achieve in all aspects of life.

The 34 Themes of Talent Measured by the Clifton StrengthsFinder

What is a theme? Essentially, it's a group of similar talents.

Kerri Strug once again provides a good illustration. Kerri used a wide variety of talents in the Focus theme to achieve in athletics and academics. Among them was her talent for focusing on the precise steps required to perform complicated gymnastic maneuvers, and, during the intense pressure of the Olympics, her talent for blocking out the distraction of intense pain to produce a gold-medal performance.

Kerri used other types of talents, too. Her talents in the Adaptability theme enabled her to achieve excellence in athletics and academics at the same time. Her talent to balance two extremely high priorities, easily moving from one to the other, was crucial to her success in each area.

As a result of studying top achievers for more than three decades,

Gallup was able to identify more than 400 themes of talent. The 34 most prevalent themes are measured by StrengthsFinder.

Back to Your Question: What Is a Strength?

Now, let's go to the definition of a strength: A strength is the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity.

As you read earlier, the concept of strengths begins with talent. Each person naturally has a group of talents. Talents are like “diamonds in the rough,” whereas strengths are like diamonds that show brilliance after they have been carefully cut and polished.

Your greatest areas of talent, your most likely sources of potential strengths, are identified by StrengthsFinder.

Just as finished diamonds start as diamonds in the rough, strengths begin with talents. And just as rough diamonds are naturally found in the earth, talents are naturally found within you. But while diamonds are refined with blades and polishing wheels, strengths are produced when talents are refined with *knowledge* and *skill*.

Unlike talent, which must naturally exist within you, skills and knowledge can be acquired. Skills are the basic ability to perform the specific steps of an activity. Knowledge consists of facts and lessons learned.

Many of the skills and much of the knowledge that are combined with talent to create a strength come through experience, and sometimes a great deal of it. Skills and knowledge are also developed in a “book learning” sense, such as in the academic arenas of high school, college, technical school, and training classes.

When you have supplemented your greatest talents with knowledge and skill to the point at which you can provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity, you have a strength. And in applying and even further refining your strengths, you move closer and closer to fulfilling your natural potential as an individual.

Each person has a unique and profound set and combination of talents that are developed and used to different degrees. This combination of talents makes each person like no other.

While each person defines success for himself or herself, achievement and excellence result from fully developing and applying strengths. Some roles require several strengths, all working together, to produce excellence.

You probably already have some strengths, and you certainly will have plenty of opportunity to develop more strengths throughout your lifetime.

What Do Strengths Produce?

As you develop strengths by building on your greatest talents, achievements will naturally follow. But there is also a great sense of personal satisfaction that results from knowing that you are becoming more and more of whom you have the potential to be. In a sense, the development and application of strengths generate a feeling that you are fulfilling your personal destiny. This can produce enormous satisfaction and enhance the quality of your life.

While the experiences of individual people differ tremendously, most report that it is a rewarding experience to be fully living in tune with their natural talents by building and using strengths. Almost everyone says increased confidence and optimism as they become aware of, affirm, and celebrate their talents. Many describe the experience as “coming alive,” or even feeling joy as they develop and apply strengths. Reports about the exact inner experiences may differ, but nearly everyone who develops and uses strengths reports a sense of positive and pleasant psychological rewards.

Our initial goal is for you to become more aware of your talents and your potential strengths. We hope you are filled with appreciation for your particular talents, for the positive differences they have already made in your life, and for the excellence strengths can produce in your future achievements, relationships, and other life experiences.

The Beauty of Strengths: Angel’s Story

Angel Alcoser is an extraordinarily talented educator. She stands in front of her bilingual kindergarten/first-grade class and performs her role with poise, grace, and excellence — yet with no formal training.

Angel obtained an “emergency credential” to teach the year she graduated from college. She hadn’t taken any courses in curriculum design, teaching methods, or assessment. But somehow she knew what to do and performed as if she were a magician generating one creative learning activity after another.

At the beginning of one class, which two visitors were observing, Angel stood before the children and said, “Boys and girls, would you like to perform for our guests?”

With a rousing “Yes,” the children lined up.

As Angel walked over to the tape recorder on a table by the wall, every eye was on her. She pushed the “play” button, and with the first note, the children burst into a breathtaking show of song and dance. The visitors were moved, even spellbound.

Angel later explained how she prepared to do her work as an educator. She related a story about the children, the potential she saw in each one of them, and how she tried to involve parents and make her classroom like a family. Then, she talked about how essential it was to connect with every child, emphasizing the importance of seeing each one as a unique person.

“Most of the children in my class come from very humble homes,” Angel said. “Some are neglected; some are abused. But,” she asserted, “I can’t control much of what goes on outside of my class. I do what I can. Once they are in my class, they are all safe. In my class, they can grow to be more than they have ever been.”

Angel continued, “I don’t focus on what they don’t have. I focus on who they are and what they have to offer. I challenge the students to see what they do have, not what they don’t. I want them to see that each of them has something that makes them special. They are each talented in some way. Some of the children are great storytellers; others seem to be natural leaders; still others are wonderful organizers. Regardless of the type of talent, I start with the child and what each of them can do best.”

How does Angel recognize the children’s talents?

“I listen. I look. I see them. I work at it every day! Almost every day, I stay after class. I sit in the classroom and meditate about each child. I let my imagination go and imagine each child both in terms of who they are now and the person they can become.”

Angel spoke glowingly about one young lady in her class, who often wore a little blue cap that flopped over her ears. The girl, Delia, carried an old file folder with accordion sides. “She’s from a very humble home,” Angel said. “It’s only her and her mother, who sells oranges on street corners. They are very poor. But Delia has a dream that one day she will become a doctor. Every day, she picks up papers and stuffs them in her little folder. She does this because she pretends that she is already in college and that those papers are the homework assignments for her college classes.”

At the end of the school year, Angel presided over the children’s graduation ceremony. Each child was encouraged to invite one or more

family members, and this really excited the children. More than 30 people attended. The children performed as a group with dance and music, singing alternately in English and Spanish.

The formal graduation ceremony began with the children taking their little chairs and making a large circle in the middle of the room. Angel stepped into the middle of the circle carrying a large box. Then, she called every child's name one by one, and each one went up to the box and pulled out a picture frame containing a piece of paper with printing and handwriting, a picture in the middle, and brightly colored stars around the border.

As the children got their framed pieces of paper, they turned and walked back to their chairs and handed their framed works of art to the parents and other guests they had invited.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, Angel read what was on the framed pieces of paper:

*"I was born to dream big dreams. I would like to be _____
when I grow up."*

In the blank space, each child wrote his or her goal, the career they hoped to pursue. Then, there was the picture of the child, beneath which these words appeared in bold print: "Yes, I can do it. Give me your unconditional love and tell me every day that I was born to do beautiful things. With much love." And then there was a line where each child wrote his or her name.

The Best of the Best All Have One Thing in Common

Angel Alcoser, in both her excellence in teaching and her approach to students, exemplifies what Gallup has discovered through more than two million in-depth interviews with people from all walks of life: Top achievers in virtually every profession, career, and field of achievement all build their lives upon their talents.

This simple but profound finding forms the heart of this book. You see, Angel isn't one of the "best of the best" by accident. She has achieved excellence because she has capitalized on her talents. In fact, she has built her teaching strategies, even her whole life, on her talents.

Findings From Gallup's Study of the Best

Here is what Gallup knows about top achievers: *They fully recognize their talents and build on them to develop strengths.* In contrast, under-achievers, the merely average, and even above-average achievers often fail to recognize their powerful talents and develop strengths. But the best achievers are certain to do so.

Top achievers apply their greatest talents in roles that best suit them. Clearly, to achieve, one must apply his or her abilities, and many do so to some level of success. But the best apply their most naturally powerful talents and do so in roles that are best suited to those talents. The ability to achieve with excellence in one area is not proof of the ability to perform equally well in another area. A proper “fit” between an individual’s talents and the task at hand is essential.

Top achievers invent ways to apply their greatest talents to their achievement tasks. Every role, position, and career entails a group of tasks that must be completed, and quite often the person who performs them must consciously seek, even invent, ways to apply his or her talents to that end — even when one’s role is well suited to his or her talents.

How Angel Alcoser Uses Three of Her Signature Themes

Angel took the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, which identifies the user’s top five themes of talent — their Signature Themes. In both her role as an educator and her personal life, she primarily uses strengths that she has developed from talents in three of her Signature Themes.

1. **Maximizer:** People exceptionally talented in the Maximizer theme focus on strengths as a way to stimulate personal and group excellence. They seek to transform something strong into something superb.
2. **Connectedness:** People exceptionally talented in the Connectedness theme have faith in the links between all things. They believe there are few coincidences and that almost every event has a reason.
3. **Developer:** People exceptionally talented in the Developer theme recognize and cultivate the potential in others. They spot the signs of each small improvement and derive satisfaction from these improvements.

You can easily see how Angel used Maximizer and Developer talents as she worked with the children. Remember that she said that she focused on who the children were, rather than who they weren't. Angel started out with the correct assumption that each child had unique and powerful talents.

Angel's ability to perceive talent in the children, to notice progress, and to mirror what she sees in each child are not coincidences. Angel has an abundance of talent within the Developer and Maximizer themes.

Angel's Connectedness talents are reflected in her determination to connect with children and their families. Connectedness also comes into play as she sets up her classroom with a family atmosphere.

Mostly, Angel's Connectedness talents are revealed in the way she meditates after school and envisions each child. She is looking for talents within each child and for the role she can play in their development. Her Connectedness talents enable her to see a bigger picture, a grand plan.

What makes Angel Alcoser such an outstanding educator starts with who she is as a person. Her natural talents are the source of her excellence. She is simply being her true self. Understand this: Top achievers fully develop whatever talents they happen to possess and apply the resulting strengths in a way that positively impacts their role or the task at hand.

The Tragedy of Undiscovered Talents

Less than five miles from where Angel first taught, there is another elementary school. A young girl by the name of Leonor was a student there in the 1950s. When Leonor was 10 years old, she and her parents emigrated to the United States from Mexico. She had done very well in school in her native country, but she didn't know any English, so classes in the United States would be much more difficult for her. Nevertheless, she was anxious to go to school, because it had always been a positive experience for her in Mexico.

In fact, Leonor had always had a secret desire to become a teacher. She had two great aunts who were teachers, and she greatly admired them. Because she could neither read nor write in English, Leonor was held back and repeated the fourth grade. Her fourth-grade teacher volunteered to stay after school to help her learn English. Leonor worked hard throughout elementary, junior high, and high school. In her sophomore, junior, and senior years, Leonor earned almost straight A's, and each year

she was on the honor roll and in the Honors Society. She graduated near the top of her class.

Unfortunately, Leonor never had a teacher like Angel, who could lead her to discover her natural talents. And despite the fact that she was an honor student, no one ever asked if she might be interested in attending college.

The year Leonor graduated from high school, her father lost his job. So Leonor found work in a business close to her home and would turn her paycheck over to her parents so they could pay the rent and buy food for the whole family.

For the next 33 years, Leonor toiled in the banking industry and hated almost every day of it. What's incredibly sad is that Leonor was convinced that she had no talents.

The tragedy for Leonor wasn't in where she worked or what she did. Banking is a fine and respectable profession in which many people thrive and are quite happy; Leonor herself advanced to vice president and administrative manager of a branch office. Clearly, Leonor achieved, and she didn't squander 33 years in banking. But those years could have been immensely more fulfilling if Leonor had been aware of her natural talents. Fortunately, in recent years, Leonor has gone through the process of discovering the talents she has had from the beginning, refining and building on them to create strengths, and applying those strengths. Following her talents, Leonor has transitioned from banking into teaching, where she is experiencing joy and excitement like she never has before.

Your Strengths Quest Begins With You

As described earlier, the seeds of your personal greatness — your talents — are already in you. Therefore, your strengths quest — your quest to achieve excellence and become all you can be through your own natural talents — is really a quest to discover, develop, and apply who you truly are. Your strengths quest begins as you look within yourself as an individual to recognize your own natural talents.

Your quest will then continue as you build on your talents to develop strengths — abilities to provide consistent, near-perfect performances in specific activities. As you do this, your self-identity and personal values should become clearer, and as a result, you will likely become more

confident, optimistic, and focused. As you achieve through your greatest talents, you will likely aspire to higher goals.

Your strengths quest is a lifelong adventure. Each of the three aspects — discovery, development, and application — will continue throughout your life. This exciting and fulfilling process should bring you a lifetime of great satisfaction and joy.