

The

Greatest

Adventures

in Human

Development

G. Kenneth West, Ph.D.

**THE GREATEST ADVENTURES
IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**



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THE GREATEST ADVENTURES IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

You Are the Hero

G. Kenneth West

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Lynchburg, Virginia

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THE GREATEST ADVENTURES IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT: You Are the Hero

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To Patty

Even if no other great adventures had come my way,
our years together would have made my life complete.

Je t'aime.



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PREFACE

Heroes in mythology knew of the great treasures that life offers. With courage and intelligence, these men and women faced the dangers and dragons of their world as they ventured across mysterious seas and continents. But gaining possession of life's treasures proved to be only half of their quest. Returning safely required insight, resolve, and at times even good fortune.

Today human beings differ little from mythical heroes. The dragons and challenges of life have changed their shapes and appearances. A few new ones may have been born. Nevertheless, modern adults still know of life's great treasures. As in the days of old, they must once again cross life's great seas to fulfill their dreams. And, once in possession, their trip home remains, at times, the most exciting yet perilous part of the voyage. In this modern era, the individual is still the hero of the greatest adventures in human development.

Throughout the generations the valuable quests in life have remained the same. Love beckons. For many, marriage and the nurturing of children fill the years with happiness and despair, victory and constant challenge. Work and careers offer opportunity and unique difficulties. And, as always, the search for the meaning of life awaits each seeker.

Fortunately, modern travelers inherit maps from those who journeyed before. Psychologists, counselors, theologians, and writers contribute important clues to guide individuals in their travels. Each chapter in this book examines one of life's greatest adventures and offers the wisdom and advice of those who know each voyage best. Although they serve only as advisors, their insights offer each reader an advantage over those who travel without direction.

In these chapters the reader will explore birth and loss, loving and leaving, growing up and growing old, children who succeed and fail, stagnant and fulfilling careers, faith and despair, crisis and transformation, and the final trials of the elderly. Also explored are the difficult travels of the poor and disadvantaged, and the possibility each reader has of making a positive difference in many of their lives.

Nothing can be more exciting than your life. No matter what challenge or crisis presently confronts you, it can become a call to marvelous quests. You are the hero of life's greatest adventures. Perhaps this book will make your passage a little easier.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mentors alter the course of a person's life—forever. By displaying an active interest in my writing and ideas when I was a student at Wake Forest University, Betty Leighton redirected my career. We frequently met for lunch to discuss papers written simply for that occasion. As a professional writer and editor, Betty knew her craft. But more importantly, she simply loved the art of writing. All of us who came under her wing soon shared her passion.

Since those college days, Betty Leighton has contributed significantly to each of my books. Not only has she served as an editor, but also as a cheerleader and close friend. Betty is one of those people for whom words of appreciation seem feeble.

I feel no more capable of expressing my gratitude to my wife, Patty, and our children, Patrick, Emily and Dustin. Patty read each chapter many times and served as the illustrator for the book. As a doctoral student at the University of Virginia, she needed no additional demands made upon her time. But, as always, she accepted each request with enthusiasm and creativity.

As an unrelenting optimist, Patty always believes that good things are on the horizon. Fortunately, her positive expectations prove to be infectious. This book would not have been written without her support and inspiration.

Writing by necessity becomes a family affair. Our children heard frequently about the manuscript and, at times, I imagine they believed that the book had become another sibling. But despite the intrusion writing makes, they

enthusiastically supported all of my efforts. In addition, the West children's daily excitement for life inspired many of these chapters.

Teaching at Lynchburg College, a small liberal arts college in the beautiful hills of Virginia, offers opportunities and pleasures that I wish everyone could experience. We know our students well and learn about their lives and struggles. The classroom becomes a second home. To my students, I owe not only an appreciation for their openness and enthusiasm, but also my boundless admiration.

Equally important are the close friendships that develop among faculty. For almost two decades, I've cherished my relationships with colleagues Ed Polloway, Pete Warren, Tom Tiller, Rosel Schewel and J. David Smith (now at the University of South Carolina). I'm most grateful for their constant encouragement. Lynchburg College provided financial support for writing and revising the manuscript. For that assistance, I'm tremendously appreciative.

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And finally, I offer a special thanks to the Hoffberger and Catalano families. Their stories, at least in part, appear in the final chapter of the book. Members of both families and their friends welcomed me into their lives with graciousness and enthusiasm. They shared insights and wisdom that will remain with me throughout my years.

I am greatly blessed in life to be paid for doing what I love to do. Teaching and writing are my passions. I've been doubly blessed to pursue these pleasures surrounded by people whom I love.

Chapter 1

ADVENTURES AND DRAGONS

Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checked by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows not victory or defeat.

Theodore Roosevelt

***Ponderings.** What are the most important challenges in your life at this moment? What major opportunities do you see unfolding in the next five years? What are your dreams for these years? What events or forces could prevent you from realizing these dreams? As you consider the lives of others, what life events do you believe bring the most meaning to people’s lives? In modern society, what internal and external factors most frequently prevent people from reaching their dreams?*

I first realized my life was a great adventure when my sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Cross, read aloud *The Odyssey* to us. I knew then that these stories were not just about men and women who lived thousands of years ago; they were about me and about you. We are the Penelopes, the Telemachuses, and the Odysseuses of our own life adventures. We are also flawed characters like Icarus and Achilles.

Like Odysseus’s adventures, ours are filled with monsters, temptations, and twists of fate that can disrupt, sidetrack, and even end our voyages. But, like Odysseus and Penelope, we have within us the spirit and wits to persevere, to live vibrantly, and to take control of our lives.

This book is about the hero in each of us. It describes the “spirit within” that urges us to live passionately. It warns of dragons that may slay us and temptations that may seduce us into prematurely ending our voyages. We are the modern sojourners, though not unlike those who traveled before us—our own ancestors.

THE CALL TO ADVENTURE

A few men and women lead movements that liberate nations or oppressed people. The average person rarely knows them personally, but knows of them. They seem to respond without hesitation to inward and outward calls to free others from political or spiritual bondage. In doing so, they risk their lives and often die along the journey. Although more visible in their accomplishments and acclaim, world heroes are not greatly different from everyone else. Each person receives the call.

True, most people do not receive the summons to adventure in earth-shaking ways. In fact, we may wonder if we want to depart from the safety of our lives. Within each individual is a need for adventure but also the desire to keep everything the same. Predictability provides comfort; even when the ordinary falls short of our dreams, it is familiar and controllable.

Therefore, it is not surprising that personal calls for change and commitment are greeted with conflicting emotions. The invitation of the call may ask that we discover a mysterious part of ourselves that longs to be unleashed. Or it may require us to shed heavy psychological armor, carried from our pasts, that prevents us from facing important life challenges. We may be asked to leave familiar family patterns that are comfortable but are preventing us or our children from becoming full participants in the great adventures of life. The call will come often during our lifetimes.

No matter what the specific invitation of the call requires, it always demands that the well-known be abandoned and an odyssey into the unknown begun. There are no guarantees of safety or assurance. Of such risk taking heroes are made.

Many calls to adventure seem pleasant. They arrive when we believe we are ready for change. Sometimes we are ready, but at other times we are not. Therefore, these can be the most dangerous invitations, even though their arrival excites us. Often we are ill prepared for or even unaware of the dangers

of the approaching journey. Such calls come with the advent of new love, new career possibilities, the birth of a child, or with various opportunities that present themselves during transitional periods. If we plunge headlong into an adventure that we are not prepared for, we may be overcome by the challenges that confront us. More difficult calls will follow.

More troublesome calls arrive with thunder; rarely are we ready for their force. They announce that we or those we love are not fulfilling their needs. Despite our intentions, something has gone awry in life. Such summonses occur at the most inopportune times when we feel consumed by life's other tasks.

Because we do not welcome calls that disrupt the normal flow of life, we may not understand the miraculous nature of the invitation. The miracle is that we receive an opportunity to embark on a liberating adventure, to bring a new passion for life to us and those we love.

These disruptive calls, like the god Proteus, take many forms. Depression often is the disguise, announcing that we have inner gifts not being developed. Marital disharmony declares that marriage, the hoped-for union of two spirits, can be so much more than we are experiencing. A child's psychological symptoms or school problems may set us on a quest for the liberation of our loved ones. Such calls may already be familiar to you.

These invitations frighten us. We know of the potential perils that await us, and we may even imagine disasters that will never evolve. We fear the abyss into which we must descend to meet and conquer the challenges that threaten us. Altering the course of life in midstream is no easy undertaking.

Supporters will be there to help. Teachers, therapists, friends, and spiritual mentors may direct us, but they can serve only as advisors. The future cannot be foretold, and we must frequently venture alone. Everyone has a unique voyage to undertake. The call will come. To hear it and respond requires the heart of a hero.

What is the call like? Think how on a long car trip you might drive for hours at night, and the broken lines pass by, again and again. Your mind wanders. You feel relaxed. Suddenly a thought startles you: I don't remember driving this car! You panic. You cannot recall the curves, the hills, passing cars or any judgment you just made. How did you dodge disaster? In the moment of panic you break into a cold sweat. Immediately, you consciously takes control of the wheel. Now every decision seems crucial. You travel down the same highway, yet everything is different. You have heard one of life's simpler calls.

Many who hear life's challenging calls refuse to take charge of the wheel. They wish to pretend that they are not responsible for the journey. Their need for comfort and predictability outweighs their spirit for adventure. They let go of the passion in favor of false security. They fear their challenges will overcome them; therefore, they choose to drive unconsciously into the night.

The timid of the earth will not jump into life's center ring where the action is. Instead, they remain satisfied with the sideshows. Nevertheless, most who fail to respond to the call will have full lives—lives that are filled with daily routines and pleasures, lives filled with events over which they feel little control, with criticism of those who take risks in life, with anger toward the fates whom they blame for their lot, with attempts to treat the hemorrhages of their lives with the small bandages offered by external sources.

Part of them still wishes to soar, however. They may become obsessed with lives of soap opera stars, so filled with emotion and change. Or, nurturing no passions of their own, they may vicariously feel the exhilaration of a basketball player who leaps above the rim to slam home a winning shot. Their addiction to the passion of others becomes a testimony to their own reluctance to live beyond the predictable. But also it gives hope that the gentle voice inside still beckons them. Some day they may take charge of the wheel.

But enough about those who ignore the call or who hearing it, fail to embark. This book is about heroes. This is a book about those who know the brevity of life and wish to experience their days to the fullest.

THE VOYAGES WE UNDERTAKE

The voyages undertaken in life are well-known. One's parents embarked on them, and their parents before them. The adventures take place on at least four great seas: love (marriage and the raising of children), careers, religion, and friendship/community making (the creation of a better planet for the adventures of future generations).

Psychologists frequently discuss life's greatest adventures. For example, Sigmund Freud wrote primarily of the first two opportunities, marriage and work. Alfred Adler and Rudolf Dreikurs recognized the additional searches. But despite the work of psychologists, the blessing and curse discovered by each sojourner is that no map or instructions dictate exactly which journeys to embark on or how to overcome the challenges to be faced.

For many, the entire life adventure can take place on a single sea. There are holy people, dedicated teachers, devoted spouses, caregivers, and noted humanitarians who concentrate on one life challenge. But most people travel all four. To balance these challenges in life calls for wisdom and courage. The challenges are different for each person; no two lives are the same.

Despite all the advice sought and received, voyagers must chart their own course, learn from their own meandering, and then frequently redirect their adventures. For each traveler the currents will change and the hazards may vary. Nevertheless, the opportunities presented by travel on the four seas fill life with the excitement and tragedy inherent in living.

One should not be frightened by the uncertainty of the odyssey. Most of the help one needs lies within.

THE INNER SPIRIT

I believe that man will not merely endure; he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.

William Faulkner

In his 1949 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, William Faulkner emphasized what humans for thousands of years have known: We each have a driving, inward spirit. This spirit is not a relic of superstition or a figment of literary imagination, but an inner force capable of guiding individuals to richer development.

Carl Rogers (1951, 1972; Figure 1.1) and Abraham Maslow (1968, 1971; Figure 1.2) built modern theories on their belief in the “self-actualizing tendency” that drives each human being toward greater development. As Rogers described, “This is the inherent tendency of the organism to develop all its capacities in ways which serve to maintain or enhance the organism” (Rogers, 1951, p. 196). Moreover, individuals have “an inherent capacity to move away from maladjustment and toward psychological health” (Corey, 1986, p. 102). When in harmony with this spirit, we live authentically, communicate clearly, know what is important, and resist goals and roles that violate our healthy growth. We can live in the present. And we can create relationships that enhance the inner growth of our loved ones.



Figure 1.1. Carl Rogers. Courtesy of The Center for Studies of the Person.



Figure 1.2. Abraham Maslow. Courtesy of Brandeis University.

Through the ages, people have attempted to understand and describe this spiritual drive. Each generation knows its presence and feels its power. Yet each finds different ways to discuss its magnificence. For the ancient Hebrews, the spirit was described as the “wind” within an individual. At religious celebrations the spiritual community exchanged the pax of peace by kissing one another. It was thought that their breath carried the spirit and a shared kiss allowed worshippers to celebrate the gift of the spirit. Today, this mystery of the inner life is still pondered.

This spirit or force within carries a small voice, a feeling that can direct a person. Yet its quiet instructions can also be ignored. Rogers’ works described, for example, how at an early age children begin to play roles that please others. They need to hear the applause of those they love. At their worst, they soon dance like puppets pulled by the strings of their loved ones and, later, by the expectations of society. As adults, they may frequently discover that they are out of touch with their own needs and desires. They are lived rather than living. They cannot distinguish between their dreams and the dreams others have for them.

Fortunately, the spirit within never dies or abandons us. When our behaviors conflict too violently with what our inner voice knows is best, we begin to develop symptoms, such as depression, insomnia, or disease. When forced to violate their inner voices, children begin to dysfunction as well. This is why family therapists consider most family crisis and symptomatic behavior to be a miracle. These knocks on the door signal that the spirit within begs to be heard. It is in crisis that human beings reach a crossroads, a second chance to be guided from within rather than from without.

In this age of science and technology, we may begin to doubt that we possess an inner spirit that is capable of directing us. Indeed, if you search for the words *spirit*, *self-actualization* or their equivalent in the index of most modern developmental psychology texts, you will be as unlikely to find it as you will the word *God*, *religion* or even *love*. What cannot be seen or measured is ignored.

By accepting this narrow understanding of life, humans are left at the mercy of outside forces. Soon they become convinced that the radical behaviorists are right, that people are no more than the combination of genetic material, their past training and current moods. People who ignore the spirit within them surrender their life travels to the expectations of society and to the authority of its guardians. Sadly, with surrender one abdicates the role of hero in one’s own adventure.

Highly developed, the inward drive eventually propels one to give to others, to care about coming generations. Alfred Adler (Figure 1.3) and later Rudolf Dreikurs (Figure 1.4), theorists who made psychology accessible to the common man, called this force “social interest” or a “feeling with the whole *sub specie aeternitatis*, under the aspect of eternity. It means striving to form a community which must be thought of as everlasting” (Adler, 1964, pp. 34–35).

Erik Erikson (1964a), the famous developmental theorist, called this same developed spirit *generativity*. Generativity means giving to the next generation through our families, careers, and service. In an interview in the New York Times during his 80th year, Erikson wrote of the importance of the struggle between generativity and the self-absorption caused by one’s surrender of spirited living.

The only thing that can save us as a species is seeing how we’re not thinking about future generations in the way we live. What’s lacking is generativity, a generativity that will promote positive values in the lives of the next generation.

Unfortunately, we set the example of greed, wanting a bigger and better everything, with no thought of what will make a better world for our great grandchildren. (1988, p. 1)

Most people feel the inward spirit, by whatever name it is known. They want to follow its call. They hear its whisper in the night. They know they are something more than an animal living without reflection or direction. Nevertheless, it is so difficult to escape the clutches of the dragons within and the dragons without. It is a challenge to follow the advice given by the well-known teacher Joseph Campbell to his students: “Follow your bliss.”

Dragons along the Way

As in all great adventures, there must be dragons. We face fierce ones. Dragons are those forces within us as well as without that derail us from adventures. They trick us into accepting an unexamined life, as if that is all there is, or as if we cannot or should not change ourselves or our circumstances. When powerful dragons overcome us, their roar drowns out the driving spirit within us that still whispers “my life can be more than this.”

Many dragons—the fiercest ones—live within. Some may be part of one’s human nature or personal circumstance; others are born during childhood. If unchallenged, our personal challenges steal our minds, for we cannot think of