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The Power of a Calling (B): Our Better Natures

What does labor want? We want more schoolhouses and less jails; more books and less arsenals; more learning and less vice; more leisure and less greed; more justice and less revenge; in fact, more of the opportunities to cultivate our better natures.

—Samuel Gompers

Joseph's Better Nature

During the past 17 years in Egypt, Joseph and his brothers learned a great deal about one another as they shared the details of their lives. But there is one detail that Joseph omitted. Since he never told his father the truth about his path to Egypt, he decided not to tell his brothers' children either. Instead, Joseph answered his nephew's question by focusing on how he drew upon his better nature to become a prominent leader, hoping to inspire and challenge them to flourish in their callings.

"When I was about your age, I dreamed of becoming a leader. But I had no idea just how unprepared I was to lead—nor did anyone tell me," Joseph said to his nephew. He continued: "I enjoyed working with and learning from Grandpa Jacob and wanted to please him. I was also passionate about interpreting and sharing my dreams and nurturing my faith. But I lacked self-awareness. Nor did I realize how that lack of awareness would prevent me from fulfilling my dreams. That didn't come into focus until I lived and worked in a strange land."

"In Egypt, I spent a lot of time alone, in part, because I was a lowly, inexperienced servant; also because I was different and couldn't speak the language. That gave me a lot of time to reflect. Being a minority in

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Part B of this case presents fictional and historic details that have been combined to advance educational purposes only. More specifically, Joseph's internal dialogue and some conversations with his family have been fictionalized to provide a vehicle to present the historical information that follows. Hence, there are no references for fictionalized quotes. In contrast, historic accounts of events and details about each brother's character attributes are quoted directly from scripture and have accompanying biblical references. Fictionalized information in Part B is offered as a conceptual bridge to Part C; together, they connect actual career and character trajectories of each brother, based upon historical information.

Egypt taught me to listen, be discrete and to pay attention to the people around me.” This dispelled any notions that being ‘special’ worked to Joseph’s advantage in Egypt, as it had when he was a teenager. “I didn’t know just how good I had it at home. Of course, I continued to work hard and do my best, all the while praying that my time as a servant would be brief—and it was,” Joseph said. As he described each job along his journey—servant, chief steward, prisoner, prison supervisor, and then vizier—Joseph recounted how he coped with drudgery, despicable people, unexpected detours, deferred dreams, and seized opportunities. “These experiences not only strengthened my character, but they helped me develop valuable skills,” he said.

Joseph’s brothers listened intently and recalled the kind of worker that he was as a boy. They were stunned to learn the details of Joseph’s path to the palace, and even more so by Joseph’s candor about his own character weaknesses. Several brothers began shifting uncomfortably as they looked within to contemplate their own character.

Character Strengths: Nature or Nurture?

Positive psychologists have identified six virtues and 24 character strengths that are essential to solve life’s problems and live the “good life”.¹ These strengths are common across cultural and religious groups. The virtues are: (1) knowledge and wisdom; (2) courage; (3) humanity; (4) justice; (5) temperance; and (6) transcendence. Having knowledge and wisdom entails being curious, creative, open-minded, oriented toward learning, and the ability to devise a reasoned perspective that can guide others. Courage involves bravery, honesty, integrity, being persistent, and showing grit or tenacity. Strengths related to humanity include being kind, loving, and empathetic toward others. Justice, an essential quality for leaders, promotes fairness, equity, and teamwork. Having temperance means regulating your emotions, actions, and speech, as well as being prudent, forgiving, modest, and tolerant. Finally, transcendence is a coherent belief system that gives meaning and purpose to one’s life; it defines ultimate goals, aspirations, and hopes for what is not yet. (See **Exhibit 1** for the 24 character strengths that constitute these virtues).

Each virtue and character strength also has an undesirable opposite. Surprisingly, the undesirable opposites may reveal dormant character strengths that have not yet been cultivated (see **Exhibit 1**). Joseph considered how these virtues, character strengths, and their opposites, might apply to his brothers.

Joseph was well aware of his brothers’ faults and failures (and his own), such as lying, fighting, sexual indiscretion, revenge, lack of empathy, and cowardice. But did that mean that they were fundamentally bad people? Many of their character weaknesses were simply artifacts of youth—challenges to overcome in the process of becoming enlightened and evolved adults. Joseph began to think of his family as a diverse, albeit dysfunctional, team with strengths and talents to be developed. Like all teams, Joseph knew that each of his siblings had been influenced by their father’s leadership – but in very different ways.

The Content of Their Character

As Joseph considered how their father treated his children, he identified three categories—the good, bad, and the invisible. The “good ones” were he and Benjamin, the last born children and the only children of Jacob’s beloved wife Rachel. Jacob wrongly attributed mythic heroism to Joseph and he was highly protective of Benjamin. They were his stars!

In contrast, Jacob treated his firstborn children, by his tolerated wife Leah, with disdain and disgust. Jacob defined Reuben, Simeon, and Levi by isolated negative events in their youth, dismissed their ideas, denied their rights as firstborns, and treated them like negative deviants. “Are they truly, fundamentally bad?

If so, are they changeable?" Joseph wondered?

There wasn't much to remember about Jacob's invisible middle-born children (Issachar, Naphtali, Zebulun, Gad, Asher, Dan, and Dinah). Leah's last born children and the children of the maids simply didn't get much of Jacob's attention. Joseph wondered what might have become of these B-players if he had.

Then there was Judah, whom Joseph found it difficult to categorize. Judah was one of Leah's older children. Even though he made embarrassing mistakes, Jacob didn't treat him like a deviant. Judah was an outlier.

Upon reflection, Joseph questioned whether their father had a warped view of all of them. He also contemplated the effect that their father's leadership and biases had on each one of them. Joseph attempted to suspend judgment while he reconciled his overall perceptions of his brothers, the fine grained details of their lives, and their father Jacob's last words to each one.

Last Words?

For some children, Jacob's dying words were a stinging reminder of their youthful mistakes. For others, his words served as a warning. For the remaining children, Jacob's final words affirmed their latent talents and were curiously hopeful; they sowed seeds of destiny and gave them something to strive toward. While some of Jacob's pronouncements made sense to Joseph, others raised questions and doubts. (Each section that follows begins with Jacob's final words to each son in italics.)

The Good: Benjamin

*"Benjamin, you're a wolf who devours his enemy in the morning and divides his plunder in the evening."*²

Joseph learned that after he mysteriously disappeared, Jacob transferred all of his attention and affection to Benjamin, whose name means "son of the right hand." Benjamin was the baby and the only living remnant of Jacob's beloved Rachel—or so he thought. The guilt ridden brothers also protected young Benjamin. For example, when Joseph's servant accused Benjamin of stealing the silver cup in his bag, several brothers risked their own lives to assure Benjamin's safety – regardless of his guilt or innocence. They knew that Benjamin's own mother died after having been caught stealing, so it was possible that he took the cup. Nevertheless, the brothers protected him. Then Joseph remembered how he too doted on Benjamin when the family reunited. Joseph gave Benjamin more food, more money, and more clothing than all of his other brothers. Yet, no one complained.

Joseph wondered about the effects that such attention and indulgences might have had on Benjamin. He struggled to reconcile Benjamin's pampered past with their father's prediction that he would aggressively devour his enemies in the morning, and distribute their possessions at night.

The Bad: Reuben, Simeon & Levi

Reuben

*"Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity and the excellency of power. Unstable as water, you shall not excel, because you went up to your father's bed; Then you defiled it."*³

While it was obviously wrong for Reuben to have sex with his father's maid, Joseph wondered whether it was an unforgivable act. After all, Reuben was young then. Based upon Joseph's own experience with Reuben, he was conflicted about their father's enduring contempt toward him. "I owe my life to Reuben," Joseph thought.

While Joseph was in Egypt, he often thought about how Reuben saved his life in the field that day when, in the midst of sibling cruelty, Reuben said, "Let's not take his life!" "Shed no blood. Throw him into this pit that is in the wilderness, but do not lay hands on him."⁴ The brothers listened and acquiesced to Reuben's authority and reason. Years later, Joseph was touched to learn that Reuben not only returned to rescue him from the pit, but was distraught when he found it empty. And that wasn't the only time that Reuben took a stand.

When the brothers came to Egypt seeking food, Reuben spoke up when Joseph surreptitiously accused them of spying. And when Joseph demanded that one brother stay behind as ransom, Reuben chastised his brothers saying, "Did I not speak to you, saying, 'Do not sin against the boy;' and you would not listen? Therefore behold, his blood is now required of us."⁵ Then, when they returned home to fetch their brother Benjamin, as Joseph demanded, it was Reuben who offered assurances to their father. "Kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you; put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you."⁶ But Jacob said, "My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is left alone,"⁷ as if his other children did not matter. Jacob rejected Reuben's sacrifice and his humanity until his dying breath. Yet Joseph entertained the possibility that Reuben was more excellent and dignified than their father realized.

Joseph never understood why their father treated Reuben and Judah so differently, especially since both were involved in sex scandals. Yet their father treated Simeon and Levi exactly the same because they were involved in the same type of scandal.

Simeon & Levi

*Simeon and Levi are two of a kind; their weapons are instruments of violence. Let not my soul enter their council; Let not my honor be united to their assembly. For in their anger they murdered men, and they crippled oxen just for sport. A curse on their anger, for it is fierce; a curse on their wrath, for it is cruel. I will scatter them among the descendants of Jacob; I will disperse them throughout Israel.*⁸

Even as Jacob lay dying, he did not see Simeon and Levi as separate and unique individuals. In his mind, they were forever united by a singular violent act. But they were, in fact, quite different.

Joseph, although just a boy when it happened, had a searing memory of the crisis surrounding their sister Dinah's rape. The family had just moved to a new city and teenage Dinah wandered into the neighborhood seeking adventure and friendship with local girls. Along the way, she attracted the attention of a young prince. He raped her. News of the crime spread throughout the community and to Dinah's family. "Now the sons of Jacob came in from the field when they heard it; and the men were grieved, and they were very angry because the prince had done a disgraceful thing in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done."⁹ The family sought a resolution, but in different ways.

The prince was captivated by Dinah's charms, fell in love with her, and tried to rectify the situation by negotiating with Jacob to marry her. Since Jacob thought it would be profitable for Dinah and the prince to marry, and for the two communities to intermarry, he made arrangements. "How could he!" thought Simeon

and Levi. Outraged, the brothers devised a plot to avenge the wrongs against their sister. Simeon and Levi feigned agreement with their father, then tricked the prince into having all men of that city circumcised, under the pretense that this would enable the two groups to intermarry. Then, Levi and Simeon assaulted the men while they were physically vulnerable. With swords drawn, Levi and Simeon murdered every man in town, took their sister back home, and then looted the city. They took their flocks and their herds and their donkeys, and that which was in the city, and that which was in the field; and they captured and looted all their wealth and all their little ones and their wives, even all that was in the houses.¹⁰

Given that only one man raped their sister, Simeon and Levi's tactics were extreme, brutal and out of proportion. Joseph was haunted by the raging argument that ensued. Livid, Jacob yelled to Simeon and Levi, "You have ruined me! You've made me stink among all the people of this land—among all the Canaanites and Perizzites. We are so few that they will join forces and crush us. I will be ruined, and my entire household will be wiped out!" "But why should we let him treat our sister like a prostitute?"¹¹ they shouted. Both father and sons felt their actions were justified. Dinah's rape and the aftermath remained one of those hot topics that some families just don't talk about. In Jacob's mind, the event forever defined Simeon and Levi and he wanted nothing to do with them.

Joseph recognized that Levi and Simeon were hot tempered. But he also recognized the flip side of that character trait (see **Exhibit 1**) and considered other evidence. First, he considered Simeon's response to their first encounter in Egypt. "If Simeon was really an irrational, cruel brute, why didn't he retaliate against me after I imprisoned him without cause?" Joseph thought. Joseph began questioning his father's judgment and wondered if Levi and Simeon had begun to see themselves merely as cruel brutes.

The Invisible: Zebulun, Dan, Asher, Naphtali, Gad, and Issachar

*"Zebulun shall dwell at the shore of the sea; he shall become a haven for ships, and his border shall be at Sidon."*¹² Joseph wondered whether a shift from agricultural to nautical life was eminent for Zebulun.

*"Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel. Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a viper by the path that bites the horse's heels so that his rider falls backward."*¹³ Joseph hadn't considered Dan as anything other than a shepherd.

*"Asher's food shall be rich, and he shall yield royal delicacies"*¹⁴. *Hmm, Asher as a royal pastry chef? I suppose it's possible,"* Joseph thought.

*"Naphtali is a deer let loose; He uses beautiful words."*¹⁵ Joseph had never thought of Naphtali as particularly poetic or literate, but didn't know what he had been exposed to since living in Egypt.

For the others sons, Jacob offered warnings and encouragement.

*Gad, a troop shall tramp upon him, but he shall triumph at last.*¹⁶

*Issachar is a strong donkey, crouching between the sheepfolds. He saw that a resting place was good, and that the land was pleasant, so he bowed his shoulder to bear, and became a servant at forced labor.*¹⁷

Joseph had neither strong impressions of nor memories about these siblings. They were somewhat unremarkable growing up (little was actually written about them.) Similarly, in Egypt, they blended in and worked as shepherds along with the rest of the family. So Joseph gave greater weight to Jacob's last words

to them as he thought about the team going forward. But he wondered how such dramatic changes might occur for Zebulun, Dan, Asher, and Naphtali.

Finally, Joseph's thoughts turned to Judah. Jacob's last words to him were the most enigmatic of all.

The Outlier: Judah

*Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.*¹⁸

Upon hearing Jacob's last words to Judah, Joseph wondered whether his father was delirious. Joseph didn't recall Judah being particularly fierce or praiseworthy, nor did Judah have any formal authority or hint of royalty. Moreover, when Joseph remembered Judah's role in the brotherly brawl years ago, he found little to admire. After all, it was Judah who said, "What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood."¹⁹ "Sell me? Really?!" Joseph was astounded by Judah's pursuit of profit, especially compared to Reuben's role in the conflict. Judah's offenses didn't stop there.

After the family reunited in Egypt, Joseph learned about Judah's sex scandal. Judah had married, moved to another town, and had three sons. Judah's oldest son died, leaving his widow Tamar without any children. According to custom, the second oldest son should marry Tamar to produce an heir, but he refused to impregnate her—and he too died. Judah then asked Tamar to go back to her parents' home until his youngest son Shelah was old enough to marry, which she did. (It's unclear whether Judah ever intended for them to marry.)

In the meantime, Judah's wife died. One night, after work in another town, a bereaved and lonely Judah sought comfort from a prostitute. Since Judah had little cash on hand, he offered her a few personal items as collateral and promised to send her money later; she agreed. But there was some confusion. When Judah's men returned to pay the prostitute, they couldn't find her and were unable to reclaim Judah's personal items. Judah resigned himself to letting her keep his personal items and considered the secret matter closed.

Months later, the widowed Tamar appeared pregnant. Judah, indignant about her unchaste conduct said: "Bring her out and let her be burned!"²⁰ But Tamar turned the tables, saying, "The man who owns these items is the father." The items belonged to Judah! Tamar was not a prostitute, but a woman seeking justice for an unmet family obligation. With his hypocrisy revealed, Judah said, "She is more righteous than I am, because I didn't arrange for her to marry my son Shelah."²¹ Judah married Tamar but never had sex with her again. Still, Joseph had mixed feelings about the matter. Then he remembered other facets of Judah's character.

When the brothers came to Egypt to buy food during the famine, Joseph demanded that they bring young Benjamin to see him. Reuben was unable to convince Jacob to let Benjamin go to Egypt, but Judah presented a persuasive and pragmatic argument that changed his mind. Judah explained the dire consequences of the worsening famine and the perils of further delay. In response to Jacob's protest and trepidation, Judah made a sacrificial plea: "Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. I myself will be surety for him; from my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever. For if we had not lingered, surely by now we would have returned this second time."²² Jacob finally relented,

sending Judah, Benjamin and all of the brothers back to Egypt.

Joseph's opinion of Judah shifted a bit more with each memory. He remembered that in Egypt, Judah served as the family's spokesperson that intervened when Benjamin was accused of stealing Joseph's silver cup. When Joseph threatened imprisonment: Judah answered, "Oh, my lord, what can we say to you? How can we explain this? How can we prove our innocence? God is punishing us for our sins. My lord, we have all returned to be your slaves—all of us, not just our brother who had your cup in his sack."²³ Then Judah stepped forward and said,

Please, my lord, let your servant say just one word to you. Please, do not be angry with me, even though you are as powerful as Pharaoh himself.²⁴ Remember, you asked us about our father? Now if you take this brother away from me, and any harm comes to him, you will send this grieving, white-haired man to his grave. And now, my lord, I cannot go back to my father without the boy. Our father's life is bound up in the boy's life. If he sees that the boy is not with us, our father will die. We, your servants, will indeed be responsible for sending that grieving, white-haired man to his grave. My lord, I guaranteed to my father that I would take care of the boy. I told him, 'If I don't bring him back to you, I will bear the blame forever.' So please, my lord, let me stay here as a slave instead of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. For how can I return to my father if the boy is not with me? I couldn't bear to see the anguish this would cause my father!²⁵

It was Judah's heartfelt plea that prompted Joseph to finally reveal his true identity. As Joseph envisioned the family caravan entering Egypt, he recalled that Judah lead the way. Joseph ruminated on all of these episodes thinking, "I am the vizier of Egypt, not him. Why would our dying father say: 'Judah, your brothers will praise you . . . All your relatives will bow before you. The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from his descendants, until the coming of the one to whom it belongs, the one whom all nations will honor.'"²⁶ Jacob's last words to Judah were the most perplexing of all, but Joseph considered the possibility.

Jacob believed that his parting words to each son were appropriate.²⁷ But did he really have the last word about who they were and what they would become?

Cultivating Better Natures

After pondering their father's last words and his own recollections, Joseph recalibrated his opinion of his father's leadership and his brothers' strengths and weaknesses. He wondered how his brothers might progress in their callings if they had accurate perspectives of their character strengths, moral failings, and latent abilities. Joseph distilled all of this information to consider what he might do differently to lead the family and take this 'team' to the next level. Joseph then recognized the need to shift his own leadership style from administrator-in-chief to more of a coach and team-builder-in-chief. Understanding that one size does not fit all, Joseph contemplated how to mentor, coach, and inspire each brother. As a leader, his goal was to amplify the positive, correct distortions, and cultivate his brothers' better nature.

Exhibit 1

Contrasts in Character Traits

Virtues and Character Strengths	Undesirable Opposites
Wisdom and Knowledge: Cognitive strengths that entail acquiring and using knowledge such as creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective/wise counsel	Dull, boring, insipid, monotonous, unimaginative, and uninspired; disinterest, ennui, world-weary; inflexibility, rigidity, dogmatic, prejudiced, intolerant, ethnocentrism, authoritarianism, stereotypes; intellectual resistance and inertia, foolishness, thoughtlessness, idiocy
Courage: Strength to exercise will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, internal or external; honesty, bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality	Cowardice, spinelessness, laziness, sloth, giving up, not trying, losing heart, losing interest, taking shortcuts, cutting corners, going for the quick fix and vacillation, deceitfulness, lying, insincerity, phoniness, pretentiousness, and falseness; sluggish, depressed, subdued, dull, jaded, listless, limp, lethargic, and lifeless
Humanity: Interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others, such as kindness, love, social intelligence, + empathy	Alienation, estrangement and loneliness, hatred, loathing, spite and abhorrence; clueless, self-deceived, lacking insight, stereotyping; selfishness, stinginess, mean-spiritedness
Justice: Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life, including citizenship, fairness, leadership, + teamwork	Selfishness, self-centeredness, egotism; prejudice, caprice, bias, poorly guides, neglects tasks, + abdicates responsibilities
Temperance: Strengths that protect against excess, including forgiveness and mercy, humility/modesty, prudence, self-control	Unforgiving, spiteful, punitive, vengeful, merciless, and hard-hearted; arrogance, pride, pomposity, grandiosity and self-centeredness; recklessness, foolishness, thoughtlessness and irresponsibility; undisciplined, out of control, impulsive, explosive, wild, raging; a root of all emotional disorders
Transcendence: Strengths that forge a connection to the larger universe and provide meaning, including appreciating beauty and excellence, hope, gratitude, humor, faith/spirituality	Oblivious, unmoved, unmindful, philistine, ignorant, or insensible; crude, coarse, prosaic, clichéd, shallow, uncultured, trivial; pessimism, hopelessness, gloom, helplessness; humorless, grim, sour, dour, tedious or boring; spiritually empty, godless, profane, life of quiet desperation, fidgeting until death, anomie, alienation; entitled, rude, ungrateful, unappreciative, unthankful

Source: Valerie Myers, *Conversations About Calling: Advancing Management Perspectives*, p. 107. Routledge Press, 2014. Material is derived from Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 29–30, ff. (Note: + denotes a strength that I've added.)

Endnotes

Direct quotes from religious texts are indicated in endnotes. Additional quotes in the case are paraphrased for the sake of readability.

¹ 1 Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

² Genesis 49:27

³ Genesis 49:3, 4 *NKJV*

⁴ Genesis 37:21, 22 *NASU*

⁵ Genesis 42:21, 22

⁶ Genesis 42:37

⁷ Genesis 42:38

⁸ Genesis 49:5 *NLT* 6, 7 *ESV*

⁹ Genesis 34:7 *NASU*

¹⁰ Genesis 34:28–31

¹¹ Genesis 34:30, 31 *NLT*

¹² Genesis 49:13 *ESV*

¹³ Genesis 49:16, 17

¹⁴ Genesis 49:20 *ESV*

¹⁵ Genesis 49:21 *NKJV*

¹⁶ Genesis 49:19 *NKJV*

¹⁷ Genesis 49:14, 15 *ESV*

¹⁸ Genesis 49:8–10 *NASU*

¹⁹ Genesis 37:26 *NLT*

²⁰ Genesis 38:24 *NLT*

²¹ Genesis 38:26 *NLT*

²² Genesis 43:8–10 *NASU*

²³ Genesis 44:16 *NLT*

²⁴ Genesis 44:18 *NLT*

²⁵ Genesis 44:29–34 *NLT*

²⁶ Genesis 49:8,10

²⁷ Genesis 49:28

Notes

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