

The True Meaning of Character

A review of the film



Invictus

(2009)

Clint Eastwood (Director)



Reviewed by

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I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul.

—William Ernest Henley, “Invictus,” 1875

When people speak of others as having “good character” or “strong character,” what do they mean? What are they referring to?

Traditionally *character* is conceptualized as a singular construct such as *integrity* or *honesty*. Other definitions of *character* identify four or five core traits that every person should strive to develop. With many of these approaches, character is either present or absent; it does not occur in degrees. These approaches are most commonly seen in U.S. character education programs, school systems, and military settings, although they appear to be changing and evolving.

Invictus (Latin for *invincible*) is a film of the true story of President Nelson Mandela’s inspired decision to use South Africa’s rugby team to unify the racially and economically

divided postapartheid country. The film, directed by Clint Eastwood, is remarkable for a number of reasons, one of which is the depth of Morgan Freeman's portrayal of Mandela.

Most viewers know of Mandela's role in establishing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to bring the forgiveness process to South Africa. Most are also aware that before he became president, Mandela displayed exemplary perseverance during his 27-year incarceration. His resilience was undoubtedly enhanced by his love of learning and kindness. As well, he decided to forgive his enemies: While in prison, he studied his captors; when he was released, he refused to criticize them.

Mandela's role in sport is less known. Knowing that the forthcoming 1995 Rugby World Cup championship was to be hosted in South Africa and watched by one billion people around the world, Mandela ingeniously decided to focus his efforts to unify South Africa through the country's rugby team. In the film, in response to an advisor's attempt at understanding Mandela's focus on rugby as a political calculation, Mandela exclaims, "It is a human calculation!" *Invictus* depicts Mandela's struggle to bring this idea to fruition and the ways in which he uses his numerous character strengths to motivate the demoralized South African rugby team.

Mandela is a man of tremendous character. But what does it really mean to have character? Traditional views of character are limited and seem inadequate to explain the personality of a figure as complex as Mandela. Yes, he possesses honesty and integrity, but these labels are inadequate to capture the dynamics of his character. The new and still-evolving science of character comes closer to meeting this challenge.

About 10 years ago, a team of 55 scientists analyzed the best thinking in philosophy, virtue ethics, moral education, psychology, and theology on the topic of character over the past 2,500 years. The result was the first comprehensive classification of six virtues (wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence), subdivided into 24 character strengths found universally across religions, cultures, nations, and belief systems (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

This classification identifies positive psychological characteristics believed to be the basic building blocks of human goodness and human flourishing. These character strengths are stable, universal personality traits that are manifested through cognition, affect, volition, and behavior. They are morally valued and beneficial, both to oneself and to others (Biswas-Diener, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Mandela's integrity and honesty are evident in the film, as well as his palpable moral courage (Putman, 1997). He speaks up even when his ideas are unpopular and are likely to have negative consequences.

At one point in the movie, there is a unanimous vote to change the rugby team's emblem, believed to be a symbol of the oppressor and a reminder of the country's recent pain; Mandela displays strong perspective/wisdom (another character strength) and takes the opposite position, maintaining that South Africa must retain the current emblem and not risk ostracizing more people. He encourages the people to surprise their fellow countrymen with

compassion, restraint, and generosity and to use forgiveness to rebuild relationships. Drawing upon his strengths of wisdom, social intelligence, and leadership, he explains that taking away what others cherish will only exacerbate their fears.

Mandela's kindness, another character strength, is prominently displayed throughout the film. For example, Mandela believes his salary is too high and remedies this by generously donating one third of it to charity. He refuses to treat his bodyguards as subalterns but instead relates to them as colleagues and strives to get to know them on a personal level. He does not take his servers and secretaries for granted but rather shows genuine kindness, is quick to give compliments, and consistently expresses gratitude.

Mandela's strengths of social intelligence, creativity, fairness, and leadership shine strongly in other ways as well. He takes time to learn every rugby player's name, flies by helicopter to meet the team, and frequently makes appearances at the games in front of racially divided crowds, shaking hands with each player on both teams before games. He asks the rugby team to conduct training camps around the country, allowing the team, which has previously appeared distant from the people, an opportunity to see how people are living in the country they represent and to connect with the people. Wherever the team goes, people see the team's logo: One Team, One Country.

Mandela calls a presidential meeting with the team captain, Francois Pienaar (Matt Damon), and they discuss leadership and the role of inspiration. Rather than "telling" Francois what to do, Mandela asks questions about how Francois leads and inspires the team, specifically how he makes them better than they think they can be, how he might encourage them to be the greatest when nothing else will do, and how to help the team exceed beyond their own expectations.

It is necessary to think about the combination of Mandela's core character strengths to fully appreciate this fascinating figure. Freeman, who has been a friend of Mandela for many years, visited with him in South Africa to discuss the role. Freeman told Mandela, "We've just read something that we think might get to the core of who you are" (Trivia for *Invictus*, n.d., para. 9).

Mandela, who previously said that Freeman was the only actor who could portray him, approved the film. Freeman watched tapes of Mandela to perfect his accent, mannerisms, and rhythm of speaking. However, beyond the behavioral nuances the real challenge for Freeman was capturing Mandela's character. Freeman said,

I wanted to avoid acting like him. I needed to be him, and that was the biggest challenge. When you meet Mandela, you know you are in the presence of greatness, but it is something that just emanates from him. He moves people for the better; that is his calling in life. Some call it the Madiba [popular South African nickname for Mandela] magic. I'm not sure that magic can be explained. (Trivia for *Invictus*, n.d., para. 10)

Through Mandela's character strengths, we learn about who this man really is, and the viewer learns what *character* means. Here are a few points the film teaches us about character:

- Character strengths are plural. (Mandela is far more than simply honest.)
- Character strengths are expressed in degrees. (Mandela's level of kindness to Francois is expressed to a different degree than is his kindness to his employees.)
- Character strengths emerge out of situations. (Mandela uses different strengths depending on whether he is at his home, at a town hall meeting, or at a rugby stadium; and his behavior differs depending on whether that rugby stadium is empty or has 80,000 people in it.)
- Character strengths are interdependent. (In order to use his fairness, Mandela must also use his strengths of leadership and social intelligence.)

In addition to educating viewers on character, the film is worthwhile because it meets each of the criteria for a positive psychology movie (Niemiec, 2007) in that it exhibits character strengths, obstacles and challenges to expressing those strengths, triumph in using strengths, and an uplifting tone. Indeed, *Invictus* is cinematically elevating. Niemiec and Wedding (2008), building from Haidt's (2003) concept of elevation, suggested that films portraying characters exhibiting moral goodness lead to corresponding physiological reactions and an increased likelihood that the viewer will conduct virtuous acts after the movie's conclusion.

Cinematic elevation resulting from this film might manifest in a number of ways. First, the viewer might take action in a way that parallels the role model (e.g., Mandela's kindness could lead the viewer to be kinder). Second, the viewer might respond through another virtue pathway (e.g., Mandela's kindness could lead the viewer to feel more love and gratitude for his or her own family or be braver). Third, the positive emotion of elevation widens the individual's attention and broadens the array of behaviors one can express in the future (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005), some of which might be altruistic behaviors.

Mandela is an extraordinary man and a figure of tremendous influence. However, the character strengths so apparent in *Invictus* are not limited to prodigies, savants, charismatic leaders, or extraordinary people—instead, they can be cultivated in all of us, and we can use cinematic exemplars like *Invictus* as models through which we can develop, grow, and become better people.

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