



S5E11: Transcript Human Flourishing & Grit with Angela Duckworth

Tavia Gilbert: Welcome to Stories of Impact. I'm writer/producer Tavia Gilbert, and every first and third Tuesday, journalist Richard Sergay and I bring you conversations about the art and science of human flourishing.

This week we're bringing you a conversation with Dr. Angela Duckworth, pioneering professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and the CEO of Character Lab, a nonprofit that advances science to help kids thrive. She was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2013, and in 2016 published *Grit*, a book that explores what elements lead to success. She makes the case that achievement is not dependent on genius, but instead, on *The Power of Passion and Perseverance*: grit. Dr. Duckworth believes that grit is part of what allows humans to flourish, so let's start with her definition of what that key component is all about.

Angela Duckworth: When I say grit, I mean two things. Perseverance for long-term goals. That's kind of obvious, that's what grit sounds like. And then also passion for the same long-term goals. And maybe that's less obvious. It is working really hard at something over years, despite setbacks, and that something that you're working toward is meaningful enough to you that you're basically pointing in the same direction as opposed to working hard on lots of different things, one after the other. That's what grit is.

I don't think it is the most important of the virtues. I don't think it is the only thing that we should care about as a society, or that I care about as a mother, or that I care about as a person. But I think it is the nature of consequential changes in society or dreams, that they take a long time to realize. And I think that is why developing the capability and inclination to pursue goals over very long periods, with effort and with continued commitment, I think that's why it emerges in my research as a hallmark of high achievers, especially when it comes to their most meaningful personal goals.

Tavia Gilbert: Part of developing grit is growing the capacity to withstand and learn from failure.

Angela Duckworth: Every high achiever I have ever interviewed believes that learning to fail is one of the most important lessons that they ever mastered, and that ability to experience failure as the same as success is really about being able to take every moment in your life and take it as information. You know, if things go really well, what can you learn from that? And if things go disastrously, what can you learn from that?

Tavia Gilbert: Dr. Duckworth says that developing that mindset takes practice.

Angela Duckworth: I aspire to have an open-minded, enthusiastic, and positive attitude toward failure, but I'm not nearly at the point where that's exactly true. I know enough, though, to keep working toward that. And I'm trying, myself, to get the period of time where I am defensive, closed-minded, scared with my fists up, I'm trying to get that to be a shorter and shorter amount of time so that I can get the good stuff, which is to learn, as every great achiever really does, is to learn from everything so that nothing is wasted, especially those precious lessons that come gift-wrapped in failure.

Tavia Gilbert: She is careful to acknowledge the stark difference between systemic adversity and setbacks that can help us develop grit.

Angela Duckworth: We ought not romanticize adversity. We ought not say, poverty is great. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we all felt marginalized and left out of conversations? But adversity of all kinds is part of life. And if we don't have an attitude toward adversity that says, there's something that I will

learn from this experience, even if I don't wish it upon myself or others, I know that it's part of life to have, you know, things happen that I don't want to happen.

Now that we understand that that is part of life, that there will be many times where our challenges are greater than our current resources, we can say, well, then what happens next?

If I never have the perspective that there's something to be gained in these difficulties, then I don't think I will live a full life. I think a full life says, you take your good days and your bad days, and you try to make something honorable out of both of those.

Tavia Gilbert: One of the paths to gaining valuable perspective through experiencing failure is to deepen self-awareness. And that self-awareness leads to empathy, which is also a part of human flourishing.

Angela Duckworth: So if I think of the times in my life where I've really struggled, there was a lack of awareness of the conflicts that were within me. I needed to reflect more and understand, "Oh, I see what's going on." The times where I've really struggled as I think when there's the lack of awareness. The conflict was there, but I was not conscious of it.

Being conscious of lack of alignment doesn't make the alignment happen spontaneously. But I think it's the first step, because then I can say, "Oh, I recognize where this negative feeling is coming from, and I can make an intentional decision." And I think that's true at the societal level where, when we come into conflict with each other, I think so often, we don't really fully understand the other person's perspective. So I think awareness, both internal and then the kind of empathic awareness of other people's perspectives and lives and feelings, are the very first step to flourishing.

Human flourishing, I think, is alignment. I think it is when your hopes and dreams line up with what you're doing every day. And I also think it's when my hopes and dreams are in alignment as opposed to in conflict with your hopes and dreams. And so when I think of flourishing, the visual that I have is that there is a kind of aerodynamic harmony both within the person and then across people.

Tavia Gilbert: Does Dr. Duckworth equate that aerodynamic harmony of flourishing with happiness?

Angela Duckworth: Some people would use flourishing and happiness synonymously. One lesson I've taken from my time trying to understand human nature and also using words to communicate to people about human nature is that there is no word – character, virtue, flourishing, happiness – there's no word that I think there's entire agreement about what it really means.

When I think about flourishing, I think it is more than happiness, because happiness, for me, suggests a kind of narrow like, "It was a good day! I feel pretty great about my life." Flourishing includes having a sense of meaning and purpose, which is not the same thing as having had an ice cream cone that day, and a lot of fun. It can be having a few really bad days, but actually knowing that this is part of something that you've bought into, that you feel like your life is part of something larger than yourself. What Aristotle might have called eudaimonia – meaning, purpose, a sense that you're part of something larger than yourself as well.

Tavia Gilbert: While the word character is one possible term for human virtues like grit, learning to fail, embracing meaning and purpose, and having empathy, Dr. Duckworth understands why "character" might have negative connotations.

Angela Duckworth: I think one of the reasons why many people don't like the term "character" is that it has a kind of pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps connotation. And I think nothing could be further from the truth. If you are a very gritty person for example, and you live in a community where there are so few opportunities, your classes aren't teaching you very much, there aren't enough laptops for you to even get onto the activity that your class is supposed to be doing that day, you don't have the time in your schedule to do anything that you want to do because you have responsibilities like taking care of a baby sister or whatever, like, these context factors enable the expression of character.

If we pit character against context, if we say, "Oh, if you think about individuals, you must not think about structural problems, societal

issues, inequality,” that either-or thinking is wrong, I think, and very dangerous because it leaves you either rooting for one or the other. And we absolutely have to think of these as intimately related.

It is only in the context where we feel safe and secure, where we have enough to eat, where there are books to read and teachers to teach us and role models to lay the steps down that we can follow in. That’s one reason why context matters. Character actually is not something that I think of as independent of context, but something that comes out of these affordances.

Tavia Gilbert: Though Dr. Duckworth recognizes the charge in the terms “character” and “character development,” when she uses the terminology, it’s thoughtful, and with an understanding of its historical use.

Angela Duckworth: Not everyone loves the word “character,” and not everyone uses the phrase “character development.” In fact, I think, you know, many would say it’s a kind of old fashioned term and should be retired. Some people don’t like that. It has a kind of finger wagging connotation, they say. Others don’t like that it has shades of morality to it.

I understand those concerns, but Aristotle used the word character to describe a life well-lived, a life that’s good for you, and good for other people. Martin Luther King used the word character when he said that character and intelligence, these are the two true goals of a real education.

So when I say character, I really mean all of the ways that we interact with each other and with our world that really do leave us and others better off. That means our humility, that means our gratitude, our ability to empathize with each other. It also means our imagination and creativity, our curiosity to learn more, our grit, our self-control, our proactivity, our optimism. It’s an infinite list, really.

And when I think of character development, I really think of a lifelong process of the cultivation of these character strengths. I’m 50, and I don’t think I’m at all close to the kind of person that I want to be. And so I don’t think character development is a project for young children or even for

young children and adolescents. I think it's a project for a living human being who continually wants to be a better person.

Tavia Gilbert: Dr. Duckworth believes that this continual search to become a better person – or, the development of grit – must be modeled.

Angela Duckworth: There is an expression that Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American writer and philosopher, used to describe the effect of a leader. He said that an organization is merely the long, extended shadow of its leader. And I think that's true. We are all modeling for each other behaviors and attitudes. And your behavior and attitude surely will influence mine. We mimic each other without a lot of conscious intent.

But a leader is a very special role model. A leader has status and authority, and we are looking to our leaders as examples of how we can and should act, how we can and should speak to each other, how we can and should forgive each other or not. And therefore, I think leaders play a disproportionately large role in the influence that we have on each other as human beings.

Tavia Gilbert: But we don't have to be in a position of formal leadership in order to help others develop strength and resilience. Every adult, Dr. Duckworth says, has an opportunity to be a role model.

Angela Duckworth: I have a dream that every kid everywhere in the world will have a psychologically wise adult in their life, a psychologically wise mom, or a psychologically wise rabbi or a psychologically wise godparent, teacher, coach. What those adults do in the life of a young person is they help them develop strengths of heart, mind and will, and when I think of character, I think that these are the strengths that are heart, interpersonal, mind, curiosity, imagination, intellectual humility, and will, grit, self-control, optimism and more.

And when I have this picture play out in my head of every young person having a psychologically wise adult in their life, shepherding them along the path, helping them to develop these strengths, it says to me that what those adults are doing is helping these young people develop into the sort of person who lives a good life for themselves and others.

Young people can develop these capabilities that help them relate to other people, relate to ideas and get things done that are important to them. But they can only do that when there are adults in their life, when they have the people around them to model and to encourage them to do those things.

In the absence of caring adults who are appropriately challenging and wonderful role models themselves of character and virtue, who say to you or signal to you that they love you and want what's best for you, and therefore they're going to push you along a little bit and maybe give you some things to do that you don't think you can do at the moment – I think in the absence of that, then young people do not grow up to flourish in the way that they could have otherwise.

Tavia Gilbert: In fact, Dr. Duckworth's own mother has been a model of flourishing for her.

Angela Duckworth: I think flourishing is more than achieving goals, and I think flourishing is much more than being thought of as successful in the eyes of society. My own mother, you know, nobody will ever write a Wikipedia page about my mom. She did not win a Guggenheim. Her paintings do not hang in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She is a wonderful person, and she is a kind person and an honest person and a caring person. And she has a great sense of humor and she's creative.

And when I realize that my research on high achievers and grit can be mistaken as a manifesto on flourishing that says, you know, really the highest goal of life is to win a Nobel Prize or a gold medal in the Olympics, I think of my mom, and I think, No! The game of life is a much, much more complex and deeper game than that. Achievement is a wonderful thing, and many of us will spend a lot of our hours and a lot of our days working to achieve goals. But the most important thing, I think, is to be a good person and to be a good person to the people that you love and a good person to strangers whom you'll never meet, and my mom is all those things.

Tavia Gilbert: Born in the United States in 1970 to Chinese immigrants, Dr. Duckworth believes that grit, and human flourishing, are probably not defined by culture, but by the common elements of what it is to be human – that

humor, creativity, honesty, care for others that she saw modeled by her own mother.

Angela Duckworth: I don't know whether flourishing is universal or is it entirely culturally idiosyncratic. But I have a strong intuition, and that is that it is, in its most important facets, universal. We all have a unique story that nobody else in history has ever lived before or ever will after we're gone. In the sense that we feel joy and sorrow, that we feel confident some days and insecurity others, that we're trying to do well by ourselves and others, that we crave intimacy, that we struggle with forgiveness – I think in the fundamental elements, human beings, the world over, and for the past and the future of this species are more alike than we are different from each other.

It is said that John Lennon really believed that even at the time of his death and was thinking about that actively, that all you need is love, like he sings, and there is something about feeling connected and caring about everyone, not just your, you know, your immediate family or your best friend from high school. But really that, like, you could pass a stranger on the street and even your enemies, you know, to feel genuine love. I mean, it's hard to argue with that.

Tavia Gilbert: Ending our episode in love is intentional. In the time we released our last episode with Vint Cerf on the Digital Age, on how vital it is to seek quality information to counteract disinformation and propaganda, Russia has declared war on Ukraine, and there is untold human suffering and loss of life. And there are, of course, parts of the globe that have been under siege far longer, with those human hearts broken and those human bodies shattered.

Like so many of you, I grieve this madness and horror, and I wonder how I can help. I don't have a clear answer, except to say for the moment that everyone who works on the Stories of Impact podcast deeply hopes that the stories of how humans can flourish, will in some small way make a difference. In the meantime, we pray for peace.

In two weeks, we'll be back with a conversation with Dr. Agnes Kalibata, Rwandan agricultural scientist and policymaker, and president of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa.

Agnes Kalibata: I look at ending hunger as a basic human right. So we can't talk about flourishing of mankind, when there's a basic need, the need that makes you feel less than human, that is not being addressed. So ending hunger is about coming through on expectations of humanity. It's about mankind coming through for mankind.

Tavia Gilbert: If you appreciate the Stories of Impact podcast, please follow the podcast, and rate and review us. We are on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, and at storiesofimpact.org.

This has been the Stories of Impact Podcast, with Richard Sergay and Tavia Gilbert. Written and produced by Talkbox Productions and Tavia Gilbert. Senior producer Katie Flood. Music by Aleksander Filipiak. Mix and master by Kayla Elrod. Executive producer Michele Cobb.

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