

# ***HUMILITY AMONG ADOLESCENT PURPOSE EXEMPLARS***

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A growing body of theoretical and empirical literature suggests that purpose plays an important role in supporting and predicting positive youth development. However, little is known about young people with purpose. Therefore, in-depth case study style interviews were conducted with nine young people who exemplify the concept of purpose. Without prompting, humility, which includes an openness to new ideas and opposing perspectives, an accurate assessment of one's strengths and weaknesses, an appreciation for the value of others, and a lack of self focus (Tangney, 2000, 2002) emerged from the transcripts as a defining characteristic of the sample. To confirm that humility was not characteristic of all adolescents, a matched sample of nine nonpurposeful transcripts were also coded, and humility did not emerge as a defining characteristic of any of these youth. The openness dimension of purpose appeared most commonly among the purposeful sample. Implications of these findings, including ways in which humility and purpose may work together to support positive youth development, are discussed.

## ***POSITIVE ROLE OF PURPOSE***

A growing body of research suggests that purpose may be an important component of thriving. For example, Benard (1991) suggests that a sense of purpose is an important and consistent feature of resilient youth, and Benson identifies it as a developmental asset (1997). Further, empirical research suggests that youth with purpose are psychologically healthier than their nonpurposeful peers (Shek, 1993), and the same appears to hold for adults (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1967; Kish &

Moody, 1989). Measures of related concepts yield similar findings. For instance, Antonovsky (1987) found that coherence, which measures a global feeling about the comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness of the world, is associated with physical and psychological health. Since purpose relates to good physical health, it is not surprising to find that a lack of purpose correlates with poor health. Research reveals that lower scores on the Purpose in Life test correlate with alcoholism (Schlesinger, Susman, & Koenigsberg, 1990) and drug use for adults

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(Waisberg & Porter, 1994) and adolescents (Padelford, 1974; Sayles 1994). Without a sense of purpose youth are likely to experience a sense of “drift” or aimlessness (Damon, 1995) or find themselves invested in hedonistic values, such as pleasure, excitement, and comfort (Crandall & Rasmussen, 1975; Paloutzian, 1981). Furthermore, nonpurposeful youth are more likely than purposeful youth to act in antisocial ways (Shek, Ma, & Cheung, 1994). They tend to dwell on problems, blame others, and report high levels of anger and negative affect (Sappington & Kelly, 1995).

Not only do purpose and related constructs predict mental and physical health, they also predict well-being. High scores on McAdam’s (2001) generativity measures suggest that generativity, a construct which shares a concern for matters beyond the self with purpose, correlates with high life satisfaction and well-being. Similarly, Ryff’s Scales Of Well-being associate a subjective sense of well-being with purpose (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). Seligman also links purpose with subjective well-being (2002). According to him, there are three primary paths to happiness. The first route to happiness involves experiencing as many of life’s pleasures as possible. This will result in short-term happiness. The other two routes produce longer lasting, deeper forms of contentment. The second, also called the good life, involves becoming deeply involved in those activities in which one excels and losing oneself in the process, and the third, the meaningful life, involves pursuing a path in which a cause or an institution supplies a sense of belonging to something greater than oneself. Pursuing a purpose involves aspects of both the good life and the meaningful life, and in this way purpose indirectly links to subjective well-being.

Along these same lines, findings from related constructs suggest that purposeful people are likely to be happier than other people. French and Joseph (1999) found that purpose was a mediating factor between religiosity and happiness, and higher scores on McAdam’s

(2001) generativity measure correlate with high levels of happiness and low levels of depression.

Purpose helps people overcome life’s challenges. Frankl (1959) was one of the first psychologists to propose that having a high-level belief system, such as a sense of purpose, enabled people to endure life’s hardships. As a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, he credits his survival to maintaining a purpose in his life. After he was released from the camp, he developed an approach to psychological counseling called logotherapy, which is based on the premise that a lack of purpose is the leading cause of poor psychological health. This approach tries to help people identify and connect with a life purpose. With regards to youth, Erikson (1968) reported that purpose helps young people successfully navigate and resolve their identity “crises.”

Purpose also plays an important role in overcoming addiction. Waisberg and Porter (1994) find that purposeful people are more likely to overcome drug and alcohol addictions, and Noblejas de la Flor (1997) concluded that overcoming drug addiction produces significantly higher purpose scores. A study of Alcoholics Anonymous members concluded that purpose positively correlates with length of sobriety (Carroll, 1993). In sum, purpose is both a cause and an effect of overcoming addictions.

Research suggests that purposeful youth have higher levels of self-esteem than nonpurposeful youth (Damon & Gregory, 1997). Empirical research proves that having a sense of meaning in life (Battista & Almond, 1973) and being generative (McAdams, 2001), two concepts closely related to purpose, are associated with higher levels of self-esteem, so it seems likely that purpose is, too.

Research from related topics converges to suggest that purposeful youth are more likely to be prosocially engaged than their nonpurposeful peers. Higher scores on the Purpose in Life test predict altruism (Shek, Ma, & Cheung, 1994; Noblejas de la Flor, 1997) and positive affect (Noblejas de la Flor, 1997) and

higher scores on McAdam's (2001) generativity measure also correlate with more social activity and political activism.

Purpose may play a role in moral development, too. Research reveals that people begin to define themselves in moral terms during adolescence, and in so doing frequently refer to grand belief systems (Damon, 1983; Damon & Hart, 1992; Hart & Damon, 1988). Purpose may serve as a high-level system of belief.

It is also likely that purpose plays a role in moral commitment. Theoretical and empirical research on the emergence of moral identity during adolescence is consistent with this hypothesis (Damon & Gregory, 1997).

Some of this research is theoretical, some is conducted on related constructs, and some does not conceive of purpose in exactly the way this study does. However, taken together, the findings strongly suggest that purpose plays a positive role in the development of young people.

Despite the strong claims made by researchers about purpose, empirical work has yet to be conducted that examines the lives of purposeful youth directly. Therefore, this study aims to understand which characteristics are shared by people with intense purposes in their lives.

### ***Purpose Defined***

The aforementioned studies conceive of purpose in varied ways. Some use purpose and meaning interchangeably, and others distinguish the two, but in inconsistent ways. Therefore, following an in-depth literature review of the varied uses of the term Damon, Menon, and Bronk (2003) put forth the following definition: *Purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and leads to productive engagement with some aspect of the world beyond the self.* This definition includes three important components. First, a purpose represents an ultimate aim toward which one can make progress. Second, a purpose is meaningful to the self. This may sound obvious, but

it means interest in maintaining purpose is voluntary and self-motivated. An adolescent's internal motivation, rather than parents, teachers, or peers, is the driving force. Finally, as well as being meaningful to the self, purposes are meaningful to others. In other words, the individual's interest in pursuing a purpose includes a desire to contribute to matters larger than the self.

## ***METHODS***

### ***Sample***

This study utilized an extreme-groups design, including nine highly purposeful youth and nine youth without purposes in life ( $N = 18$ ). The decision to use a comparison sample of nonpurposeful youth was fairly straightforward; without one claims about the particular nature of the characteristics which describe purpose exemplars could not be made. Highly purposeful youth, rather than young people with a less intense but perhaps more typical form of purpose, were included because often the best way to understand what a construct looks like in practice is to examine it in its most intense form. Furthermore, many similarities likely exist between the way ordinary purposes and extraordinary purposes develop, and what is gleaned from this population should apply to less purposeful samples as well.<sup>1</sup>

Participants included adolescents, rather than adults or younger children, for two reasons. First, adolescence is the first time young people have the opportunity to commit to long-term aims. Before adolescence young people typically lack the cognitive skills required for the hypothetical and deductive reasoning essential to planning and maintaining an enduring purpose (Piaget, as cited in Ginsburg & Opper, 1979). Second, adolescence is the first time youth are typically afforded the relative freedom to step out on their own and affect the world beyond themselves. Without this level of independence, purpose cannot flourish.

The data for this study represent a subset of the data collected in conjunction with the Stanford Center on Adolescence Youth Purpose Project, under the direction of Principal Investigator William Damon. Members of this research team collected national survey and interview data from nonidentified samples of adolescents and case study data from a sample of purpose exemplars. The present study focuses on the purpose exemplars who were intentionally selected through a system of nominations to address the research question. The nonpurposeful youth included in the present study were also selected from the Stanford study. In conjunction with this larger study, 49 adolescents were interviewed and each transcript was coded for purposefulness. A cluster of 12 young people who demonstrated no clear purpose in life emerged. In order to achieve a loosely matched sample with the purposeful youth, 9 of these 12 transcripts were selected for use in the present study.

From an aggregate perspective, the demographics of the nonpurposeful youth resembled those of the purposeful youth. Both groups ranged in age from 12 to 23 years of age (nonpurposeful youth:  $M = 18.11$ ,  $SD = 2.47$ ; purposeful youth:  $M = 19.11$ ;  $SD = 3.37$ ), and they were Caucasian (nonpurposeful youth: 55%; purposeful youth = 67%), African American (nonpurposeful youth: 22%; purposeful youth = 11%), Asian (nonpurposeful youth: 11%; purposeful youth: 11%), and Hispanic (nonpurposeful: 11%; purposeful youth: 11%). They came from rural (nonpurposeful: 44%; purposeful: 33%), suburban (nonpurposeful: 44%; purposeful: 33%), and urban (nonpurposeful: 11%; purposeful: 33%) hometowns across the United States and Canada. Finally, all youth were either in school or working at the time of the interviews.

To determine if participants met the criteria for purpose (or no purpose), their interviews were coded along four dimensions. First, purposeful youth demonstrate a “stable and generalized” commitment to something. The purpose exemplars, expressed at least a 5-year

commitment to a particular interest. Second, purpose requires an “intention to accomplish something.” In other words, the purposeful youth had plans for making progress in their area or issue of interest. Third, purposes are “meaningful to the self,” meaning that the youths’ involvement was voluntary and self-motivated. Finally, purpose “leads to productive engagement with some aspect of the world beyond the self,” which means purposeful youth were not committed to purely hedonistic or self-serving aims; instead they demonstrated a commitment to making a difference in the world beyond themselves. The purpose exemplars met each of these criteria, while the nonpurposeful youth met at most two.

The life purposes of the exemplars varied significantly. Slightly more than half of the group was dedicated to a social cause (e.g., raising money to build wells in Africa, promoting cancer research, curbing gun violence, promoting adolescent health, and preserving the environment.) The other four youth were devoted to different issues (e.g., enhancing Internet security, creating and promoting jazz music, spreading conservative politics, and serving God).

### **Data Analysis**

Using the Youth Purpose Interview protocol (Bronk, Menon, & Damon, 2004), the nine purpose exemplars were interviewed for approximately 3 hours each. Questions in this protocol probe the things that matter most to young people. For example, questions include the following: *What are some of the things you really care about? What kind of person are you? What would you need for your life to feel complete?* With each of these questions the interviewer probes deeply around why these things matter to the young person in order to gauge the rationale or motivation behind the participant’s primary interest or potential purpose. These probes are key to determining if an “other-oriented” motivation is present. If the young person identifies something as particu-

larly important to him or her, then the interviewer follows up with a line of questioning around this interest designed to tease out whether this interest represents a purpose or not. Interviews with the non-purposeful youth were conducted using the same protocol. However, they tended to be shorter as these interviews omitted a line of questioning around life purpose, since no discernible purposes were evident.

Because the aim of this study was to generate a grounded theory of purposeful youths' characteristics and experiences, the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) was employed. As such, following a portion of data collection, transcripts were reviewed and trends and patterns were noted in memos. These trends and patterns became the basis for codes, and the emerging codes were applied to each of the new transcripts. They were omitted or modified to most accurately describe the data. This process continued until all the data were collected and coded. Literature relevant to each of the emergent codes was consulted in order to name and operationalize the codes in a way that was consistent with existing research.

### **Code Creation**

Codes emerged around the characteristics and experiences that young people with purpose share. For example, a willingness to sacrifice for the things that matter most, identification of or creation of groups of like-minded peers, and strong relationships with mentors represented codes around the experiences shared by adolescent purpose exemplars. Vitality, openness, focus, and humility emerged as codes representing the characteristics shared by the sample of purposeful youth.

The most striking and theoretically interesting code to emerge was humility. According to Tangney (2000, 2002), one of the most widely cited writers on humility, there are four key features of authentic humility. First, authentic humility means having an accurate, not over- or underestimated sense of one's abilities and

achievements, including having an accurate assessment of one's shortcomings, imperfections, limitations, and gaps in knowledge. Authentically humble people, in acknowledging their own limitations, often refer to a higher power. Second, authentic humility is associated with an openness to new ideas, contradictory information and advice. Third, being humble means maintaining a relatively low self-focus. Tangney (2002) even refers to a "forgetting of the self" (p. 411). Finally, authentic humility entails appreciating the value of all things, as well as the many ways that people and things contribute to the broader world. Authentic humility, according to this definition, is not a negative trait, but, as Peterson and Seligman (2004) note, it is a character strength.

In order to operationalize this definition, the humility code was broken into seven subcodes which closely follow Tangney's definition of purpose. The first subcode was "Accurately assesses own strengths and weaknesses." This follows directly from Tangney's definition. The next four were Openness subcodes, including "Embraces opposing opinions," "Demonstrates an openness to learning and growing," and "Values open-mindedness." Taken together, these subcodes compose Tangney's second aspect of humility. Finally, "Appreciates others' contributions" and "Forgets the self" follow from Tangney's last two forms of humility.

To confirm that the coding scheme was sound, a second researcher applied the codes to a randomly selected sample, representing 5% of the purposeful and nonpurposeful youths' quotations. The inter-rater reliability statistic was .85. In other words, the same codes were applied 85% of the time.

### **RESULTS**

Analysis of the data yielded a number of interesting results. This paper focuses on one of the strongest findings, and that is the emergence of humility among the purposeful sample.<sup>2</sup>

### *Humility*

Humility is not a characteristic typically associated with adolescents, especially not adolescents, such as the exemplars, who have earned a good deal of recognition for their accomplishments. However, though humility was not intentionally probed, 107 instances of the construct emerged from the purposeful sample and only 12 instances emerged from the nonpurposeful sample. Table 1 summarizes the number of codes that were applied by subcode by purpose exemplar, and Table 2 summarizes the number of codes that were applied by subcode by nonpurposeful participant.

The humility code included the following subcodes: Openness (including being open to learning and growing, being open-minded, and seeking new perspectives), Accurate assessment of own strengths and weaknesses, appreciation for others' contributions, and Forgetting the self.

### *Openness*

Among the nonpurposeful youth, only four instances of Openness appeared; however, Openness was the manifestation of humility that appeared most often among the exemplars. Sixty-five of the 107 humility codes fell into this subcode. All of the purposeful youth demonstrated some form of openness, but its role and form varied from youth to youth and from instance to instance. Forms of openness included intellectual curiosity, an appreciation for opposing perspectives, and open-mindedness. Each of the forms of openness supported the youths' progress toward their respective purposes in life.

#### *Being Open to Learning and Growing*

The most prevalent form of openness identified among the purpose exemplars was a desire to learn and grow. Eight of the nine

TABLE 1  
Number of Times Subcodes Appeared by Purpose Exemplar

	<i>Aspects of Humility</i>					
	<i>Aspects of Openness</i>		<i>Accurately</i>			
	<i>Open to Learning and Growing</i>	<i>Openminded</i>	<i>Embraces Opposing Perspectives</i>	<i>Assesses Strength/Weaknesses</i>	<i>Appreciates Others' Contributions</i>	<i>Forgets Self</i>
Reid	0	0	0	4	0	0
Ted	3	4	5	4	1	0
Barrett	3	0	0	2	2	4
Palmer	7	0	1	1	1	0
Natalie	3	0	1	1	0	0
Macy	4	8	0	1	4	1
Sawyer	6	1	1	6	4	1
Mitch	4	9	2	2	2	0
Malek	3	0	0	1	0	0
Total	33	22	10	22	14	6

TABLE 2  
Number of Times Subcodes Appeared by Nonpurposeful Participant

	<i>Aspects of Humility</i>					
	<i>Aspects of Openness</i>					
	<i>Open to Learning and Growing</i>	<i>Openminded</i>	<i>Enbraces Opposing Perspectives</i>	<i>Accurately Assesses Strength/Weaknesses</i>	<i>Appreciates Others' Contributions</i>	<i>Forgets Self</i>
PA9-9	0	0	0	0	0	0
TN9-9	0	0	0	0	0	0
BA9-12	2	0	0	2	0	0
VI20-25	0	0	0	1	0	0
VI12-19	0	1	0	0	0	0
TN12-3	0	0	0	0	1	0
VI20-10	1	0	0	1	0	0
TN12-2	0	0	0	0	0	0
TN20-11	0	0	0	3	0	0
Total	3	1	0	7	1	0

exemplars demonstrated this aspect of openness. For example, Ted<sup>3</sup> said,

I see everybody as my teacher. Whatever experiences I collect from other people, I'm constantly learning from them and hearing about their perspectives and then taking them to shape my own.... Even though it's not maybe an academic teacher, people have always had a pretty big impact on my life. (Ted, p. 23, lines 1050–1055)

Similarly, Palmer, the jazz musician, noted that musicians need to be open to outside influences and offered aspiring musicians the following advice: "Listen, ... you have to listen. Otherwise you won't know what you're trying to sound like. You won't get inspired. You need direction, so teachers are good" (Palmer, p. 15, lines 745–748). Both Ted and Palmer were consciously open to outside influences.

Likewise, Sawyer, the adolescent health advocate, talked about being open to learning and growing. In response to why she felt compelled to get involved in the antismoking

campaign she said, "It was the confidence that I had a lot to learn—I still have a lot to learn—but I was open to that possibility" (Sawyer, p. 21, lines 818–819).

Related to being open to learning and growing, intellectual curiosity represents another aspect of openness. Natalie, illustrating this form of openness, said, "I want to definitely be more learned on a lot of different issues—to be truly educated" (Natalie, p. 2, lines 79–80). Similarly, Macy demonstrated lofty educational aspirations. "I would major in [psychology] before I go to medical school ... so I'd have that and then go to medical school. And then apply what I learn from that to my [medical] practice" (Macy, p. 10, lines 369–372). Additionally, she planned to spend a semester in Mexico learning, among other things, the Spanish language. Since Macy's ultimate aim was to move to Latin America, to offer medical services to impoverished residents, her ambitious educational plans aligned with and supported her purpose in life.

Openness was not only an approach to the adolescent's purposeful pursuits, but also to their lives in general. For instance, Palmer recognized that he learned more than just music from his teachers.

Music is just a piece of the puzzle.... I've got this great deal worked out about getting lessons where I can take the teacher out to a restaurant after the lesson to pay for [the lesson].... It's like an extension of the lesson, because there's still talking, and you don't have to be sitting in front of a piano to learn from them. Just hearing them talk and their views on life, and the way they see things. It's a learning experience. (Palmer, pp. 15–18 lines 707–1148)

Similarly, growing up in West Virginia did not afford Natalie many opportunities to learn about or engage in her Hindu background, but upon,

coming [to Harvard] I realize that even if it's not necessarily a huge part of my personality or like who Natalie is, I think it's important to explore [Hinduism]. And so I've tried to like learn about—like I took a class with one of the D, one of the scholars in Hindu mythology, or I guess Hindu in general ... and I'm trying to as well, learn more about the culture, do some of the cultural activities I suppose as well. And that's been great experience. (Natalie p. 30, lines 1338–1344)

Natalie, like the other exemplars, expressed a strong intellectual curiosity toward a variety of aspects of her life.

Malek, the technology guru, presented a particularly interesting instance of openness to learning. He described himself as curious.

Pretty much everybody in [the technology field] is driven by curiosity and just knowing how things work. That's a lot of times how you come across stuff, is you sit down and you try to figure out, "how does this certain type of system or software or whatever work?" (Malek, p. 3, lines 194–198)

This high school drop-out spoke at length about the joy he derived from learning. Ironically,

he left high school because he did not find if offered sufficient opportunities for new experiences.

That was one of the things I hated about high school. Every Sunday night I was, like, crap. I already know my entire week. I know everything that's going to happen. Variations on homework and crap, but it's relatively going to be the exact same thing, and I just didn't look forward to that. (Malek p. 19, lines 1059–1064)

The opportunity to learn about technology initially drew Malek to technology.

Once I finally got Internet access, I was just trying to learn things and eventually came across some hacking documents and all that stuff. I just started reading and thought it was such interesting things. Because I had already been into trying to figure out how the computer works and how to tweak things and do this and that. And so I read this hacking thing and I thought, "wow, these people really know how to tweak things!" (Malek lines p. 8, 400–405)

From this community he initially learned a good deal about Internet security, but eventually even this "became the same thing over and over." When this happened, he decided it would be more interesting and worthwhile to devise strategies for protecting Web sites.

His intellectual curiosity led him to consistently seek challenging, novel experiences.

Always, from when I was really young, I would take [things] apart.... I think the first thing I took apart was some sort of radio. Couldn't get it back together. I had no idea. I was six or seven. But I've always kind of taken things apart. And when I got into computers, there's so much stuff in this one little machine that you can figure out, and so many things to learn. (Malek p. 2, lines 211–215)

The reason Malek enjoyed technology was the constant challenge it provided along with the constant opportunity to learn more.

Each of these young people was actively engaged in the learning process. They experi-

enced positive feeling in the process of acquiring skills, satisfying curiosity, building on existing knowledge, and acquiring new knowledge. Among the nonpurposeful youth, however, this interest was significantly less evident.

### *Valuing Open-Mindedness*

One of the nonpurposeful youth and four of the purpose exemplars said they valued open-mindedness. When asked what kind of person he was, Mitch, the conservative politician, said, “I’m pretty open-minded” (Mitch, p. 1, line 62). In addition to valuing open-mindedness, he also admired the characteristic in others. One of the reasons he said he looked up to his mentor was because he “had an open-minded slant to him” (Mitch, p. 14, line 862). When he and his mentor did not see eye to eye, it was often because Mitch felt that his mentor was not being sufficiently tolerant. “We disagreed on issues and we would spur on things like homosexuality and things like religion and being open-minded and accepting people” (Mitch, p. 16, line 975). Mitch said he was closer to his mom than his dad, in part because, “There’s more accepting people with my mom” (Mitch, p. 21, line 1107).

Ted, like Mitch, also said he valued open-mindedness. In fact, he advised people to “always keep an open mind when you’re considering different issues. I think that when you’re open to different experiences and things like that, I think you benefit.... I think a good person is always somebody that’s open to different perspectives and different ideas” (Ted, p. 2, lines 89–91). Open-mindedness, while not as prevalent as openness to learning and growing or embracing opposing opinions, was evident among this sample.

### *Embracing Opposing Perspectives*

Another aspect of openness that emerged from the interviews with the purpose exemplars was an interest in seeking new points of view. None of the nonpurposeful youth talked

about this interest, but five of the exemplars did. When asked about her patriotism, for example, Natalie acknowledged that people from other countries do not always support American policies, but she said, “I like hearing the perspectives of other countries [sic], you know, people of other countries about America” (p. 37, lines 1688–1690). Similarly, Ted said he enjoyed talking with people who did not share his views on gun laws. “It’s invigorating to have another perspective to bounce ideas off of and see what the opposing side has to say” (p. 7, lines 558–560).

Palmer pointed to the importance of not only listening to other perspectives, but also with seriously considering them.

I always judge being a good person as, I always look at their points of view.... I always switch positions. That’s the way I look at politics, too. A lot of things in life.... I think, well, switch places with them. How would we feel if this happened?  
(Palmer, p. 3, lines 92–98)

Two exemplars spoke about their hopes for openness on a broad scale. First, Sawyer recognized that disagreements about how to best promote adolescent health, but despite divergent opinions she believed that a

need to hopefully create a culture that’s more open and receptive to having dialogues and realizing that when we talk about our bodies, it’s not some drastic, horrible, negative thing going on. But people are curious, and identity is a part of health, and figuring out who you are. That needs to be in the public health arena. (Sawyer, p. 33–34, lines 1290–1296)

Similarly, Mitch expressed hope for more global, political discussions. “Foreign policy, I’m pretty, I think there’s a need for dialogue, open debate, among the international community” (Mitch, p. 33, lines 1561–1562). Whether in reference to their purposes, their personal lives, or the world they lived in, the value of embracing opposing perspectives was evident among this sample.

### *Balancing Openness With Focus*

Being open to new experiences allowed the exemplars to initiate and maintain their life purposes. If Macy had not been receptive to the church her parents initially encouraged her to attend, it is unlikely she would have discovered a religious purpose for her life.

I started coming [to church] with my parents and stuff and then they would say, “pray for this” or “pray for that.” So I was, “okay,” so I started praying for things. So they said, “ask Jesus into your heart,” so I did. A couple of times. (Macy, p. 23, lines 838–891)

Similarly, if Barrett, the environmentalist, had not been open to learning, it seems unlikely she would have been able to implement her oil recycling program on a statewide level. When she started the work she said she knew little about the science or pragmatics of recycling motor oil; she attended conferences to learn more. Once there she sought out people who were willing to share their knowledge with her. She said to them, “okay, just talk to me! I’m just listening. Teach away!” (Barrett, p. 8, lines 526–527). Like Barrett, Malek owed much of his technological know-how to his interest in learning from books, people, and online sources. When he was first introduced to computers, he “just started reading and learning” (Malek, p. 3, line 363). He also learned by experimenting. “I just started trying to figure stuff out. I started messing around with things and reading and learning more” (Malek, p. 4, lines 377–378).

Openness in all of its forms, including demonstrating intellectual curiosity, valuing open-mindedness, and embracing opposing perspectives, helped the adolescents in this study find and maintaining inspiring life purposes. Had they not been open, they would have had a difficult time sustaining their interests to the extent they did.

However, had they only been open, without also being focused, they likely would not have accomplished much. An unmoored person would likely be swayed from one direction to

another without making much forward progress. These youth, however, accomplished a good deal, and one key to understanding how, lies in understanding how they balanced a sense of focus with a sense of openness.

Each of the youth balanced these seemingly contradictory characteristics in much the same way. Their ultimate concerns served as a compass guiding them in a constant direction; however they all remained open to learning new things about their interests, to reinterpreting what their interests meant to them, and to changing the ways in which they pursued their ultimate concerns. For example, Ted said,

I’d like to see myself serving in some capacity of where I’m serving others. Whatever it is, whether as a result of being so politically involved. I’d like to look into law, politics, history. That kind of a bent. But always being, in some capacity, to help serve others is the way I see myself going. (Ted, p. 22, lines 918–922)

For Ted a desire to help others served as his stake in the ground. At the time of the interview, promoting stricter gun control laws was the way he felt he could best achieve this aim, but he was open to changing his means should a better way of helping others become available to him. Similarly, Palmer was dedicated to his music, but he was open to the type of music he would pursue. “I don’t know ... where I’m going to go musically. That’s all very abstract. It depends on who influences me and who I get my mind opened by” (Palmer, p. 4, lines 342–343). Along those same lines, Macy’s ultimate aim, service to God, was fixed, but the way she went about it was flexible.

So they were prophesizing this over me, that I was supposed to go to some other country.... That God was going to use me there.... So, I was like, wow! Nothing like that had ever been prophesized over me before. So, I was like, wow, this is weird. I was thinking that. I didn’t know what was going on. I had never seen myself doing that when I was older. (Macy, p. 15, lines 511–517)

When a prophet told her that God wanted her to serve people in Latin America, Macy's plans evolved to accommodate this vision. While remaining committed to serving God, she was open to how she would do it. This delicate balance between focus and openness was an important and unanticipated feature of the purposeful sample.

### ***Accurate Assessment of One's Strengths and Weaknesses***

Four of the nonpurposeful youth and all of the purpose exemplars either spoke directly about their strengths and weaknesses or described incidences which signaled their assessments. For the purpose exemplars, approximately one fifth of the quotations coded as humility fell into this subcode (22 of 107). For the nonpurposeful sample, this was the most frequently applied humility subcode applied; 7 of the 12 quotations fell into this category.

Among the purpose exemplars, the youth pointed to a variety of talents and shortcomings. Throughout her interview Natalie, for example, struggled to eloquently express her ideas.

I'm not sure if I always am able to express what I'm really thinking. So that's one thing. It's weird because a lot of times I hear, I get feedback saying, "Oh you're great at this." But I feel like I still need to improve upon that. (Natalie, p. 3, lines 108–110)

She accurately identified one of her weaknesses.

According to Tangney, many authentically humble people who display this aspect of the humility virtue refer to a higher power, as Macy did.

I don't really think it was anything that I did that makes me such a good Christian. I think it's totally God, and his plan for my life. He has something for me, and I don't know why, and I don't know what, but I think that's the number one reason. I know

I had choices, and I could have chosen to do something else, but I think God was the one orchestrating what I did and the choices I made. (Macy, p. 14, lines 976–977)

Macy acknowledged that she played an important role in determining who she became. She "had choices," but she also acknowledged the influence of a higher being.

Palmer too readily acknowledged that his high level of playing was due only in part to his abilities and dedication. He humbly acknowledged that he had opportunities to learn, to practice, and to perform that were not readily available to other youth. "I don't think it's my qualities as much as the environment I've been exposed to" (Palmer, p. 8, line 1117). Given a love of music and a dedication to practicing, anyone with the same opportunities could have achieved what he had.

What helps is when you incorporate music into your life. When it becomes a regular part. You're in a band that rehearses every weekend or something, because then every week you get exposed to the music and, of course, every week you're going to learn something new. So eventually you're just going to get better and better. (Palmer, p. 8, lines 1120–1123)

Reid, the youth committed to providing clean drinking water to people in need, professed the same belief. The powerful social change he affected in Africa was something that all people could achieve, if they worked hard enough. "I believe you can make a difference no matter who you are" (Reid, p. 4, line 403). This belief about learning reflects goal theory's positive mastery orientation.

### ***Community of Like-Minded Peers***

In accurately assessing their own strengths and weaknesses, the purpose exemplars demonstrated a sense of self-confidence tempered with a sense of humility. The youths' generally high level of confidence was evidenced by their actions rather than their words. Each of

these young people remained committed to his and her interests for at least 5 years, which suggests a high level of certitude and dedication. Their long lasting commitments would not have been as notable had they acted in supportive communities. However, in each case the youth encountered communities of people that did not share and in many cases even opposed their interests. Adolescence is typically marked by a desire to fit in, but that was not the case with these youth. They acted even when it was not the popular course of action. For example, Sawyer, who was dedicated to promoting adolescent health initiatives such as anti-smoking campaigns, said, "There wasn't a lot of support in my high school among the peers for the things that [I was] doing" (Sawyer, p. 17, lines 624–648).

Palmer had a similar experience. He spent considerable time pursuing his musical interests, but most of his friends did not share his passion and often chastised him for spending time on his music rather than with them.

It was really hard in high school because ... I had some really solid friends that aren't musicians.... A lot of people are, I think, overshadowed by my music [and] ... have trouble realizing that. "Oh I can't go out, I can't go bowling with you because I have to practice." People think, "oh, he obviously doesn't like me because he's staying home to practice, that's boring." (Palmer, p. 5, lines 528–535)

Like the others, Palmer's desire to remain committed to his music despite support from his peers points to an inner confidence.

Mitch too remained dedicated to his interests despite, not only a lack of support, but an open hostility toward his beliefs. His commitment to promoting conservative politics on one of the most liberal college campuses in the nation did not garner support. Similarly, Barrett promoted an environmental message in a conservative town, where she was often teased for her activities. "We're the tree huggers at school. We're the only environmental people who stand out really, I guess. So we get called

tree hugger all the time" (Barrett, p. 2, lines 142–144).

All the young people demonstrated a strong sense of confidence, and for eight of the nine young people this confidence was underscored by their comfort acting in decidedly unpopular ways. One way the young people managed to stay committed despite a lack of broad popular support, was to seek out communities of like-minded peers.

Locally Natalie found little support for her cancer fund raising efforts, so through the Internet she identified youth from across the country who shared her interest.

People who I did like ACS (American Cancer Society) stuff with, I am very much—we work together, but we're also friends. But actually, my immediate friends weren't the ones who did the ACS.... It wasn't like my best friends and I started a group. (Natalie, p. 5, lines 792–797)

Natalie had to create a community of peers who shared her interests and in doing so she founded a nation-wide association of young people committed to supporting cancer research.

Another way the young people dealt with the lack of support was to seek out a ready made community of like-minded peers. In high school, Palmer had difficulty maintaining friendships with peers who did not share his musical interests because they could not understand his dedication. However, by joining bands and playing with different youth groups, Palmer was welcomed into a community of musicians.

I didn't come [to high school] at lunch time because I was only at school for two classes. I'd go to San Francisco for this big band solo every week and I'd go to Monterey sometimes, ... so I managed to become really solid friends with my bass player. (Palmer, p. 4, lines 540–544)

For college, he chose to attend a music school, where he found he knew many of his classmates before he even started. "I knew almost half of my class, I guess. And I knew of people

that had been in there because it's a small world and I hear from the older guys about the people that they were competing with" (Palmer, p. 4, lines 563–565). Beyond just his school community, Palmer was also inducted into the broader jazz community. Well-established musicians were remarkably willing to support Palmer's musical interests. "Herbie Hancock's pretty cool and he influenced me a lot" (Palmer, p. 5, lines 683–684). Palmer said that this community was "connected through the music" (Palmer, p. 5, line 727) and that his enduring commitment to music "is tied to the people I meet [through it]" (Palmer, p. 2, line 83).

Mitch and Malek also sought out like-minded groups. Once on the liberal UC Berkeley campus, Mitch discovered a small group of similarly minded Republicans and quickly bonded with the group.

I went to Berkeley and it just sort of happened. And there were other people starting a [Republican] club at Berkeley and then really getting it going. They were really passionate about it. And then I like them and so I jumped on board with them. (Mitch, p. 5, lines 305–308)

Similarly, Malek discovered a virtual community of people who shared his fascination with technology. This group became a sort of surrogate family for him. When he ran away from home as a teenager, he moved in with an online acquaintance. From there he moved in with another online friend and eventually landed a job with other friends from this online community. Along with some of these people, Malek founded a large technology firm. There he continued to surround himself with like-minded colleagues and friends. "Most of my friends I work with. We are really closer. Like the guys [in my office]. Friendly. Especially the research guys. Last night we were playing video games until 4 A.M." (Malek, p. 7, lines 802–805). Whether the exemplars created a group of like-minded peers or sought out an existing group, having a supportive commu-

nity of youth was important to their pursuit of purpose.

### *Appreciation for Others' Contributions*

The third aspect of humility that surfaced among this sample was an appreciation for the value of all things. One nonpurposeful youth made a comment coded this way, and fourteen of the purpose exemplars' quotations fell into this subcode. For instance, Mitch said, "I think that every person in someone's life makes a difference in some form or another, and I want them to affect me" (Mitch, p. 20, line 1219). At the same time as he recognized the potential for others to influence him, he expressed a desire to be impacted by them, which signals an appreciation for the value of others. Similarly, Natalie recommended others "always be inspired and ... always let yourself be inspired by other people because that challenges you and that makes you yourself realize that like, like there's more I can do" (Natalie, p. 42, lines 1903–1905). She valued the positive impact others had had on her. Finally, Sawyer also recognized the value of others' contributions.

I think a core belief is that you can't do anything by yourself. Or anything that you think you do by yourself is really supported by a mountain of other people... I just think you really can never take personal credit for anything. That there are so many other things that go into that. So that's a value and something that is a challenge, because particularly, it's been really challenging with this Rhode Island stuff. Because there's been a lot of attention to it, and it's Sawyer! And it's not me. It's been a lot of other things that have happened in my life, and a lot of luck ... and having these people that care about me, and all that stuff. So, it is challenging. I don't want people to see these accomplishments as Sawyer's accomplishments, but as the accomplishments of a group of people that care about the issue. (Sawyer, p. 28, lines 1091–1101)

Sawyer, like the other exemplars, recognized that her success would not have been possible without others' help.

### *Forgetting the Self*

Finally, none of the nonpurposeful youth and three of the purpose exemplars made comments coded as “forgetting of the self.” Only six of the purpose exemplars’ quotations coded as humility demonstrated a “forgetting of the self,” and most of the quotations pertained to one interviewee, Barrett. Barrett actively tried to “lose herself” by focusing on her work rather than on her accomplishments. Her strategy for dealing with praise, be it from the president or a neighbor she told us, was to focus on the program aims rather than on her own achievements. Barrett was the only youth who spoke directly about humility. When asked to explain what she meant by humility, she said,

Really learning how to take more prestigious things, I guess, and being able to turn around and shine it on the program instead of on the person, because that’s what it’s all about. It’s the program that makes the difference, not us. We’ve just put it into action, you know? We just got the ball rolling. (Barrett, p. 2, lines 88–91)

In reference to a particularly high profile award from the Environmental Protection Agency, Barrett said,

When we got the EPA award, it was really, “hey, we have this award. Let’s hang the plaque on the wall and start working again.” So, I think it’s just to keep moving, and as you keep moving it doesn’t really fade, but it doesn’t take the spotlight anymore and you don’t focus on that. You focus back on the work and on what needs to be done to reach those people. I think that really helps because it keeps you in check. (Barrett, lines 123–126)

Barrett, along with two of the other exemplars, demonstrated this aspect of humility in her words and actions.

### **DISCUSSION**

Humility, in its four forms, spontaneously emerged as a defining characteristic of each of

the purpose exemplars and of none of the nonpurposeful youth. One hundred and seven instances of humility emerged from the purposeful interviews whereas only 12 instances of the character strength emerged from the nonpurposeful transcripts. While each of the purpose exemplars demonstrated humility, each aspect of humility was not equally represented. Openness was the most prevalent form of humility to emerge. This aspect of the character strength includes an open-mindedness, an interest in opposing perspectives, and an eagerness to learn and grow.

Admittedly, the sample sizes are small for this type of comparison and future studies should seek to survey larger purposeful and nonpurposeful subjects more directly regarding their respective levels of humility. However, researchers (Tangney, 2000; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) point out that stronger measures are needed to accurately assess humility. Recently Rowatt, Powers, Targhetta, Comer, Kennedy, and Labouff (2006) developed an implicit measure of humility, however, validation of the measure is still underway and individual and peer ratings of humility are not strongly correlated. Further, while the authors acknowledge the importance of doing so, they do not examine the openness aspect of humility. In light of this, the emergent nature of this methodology may prove as useful as any.

It is impossible to know from the current study whether purpose spurs the development of humility or if humility spurs the development of purpose. However, the direction of influence is not important. What is important is how the two characteristics work together to promote positive youth development. In each case, humility supported the youths’ pursuit of purpose and vice versa. Templeton (1995, 1997) has theorized that the openness humility carries along with it plays an important role in facilitating intellectual growth, and arrogance, humility’s opposite, serves as a barrier to the acquisition of new knowledge. This study provides empirical support for this assertion. By being open to learning and growing, the young people were able to glean a variety of impor-

tant lessons that helped them find and maintain their purposes. Building practical knowledge is an important step in progressing toward purpose and an eagerness to gain knowledge clearly facilitates learning.

Another way these two characteristics are likely to promote positive development is through facilitating relationships with mentors. A related analysis on this same dataset (see Bronk, 2005) revealed that each of the purpose exemplars had long term mentoring relationships characterized by frequent interaction with adults who helped them learn more about and pursue their respective interests. Results revealed that mentors were less common among the nonpurposeful youth and when they were present, these relationships were often non-existent or short-term. An openness to learning, an appreciation for others' contributions, and an ability to accurately assess one's shortcomings are all characteristics that seem likely to make someone a desirable protégée. With the help of mentors, these young people discovered and maintained their purposes over time.

Yet another way these characteristics are likely to foster purpose and positive growth is through their association with like-minded peers. Rather than working in isolation toward their aims, these young people sought out friends and adults who shared and supported their interests. By working with others it was less likely that any of these young people would get off course and start progressing in less positive directions. Further, working among supportive others likely played a role in keeping these youth committed to their aims over time.

In a variety of ways, humility plays an important role in supporting purpose and together the two characteristics position youth to develop in positive directions.

## NOTES

1. Colby and Damon make a similar claim in regards to their use of moral exemplars in

*Some Do Care* (1992). "Great moral acts, we believe, spring from the same source as lesser ones" (p. 4).

2. The interested reader is directed to Bronk (2005). *Portraits of purpose: A study examining the way purpose contributes to positive youth development* (Doctoral Dissertation, Stanford University, 2006). UMI ProQuest Digital Dissertations, AAT 3187267.

3. Names have been changed to protect participant's privacy.

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