

THE BIG IDEAS

Superman + Clark Kent

Who's who?

Activating Your Heroic Self

Science of.

Motivation

And emotion.

Virtues as Superpowers

The extraordinarily virtuous world.

Crossing the Threshold

Today the day?

The Alter Ego Effect

The Power of Secret Identities to Transform Your Life

BY TODD HERMAN · HARPERBUSINESS © 2019 · 272 PAGES

“When you see how the Alter Ego fits into the human condition, the different roles we play in life, and the Fields of Play we stand on, it gives you the freedom to unlock a creative force. When you see how an Alter Ego helps us battle the natural challenges we all face with greater optimism, it can unlock a more playful and empowering approach to overcoming fear. And when you see it’s a natural part of being human, has been used by tens of thousands of people to achieve goals both big or small, and is the most ‘real you’ you could be—it will unlock the capabilities you didn’t know were there.

Before I go any further, I need to make a quick disclaimer, because I don’t want to mislead you with that last paragraph.

This isn’t a motivation rah-rah book filled with cotton-candy ideas plucked from other cotton-candy self-help books that riddle the bookshelf and e-readers. This isn’t a book with an ‘easy button’ buried inside it. There is no treasure map to a pile of gold coins.

This book is for real people doing hard things. This isn’t a book to remove the challenges of life. It’s to take the part of you that shows up when you least expect it, and show you how to get it to show up when you most need it.”

~ Todd Herman from *The Alter Ego Effect*

The Alter Ego Effect.

This is one of the most fun and compelling and inspiring books I’ve read in awhile. (*The 5 Second Rule* and *Atomic Habits* come to mind as I peruse my memory of recent reads of great, life-changing books.)

I REALLY (!!!) enjoyed reading it, had a ton of fun constructing and playing with some potential Alter Egos and highly recommend it.

I also REALLY (!!!) enjoyed how high-performance coach and mental game strategist Todd Herman describes the science behind the power of “secret identities” to transform our lives and loved the parallels between his perspective and our Big 3 Identities > Virtues > Behaviors model.

The book is packed with great stories and Ideas (get a copy [here](#)) and, as always, I’m excited to share a few of my favorites so let’s jump straight in!

SUPERMAN + CLARK KENT <- WHO'S WHO?

“I’ve always been fascinated by comics, comic book heroes, and the worlds they live in. The origin stories, the villains, and the epic battles always found a way to draw me into their worlds. As a kid, I loved the Christopher Reeve *Superman* movies. Today people might laugh at those 1980s productions compared to the epic rebirth of superhero movies happening now, but back in

“You have stages you’re already performing on and stages you might like to perform on, and my question is: Would you like to show up there as the heroic version of yourself?”

~ Todd Herman

"That's all we're doing with the Alter Ego—we're consciously and intentionally choosing to bring the best version of our 'selves' forward for the different roles we play in life."

~ Todd Herman

the day, they were awesome. Now, here's a riddle for you:

Everyone knows that Superman and Clark Kent are the same. But which one is the alter ego?

I've asked this question for the past fifteen years, countless times in front of audiences around the world, and 90 percent of the audience immediately yell out, 'SUPERMAN!'

It sounds right. Because when you think of 'alter egos,' you think of superpowers, heroism, and epic battles. All the qualities of a superhero like Superman.

Except—it's wrong.

The alter ego isn't Superman; it's Clark Kent. Superman is the real person. He created the alter ego, mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent, as a useful persona to go unnoticed day-to-day on earth and blend in to help him achieve a crucial goal: understanding humans.

Superman would flip between his alter ego and the S on his chest at precisely the moments when he needed each persona the most."

I read that passage with a choir of angels singing in the background.

Quick recap then we'll cue the angels.

Superman and Clark Kent. We all know they're the same.

But... Which one is the "real" person and which one is the alter ego?

Alas, although 90% of the people to whom Todd asks this question say that Superman is the alter ego, they get it backward.

The REAL person is Superman. The fumbling Clark Kent is the alter ego.

Enter that choir of angels moment.

Although Todd is making a slightly different point in this context, my mind immediately went to our endless discussions about Optimizing so we can more consistently express the best version of ourselves as we make Aristotle proud by high-fiving our inner daimons en route to eudaimonic flourishing.

So...

I ask you...

Which is the REAL you?

The soul-level inspired Superyou or the fumbling fearful Clark Kent-ish you?

* Insert Jeopardy music here *

"This isn't being fake. Pretending to know about particle physics when you don't is fake. Using an Alter Ego to entertain a group of physics students when you have been a boring physics professor until now is just using the right tools for the job."

~ Todd Herman

To help us answer the question, let's bring Eric Butterworth in to the discussion. Here's what he has to say in [Discover the Power within You](#): "You may say, 'But I am only human.' This is the understatement of your life. You are not only human—you are also divine in potential. The fulfillment of all your goals and aspirations in life depends upon stirring up and releasing more of that divine potential. And there is really nothing difficult about letting this inner light shine. All we must do is correct the tendency to turn off our light when we face darkness."

P.S. Speaking of 1980s Christopher Reeves era Superman, here's a little [+1 on How Clark Kent Becomes Superman in 11 Seconds](#). Let's flip the switch!!! :)

ACTIVATING YOUR HEROIC SELF, SCIENCE OF

"Well, the idea of using Alter Egos to create some distance between how you currently see yourself and how you'd like to perform is not only smart, it's backed by research. A lot of my clients initially talk about how their Alter Egos protected them, only to later realize that their

"Your Alter Ego is really about defining how you want to show up, defining the Superpowers, and borrowing the characteristics of an existing person, character, superhero, animal, or whatever to help activate your Heroic Self."

~ Todd Herman

Alter Ego is actually who they always were and who they had always wanted to be.

This idea of creating distance between our identities is something that researchers are starting to validate. A recent University of Minnesota study of four- and six-year-old children found that to teach kids perseverance parents should teach children to pretend to be like Batman or another favorite character— because it creates psychological distance, the very thing my clients like Ian talk about, and what I've observed happens when people create alter egos.

The study split kids into three groups. The researchers put a toy in a locked glass box and gave the kids a ring of keys. The catch? No key work. The researchers wanted to see how to improve the children's executive functioning skills and were interested in seeing how long they would try to unlock the box and what they would try. To help the kids, the researchers gave them what they called strategies. One strategy was to pretend to be Batman. The kids could even wear a cape! Dora the Explorer was a choice, too.

Researchers found that the kids who worked the longest were the ones who impersonated Batman or Dora, followed by children who just pretended, and, finally, the kids who remained in the first-person perspective. The kids impersonating Batman or Dora were flexible thinkers, they tried the most keys, and they were calmer. One four-year-old even said, 'Batman never gets frustrated.'

The study shows us the power of identity—the power of how we see ourselves—and what happens when we, for a moment in time, can call forth a different self.

That's from a chapter called "The Power of the Alter Ego Effect" subsection: "Activating Your Heroic Self."

And, that HAS to be at least tied for most awesome study *ever*, eh?

Perhaps tied with this one by Harvard Professor of the Psychology of Possibility Ellen Langer's studies in [Counterclockwise](#). Impersonating Batman (cape, please!!) and watching your performance soar reminds me of this: *"In one study I conducted with my students, we explored the mindset most of us have regarding excellent vision air force pilots have. All participants were given a vision test. One group of participants were then encouraged to role-play 'air force pilots.' They dressed the part and, in uniform, sat in a flight simulator. They were asked to read the letters on the wing of a nearby plane, which were actually part of an eye chart. Those participants who adopted the 'pilot' mindset, primed to have excellent vision, showed improved vision over those who were simply asked to read an eye chart from the same distance."*

Really? Yep.

Then there's all of Langer's other research on elderly men acting as if they were decades younger only to see their bodies measurably change in days.

Richard Wiseman wrote a whole book on all the research (and there's a LOT!) proving what he calls [The As If Principle](#). As he puts it: *"The notion of behavior causing emotion suggests that people should be able to create any feeling they desire simply by acting as if they are experiencing that emotion. Or as [William] James famously put it, 'If you want a quality, act as if you already have it.' I refer to this simple but powerful proposition as the As If principle.*

This aspect of [William] James's theory energized him more than any other. In one public talk, he described the potential power of the idea as 'bottled lightning' and enthusiastically noted, 'The sovereign voluntary path to cheerfulness . . . is to sit up cheerfully, to look round cheerfully, and to act and speak as if cheerfulness were already there. . . . To wrestle with a bad feeling only pins our attention on it, and keeps it still fastened in the mind.'"

So... Shall we grab a Batman or Dora costume today on your way to the office? :)

"Just as many streets and avenues lead to the center of town, there are many ways to help you connect to this concept, use it, and lead your Heroic Self onto the Field of Play."

~ Todd Herman

MOTIVATION

"In other words, our emotions drive our actions. It's almost impossible for you to take action towards something you're indifferent too.

Beyond just taking action, the emotional resonance you feel toward what you want, toward why you're creating this Alter Ego, is also your motivation. The word *motivation* comes from the Latin word *motivus* which means 'moving cause.'

As a mental strength coach, there's one thing I can't coach people on. That's motivation. I won't touch it. It's one of the few things that no one can coach you to want or create for you. It's the X-factor. I can't make an athlete get up at 4 a.m. to run drills and wind sprints. I can't make an entrepreneur want to start and grow a business or to stick with it when they hit the rough patches. I can't make someone want their goal bad enough that they're driven to overcome any and every obstacle, no matter how tough or how high the cost.

In his best selling book, *How We Decide*, Jonah Lehrer makes the case that rationality depends on emotion. Feeling, not intellect, drives motivation. Lehrer points out, '*Emotion and motivation* share the same Latin root *movere* which means 'to move.' The world is full of things, and it is our feelings that help us choose among them.'

You have to find that motivation within, and very often that motivation comes from feeling so emotionally connected to what we want that nothing else matters. It's the core purpose of our being. We have to go on this quest. We have to enter our Extraordinary World, no matter the cost, no matter the odds, no matter the outcome."

Let's geek out on some etymology.

Did you know that the words *emotion* and *motivation* share the same Latin root, *movere*, that literally means "to move"? Yep.

Perhaps that's why Joseph Campbell was so adamant that we should follow our bliss as we set out on our Heroic Quest. Or, perhaps he was so adamant because he was tapping into ancient wisdom and knew that our deepest joy was our quickest route to enlightenment.

As we discuss in [The Power of Myth](#) (and that I riff on in the documentary [Finding Joe](#)): "Now, I came to this idea of bliss because in Sanskrit, which is the great spiritual language of the world, there are three terms that represent the brink, the jumping-off place to the ocean of transcendence: *Sat*, *Chit*, *Ananda*. The word '*Sat*' means being. '*Chit*' means consciousness. '*Ananda*' means bliss or rapture. I thought, 'I don't know whether my consciousness is proper consciousness or not; I don't know whether what I know of my being is my proper being or not; but I do know where my rapture is. So let me hang on to rapture, and that will bring me both my consciousness and my being.' I think it worked."

Bliss. That's a pretty strong emotion. Fantastic fuel for motivation.

Science agrees.

As per that [Motivation Equation](#) we talk about all the time, Piers Steele tells us that it ALL starts with a strong desire. You have to really (!!!) want it.

[Angela Duckworth's science of Grit](#) concurs. Want grit? Start with Passion. Not the "fireworks" variety that comes and goes but the "compass" kind that enduringly points you in the right direction on that heroic quest of yours.

So... Where's/how's your bliss?

P.S. One more Campbell gem: "Your bliss can guide you to that transcendent mystery, because bliss is the welling up of the energy of the transcendent wisdom within you. So when the bliss cuts off, you know that you've cut off the welling up; try to find it again."

"When you use the creative force from your Core Self and intentionally decide who will show up, the things and behaviors you've 'always had' can shift instantly. ... Most of us don't realize that we're telling ourselves a lethal story that we believe is gospel when, in fact, we can silence it and create and live a new story."

~ Todd Herman

P.P.S. This is a REALLY powerful point especially important to keep in mind as we look to share this wisdom with others: "As a mental strength coach, there's one thing I can't coach people on. That's motivation. I won't touch it. It's one of the few things that no one can coach you to want or create for you. It's the X-factor. I can't make an athlete get up at 4 a.m. to run drills and wind sprints. I can't make an entrepreneur want to start and grow a business or to stick with it when they hit the rough patches. I can't make someone want their goal bad enough that they're driven to overcome any and every obstacle, no matter how tough or how high the cost."

THE EXTRAORDINARILY VIRTUOUS WORLD

"The Extraordinary World is extraordinary because we tackle life head-on, we challenge it, and we don't let distractions slow us down. It also allows you to suspend disbelief about your capabilities, because you're taking an Alter Ego onto the Field of Play. ... Plus, it turns out there's research to back up the power of intentionally bringing predefined Superpowers to your world.

Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson are two of the most widely cited researchers of happiness and well-being. Over the period of a decade, they studied almost one hundred cultures around the globe. The team tested 150,000 people to determine how people that were coping with adversity and the challenges of life operated. They found that they people who identified their core characteristics or Superpowers and deliberately and intentionally focused on Activating those Superpowers were more resilient and fulfilled."

You know those Virtues we talk about all the time?

... The ones that Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson tell us we want to put "in Action"?

Well... How about we reframe those Virtues a bit and call them SUPERPOWERS. Because, that's basically what they are.

Science says: It's ALL about putting those Virtue-Superpowers in action.

In *Flourish*, Seligman says: "In authentic happiness theory, the strengths and virtues—kindness, social intelligence, humor, courage, integrity, and the like (there are twenty-four of them)—are the supports for engagement. You go into flow when your highest strengths are deployed to meet the highest challenges that come your way. In well-being theory, these twenty-four strengths underpin all five elements, not just engagement: deploying your highest strengths leads to more positive emotion, to more meaning, to more accomplishment, and to better relationships."

And, in *Authentic Happiness*, he puts it this way: "The good life consists in deriving happiness by using your signature strengths [/virtues!] every day in the main realms of living. The meaningful life adds one more component: using these same strengths to forward knowledge, power, or goodness. A life that does this is pregnant with meaning, and if God comes at the end, such a life is sacred."

How about the Heroic Life?

Knowing our Superpowers. Putting them in action in service to something bigger than ourselves as we strive to have strength for two and give the world all we've got.

P.S. Have you taken the Signature Strengths survey yet? It's awesome. Check it out [here](#). And, check out this [+1 on Putting Your Virtues in Action](#) for more.

CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

"There's a point in the Hero's Journey where the Hero has to 'Cross the Threshold.' It's the moment they leave their Ordinary World and set out on a new adventure. In *Star Wars*, it's when Luke Skywalker goes with Obi-Wan Kenobi to Mos Eisley and leaves his family farm. In

"Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote, 'To live is to suffer, to survive is to find some meaning in that suffering.'"

~ Todd Herman

" My goal as a performance coach is to help people get to the place where they consistently perform at their highest level, wherever that may be for someone. To do that, performance has to become a habit. It has to happen just as naturally as you breathe. "

~ Todd Herman

The Lord of the Rings, it's when Frodo leaves the Shire and embarks on the quest to destroy the ring. In the 2017 *Wonder Woman*, it's when Diana leaves the hidden island of Themyscira to help save humanity.

In each case, there's an adventure, quest, or mission to be undertaken. Sometimes it's made by choice, and sometimes it's been chosen for them, whether by circumstance or a deep desire to fulfill some destiny. ... Now, [for whatever reason you picked up this book] the next step is to 'cross the threshold' and begin.

At the end of your life, you won't remember the thoughts or intentions you had. You'll remember the actions you took. You'll judge yourself by how you showed up, by what you did, what you said, how you acted, and whether you performed in a way you knew you could in any of the stages of life.

Just like any coach, when you hear the buzzer sound, I want you to look back and say, 'I left nothing behind. I gave it my all. I did everything I wanted to do, and more important, I showed up as my Heroic Self with all my capabilities, skills, and intentions. And it toppled dominoes, which changed my life in extraordinary, unpredictable ways. And because I did this, I lived a full life.' ...

My final challenge for you is to create your Alter Ego, cross the threshold, and reveal your Superpowers to the world.

Your mission begins now . . ."

Those are the final words of the book.

Is it time for you to cross a(nother) threshold? As Steven Pressfield tells us in [The Artist's Journey](#), that's an all-day every day thing. And, as Campbell says, "When you get to a chasm... Jump... It's not as wide as you think."

Here's to you and your Heroic Self saying, "YES!" to your next Hero's Journey as you step forward, cross the threshold and give us all you've got!

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.

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