

## Acting 'As If' by Shannon Polly MAPP

Children play. They imagine. They play 'dress up'. Right now my two- and four-year-olds are running around the house both pretending to be Dorothy and I have been cast as the 'Wicked Witch'. It is by playing 'mommy' or 'doctor' or 'dragon-slayer' that they try new things and learn how to grow into adulthood.

But something happens when people get older. They get put in boxes. You are a teacher, and teachers only do certain things. You are a businesswoman, so you can't also be a ballroom dancer.

To explore what happens when we jump to conclusions, I facilitate a game called "Two truths and a lie," in some of my workshops. When I tell participants that I was an actor and an associate Broadway producer, they think it's the lie. "But you couldn't be," they respond. "You're the facilitator!" Society tells us how to fit into our roles so that we become more easily categorized. But this limits our creativity and our development.

The truth is that we play many characters in our lives. I am a mother, a wife, a daughter, a businesswoman, and a friend.

Shakespeare put it best in *As You Like It*:

*"All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts."*



[Konstantin Stanislavsky](#)

So how do we break out of being stuck in particular roles? Both acting teachers, like Konstantin Stanislavsky, and psychologists, like Alfred Adler, recognized the benefits of taking on new roles for development.

According to Adler, "When people have difficulty [...] speaking assertively or responding with some measure of empathy, the clinician might encourage them to act "as if" they were assertive or empathic several times a day until the next session. As people begin to act differently and to feel differently, they become different."

To apply the actor's tool kit to real life, we can act "as if" with our intentions, emotions, and physicality. One excellent way to act "as if" is to read aloud.



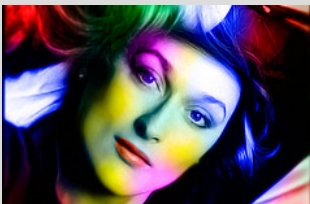
If a baby says “ba-ba”...

Social psychologist Daryl Bem states that humans form conclusions about themselves by observing themselves in the same way that they form conclusions about others by observing them. Acting “as if” gives people opportunities to enact best possible outcomes or to create new stories about their lives. Asking people to pretend helps them get past resistance to change by reducing the risk.

Acting “as if” can also feel risky. No one wants to look silly in front of his or her peers. I’ve had coaching mentors tell me not to use the term ‘role play’ because clients have such visceral negative reactions to the idea of performing. But when I ask clients to “try on” conversations with their bosses about reducing hours, the words flow, and the future conversation becomes less daunting. The fear of the conversation turns out to be worse than the conversation itself. So what are we doing when we “try on” that conversation?

In human development, we venture from who we are right now into who we are not yet but could be, territory that Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky called our zone of proximal development (ZPD). The acquisition of new knowledge is dependent on previous learning as well as “trying on” new behaviors, often reflected back to us by the people around us. If a baby says “ba-ba,” we don’t say “Nope, that’s not it. Try again!” We say, “Bottle! Look honey, she just said ‘bottle!’” As adults we help children grow into what they can become. When you finish words for babies, they are growing in their ZPDs. When we “try on” new ways of behaving, we are venturing into our own ZPDs and expanding our ideas about what is possible.

When I facilitate workshops on character strengths, I find that many people immediately focus on the bottom of their lists where their weakest strengths are. We are hardwired with a negativity bias, after all, and it is not a bad thing to want to improve. I frequently get asked, “How can I develop my strengths?”



Actors take on many colours

I respond, “Pretend that you have them. Act ‘as if’ you are kind, or forgiving, or curious.”

“But how do I do that if I don’t know how?”

“Improvisational theater would tell you to make it up. You have probably observed someone acting in that way in your lifetime. Take that next meeting of yours and try

acting ‘as if’ you have that strength.”



Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet

One way to act “as if” is to read a piece of literature or a speech that embodies that strength. In this book, the discussion of each character strength is augmented with at least one monologue, poem, or famous speech to be performed aloud.

Don’t just read them silently to yourself. Reading silently means you are only taking in the text with your eyes. In addition to helping you act “as if,” reading aloud:

- Sharpens your focus
- Connects you to your emotions and imagination
- Increases your vocabulary
- Results in greater comprehension
- Gives you an opportunity to play
- Exercises your body
- Challenges your use of intonation
- Improves listening and reading skills

These benefits are worth the discomfort of going outside your comfort zone and the fear of looking foolish. Reading aloud helps you explore your ZPD and expand yourself. Literally, by taking on new characters out loud, you can build character strengths.

So try it right now. Put down your coffee. Stop checking your email. Read the following aloud, and start to embody the strengths of zest, bravery, and appreciation of beauty and excellence.

## Chesapeake (Monologue)

By Lee Blessing

*(This character is a senator addressing Congress to urge for Arts Funding)*



*“Are there miracles in life? I for one know that there are. And because I know this, I recognize that there are dimensions of life that we do not understand, that we must explore. If we refuse to this, if we fail to examine publicly and persistently and collectively the innermost nature of life, we lose the right to call ourselves a society at all. We become merely an aggregation of purposeless spiritis, ghosts encased in flesh.*

*Nearly two hundred years ago we sent Lewis and Clark to go where we could not. To explore a land we knew was ours, but which only they could reach. They brought it back to us. I submit that a similar land, but far vaster, occupies the human soul. Only a few people can find the way there. If we help them go we help ourselves, because they can—they will – bring it back to us. Their discoveries won’t all be happy or beautiful. Some will be dangerous. But each will enlarge us. Deepen us. Revive us.”*

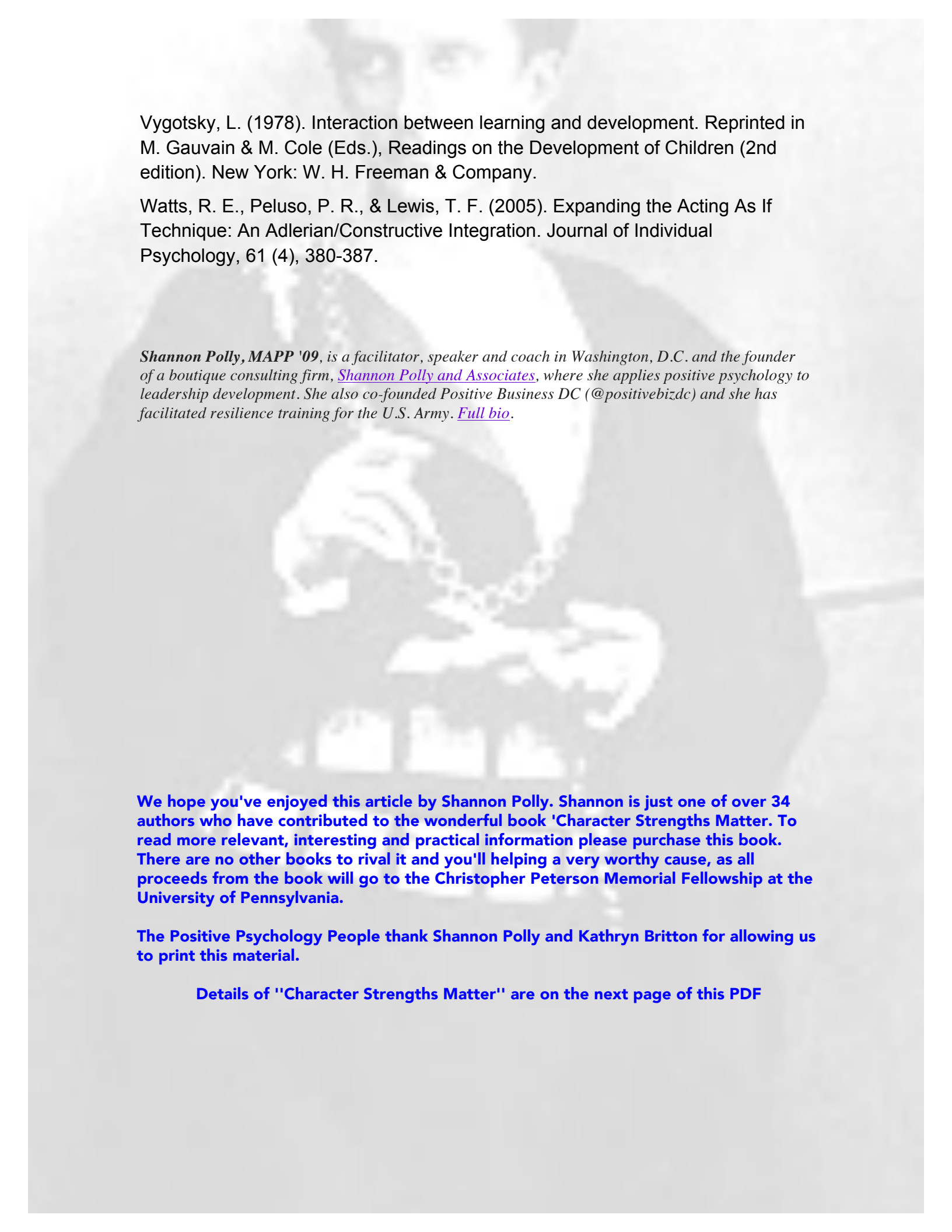
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*Shannon Polly, MAPP '09, is a facilitator, speaker and coach in Washington, D.C. and the founder of a boutique consulting firm, [Shannon Polly and Associates](#), where she applies positive psychology to leadership development. She also co-founded [Positive Business DC \(@positivebizdc\)](#) and she has facilitated resilience training for the U.S. Army. [Full bio.](#)*

**We hope you've enjoyed this article by Shannon Polly. Shannon is just one of over 34 authors who have contributed to the wonderful book 'Character Strengths Matter. To read more relevant, interesting and practical information please purchase this book. There are no other books to rival it and you'll helping a very worthy cause, as all proceeds from the book will go to the Christopher Peterson Memorial Fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania.**

**The Positive Psychology People thank Shannon Polly and Kathryn Britton for allowing us to print this material.**

**Details of "Character Strengths Matter" are on the next page of this PDF**



# CHARACTER STRENGTHS MATTER

## HOW TO LIVE A FULL LIFE

Positive Psychology News Series

EDITED BY SHANNON POLLY, MAPP & KATHRYN BRITTON, MAPP



Within this book, you will find stories, research explanations, read aloud passages, and tangible exercises to help people leverage their character strengths for higher performance and happiness.

The book honors the late Christopher Peterson whose research has shown that character strengths are ubiquitous across culture and time. From Aristotle to Maasai warriors to Mother Teresa, we all have the same strengths to varying degrees.

"This is among the best books in all of positive psychology," says Jon Haidt author of *The Happiness Hypothesis* and *The Righteous Mind*. "It takes one of the most important areas of research – the character strengths – and makes it as accessible, as practical, and as inspiring as could be. I particularly love that it is written for sharing. Every couple and every family should have a copy. This will become my standard dinner party gift, instead of a bottle of wine."

Proceeds from the book will go to the Christopher Peterson Memorial Fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania. Available at

## HOW TO LIVE A FULL LIFE



This book is dedicated to the memory of Christopher Peterson (1950-2012), our mentor and inspiration in the exploration of character strengths. Christopher Peterson was the Arthur F. Thurnau professor of psychology at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He was science director of the VIA Institute on Character and co-author of *Character Strengths and Virtues*. One of the founders of positive psychology, he is noted for his study of character, optimism, health, and well-being.



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