

THE BIG IDEAS

The Hero Code

In ten virtues and commitments.

Courage

Virtue #1.

Humility

Virtue #2.

Perseverance

Is indispensable.

Hope + Duty

Give it. Do what you're here to do.

YOU

Are the hero we've been waiting for.

The Hero Code

Lessons Learned from Lives Well Lived

BY ADMIRAL WILLIAM MCRAVEN · GRAND CENTRAL PUBLISHING © 2021 · 176 PAGES

"In 1977, I graduated from the University of Texas at Austin and joined the Navy SEALs. Over the course of the next thirty-seven years, I traveled the world. I saw the worst of humanity: war and destruction, disease and poverty, cruelty and indifference. The world was full of problems, seemingly intractable, unsolvable, impossible problems! But also in those thirty-seven years I saw the very best of mankind. Men and women who sought peace, who rebuilt nations, who cured disease and lifted the poor from poverty. Men and women whose compassion was so deep that it made the cruelty and indifference in the others pale in comparison; men and women who were from all walks of life, from every socioeconomic background, from every race, every creed, and every gender and orientation. ...

This book is about heroes and the virtues they possess. You may wonder whether you can ever be as courageous and compassionate or as humble as the men and women in these stories. *Trust me, you can!* For some, living the Hero Code comes more naturally. But for most of us, we must learn how to bring forth these virtues. We need to see them in the lives of others and try to mirror them in ourselves. We need to build those qualities through small steps that eventually become the foundation of our character."

~ Admiral William H. McRaven from *The Hero Code*

"How wonderful is it that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

~ Anne Frank

This is the third Note we have created on Admiral William H. McRaven's great books.

We started with [Make Your Bed](#)—a short, brilliant, inspiring manual all about "Little Things That Can Change Your Life... And Maybe the World" that was inspired by [McRaven's commencement address at the University of Texas at Austin that went viral](#).

Then we featured his autobiography called [Sea Stories](#) which is all about the wisdom he gained from his nearly four decades in special operations.

This is his latest book. Of course, when I saw the title I KNEW I had to read it. And, here we are.

As expected, the book is fantastic. It's a super-quick reading, incredibly inspiring look at "Lessons Learned from Lives Well Lived" that walks us through the lives of every day heroes who showed up and gave us all they had. I highly recommend it. Get a copy [here](#).

We'll start at the top with the ten virtues that form the basis of The Hero Code.

THE HERO CODE

"I came to realize that there is a hero in all of us. There is an innate code that has been there since the birth of mankind. It is written in our DNA. It is what drove the great expansion of humanity out of Africa. It summoned the explorers to cross the deserts and the seas. It helped create the great faiths. It emboldened the early scientists and philosophers. It nurtured the ill and infirm. It spoke truth to masses. It brought order to chaos and hope to the desperate. This

code is not a cipher, or a cryptograph, or a puzzle to be solved. It is a moral code, an internal code of conduct that drives the human race to explore, to nurture, to comfort, to inspire, and to laugh so that societies can flourish.”

The Hero Code.

Admiral McRaven tells us that it is a moral code and walks us through ten of the core virtues that make up the code. Each virtue has its own commitment. Here they are.

1. *I will always strive to be COURAGEOUS; to take one step forward as I confront my fears.*
2. *I will work to be HUMBLE; to recognize the limits of my intellect, my understanding, and my power.*
3. *I will learn to SACRIFICE by giving a little of my time, my talent, and my treasure to those in need.*
4. *I will be a person of INTEGRITY; every decision I make and every action I take will be moral, legal, and ethical.*
5. *I will be kind and COMPASSIONATE to at least one person every single day and expect nothing in return.*
6. *I will never give up on matters that are important to me, my family, my country, or my faith. I will PERSEVERE.*
7. *Whatever job I am given, whatever DUTY I am bound by, I will do it to the best of my ability.*
8. *I will use my unique talents to inspire others and give them HOPE that tomorrow will be a better day.*
9. *I will use HUMOR to comfort others, and never be afraid to laugh at myself.*
10. *No matter how great or small the offense against me, I will try to FORGIVE. I will be the victor, not the victim.*

To repeat. The Hero Code has ten core virtues: Courage. Humility. Sacrifice. Integrity. Compassion. Perseverance. Duty. Hope. Humor. Forgiveness.

Each virtue has its own chapter in the book. Let's explore a few of my favorites now.

COURAGE

“None of us are immune from life's pain and disappointment. But if you doubt for even a second that you have the courage necessary to confront the evil in the world or that weakness that resides deep inside all of us—you're wrong. ...

We all have our lines in the sand, those fears that keep us from being courageous. But all you have to do to overcome those fears, those obstacles, those challenges in your life is to take one step forward. *Just one.* Take one step forward and get on the helicopter. Take one step forward and fight injustice. Take one step forward and challenge the bullies. Take one step forward and face your inner demons. And if you take that one step forward you will find the courage you seek, the courage necessary to overcome your fears and be the hero you long to be.”

Welcome to the first chapter on the very first virtue we discuss: COURAGE.

McRaven is in good company kicking a book on virtue off with Courage. [Aristotle](#) chose to do the same thing in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.

As we've discussed many times, the word *courage* comes from the same root as heart. Just as the heart pumps blood to your arms and legs and vital organs, courage is the virtue that vitalizes all the other virtues.

The way to cultivate our courage?

Science agrees with McRaven as well. As we discuss in our Notes on [The Courage Quotient](#) by [Robert Biswas-Diener](#), we need to be willing to act in the presence of fear or, as McRaven puts

"Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities, because it is the quality which guarantees the rest."

~ Winston Churchill

it: "all you have to do to overcome those fears, those obstacles, those challenges in your life is to take one step forward."

One of the reasons I love creating these Notes is that I get to go back through my favorite passages and, as I type each word out, really *feel* the intention and the nuance of the author's wisdom. As I typed this passage out, I was struck by the way McRaven emphasized "Just one."

*"We all have our lines in the sand, those fears that keep us from being courageous. But all you have to do to overcome those fears, those obstacles, those challenges in your life is to take one step forward. **Just one.**"*

When we face the inevitable obstacles and challenges of life and feel the inevitable fears that arise in those situations, all we need to is take JUST ONE step forward.

JUST ONE step forward in that moment when you tend to freeze or to freak out. JUST ONE step forward—approaching your challenges rather than avoiding them. JUST ONE step forward—saying "Bring it on!" rather than "Make it go away!"

That is the essence of courage. A willingness to act in the presence of fear, not once in awhile or when you feel like it but more and more consistently all day every day ESPECIALLY when you don't feel like it—knowing that your infinite, HEROIC potential exists just on the other side of your comfort zone as you cultivate the strength for two and give us all you've got.

HUMILITY

"Humility is the simplest of all heroic qualities to assume, and yet the least expressed. To be humble is to recognize that one's intellect, one's physical strengths, one's wealth all pale when compared to the vastness, the complexity, the richness, the power, and the grandeur of the universe. And if we are humbled by our place in the universe, then we are much more likely to see that our differences are infinitely small. We are much more likely to see that our understanding is equally fraught and that our power to overcome even the tiniest challenges is similarly difficult. Humility is born of respect. Respect for what we do not know. Respect for what we cannot readily see. But out of this humble approach to life, we are more likely to appreciate the beauty that surrounds us, more likely to gaze into a microscope or peer at the stars and be awed, more likely to be inspired by little acts of kindness. And we are much more likely to treat others as we would have them treat us.

The power of humility is that it brings us closer together, and the role of every hero is to unite people, not divide them. *Be humble. It will serve you well.*"

Welcome to virtue #2: Humility.

Right before that passage, McRaven walks us through how humility shows up in a range of wisdom traditions, telling us: "In Matthew 23:12, Jesus says, 'Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.'

But it is not just Christianity that extols the virtues of humility. The Quran tells us that 'the servants of the most merciful are those who walk upon the Earth in humility.' In the Old Testament, Proverbs 11:2 says, '...with humility comes wisdom.' Confucius offers that 'humility is the solid foundation of all virtues.' Hindus believe that 'only the humble know how to appreciate and admire the good qualities of others,' and the Buddha says, 'You learn nothing from life if you think you are right all the time.' Even the Greek philosopher Socrates boldly exclaimed that he was the wisest man in Greece, because he knew that compared to God, 'the wisdom of men is worth little or nothing.'"

When I read this chapter I thought of two things: My favorite encapsulation of the essence of humility and the fact that humility is the antidote to entitlement and the pathway to gratitude.

"He who would accomplish little must sacrifice little; he who would achieve much must sacrifice much; he who would attain highly must sacrifice greatly."

~ James Allen

The first is a quote often mis-attributed to C.S. Lewis that belongs to Rick Warren. He tells us: "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less."

(btw: While searching for that quote on humility I found this one by [Ben Bergeron](#) in his great book [Chasing Excellence](#): "The moment you believe you've arrived at the door of greatness, it will be slammed in your face.")

Then there's wisdom from [Robert Emmons](#), the leading scholar on the science of gratitude. In [Gratitude Works!](#), he tells us: "The more I contemplate the requirements for cultivating gratitude, the more I am convinced of the necessity of humility. In gratitude and humility we turn to realities outside of ourselves. We become aware of our limitations and our need to rely on others. In gratitude and humility, we acknowledge the myth of self-sufficiency. We look upward and outward to the sources that sustain us. Becoming aware of realities greater than ourselves shields us from the illusion of being self-made, being here on this planet by right—expecting everything and owing nothing. The humble person says that life is a gift to be grateful for, not a right to be claimed. Humility ushers in a grateful response."

Here's to cultivating a deep sense of humility as we strive to embody virtue and serve Heroically.

PERSEVERANCE

"I believe history will show that success is not just a function of brains or brawn, of talent or intellect, of skill or resourcefulness, but of perseverance. Genius without resolve is just another passing person with a bright idea. Athletic prowess without determination is just another talent wasted. The world is filled with men and women who amounted to nothing because they gave up on their dreams: because they didn't have the guts, the determination, the willpower to keep going—no matter what. But history is equally replete with heroes who fought through the challenges, persevered, and made a difference.

George Washington was defeated on the battlefield more times than he won. Abraham Lincoln lost eight elections before he won the presidency. Thomas Edison failed ten thousand times before inventing the lightbulb. Henry Ford had two failed companies before he found success. J. K. Rowling was destitute before she got the first Harry Potter book published, and Oprah Winfrey had an extremely difficult childhood before finding her way. Martin Luther King once famously said, 'If you can't fly, run. If you can't run, walk. If you can't walk, crawl. But by all means, keep moving.'"

Welcome to Virtue #6: Perseverance.

That first paragraph reminds me of this classic Calvin Coolidge wisdom: "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination are omnipotent. The slogan 'press on' has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race."

And, although I knew about Lincoln's failures and [J. K. Rowling's](#) challenges before Harry Potter success (check out our Notes on [Leadership in Turbulent Times](#) for more on Lincoln and our collection of Notes on all the Potter books [here](#)), I never knew that about George Washington. Fascinating to imagine him losing more battles than he won. Thank you, George, for persevering.

I also thought about that fantastic ancient Sanskrit word for being a hero in the beginning: *arambhashura*.

As [Eknath Easwaran](#) tells us in [Conquest of Mind](#): "In Sanskrit we have a word which means 'heroes at the beginning': people who take up a job with a fanfare of trumpets but soon find that their enthusiasm has tiptoed down the back stair. Those who go far in meditation are the ones who keep on plugging. They may not be very spectacular; they may never hear a

"I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish small tasks as if they were great and noble."

~ Helen Keller

trumpet. But they keep on trying day in and day out, giving their best in every situation and relationship, never giving up. Such people are bound to reach their goal."

I'm typing this on the Monday after Father's Day. Yesterday I took Emerson and Eleanor with me to go get a tattoo. (Yes, that's like me! Hah.)

As you may know, I have "ARETE" tattooed on my right forearm to remind me to practice my philosophy and strive to close the gap between who I'm capable of being and who I'm actually being in any given moment.

I tattooed "HEROIC" on my left forearm along with the numbers "51 | 2051" to capture the ultimate mission to which I've dedicated my life: playing my role as humbly yet heroically well as I can to help create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051.

Yesterday, the kids and I went on a little adventure to add "101 | 1M" next to the "51 | 2051." The "101" represents my commitment to doing everything in my power to get my Soul Force to 101 so I can help YOU get YOUR Soul Force (as measured in the [Heroic app!](#)) to 101. The 1M represents the first million people I'm committed to doing everything in my power to help get to a Soul Force score of 101 so we can have a shot at that 51 | 2051.

Science says we increase our odds of achieving our goals by about 42% if we write them down. I figured I'd write my most important goals somewhere I'd never miss them and let them serve as a constant reminder to PERSEVERE (just one step at a time!) through all the inevitable obstacles in a good heroic quest.

HOPE (+ DUTY)

*"What is hope but a belief that tomorrow will be better: that tomorrow your children will be happier; that tomorrow your cancer will be in remission; that tomorrow your rescuers will try again; that tomorrow your country will not be at war; that tomorrow the nation will be united and the world will be safer? But hope is more than just a fanciful wish. If you want to bring hope to the world, you will have to find what you're good at and give it to others. People believe in the hope-givers, the Dr. Keatings and the Green Berets, *only* if they believe they can deliver on their promise. The good news is, *each of us has something that we are good at*—something we can give to others that makes them hopeful. A talent that someone else in the world is lacking. We are faster, stronger, smarter, kinder, gentler, richer, more courageous, more forgiving, more gracious, more trustworthy, more honest, more of something. All heroes have something that makes them unique. Find that talent and use it to inspire others—to give hope, to make tomorrow a better day."*

Hope. This virtue and the manner in which McRaven encourages us to give it to others by discovering and sharing our gifts perfectly ties into the prior virtue on Duty.

In that chapter he tells us: *"The idea of duty is a simple one. We all have a job to do in life. Whether that job is serving customers in a restaurant, taking care of our family, teaching our children, policing our cities, caring for the ill and infirm, protecting our gate, following the military Code of Conduct, or leading the country, we must do our job to the best of our ability. We must do our job well, not because it serves our interest, but because it serves the interests of others. We do not live in this world alone. Duty is a recognition that you have a responsibility to your fellow man and woman. It is an unselfish act, whether great or small, that contributes to the welfare of humanity. That is what makes it so very powerful. If you want to be a hero, it's easy. Just do your duty!"*

I say our ULTIMATE Job (with all caps ULTIMATE and capital J!) is to become the best version of ourselves as we live with more Wisdom + Self-Mastery + Courage + Love + Hope + Gratitude + Curiosity + Zest so we can show up most powerfully in our Energy + Work + Love—not someday but TODAY.

When we do THAT, our very presence will serve as a light to others and inspire them to do the same. And THAT is, from my perspective, the most kind, loving and Heroic thing we can ever do.

YOU ARE THE HERO WE'VE BEEN WAITING FOR

*"Be the hero we need you to
be—live the Hero Code."
~ Admiral William H. McRaven*

"Being a hero won't be easy. It wasn't meant to be. Being a hero can be filled with pain and disappointment. It is dangerous at times. If you stand your ground or stand up for what you believe in, you are likely to suffer the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.' But we call people heroes for a reason. Their actions rise above the crowd. They separate themselves from the weak-kneed, the bench-sitters, those who lack the moral fortitude to do the right thing, and, in the end, the heroes make us better people, a better society, and a better world. As much as I hoped [as a kid] the Man of Steel would be around to save the world, he is not. It is up to us. *It is up to you.*

Be the hero we need you to be—live the Hero Code."

Those are the final words of the book.

As I often say, we are facing historically significant challenges.

We're not just recovering from the effects of a global pandemic of Covid-19.

We have pandemic levels of anxiety and depression. We have pandemic levels of obesity and diabetes and cancer. We have pandemic levels of political polarization, social injustice, and environmental degradation.

And the ONLY possible way we are going to rise up and face these challenges is if YOU rise up and more and more consistently show up as the best, most Heroic version of yourself.

It's time to stop looking outside of ourselves for the hero who will save us. Look in the mirror. YOU are the hero we've been waiting for.

It's time for us to live our own idiosyncratic Hero Codes and get to work. It's time to change the world—one person and one virtuous act at a time, together, starting with you and me and us...

TODAY.

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher-CEO

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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.