

Moving from good to great: A narrative perspective on strengths

An aerial photograph of a white tugboat with a red stripe along its hull, moving through the water. The boat is viewed from the side of another vessel, which is partially visible on the right edge of the frame. The water is dark blue with white wake behind the tugboat.

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What a narrative perspective brings

- Have the experience you are having
- Do the work that is in front of you
- Trust the darkness; seek the light
- Create space for what wants to unfold
- Let go of the good to step into the great

Remember the hug . . . it embodies all five.

An exercise

Write about one of your core strengths (using these questions as sparks)

- When did you first recognise it as one of your strengths?
- Where do you think it comes from?
- Who or what brings it out in you?
- When is it not helpful?
- What have you gained from this strength? What have you lost?
- When do you not use it?
- What could you learn from its opposite that might enrich you?
- How do you feel about it at this point in your life?
- What would you like to do differently with your strength?

Working with strengths

1. Strengths are culturally and narratively defined, reflecting both collective ancient archetypes and contemporary individual attributes
2. Strengths are dynamic and contextual energies (not static and universal entities), reflecting their embodied and relational nature
3. Strengths can serve both protective and generative functions, reflecting their role in both shaping our ego and enabling our growth

Starting out . . .

- The first step is **knowing** your core strengths; the longer journey is **learning** more about them and maturing them.
- Accept what **is** before embarking on creating what you want to change. It is about **courage** more than bravery.
- Explore whether your strength is more *intrinsically motivated* (**innate** or **acquired**) or more *extrinsically motivated* (**internalised** or **compensatory**).
- Appreciate what your strengths have enabled you to do in your life thus far even as you seek opportunities to deepen their true gifts through **integrating their shadow**.

*In the spiritual life, nothing goes away.
There is no heavenly garbage dump.
It's all here, wherever we are.
Everything belongs.*

Richard Rohr



Your shadow travels with you.

What is our Shadow?

- A natural by-product of the development of our ego
- A strategy to secure sufficient safety and love
- Where we bury qualities that don't fit our self-image
- Most easily seen in our projections onto others
- An untapped reservoir of vital maturational energy
- An invitation to keep dying to our self to be reborn

It takes enormous energy to maintain aspects of ourselves in the shadow. We must be constantly on guard, making certain that nothing sneaks out, making sure that no one can see our dark parts. If we could free our psychic energy from the role of keeping watch, imagine the energy we would be able to spend on real intimacy, creativity, heartfelt compassion, and love.

(Brehony, 1996)

Learning edges: The key to growth

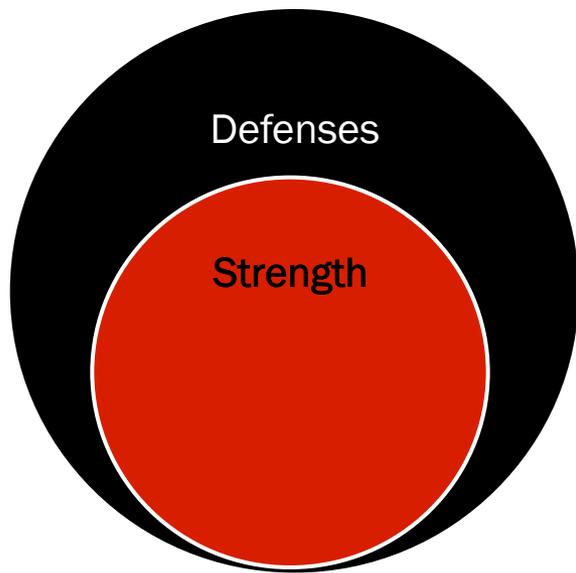
A learning edge is on **the cusp** of a strength, a space we can open up through relaxing our defence in order to discover the gold that is there.

Our defences reflect our lifelong strategies to avoid feeling overwhelmed, alone and/or powerless. They often compensate for the parts of us that sit in shadow. They served us well enough when we were young, but are important thresholds for our development and maturation as adults. The goal is to create enough space between the strength and the defence to discover and integrate the learning edge. *Ask yourself, “What am I avoiding by engaging in this defence?”*

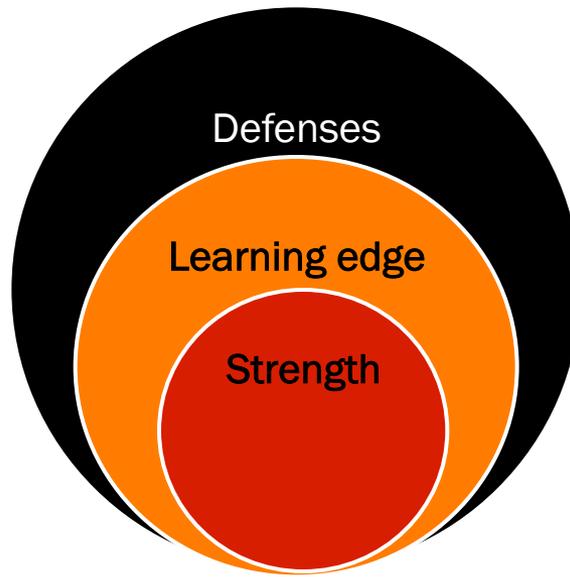
Examples

1. A coach helps someone with “love of learning” (*strength*) to explore how she over-prepares for meetings (*defence for strength habitually used*) to avoid being caught off-guard and spontaneous in the moment (*learning edge*)
2. A coach works with his ability to create order (*strength*) by noticing that he is rewriting his business plan (*defence for strength feeling threatened*) to avoid talking openly with two associates who have failed to deliver (*learning edge*)

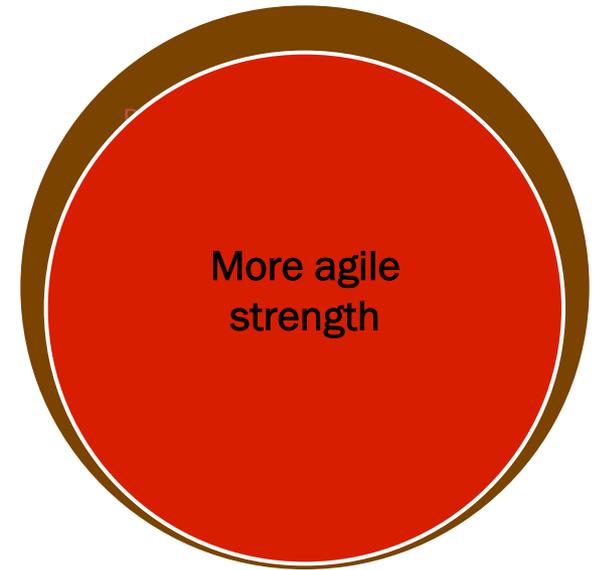
The three stages of growth



Reactive



Inquisitive



Generative

Coaching using learning edges

When we are in a **Reactive** mode, we either habitually use our strength or activate our defence to ease our anxiety if it is not working as we had hoped. Either way, we are stuck in a dance between the two and tend not to see any other choices. The net result is that we miss the opportunity to learn about ourselves and to develop new ways of seeing ourselves and the world. For example, a person in a recent Narrative Design Lab whose strength is compassion realised that she uses sarcasm as a defence when she is feeling unappreciated in the wake of showing concern.

She moved into an **Inquisitive** mode through unpacking this defence; it was clouding her strength. She was able to adapt it through finding the ‘gold’ in its learning edge (selfishness), releasing her judgment of it, and exploring how it might help mature her strength. Her defence had masked a fear that others would not meet her need; it was held in place by a story that it was better to not even acknowledge that she had them.

In the **Generative** mode, she learned to pause when she felt underappreciated to check in with herself as to whether she over-played that strength and/or did not sufficiently consider her own needs. As a result, she integrated more of her shadow, freed up energy she could use, and developed greater agility and impact with her strength—moving from good to great.

Coaching using learning edges

Example using a VIA Strength: Industry, diligence and perseverance

Reactive mode: A project manager at a professional services firm often comes across as invincible and does whatever it takes to complete a task or project; he often gets defensive when he is overly distracted or delayed and/or he is not acknowledged for his competence.

Inquisitive mode: He is invited to nonjudgmentally assess how he decides what to do and how to do it. He recognises that his defences often mask a pattern of over-achieving and the fears behind it: being ‘good enough’, letting others down and others won’t be there to help. The first step in using his strength more wisely is to identify his learning edge: *vulnerability*.

Generative mode: He explores how being more vulnerable in a volitional way will enrich his strength (e.g., “throttling back” when he is pushing himself or others too hard, creating more experiences to allow others to help him, and learning to make choices that are aligned with priorities).
The result is a strength he can use more selectively and effectively.

Working with your learning edges

1. One of my strengths is . . .
2. However, I get defensive when . . .
because I am afraid (of) . . .
3. I would grow by learning (to) . . .
4. Therefore, I will . . .

The journey to superior performance is neither for the faint of heart nor the impatient. The development of genuine expertise requires struggle, sacrifice, and honest, often painful self-assessment. There are no shortcuts.

(Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2007, p. 116)

Coaching people on their strengths

1. People have evolved their strengths for a variety of reasons, many of which have served them well just as they are. **Begin with acceptance and gratitude.**
2. Start where people are now and with what they have to work — then build up and out from there to **mature their strengths**. In doing so, pick battles small enough to win and big enough to matter (Jonathon Kozol).
3. Address shadow issues and help people discover their learning edges so they can sharpen their strengths and apply them with greater satisfaction and impact. Their **'weaknesses'** are often just shadow-infused strengths they have over- or mis-applied.
4. **Acknowledge people's strength** (ie, “I appreciate your great compassion”, “your idea”, or “your initiative”) even if how it was delivered was not timely or helpful — then explore ways in which it might be used more effectively next time.
5. Life is too short to do anything but use our strengths to their fullest in our life and work. **Create communities** in which people are surrounded by stories that support their success and they can have meaningful conversations about what matters to them.
6. **Remember the tugboat—be real, find the points of leverage and nudge.**

Moving from good to great in organisations

Key theories

1. Attachment work: core narrative patterns, anxiety management
2. Adult development: proximal development, subject/object
3. Jungian psychology: the unconscious, shadows and archetypes
4. Narrative coaching: mindful, experiential and nondirective strategies

Common applications

1. Advising organisations who are serious about culture change
2. Consulting with HR leaders to deepen impact of development programs
3. Coaching project teams to optimise engagement and outcomes
4. Providing advanced programs for internal and external coaches



Seek and ye shall find.

Moving from good to great

Think | head

Feel | heart

Be | hara

Do | hips

Growth happens



in the in-between

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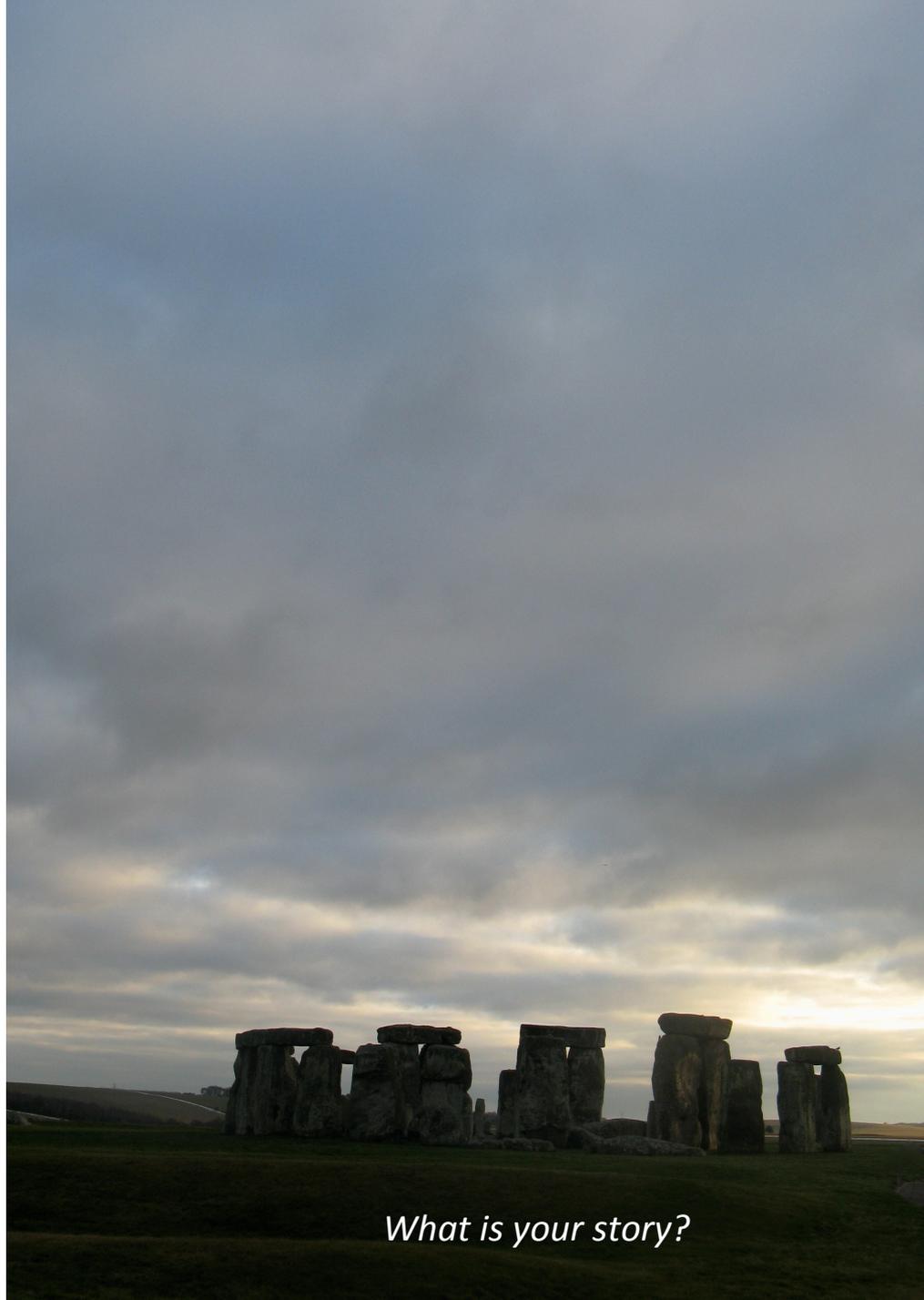
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What is your story?