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Negotiating Strengths

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Practicing Reference . . .

Negotiating Strengths*

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Ms. Whisner muses on identifying and evaluating one's strengths, especially in the interviewing context.

¶1 Five years ago I wrote a column about weaknesses.[1] After opening by saying that weaknesses are hard for most people to talk about, I parenthetically noted that strengths are also hard to talk about, but said that was a topic for another piece. This spring one of our law library interns told me she'd found the first piece helpful (swell!) and asked whether I'd ever written the second. Why, no, I hadn't—but that's a good idea.

¶2 Strengths are hard for many of us[2] to talk about for at least four reasons. First, we are taught that it's unseemly to brag and we don't want to be boastful.[3] Second, we might fear that others would disagree with our self-assessment if we spoke it aloud. It would be embarrassing—or disillusioning—to say we have a strength and to have our audience shoot us down. Third, we might have an exaggerated sense of how strong a trait must be to be claimed as a strength. For instance, I'm pretty good at recalling scattered bits of general knowledge, but I'm not as good as Ken Jennings[4]—I'm not even as quick as I was myself when I was younger—so maybe I shouldn't say it's one of my strengths. But Ken Jennings is exceptionally good at it, and my younger self was really quick. I think it's probably fair to say it's one of my strengths because I'm still better at it than most people I interact with. I'm just not going to challenge Ken Jennings to a trivia duel. Finally, we might lack self-knowledge. Perhaps you know someone who is so compassionate and trustworthy that he shines as a confidante and adviser but doesn't recognize how rare

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1. Mary Whisner, *Negotiating Weaknesses*, 104 Law Libr. J. 455, 2012 Law Libr. J. 32.

2. From here on, when I make a generalization like "strengths are hard to talk about," please assume that I'm adding "for many of us." I know that there are exceptions to all of my claims. For instance, there are confident people, overconfident people, and falsely confident people who are happy to discuss their strengths.

3. Pride is one of the seven deadly sins, after all. *See, e.g.*, Adam Shannon, Seven Deadly Sins, http://www.deadlysins.com [https://perma.cc/CHB7-SWLR].

4. Jennings won seventy-four games and $2.52 million on the TV gameshow *Jeopardy!* in 2004. See *About Ken*, Ken Jennings, http://www.ken-jennings.com/about [https://perma.cc/T3UZ-C9CD].

those attributes are. Maybe someone else is so creative at solving research puzzles that you are frequently dazzled, but that person doesn't recognize her own flashes of brilliance.

¶3 Each of these obstacles to talking about strengths can be addressed and overcome. If you've internalized the idea that saying something good about yourself is vain, think about context. Let's grant that you'd be thought obnoxious if you filled every conversation with comments about your cleverness and skill. If someone makes small talk about the weather or a new series on Netflix, that's not the right occasion to interject a comment about the impressive series of online tutorials you created. If you're waiting in line with strangers at the bus stop, you probably shouldn't start talking about how well you did in moot court. You don't have to start bragging all the time: you just have to give yourself permission—even encourage yourself—to talk about your strengths in the very special context of job interviews. The next step will be to broaden the context a bit: it's also helpful to think and talk about your strengths when you're considering what projects to take on or how to work in a team.

¶4 If you're not sure whether to claim an attribute of yours as a strength—either because you're unsure whether it's strong enough to count or because you're afraid someone will dispute that you have that attribute at all—talk to a person you trust.[5] For example: "Karen, we've worked on a couple of group projects together in our classes. Do you think it would be fair for me to say that I'm good at organizing a project and getting disparate people to work toward a shared goal?" Or: "Professor Richards, I really valued the opportunity you gave us to create animated database demos, and I felt pretty good about the one I made. Even though I've only created one, do you think it would be okay to talk about it when I go out on interviews? I'm not an expert, of course. Maybe I could say that my strength is being able to learn new technology?"

¶5 And if self-awareness is your challenge, there are ways to deal with that, too. Spend some time thinking about what you've done in different jobs and classes. Are there projects that stand out? What do you think made them successful? Think about feedback you got. Did your supervisors or professors tell you anything that puts you in mind of a strength? What if you got similar feedback in different contexts? If your professors and your supervisors all compliment your writing, maybe you're actually good at it. Think about other feedback you've received. Did a patron thank you for explaining something well? Did a professor send you an e-mail thanking you for a prompt and thorough response to her question? Did a classmate tell you that your edits on his paper were really helpful? All of these comments might point you toward a strength you hadn't focused on. (By the way, I think it's

5. It should be someone with knowledge of the field. For example, I trusted my dad for many things, but not career advice. When I was a senior he suggested I might go to medical school. I knew that I had not taken biology or chemistry, so—no matter how smart and able he thought I was—I would not be a good candidate for medical school.

My sister-in-law Marcia has taught public speaking in college for many years. Once a student disputed a grade, with this evidence: "My mother heard me practice the speech, and she thinks it deserves an A." Marcia replied, "Well, *my* mother thinks I'm as pretty as Miss America, but that doesn't make it true."

a good idea to keep a file of thank you notes and other nice comments. You can pull it out when you're feeling discouraged—and you can also use it when you're trying to think of strengths to talk about.)

¶6 Sometimes people have a hard time evaluating how distinctive their strengths are. Some years ago I suggested to an intern that she might list some computer skills on her resume. "But everyone knows those," she protested. I suggested that she shouldn't be so sure. Maybe her classmates all used the applications she did, but the resume would be seen by search committee members who might not have tinkered with creating infographics or designing web pages (I hadn't). This is another instance where it's useful to talk to trusted advisers.

¶7 Now we've got you warmed up. You're willing to talk about strengths and you have a list of some. Which do you choose to highlight in an interview? One temptation is to parrot back whatever qualities the employer listed in the job ad. But there are problems with this approach. For one thing, the interviewers might recognize the words they wrote and think you're just trying to please them.[6] Your recitation will be flat and boring if you aren't talking about what's meaningful to you. And sticking to the job ad's script will deprive the interviewers of the opportunity to hear about your strengths—some of which might serve the organization in ways they hadn't imagined. Puffery doesn't stand up. If the interviewers later see that you were just saying these things with little grounding, they might conclude not only that you lack the skill or attribute in question but, worse, that you are less than forthright.[7] Even if they don't spot the puffery during the interview, it might be revealed later—perhaps when you're on the job—and you don't want to lose credibility then, either.

¶8 Another way of playing to your audience is to tell each interviewing group what you think they want to hear. For example, if you're interviewing to be a middle manager, you might tell the people you'd be supervising that you have a very collaborative management style and respect staff ideas and concerns, but tell the director that you are no-nonsense and you're all about efficient implementation of management's directives. Maybe each answer has some truth to it, but engaging in spin can also hurt your credibility, during the interview or later, on the job.

¶9 Although you don't want to parrot the job ad, you do want to think about which strengths will be relevant to the job. If you have absolute pitch or can juggle flaming torches, that's very impressive,[8] but it doesn't make you a better candidate for most library jobs. The job ad can be a starting point. If it says "excellent communication skills," don't just say those words, but think about which of your strengths relate to that—for instance, "I have experience writing for diverse audiences, from appellate judges to high school students, and I can adapt my style to the audience."

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6. In the television show *Leave It to Beaver*, Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver weren't fooled by Eddie Haskell's phony politeness either.

7. It doesn't have to rise to the "Liar, liar, pants on fire!" level to hurt your credibility.

8. About one in ten thousand people has absolute pitch. Daniel Levitin, This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession 149 (2006). I don't know how many people can juggle flaming torches. Funny search sidelight: if you type "juggling statistics" into Google, you get lots of material about manipulating statistics, rather than statistics on the number of people who juggle.

¶10 Beyond the job ad, think about what makes you good at your job—or what would make you good at the job you want. What strengths have you seen in others? Do you share them? It is critical here to remember that you don't have to have the same strengths as the next librarian to excel at the work. Draw a lesson from another field, acting: veteran actors Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin approach their craft very differently, but both excel.[9] Their contrasting styles probably contribute to the success of their ensemble cast. Similarly, a successful library or library department might thrive with different sets of skills. One librarian might be exceptionally well organized, with color-coded calendars, checklists, and files. Someone else might be a little underorganized but have a talent for coming up with good teaching examples on the fly. One librarian's gregarious nature might help the library's outreach efforts while another's careful attention to detail might contribute to a successful digitization project. In short: it's okay for you not to have all the strengths of the librarians you look up to. Think about the strengths you do have and how they can help the library. You can even talk about developing strengths you don't have yet, as one candidate did when she told us she wanted to improve her public speaking and so had joined Toastmasters.[10]

¶11 Listing strengths without giving examples can seem vague (and vacuous). It might betray a lack of substance. At the least, it misses an opportunity to drive home the point. The examples will make the strength vivid and memorable.[11]

¶12 Perhaps this will seem obvious or trivial to readers, but I offer here a bit of advice I've given to years-worth of interns as they head to interviews: Take some index cards (or slips of paper). Write on each card a strength you'd like your interviewers to know about. Then jot a couple of bullet points reminding you of examples. On the plane to your interview, shuffle through the cards several times so the strengths and examples will be fresh in your mind. This will reduce the risk of your mind going blank when someone asks you the inevitable question about strengths. During your interview, throw in the strengths and examples as the opportunity arises. (Opportunities to talk about your strengths come up even when the interviewer doesn't ask explicitly.) Try to mention your best strengths throughout the day. This technique will help you show your best self to the interviewers.

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9. *See, e.g.*, *Brooklyn Decker: Two Truths and a Lie, Lie, Lie*, Ask Me Another (Nov. 11, 2016), http://www.npr.org/2016/11/11/501707962/brooklyn-decker-two-truths-and-a-lie-lie-lie (audio at 3:28) (interview with Brooklyn Decker):

> I actually feel like Jane and Lily are opposites as actors, in that Jane is so technically precise when it comes to the way you hold your face to camera, where a camera angle is, where a camera's sitting, where the lights [hang]: she's so knowledgeable about the technicalities it takes to film a scene, whereas Lily comes in and it's just like this ball of energy and she's living in her natural self, y'know, and you just film it and it's perfect on camera. So they both bring these incredible strengths, but very opposing strengths, to a scene.

10. Marian Gould Gallagher, who was eventually renowned for her witty speeches, began her career with "terrible stage fright," which she addressed by joining a Toastmistress class. Pegeen Mulhern, *Marian Gould Gallagher's Imprint on Law Librarianship—The Advantage of Casting Bread upon the Waters*, 98 Law Libr. J. 381, 397, 2006 Law Libr. J. 20, ¶¶ 54–55.

11. On the power of concrete examples and stories, see generally Chip Heath & Dan Heath, Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die (2007).

¶13 It took five years, but I've followed through on that idea of writing a piece about strengths. Just as we all have weaknesses, we all have strengths. Like weaknesses, strengths are hard to talk about, but for different reasons. It's good to think about them, if only to prepare for interviews. (Self-knowledge is helpful throughout your life, too.) Remember that you don't have to do all this thinking on your own: you can talk to classmates, professors, or mentors to get some input. Take heart—and good luck on those interviews!