

Preface

During the writing of this book, we were reminded of something that Nobel Laureate and physicist Sir William Bragg stated: “The important thing in science is not so much to obtain new facts as to discover new ways of thinking about them.” This book represents a new way of thinking about movies and how they relate to those qualities that make us human.

There are tens of thousands of accessible movies that speak to what is strong in human beings. We hope that the discussion and cinematic examples in this book will provide the reader with new ways of thinking about strengths and what constitutes a good and meaningful life; we also hope it will help our readers identify ways to change their lives for the better. This parallels one of the missions of the positive psychology movement.

Following an introduction that gives the reader a brief background to positive psychology, character strengths, and the world of cinema, we discuss the portrayal of specific character strengths in movies. Each of these chapters describes strengths according to the typology developed by Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman in their seminal text classifying six virtues and 24 strengths, *Character Strengths and Virtues* (2004). These virtues and strengths are listed below:

- 1) **Wisdom and Knowledge** (cognitive strengths): creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective
- 2) **Courage** (emotional strengths): bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality
- 3) **Humanity** (interpersonal strengths): love, kindness, social intelligence
- 4) **Justice** (civic strengths): citizenship, fairness, leadership
- 5) **Temperance** (strengths that protect against excess): forgiveness and mercy, humility and modesty, prudence, self-regulation
- 6) **Transcendence** (spiritual strengths of meaning): appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality

This classification system provides a basic structure for us to use in discussing movies that portray virtuous characters who develop and maintain their strengths and use these strengths to overcome obstacles and adversity. Our approach and this core structure is maintained throughout the book; in each of the core chapters, we try to balance film discussion, related psychological research, and practical applications.

As a highly popular Harvard professor, Tal Ben-Shahar, often notes, positive psychology is a “bridge” merging scientific research with self-help. We want this book to blend the two as well. The positive psychology movement is rooted in science; scientific research is not only the foundation of positive psychology, but also the means by which the field will progress and prosper. Therefore, we found it important to begin each chapter with a brief description of a given strength’s core concepts and some of the important research relevant to the strength being discussed. However, this book is not meant to be a primer in positive psychology, for others have done this already (see Peterson, 2003); instead, we try to highlight recent and important studies to help the reader make connections between positive psychology and the cinema. In addition, scattered throughout the chapters, the reader will discover important theories that are relevant to the field of positive psychology; these theories focus on wellness, and, whenever possible, we describe the links between the theories discussed and films. For example, we believe it is important to include film examples that illustrate Barbara Frederickson’s broaden and build theory as it relates to curiosity, Kabat-Zinn and Segal’s work with

mindfulness in several chapters, including those on self-regulation and perspective, and Csikszentmihalyi's work with flow and its relationship to creativity, to cite three important theories in positive psychology.

We include an International Cinema section in each strength chapter. We pay particular attention to international cinema, because we believe world cinema has a special ability to convey important messages and themes that transcend culture and national boundaries. "International cinema," "world cinema," and "foreign films" generally refer to films from a country other than one's own; therefore, we focus on non-U.S. films in these sections (including films that are not foreign language films, but which come from the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia).

We are often asked about how we selected films for inclusion in this book (and in our earlier book, *Movies and Mental Illness*). With both books, we emphasized an eclectic approach in our selection and categorization of films. In addition to searching films in our own extensive databases, we viewed and commented on every film included by the American Film Institute on their list of Top 100 Inspiring Movies (see Appendix F). We felt this was important since the list was compiled by some of the world's leading film scholars. In addition to other DVD movie clubs, we reviewed all of the films released by the Spiritual Cinema Circle, a monthly DVD club that had its inception a few years ago and which releases movies each month. We paid special attention to Academy Award winners and nominees, especially each film in the categories of Best Screenplay-Adapted, Best Screenplay-Original, Best Director, Best Film, and Best Foreign Language Film. We reviewed those movies that won awards at film festivals, particularly winners and nominees at Cannes and Sundance. In the world of popular and independent films, word-of-mouth is one of the best markets and idea-generators. We listened carefully to suggestions made by participants in our monthly movie discussion group, eminent positive psychologists, colleagues, film seminar groups, and bloggers. With each film, we systematically assessed whether it met any of the criteria for a positive psychology film (see Chapter 1). Those films that did not appear to meet any of these criteria were eliminated from consideration; some wonderful films (e.g., *A Clockwork Orange*) were deliberately excluded for this reason.

From time to time the reader will identify important human qualities that are not listed as one of the 24 strengths. It is often the case that such qualities are subsumed under a previously listed strength or are a combination of more than one strength. For example, "patience" can be mostly explained by the strengths of open-mindedness and fairness, while "trust" can be seen as a combination of strengths such as perspective, integrity, care, and social intelligence.

Some of our objectives in writing this book include the following:

- 1) We hope that providing detailed examples of several films that portray strengths and virtues will lead viewers to positive emotions, experiences, and positive strengths of character – or at least provide ideas and inspiration from which these qualities can develop. This is certainly consistent with the feedback we have received from hundreds of individuals who have participated in movie discussions about positive psychology films. Students, clients, and other groups may find that the powerful sensory medium of film will facilitate these strengths in a way that few modalities and interventions can.
- 2) We hope that this book will lead to research that examines the use of positive psychology films in educational, clinical, and other research settings. We are not well positioned to conduct this research ourselves; however, this book may be a catalyst for masters' theses and dissertations in this area.
- 3) We hope this book will inspire people to see movies in a fresh way, a way that opens up new avenues of perceiving and integrating information. Often people view mov-

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ies for entertainment. While this is a wonderful, important pastime, we believe in the importance of looking deeper during the movie-going experience. To “look closer” (the working title of the film that later became *American Beauty*), is to appreciate character dynamics, subtleties of the cinematic art, and important motifs that reflect universality and transformation.

At the same time, we understand the clear limits to what movies can offer. We remain informed by the comment Alfredo makes to Toto in one of the all-time classic films, *Cinema Paradiso*, “Life isn’t like in the movies. Life...is much harder.” Despite all the benefits movies have to offer, we are humbled by their limitations.

We recommend the following strategy for using this book. First, review the introductory chapter and then proceed to whichever strength you personally need to improve, or whatever strength you need to assist a student or patient in developing. Alternately, simply pick the strength that most piques your curiosity. Then use the appendices to help you select films that will help you learn more about a particular strength.

We do need to warn the reader: some of our discussions contain “spoilers.” These are intentionally included at those points in which we feel the spoiler will enrich the discussion’s content and depth; nevertheless, we hope the message of looking more deeply in movies will be more important for readers than something as pedestrian as mere plot.

As we prepare future editions of this book, we welcome your feedback and suggestions. Feel free to visit our websites and blogs, and do take time to email us your thoughts. But most of all, happy viewing!

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