

# Heroism Science

---

Volume 4  
Issue 2 *Special Issue - Heroism Science*  
*Conference, Richmond 2018*

Article 6

---

2019

## Heroic Consciousness

Scott T. Allison  
University of Richmond, [sallison@richmond.edu](mailto:sallison@richmond.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/heroism-science>



Part of the [Cognitive Psychology Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Allison, Scott T. (2019) "Heroic Consciousness," *Heroism Science*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.  
DOI: 10.26736/hs.2019.02.06  
Available at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/heroism-science/vol4/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Heroism Science* by an authorized editor of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

**Heroism Science: An Interdisciplinary Journal** (ISSN 2573-7120)

<https://scholarship.richmond.edu/heroism-science/>

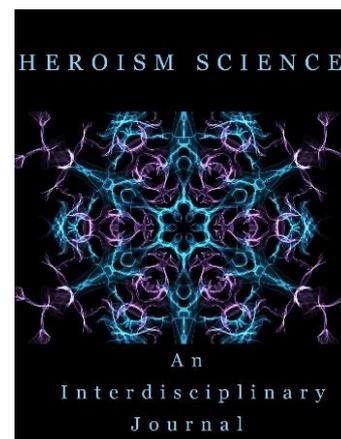
**Vol. 4 No. 2 (2019) pp. 1-43**

# Heroic Consciousness

*SCOTT T. ALLISON<sup>1</sup>*

*University of Richmond*

*sallison@richmond.edu*



**ABSTRACT:** This article describes heroic consciousness – how heroes perceive, experience, and think about the world. I describe the transformation of consciousness from its pre-heroic state to its heroic state. Pre-heroic consciousness is characterized by nescient and maladaptive thinking, dualism, separation, mono-rationality, and a naïve sense of empowerment. Heroic consciousness is exemplified by nondualism, unity, transrationality, and the wisdom of tempered empowerment. Heroic consciousness is achieved via three routes: (1) traversing the hero’s journey, (2) effective use of specific spiritual practices, and/or (3) participation in hero training programs. I discuss the implications of heroic consciousness for individual and global well-being.

**KEYWORDS:** *consciousness, hero’s journey, heroic consciousness, nondualistic thinking, unitive consciousness, radical amazement, heroic transformation, transrational phenomena, wisdom*

## Article history

*Received: June 17, 2019*

*Received in revised form: July 28, 2019*

*Accepted: September 1, 2019*

*Available online: September 15, 2019*

---

<sup>1</sup> Copyright 2019 Heroism Science

ISSN: 2573-7120 | Licensed under the Creative Commons, Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC By-NC-ND)

## 1 INTRODUCTION

---

Human beings have two eyes, each seeing the world from a slightly different angle and registering a slightly different image on the back of the eye. These two separate images are sent to the brain, and within a fraction of a second a new single image is brought to our awareness. This new image is a synthesis of the two separate images, and is superior to them. Endowed with three dimensions, this enhanced image gives our perception width, length, depth, and distance between objects. Evolutionary processes shaped the development of our stereoscopic vision. Early hominids who were furnished with this three-dimensional imaging process found themselves at a reproductive advantage over others who lacked such a mechanism. I argue that this visual process is representative of a more general evolved human consciousness capable of transforming complex, competing experiences into synthesized, enlightened, experiential wholes. I use the term *heroic consciousness* to describe the realization of this synthetic physical, psychological, and perceptual capacity.

This article discusses how heroes see and experience the world. Psychologists and philosophers have yet to arrive at a consensus regarding the definition of consciousness (Koch, 2018). Indeed, philosopher Yuval Noah Harari (2018) describes consciousness as “the greatest mystery in the universe” (p. 321). I take the liberty of defining consciousness in its broadest phenomenological sense, as human awareness, sentience, perception, and thinking. Consciousness, I argue, is grounded in psychological, physical, and ecological processes and contexts (see Efthimiou & Allison, 2017; Ross, 2019). This article illuminates the characteristics of heroic consciousness, showing how the consciousness of heroes becomes transformed over time and how such consciousness endows heroes with the ability to adopt an integrated, nondual, paranoetic worldview. The hero’s consciousness is characterized by third force perception, transrationalism, unity, and the wisdom of tempered empowerment – a

direct contrast to the pre-heroic consciousness of dualism, hyper-rationalism, and a *naïve* sense of empowerment.

Human beings are naturally equipped with a transformative drive toward realizing heroic consciousness, as exemplified by our brain's evolved ability to transform two different visual images into one synthesized image. Other examples of embodied heroic transformation include the human reproductive ability to convert an egg and a sperm into another human, and the ability of people to show neural plasticity and tissue regeneration (Efthimiou, 2016, 2017). At the psychological level, human beings display heroic consciousness by employing the nondualistic strategy of unifying disparate experiences into integrated wholes, by engaging in an enlightened processing of transrational phenomena, and by acquiring the wisdom to know when, how, and whether to act heroically. Heroic consciousness is to be aware of thoughts, use them judiciously, but not be obsessively driven by them (Tolle, 2004). It is to have an ego but not be a slave to it (Efthimiou, 2019). It is to know when heroic action is needed and when it is not (Beggan, 2019).

Heroic behavior – which can be viewed as action resulting from the perceived absence of any boundary between self and others – reflects the culmination of the social, psychological, and ecological experience of heroic consciousness. Heroic consciousness is not a belief system but rather a way of seeing and experiencing the world. As I will describe in this article, much of the world is trapped in pre-heroic consciousness. Humans tend to be educated and socialized to focus on *what* to see and *what* to think rather than on *how* to see and *how* to think. My emphasis here will necessarily be on the psychological aspects of consciousness, as I have neither the space nor the expertise to delve into the full richness of consciousness at the biological and ecological levels.

## 2 HEROIC TRANSFORMATION AND CONSCIOUSNESS

---

Much of heroic consciousness springs from processes involved in heroic transformation, a topic that I have written about at length with my colleagues George Goethals, Greg Smith, and our students (Allison, 2019; Allison & Goethals 2014, 2016, 2017; Allison, Goethals, & Spyrou, 2019; Allison et al., 2019; Allison & Smith, 2015; Goethals & Allison, 2019). This work has identified the types, functions, and developmental arcs of heroic transformation. Heroes transform mentally, emotionally, spiritually, physically, morally, and motivationally. These transformations enable the hero to evolve from egocentricity to sociocentricity; from stagnation to growth; and from dependence to autonomy. Heroic transformation serves many purposes. It helps people pass through key developmental stages in life; it promotes social and emotional healing; it builds social unity; it advances society's development; and it furthers people's spiritual and cosmic understanding of the world. Wundrack (2019) argues that heroic transformation "can only be fully understood if we conceptualize the individual from the very beginning as psychologically embedded, engaged, entangled and extending in their (social) environment" (p. 6). Efthimiou, Allison, and Franco (2018) assert that heroic transformation is ultimately aimed at promoting individual and societal wellbeing, equilibrium, and wholeness.

Overall, there is general consensus centered on the idea that transformation is "an evolutionary process within the *consciousness* whereby one sees the world in a new way" (Wade, 1998, p. 714, italics added). Personal transformation has been defined as "a dynamic, uniquely individualized process of expanding consciousness" (Wade, 1998, p. 714). Heroic behavior is always a reflection of this expanded consciousness. Joseph Campbell (1988) argued that the goal of the hero's journey in myth and literature is to bring about "a transformation of *consciousness*" in the hero (p. 155, italics added). Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou (2017) argue that heroism heightens our conscious "awareness of ought selves and ideal

selves” (p. 27). Heroism scientists have recently argued that the ultimate goal of heroic transformation is the attainment of a higher, or deeper, level of consciousness (Jones, 2019; Ross, 2019).

Heroism scholars who study transformative consciousness often approach the topic from a spiritual perspective, perhaps because a spiritual awakening is also a heroic awakening. The goal of spirituality shares the same goal as heroism -- *to see our inner, truer, and best self, and to discern that this new truer self is deeply connected to everyone and to everything*. This type of “seeing” requires a fresh, heroic set of eyes, a new type of consciousness that involves viewing the world in a way that dares to deviate from our Western culture’s emphasis on individualism, hyper-rationalism, and materialism. Ross (2019), for example, has conceptualized heroic transformation as the pathway to “higher or increased consciousness” (p. 5). A person with heroically transformed consciousness is “able to sense through division and experience the unity inherent in all, and will be able to unify perceptions and self” (p. 6). From this perspective, Ross (2019) argues that “the desire to transform is embedded in universal passages of life-death-rebirth, just as the cosmos is renewed. The consciousness that emerges from this amalgamation is unbounded, grounded, peaceful, loving, and awake” (p. 35). According to Efthimiou and Franco (2017), heroism reflects an “expansion of consciousness ... felt across the physical and spiritual plane, illustrating a critical connection between the hero’s journey, intelligence, and the transformative process” (p. 39).

Adopting a similar approach to heroic consciousness, Jones (2019) has emphasized the importance of mindful meditation in producing heroically transformative outcomes. One characteristic of the heroically conscious individual is their attainment of advanced states of nondual awareness (Grof, 1972; Josipovic, 2014). Nondualism refers to “a dissolution of the sense of an abiding and separate self and a perception of oneness or connectedness to people

and surroundings” (Jones, 2019, p. 14). Nondual awareness results from “the removal of the cognitive, perceptual, and sensory layers of information processing leading to a more expanded and unitary state of consciousness” (p. 14). This spiritual practice is the basis of Eckhart Tolle’s (2004) emphasis on remaining alert in the present moment and identifying not with the mind but with awareness of “the power of now”. Consciousness is found in the “now”, in the stillness of “being”. People are ensnared in a state of unconsciousness when they are preoccupied with the past, with the future, and with personally identifying with their mental clutter. Hero training programs and many spiritual practices are designed to encourage the habit of staying present, vigilant, grounded, and aware of current sensations and surroundings (Goethals & Allison, 2019).

Joseph Campbell often discussed the connection between the consciousness of a hero and the consciousness of a spiritually awakened individual. Several of Campbell’s books highlight the spiritual and cosmological significance of the hero monomyth in classic hero mythology (see Campbell, 1972, 1988, 2004, 2016). One of the central functions of hero mythology, according to Campbell (1972), is “to waken and maintain in the individual a sense of awe and gratitude in relation to the mystery dimension of the universe ... so that he recognizes that he participates in it, since the mystery of being is the mystery of his own deep being as well” (p. 215). Although Campbell was not a religious person, he shared Carl Jung’s (1938) belief that spiritual mythologies and symbols play a significant role in helping people become more psychologically whole. Wholeness and union with others are central goals of the hero’s journey, with Campbell (1949) noting that by journey’s end, the hero “shall be with all the world” (p. 25). The journey of the hero requires the hero to “die spiritually and be reborn to a larger way of living” (Campbell, 1988, p. 141). The transformed hero is “selfless, boundless, without ego” (Campbell, 1972, p. 151). During the journey, the hero “learns to experience the supernormal range of human spiritual life” (p. 152). Sounding very much like

a spiritual teacher, Campbell offered that “when we quit thinking primarily about ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness” (p. 155).

### 3 FOUR TELLTALE CHARACTERISTICS OF HEROIC CONSCIOUSNESS

---

*“We divide in thought what is not divided in nature.” -- Alan Watts*

From my review of the literature of heroism science, cognitive psychology, transpersonal psychology, philosophy, spirituality, and transformative studies, I have identified four telltale signs that an individual has experienced heroic consciousness. There are no doubt more than four characteristics, and there are no doubt other (and better) ways of describing these signs of heroic consciousness. The four characteristics of the hero’s consciousness include the tendency to show clarity and effectiveness in: (1) seeing the world from a nondualistic perspective; (2) processing transrational phenomena; (3) exhibiting a unitive consciousness; and (4) demonstrating the wisdom to know when to act heroically and when not to act when action would be harmful. Let us now examine each of these four telltale attributes in more detail.

#### 3.1 NONDUALISTIC THINKING

A central element of heroic consciousness is the hero’s use of the mental and spiritual approach to life known as *nondualistic thinking* (Jones, 2019; Loy, 1997; Rohr, 2009). Heroes are adept at both dualistic and nondualistic mental approaches. Heroes first master dualistic thinking, the ability to partition and label the world when necessary, and then they

learn to go beyond this binary thinking by seeing a rich, nuanced reality that defies simple mental compartmentalizations. Cynthia Bourgeault (2013) describes this richer psychological mindset as *third force thinking* that transcends the rigid mindset of dualities. A third force solution to a problem is “an independent force, coequal with the other two, not a product of the first two as in the classic Hegelian *thesis, antithesis, synthesis*” (p. 26). Psychologists have known for a half-century that human cognition is characterized by a need to simplify and categorize stimuli (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). Because our lives include daily encounters with a range of phenomena that defy simple dualistic thinking, it is of crucial importance that we engage in third force approaches that access our deeper intuitions and artistic sensibilities. Third force solutions to problems are innovative and heroic solutions. In my view, it is crucial that we emphasize third force nondualistic thinking approaches in early education to help promote heroic mindsets in young children.

In contrast to dualistic thinking, nondualistic thinking resists a simple definition. It sees subtleties, exceptions, mystery, and a bigger picture. Nondualistic thinking refers to a broader, dynamic, imaginative, and more mature contemplation of perceived events (Rohr, 2009). A nondualistic approach to understanding reality is open and patient with mystery and ambiguity. Nondualistic thinkers see reality clearly because they do not allow their prior beliefs, expectations, and biases to affect their conscious perception of events and encounters with people. Abraham Heschel (1955) described it as the ability to *let the world come at us* rather than *us come at the world* with preconceived categories that can skew our perceptions. “Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement,” wrote Heschel. “Wonder or radical amazement, the state of maladjustment to words and notions, is therefore a prerequisite for *an authentic awareness of that which is*” (p. 46-47, italics added).

Rohr (2009) describes nondualistic thinking as “calm, ego-less seeing” and “the ability to keep you heart and mind spaces open long enough to see other hidden material” (p.

33-34). According to Rohr, this type of insight occurs whenever “by some wondrous coincidence, our heart space and mind space, and our body awareness are all simultaneously open and nonresistant” (p. 28). Asian spiritual philosophies describe nondualistic seeing as *the third eye*, which is the enlightened ability to see the world with balance, wisdom, and clarity. Heroic protagonists in literature are often compelled to view the world at these deeper levels by traversing the hero’s journey, which involves a descent into a desperately challenging and painful situation. During these darkest of times, heroes realize that their simple dualistic mindsets no longer work for them. The pre-heroic consciousness must be discarded, allowing heroes to achieve clarity and accumulate life-changing insights about themselves and the world (Allison & Goethals, 2014). We are all called to experience a transformative, expansive, nondualistic consciousness, and we usually get there through great love (Rohr, 2011) or great suffering (Allison & Setterberg, 2016). But not everyone gets there. Some remain sadly stuck at the level of dualistic consciousness. Dualistic thinkers have a split consciousness that contributes to perpetuating all the damaging “isms” of society – racism, sexism, classism, ageism, and nationalism, to name a few. Split people tend to split people.

I propose that dualistic thinking, the pre-heroic consciousness, is comprised of a two-step psychological process. First, people mentally divide the world into binary units, such as “us versus them”, “true versus false”, “big versus small”, or “self versus other”. This first step is a purely cognitive labeling process, quickly activated and largely reflecting a deep and well-practiced conditioned response. The second step in the process is less cognitive and more emotional. After making the initial dualistic assessment, the dualistic thinker then makes the evaluative determination that one component of the target of perception is good and the other component is bad. If the dualistic judgment is “self versus another”, the tendency is to conclude that the self is better than the other, a phenomenon known as the *self-*

*-serving bias* (Alicke & Sedikides, 2009). If the dualistic judgment is “us versus them”, the tendency is to conclude that one’s own group is superior to another group, a phenomenon known as *ingroup bias* (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). This two-step process of *dividing then egocentrically evaluating* resembles that of many psychological processes involving an initial quick heuristic judgment followed by a self-enhancing evaluation (e.g., Roch, Samuelson, Allison, & Dent, 2000). It is a pre-heroic consciousness that allows our brains to go on autopilot, splitting the world mindlessly and then interpreting our mental division in a self-serving manner.

If nondualistic thinking reflects a more heroic consciousness than dualistic thinking, how does one adopt a nondualistic approach to the world? I believe there are at least two routes to attaining nondualistic thought. One route consists of Abraham Heschel’s idea of approaching the world with an openness and receptivity to awe, wonder, and gratitude (Burhans, 2016). Heschel, you may recall, called this *radical amazement*. Our thoughts constrict what we can see, according to Heschel (1955, p. 47): “While any act of perception or cognition has as its object a selected segment of reality, radical amazement refers to *all of reality*”. Research shows that training in mindful meditation can help quell the initial labeling and categorizing process and thus better enable people to see the world as it is rather than as we “think” it is (Jones, 2019). In his book *Blink*, Malcom Gladwell (2007) argues that spending less time thinking and relying upon one’s immediate intuitions often engenders greater clarity about the world. This first route to nondualistic thinking requires us to adopt practices that encourage us to approach the world with more wonder, awe, openness, intuition, feeling, and artistic sensibility. Adopting these practices inhibits our predilection for forming quick mental partitions of the world that limit our ability to see the world more broadly, deeply, holistically, heroically, and with more radical amazement.

The second route to nondualistic thinking does not seek to reduce initial mental labeling but instead focuses on correcting for mental labels after they have already been generated. There is some evidence that the tendency to make quick, spontaneous categorizations of the world is wired into us and may therefore be very difficult to avoid (Pendry & Macrae, 1996). Awareness of this pattern is critical to remedying it. If we find ourselves dividing the world dualistically in our minds, we can become aware of this initial binary thinking and then pause to make the necessary corrections. Engaging in mental adjustments that help us see the world in broader, more unifying terms may indeed be the height of heroic consciousness. This two-step process of automatic judging and then correcting has been documented as a pervasive human decision-making process (e.g., Gilbert, 1998; Kraft-Todd & Rand, 2017; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). We are all capable of heroic consciousness even if at first, as a result of deeply ingrained habit, we show a dualistic pre-heroic consciousness. The challenge here is ensuring that we make the full correction. Research shows that people tend to make initial, faulty judgments and then fail to sufficiently correct for them (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). The heightened awareness of a heroically conscious individual will not allow this to happen.

There are many historical examples of the heroic use of nondualistic consciousness. John F. Kennedy used nondual thinking in his response to the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. A year earlier, Kennedy and his advisors were humiliated by the consequences of their dualistic reaction to the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. Learning from this failure, Kennedy patiently considered many possible responses to the missile crisis rather than frame the decision as either going to war versus doing nothing. He settled on a naval military blockade that nicely diffused the crisis and averted a nuclear showdown with the Soviets. Mahatma Gandhi's use of nonviolent, passive resistance is another striking example of nondualistic thinking. Rather than frame India's struggle for independence as either a violent revolution or total

submission, Gandhi developed an ingenious strategy of peaceful resistance that became a model for social change worldwide. Martin Luther King, Jr. practiced this same nondualistic approach during the U.S. civil rights movement of the 1960s. “Nonviolent resistance,” King wrote, is “a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love” (King, 1958). Frimer, Walker, Lee, Riches, and Dunlop’s (2012) study of great moral heroes found that they tended to be nondualistic in pursuing their moral goals. According to Frimer et al. (2012), “moral exemplars exhibited the hierarchical integration of agency and communion by treating agentic motives as a means to an end of communal motives” (p. 1140). Through patience, contemplation, and openness, a third-force solution to problems emerges that reflects a higher intelligence and consciousness.

### 3.2 PROCESSING OF TRANSRATIONAL PHENOMENA

Encounters with experiences that defy rational, logical analysis are an inescapable part of life. A second major characteristic of the hero’s consciousness is the ability to process and understand these experiences, as they often reflect the most important issues of human existence. These *transrational phenomena* are mysterious and challenging for most people to fathom, and thus they require a heroic consciousness to unlock their secrets. Rohr (2009) has identified five such phenomena, and I will add two more. Rohr’s five are *love*, *death*, *suffering*, *God*, and *eternity*. The two that I am adding are *paradox* and *metaphor* (see also Allison & Goethals, 2014; Efthimiou, Bennett, & Allison, 2019). These seven transrational experiences are a ubiquitous part of human life, pervade good hero mythology and storytelling, and are endemic to the classic monomythic hero’s journey as described by Joseph Campbell (1949).

To illustrate the importance of understanding the seven transrational experiences in storytelling, let us consider the role of each in the classic 1993 film *Groundhog Day* starring

Bill Murray. The movie can be summarized as follows: The hero, Phil Connors, is a narcissistic television meteorologist covering the annual Groundhog Day ritual in Pennsylvania. Phil is hateful to everyone and has a crush on his producer, Rita. Soon he discovers that each day is a repetition of the previous day, and no one but him is aware that the day is repeating itself. The movie derives much of its humor and wisdom from how Phil handles his temporal entrapment. Here's how the seven transrational phenomena of the hero's journey come into play:

(1) *Eternity*: The hero of *Groundhog Day*, Phil Connors, finds himself stuck in time, repeating the same day over and over again, seemingly for eternity.

(2) *Suffering*: Phil suffers greatly because he cannot escape the time trap. He suffers also because despite his best efforts he cannot win the heart of Rita, his producer.

(3) *God*: Although never mentioned as divine per se, some outside authority or supernatural force is responsible for entrapping Phil in the time loop. This mysterious power is also responsible for eventually releasing Phil from the time loop.

(4) *Love*: Phil is deeply in love with Rita, but it is not until the end of the story that she reciprocates his affections.

(5) *Death*: Unable to win Rita's heart or escape the time trap, Phil ends his own life many times and in many ways, only to discover that suicide for him is impossible. Later, he is unable to prevent a homeless man from dying.

(6) *Metaphor*: The endlessly repeating day is a metaphor for the rut of unhappy living that plagues most of humanity.

(7) *Paradox*: Phil has to suffer to get well. The harder Phil tries to win Rita's heart, the less successful he is. The more he focuses on changing himself, the more he changes Rita. By helping others, he helps himself.

When we are young and not far along our hero's journeys, all seven of these transrational experiences tend to overwhelm our ill-equipped pre-heroic consciousness. We need stories like *Groundhog Day* to help us awaken to a new, wiser, broader consciousness. Much like Phil Connors, most human beings suffer until and unless they adopt a heroic consciousness that enables them to grasp the transrational world. Heroic consciousness is available to us once we realize that choosing to remain unconscious leaves us feeling alone, disconnected, frustrated, and miserable. I am not arguing that our pre-heroic rational minds are bad; in fact, pre-heroic consciousness is useful for healthy early life ego development and identity formation. Phil Connors became a successful television meteorologist by relying on his pre-heroic consciousness alone. I am only claiming that pre-heroic consciousness is insufficient for mastering life's biggest mysteries involving the seven transrational phenomena. These issues require a broader, more enlightened consciousness to understand, and until we understand them, we are doomed to suffer much like Phil Connors.

The transrational truth of paradox is a counterintuitive feature of life that post-modern people today find especially challenging to understand. We can use the paradox of heroism as an illustration (see Allison & Goethals, 2012, and Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011, for a discussion of heroism paradoxes). One of the major paradoxes of heroism is this: Our world values heroes and needs heroes, yet no one – no matter how motivated -- can wake up one morning and decide to become a hero. Thus, we must wrestle with the question of whether we can choose to become a hero, or whether fate, luck, and circumstances -- forces beyond our control -- just make heroism happen. This question evokes issues central to the fields of

both psychology and philosophy. Only a nonbinary, nondualistic perspective can shed light on such a broad and profound paradox.

On the surface, the issue of whether or not we can decide to become a hero has the dualistic feature of “choosing heroism” versus heroism consisting of something that is “done unto us”. It turns out that there is more complexity to heroism than can be captured within a simple choice versus no-choice framework. Just as Phil Connors could not simply decide to exit his time loop or make Rita fall in love with him, none of us can decide to become a hero. But it is also true that while Phil could not “will” himself out of the time loop or into Rita’s heart, he did not sit in his hotel room and just wait for fate, luck, or the universe to rescue him or to bring Rita’s love to him. To accomplish his heroic mission, Phil had to do his part, even if his part included doing many dumb and underhanded things that made his life worse at first. *Paradoxically, there was nothing Phil could do to become a hero, and yet everything he did made his heroism possible.* Understanding the paradox of how one becomes a hero requires a deeper, broader, nondualistic consciousness.

To understand the genesis of heroism from a nondualistic perspective, we turn to the wisdom of an underrated psychologist named Leslie Farber, who in 1966 noted that the best psychological states that we strive for cannot be “willed” by us. These desirable states include happiness, wisdom, courage, resilience, and even a good night’s sleep. We all long for these states, and engage in activities that we think will produce them. Paradoxically, our efforts may backfire completely. We can decide, for example, to read books, but we cannot decide to be wise. We can participate in activities that bring a smile to our faces but we cannot “will” happiness. We can go to bed at night but we cannot “will” ourselves to sleep. In fact, our best efforts to “will” happiness and sleep often make us unhappy and sleepless. Imposing a dualistic framework on nondualistic phenomena usually invites failure, frustration, and despair. Phil Connors is proof of that.

The same principle holds true for the question of how we adopt heroic consciousness. We can do things to make heroic consciousness more likely, such as participate in hero training, become a lifeguard, or engage in mindful meditation -- in much the same way we can make sleep more likely by getting our bodies into a bed at night. But like falling asleep, we cannot “will” heroism. People who know how to save lives do not become heroes until circumstances present themselves that allow for heroism to happen. Law enforcement personnel have the training and are ready to save lives but most do not save lives -- a fact for which we should be grateful. Imagine the bloody carnage of a world where every trained hero uses their training.

In short, there are some “end states” that we cannot “will” to happen; they only happen as byproducts of various behaviors, experiences, and unwilled processes, some of which we can control and some we cannot. A wonderful quote by French philosopher Georges Bataille sums it up: *“Mere words have something of a quicksand about them. Only experience is the rope that is thrown to us”*. Words are dualistic; experience is nondualistic (Rohr, 2009). We cannot vow to become courageous and resilient, nor can we think our way there. Instead, we must experience circumstances that are so dire and challenging that we have no choice but to acquire courage and resilience. Our circumstances must outstrip the resources we have to cope with them; only in this way can we transform heroically. Painful yet transcendent experiences are the rope thrown to us, and we must grab that rope even if, and maybe especially if, the experiences are so painful they take us near our breaking point. These experiences are the seeds of and the essence of the hero’s journey, the hero’s transformation, and the hero’s consciousness.

We can therefore see that one possible resolution to the dilemma of whether we choose heroism or heroism chooses us can be found through a nonbinary, third force approach to the problem. The field of psychology has slowly been dismantling false

dichotomies (Heinzen & Goodfriend, 2019), with contextualistic epistemology serving as one of the major philosophical approaches that can better capture life's nuances and richness compared to binary or categorical approaches (see McGuire, 1983). The nascent field of heroism science is rife with phenomena that defy simple binary scientific analysis, and these phenomena require a deeper, fuller, third-force, or transdisciplinary approach to understand. Our lives operate in much the same way. We need both dualistic and nondualistic approaches to navigate our world successfully. To be the master of both worlds, as Joseph Campbell (1949) phrased it, we must first master dualistic thinking as our friend Phil Connors did in becoming successful professionally. This success alone will not bring happiness. To escape the trap of this first world, we must master nondualistic approaches toward understanding and successfully navigating through the mysteries of the transrational world.

### 3.3 UNITIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

*“A human being is a part of the whole, called by us ‘Universe,’ a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest -- a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.” -- Albert Einstein (1950)*

I began this article noting the evolutionary benefits of the human brain's ability to merge two disparate images into a single coherent whole. Just as this nondualism at the biological level enhances our survival, so does nondualism at the psychological level. Heroic consciousness is a nondual, unitive consciousness, exactly like that described in the above quote by Einstein (1950). While recognizing and valuing individual separateness and

multiplicity, heroic consciousness sees and seeks unification. Joseph Campbell (1988) enjoyed telling the story about two Hawaiian police officers who were called to save the life of a man about to jump to his death. As the man began to jump, one officer grabbed onto him and was himself being pulled over the ledge along with the man he was trying to save. The other officer grabbed his partner and was able to bring both men back to safety. Campbell explained the first officer's self-sacrificial behavior as reflecting "a metaphysical realization which is that you and that other are one, that you are two aspects of the one life" (p. 138). Heroic consciousness is the awareness of this truth. Campbell (1988) taught us that the classic, mythic initiation journey ends with the hero discovering that "our true reality is in our identity and unity with all life" (p. 138).

Einstein's metaphor of the mental prison is especially descriptive of pre-heroic consciousness. The pre-hero is trapped in the "delusion" of tribal identity and of separateness from the world. Consistent with the mental prison metaphor, spiritual leaders have referred to our over-reliance on mental life as an "addiction" (Rohr, 2011) and a "parasitic" relationship (Tolle, 2005). Both the *perseverance effect* and *confirmation bias* in psychology refer to the troublesome tendency of people to hold onto their beliefs even when those beliefs have been discredited by objective evidence (Fiske & Taylor, 2013). The stories that we tell ourselves and cling to can hinder the development of our heroic consciousness (Harari, 2018). This is why hero training programs focus on strategies aimed at re-writing our mental scripts to bolster our heroic efficacy (Kohen et al., 2017). The trait of being open to new ways of thinking is considered by psychologists to be a central characteristic of healthy individuals (Hogan et al., 2012). Even the New Testament speaks directly to the importance of being open to transforming our minds in becoming more heroically conscious. Romans 12:2 reads: "Do not *conform* to this world, but be *transformed by the renewing of your mind*. Then you will be able to do what is good and what God's will is" (italics added).

Heroes escape their mental prisons and experience a transformed consciousness when they engage in the process of self-expansiveness (Friedman, 2017), during which the boundaries between oneself and others are seen as permeable. Many spiritual geniuses, including Thich Nhat Hanh, Eckhart Tolle, and Richard Rohr, deem *unitive consciousness* as core to their definition of spiritual maturity. Buddhist philosopher Hanh (1999) writes that human beings tend to believe that their fellow humans “exist outside us as separate entities, but these objects of our perception *are* us .... When we hate someone, we also hate ourselves” (p. 81). Rohr (2019) emphasizes that consciousness is the key to understanding the *oneness* of humanity: “The old joke about the mystic who walks up to the hotdog vendor and says, ‘Make me one with everything,’ misses the point. I am already one with everything. All that is absent is awareness” (p. 1).

In their list of features that distinguish heroes from villains, Allison and Smith (2015) argued that heroes seek to unite the world whereas villains seek to divide it. Unification in perception and in action tends to reduce human suffering, whereas division in perception and in action tends to produce suffering. The hero’s consciousness thus operates in the service of ending human suffering, and the villain’s consciousness (and also at times pre-heroic consciousness) can operate in the service of producing human suffering. Harari (2018) suggests that the recognition of real human suffering may be the litmus test for distinguishing a high-level consciousness from a low-level one. According to Efthimiou et al., (2018):

the pre-heroic, unawakened state is characterized by comparing to others, criticizing others, and taking offense from others. There is a distinct lack of joy in the pre-heroic state, as untransformed individuals are destined to experience suffering and misery and will likely engender such suffering in others around them, too. Only by mentally and spiritually seeing the ‘oneness’ of humanity can personal wellbeing become possible (p. 226).

Heroic consciousness is therefore necessary to achieve personal wholeness, collective wholeness, and the future well-being of our planet.

Allison and Smith (2015) also point out another defining feature of heroes, namely, the tendency of heroes to transcend their pain and use their suffering to develop a heroic consciousness. Suffering promotes unitive consciousness (Allison & Setterberg, 2016). In contrast, villains are unable to use their suffering for transcendence. Villains tend to succumb to their pain and allow it to entrench them in the world of materialism, dualistic thinking, and a sense of immature empowerment. Eckhart Tolle (2005) has claimed that if evil has any reality, it is “complete identification with form -- physical forms, thought forms, emotional forms. This results in a total unawareness of my connectedness with the whole, my intrinsic oneness with every ‘other’” (p. 22). Villains, in fact, operate at such an unconscious level that they usually lack the awareness that they are doing any harm (Baumeister, 2012). Villains often deny they are villains, and heroes often deny they are heroes -- but these denials occur for completely different reasons. Villains are driven to bolster their egos, whereas heroes have no egos to bolster. The heroic consciousness is in ego-less union with everyone. Carl Jung (1938) also emphasized the importance of psychological wholeness, which can only be brought about by bringing unconscious material into conscious awareness. According to Rohr (2009) the pathway toward enlightened consciousness requires the healing of three things: our woundedness, our egocentricity, and our separateness. Only when we rid ourselves of these identifications and illusions can we see wholeness and unity, allowing us to experience heroic consciousness.

### **3.4 WISDOM OF TEMPERED EMPOWERMENT**

In the 1930s, a theologian and philosopher named Reinhold Niebuhr penned what is today commonly referred to as the serenity prayer (Shapiro, 2014). The prayer is as follows:

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,*

*Courage to change the things I can,*

*And wisdom to know the difference.*

The serenity prayer has enjoyed considerable worldwide recognition as a result of being adopted by nearly every 12-step recovery program. I believe the serenity prayer contains brilliant insight about heroic, behavioral self-regulation. George Goethals and I have written elsewhere about addiction recovery programs deriving their effectiveness from their use of the hero's journey as a blueprint for growth and healing (Allison & Goethals, 2014, 2016, 2017). Other scholars and healers have also noted the parallel between heroism and addiction recovery work (Efthimiou et al., 2018; Furey, 2017; Morgan, 2014). The serenity prayer is the centerpiece of recovery programs because addiction is largely a disease of control (Alanon Family Groups, 2008). The prayer works because it helps recovering addicts develop the wisdom to know when to exercise control over their lives and when to admit powerlessness.

Each of the three lines of the serenity prayer reflects the wisdom of heroic consciousness. First, the prayer asks for the serenity to accept people and circumstances that cannot be changed. This is a prayer for acceptance of non-action when action is pointless. It takes a deeper, broader, heroic consciousness to recognize the futility of action in a situation that *seems* to call for action. For example, if a chronic alcoholic is repeatedly arrested for disorderly conduct, and their partner repeatedly bails him out of jail, the partner may finally have had enough and decide *not* to bail out the alcoholic in the future. Not helping someone may at times lead to a better outcome than helping someone. After not being bailed out, the alcoholic sitting in jail may do some much-needed soul-searching that can lead to their own recovery and healing. The partner who fails to help the jailed alcoholic may be more of a hero

by doing nothing than by any action they can take. In terms of the serenity prayer, the partner accepts that they cannot change the alcoholic and that they cannot stop the cycle of repeated arrests for disorderly conduct. Passive acceptance and non-action are sometimes the wisest responses and reflect a nondualistic heroic consciousness.

Beggan (2019) would call this heroic non-action an example of *meta-heroism*.

According to Beggan (2019), “The meta-hero acts heroically by not acting heroically, at least in terms of a more narrow definition of heroic action. In this case, the right thing may actually create hardship and moral ambiguity” (p. 13). Beggan (2019) points out that there is a bias in heroism science toward taking action rather than inaction. His analysis puts the adage that “the opposite of a hero is a bystander” on its head. It seems there are times when heroes are indeed bystanders. But it takes an enlightened consciousness to discern these moments that call for heroic inaction.

The second element of the serenity prayer focuses on praying for the courage to change things that are changeable. After realizing that they are powerless over the alcoholic, the partner may recognize that they do have power over their own choices and attitudes. We can only change ourselves, not others. It takes heroic courage not to help a loved one when helping might be enabling the loved one’s pattern of dysfunctional behavior. Moreover, it takes heroic courage to take charge of one’s own life by confronting the alcoholic about the dysfunctional pattern, setting boundaries with the alcoholic, or perhaps even terminating the relationship with the alcoholic. In any difficult situation, there are always things one can change and options one can consider, although it may take great courage to try something that is completely different and outside one’s proverbial comfort zone. It requires a heroic consciousness to consider all the things that can be changed with the goal of doing what is best for all concerned. In *Groundhog Day*, Phil Connors could have stayed in bed in his hotel

room for all eternity. But instead, he accepted his powerlessness over the time loop and became focused on changing the one thing he could change: himself.

The third and final component of the serenity prayer asks for “the wisdom to know the difference” between those things over which we are powerless and those things over which we do have power. This wisdom lies at the heart of heroic behavioral consciousness, healthy self-regulation, and sage empowerment. I call this *the wisdom of tempered empowerment*. Pre-heroes cannot easily distinguish between what they can control and what they cannot, nor are they adept at anticipating the efficacy of their efforts to control others or their environment. As a result, pre-heroes can easily become meddling or enabling individuals who do more harm than good (Beggan, 2019). People with heroic consciousness possess the wisdom of tempered empowerment by recognizing the difference between situations that call for action and situations that call for inaction. The heroically conscious individual has the courage to do great things as well as the courage to avoid the kind of helping behavior that may be harmful, futile, counterproductive, or unnecessary.

A useful example of the wisdom of tempered empowerment can be found in Holocaust rescuers of Jews during the Second World War. Fagin-Jones (2019) makes a convincing case that Holocaust rescuers possessed the emotional intelligence and emotional self-regulatory ability to apply the wisdom to know the difference between what they could control and what they could not. According to Fagin-Jones (2019), “rescuers reported having an ongoing awareness of the constant danger and ever-increasing existential threat posed by the Nazis, but they possessed the emotion-regulation capacity to manage feelings of chronic terror and to remain efficacious in their heroic action often over a period of two to five years” (p. 13). Rescuers were able to recognize what they could not change and thus focused on saving lives that they could save. The serenity prayer was crafted to help people manage their choices in crisis situations when a heroic consciousness may be needed for survival and for

achieving heroic aims. Coincidentally, German-American Reinhold Niebuhr composed the prayer to help him adjust to his powerlessness over the evils of Germany's Third Reich.

## **4 PATHWAYS TO HEROIC CONSCIOUSNESS**

---

Consistent with Farber's (1966) contention that there are some positive outcomes in life that we cannot simply "will" to happen, it is my belief that heroic consciousness does not arise in people simply because they desire it. Heroic consciousness requires a set of experiences, behaviors, and practices. What are these activities that can promote heroic consciousness in everyday people? From our review of theory and research on heroism, developmental processes, leadership, and spiritual growth, my colleagues and I have identified three categories of activities that encourage heroic consciousness (Allison et al., 2019; Goethals & Allison, 2019). These activities include (1) the hero's journey; (2) certain spiritual practices; and (3) participation in training and development programs. Let's explore each of these in turn.

### **4.1 THE HERO'S JOURNEY**

The hero's journey as described by Campbell (1949) is designed by nature to engender heroic consciousness. An abundance of recent scholarship has identified the myriad psychological benefits of traversing the hero's journey (e.g., Allison et al., 2019; Martin, Connors, & Newbold, 2019; Williams, 2018). Campbell (2004) described the journey as a much-needed voyage designed to "wake you up" (p. 12). Becoming more conscious appears to be the goal. Efthimiou and Franco (2017) have called the hero's journey "a discrete form of complete intelligent behavior" and "a seat of intelligence" itself (p. 35). During the hero's quest, "ineffable realizations are experienced" and "things that before had been mysterious are now fully understood" (Campbell, 1972, p. 219). According to Campbell (1988), the

hero's outer journey reflects an inner, psychological journey that involves "leaving one condition and finding the source of life to bring you forth into a richer or mature condition" (p. 152). Heroic consciousness is thus a mature consciousness. Heroes, said Campbell (1988), "undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness," requiring them "to think a different way" (p. 155). My argument in this article is that this different way of thinking is nondualistic, transrational, unitive, and features the wisdom of tempered empowerment.

Williams (2018) has offered an insightful analysis of the clinical benefits of framing the lives of clients in therapeutic settings as paralleling the various stages of the hero's journey. According to Williams (2018), successful passage through the twelve stages of Campbell's monomyth produces "a new awareness of self" and "increased wellbeing" (p. 72). This new self-awareness reflects an enhanced heroic consciousness. Martin et al. (2019) argue that the hero's journey is a journey of self-transcendence that involves "moving beyond self-centered consciousness, seeing things with a clear awareness of human nature and human problems, and attaining some freedom from biological and social conditioning" (p. 4). Martin et al.'s (2019) description of the benefits of the hero's journey mirror those described by Allison and Goethals (2017), who suggest that heroes move from egocentricity to sociocentricity, from stagnation to growth, and from dependence to autonomy. Heroic consciousness is always an expansive, life-affirming, and growth-oriented consciousness. Williams (2018) and Martin et al. (2019) offer strong evidence that the hero's journey, in the words of Efthimiou and Franco (2017), results "in some form of altering of consciousness" (p. 38).

As many have noted, a jarring, unpleasant, and unwelcome incident often signals one's departure on the journey. The incident is often a loss, accident, illness, transgression, death, divorce, or disaster. We are forced to awaken. Because the hero's journey is painful, it is rarely an undertaking that we embark on willingly; it is "done unto us". During the journey

we must be diligent in doing our part to secure allies and mentors, and to take actions that cultivate strengths such as resilience, courage, and resourcefulness (Williams, 2018). After being transformed ourselves, we take on the role of mentor and become duty-bound to transform others. Having negotiated the heroic path, we must use our heroism to craft a newfound purpose for our existence, a purpose that drives us to spend our remaining years making a positive difference in other people's lives. Bronk and Riches (2017) call this process *heroism-guided purpose*. Heroic consciousness is always a consciousness of generous service to others.

## 4.2 SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Over the past decade, research findings in cognitive neuroscience and positive psychology have illuminated the psychological gains associated with engaging in different types of spiritual practices. Mindfulness has especially been the subject of considerable research about its implications for health, well-being, and heroic consciousness (Jones, 2019). Focusing one's awareness solely on the present moment is the principle aim of mindfulness. People who practice mindful meditation show less stress, better resilience, more joy, more compassion, and improved subjective well-being (Hofmann, Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010). Mindful meditation silences our mental clutter and therefore "wakes us up to what is happening", allowing "contact with life" (Hanh, 1999, p. 81). Eckhart Tolle (2005) contends that "our entire life only happens in this moment. The present moment is life itself" (p. 99). Consciously flourishing in the present moment lies at the heart of the psychological phenomenon of *flow* described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2008). When undergoing flow, people are "in the zone", fully present, and completely "immersed in a feeling of energized focus" (p. 45). Heroic consciousness is manifest when we stay grounded in the present.

Additional spiritual practices also contribute to the development of heroic consciousness. The practice of humility can be transformative and has been associated with increased altruism, forgiveness, generosity, and self-control (Worthington & Allison, 2018). The benefits of practicing gratitude have also been validated by recent research. Algoe (2012) discovered that gratitude improves one's energy, optimism, sleep, patience, depression, and overall approach to life. Gratitude therapy helps people become happier, more agreeable, more open, and less neurotic. Related to gratitude are experiences with wonder and awe, which have been shown to promote greater generosity and a deeper sense of connection to the world (Burhans, 2016; Piff, Dietze, Feinberg, Stancato, & Keltner, 2015). Humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow believed that experiencing regular doses of wonder is a hallmark characteristic of the self-actualized individual. A sense of wonder allows us to identify with the present moment rather than with our thoughts, our ego, or our tendency to be past or future oriented. Wonder and awe engender a nondualistic consciousness. The ability to practice acceptance is another spiritual practice that can produce a transformative consciousness. Spiritual gurus have also called acceptance a "release", an ability to "let go", or surrender. Buddhist teacher Thich Naht Hanh (1999) claims that "letting go give us freedom, and freedom is the only condition for happiness" (p. 78). William James (1902) also described the beneficial practice of letting go among religiously converted individuals.

Forgiveness is another transformative spiritual practice that encourages a more heroic consciousness. People who are able to forgive others enjoy healthier relationships, better mental health, less anxiety, and lower blood pressure (Worthington, 2013). Forgiveness may be the most loving thing we can do for ourselves and others, and love may be the ultimate conduit to heroic consciousness. Heroes such as Ebenezer Scrooge (in *A Christmas Carol*), the Grinch (in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*), and George Banks (in *Mary Poppins*) all became more heroically conscious as a result of love. Thich Naht Hanh (1999), moreover,

weighs in that “love, compassion, joy, and equanimity are the very nature of an enlightened person” (p. 170). Loving kindness also transforms us biologically (Keltner, 2009). Being kind and even witnessing kindness have also been found to increase levels of oxytocin and activate the motivation and reward circuits of the brain (Esch & Stefano, 2011). Phil Connors in *Groundhog Day* shows us beautifully how a healthy loving relationship can renovate our consciousness, transforming it into that of a hero who is ready to make a positive difference in the world.

### 4.3 TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES

Even if we have been on the hero’s journey and have adopted spiritual practices that facilitate heroic consciousness, we may want to hone our heroic mindset skills further by engaging in planned activities that are geared directly toward enhancing a heroic approach to life. An example of a hero training practice can be found in initiation rituals and rites of passages found in many cultures throughout the world. Although modern Western societies no longer follow the majority of these practices, most cultures throughout history deemed it necessary to require adolescents, particularly boys, to undergo rituals that signaled their transition into maturity and adulthood (van Gennep, 1909). In many African and Australian tribes, initiation requires initiates to experience pain, often involving circumcision or genital mutilation. It is also not uncommon for rituals to include a challenging survival test in nature, temporarily depriving initiates of their ability to control their lives. These rituals are designed to humble initiates, making them vulnerable, teachable, and powerless, thereby fostering their ability to see the world from a more nondualistic perspective.

How we raise our children is crucial in their acquisition of either a non-heroic or heroic consciousness. Fagin-Jones (2017, 2019) has done extensive research on differences in parenting practices that may account for differences in heroic consciousness between rescuers

and nonrescuers of Jews during the Holocaust of World War II. Fagin-Jones (2017) found that rescuers reported having more loving, supportive relationships with their parents as compared to bystanders. These bystanders reported relationships with parents that were more cold, negative, and avoidant. More rescuers than bystanders recalled their parents as affectionate and engaged in praising, hugging, kissing, joking, and smiling. These early cohesive family bonds encouraged a more heroic consciousness based on tolerance, inclusion, and openness. Rescuers' parents were less likely than bystanders' parents to role model dualistic thinking. Bystanders had parents who dualistically expressed negative Jewish stereotypes such as "dishonest", "untrustworthy", and "too powerful". Overall, rescuers were raised to adopt a more unitive consciousness. Rescuers had greater involvement in community, commitment to others' welfare, and responsibility for the greater good. Fagin-Jones (2019) has coined the term *prosocialization* to describe parenting with "the conscious intention of raising caring, morally courageous kids" (p. 11). Through prosocialization, heroically conscious parents are able to raise heroically conscious children.

In examining the characteristics of people who risked their lives to save others, Kohen, Langdon, and Riches (2017) discovered several important commonalities. They found that these heroes:

*imagined situations where help was needed and considered how they would act; they had an expansive sense of empathy, not simply with those who might be considered 'like them' but also those who might be thought of as 'other' in some decisive respect; they regularly took action to help people, often in small ways; and they had some experience or skill that made them confident about undertaking the heroic action in question.*  
(Kohen et al., 2017, p. 1).

There are four points that Kohen et al. (2017) raise here about a conscious preparation for heroism. First, they emphasize the importance of imagining oneself as capable of performing heroic action when it is required. Developing mental scripts for helping others is an idea central to renowned psychologist Philip Zimbardo's Heroic Imagination Project (2019) hero training programs. Established over a decade ago, the Heroic Imagination Project (HIP) aims to encourage people to envision themselves as heroes and to "prepare heroes in training for everyday heroic action". The HIP organization achieves this goal by training ordinary people to "master social and situational forces as well as their automatic human tendencies in order to act in ways that are kind, prosocial, and even heroic" (p. 1). HIP students are trained to enrich their situational awareness, leadership skills, moral courage, and sense of efficacy in situations that require action to help others. This type of training fosters a heroic consciousness.

Second, Kohen et al. (2017) stress that a hero shows empathic concern for all people, regardless of their similarity to the hero. Research supports the idea that empathy can be enhanced through practice and training, prompting the opening of several dozen empathy training programs operating around the world (Tenney, 2017). Svoboda (2013) offers compelling evidence that empathy and compassion are muscles that can be strengthened with repeated use. This suggests that unitive consciousness can be learned. The third point that Kohen et al. (2017) emphasize is that heroes make a habit out of helping people, even small gestures of helping. Helping others in little ways reinforces the conscious self-perception that one possesses heroic attributes, thus increasing the probability that one will help when a true emergency arises. Finally, Kohen et al. (2017) observe that heroes often undergo either formal or informal training in saving lives. These skills are often acquired from training for law enforcement, military, firefighting, emergency medical services, lifeguarding, or CPR classes (Svoboda, 2013).

Along these same lines, Kramer (2017) developed a new methodology for helping people adopt a heroic consciousness about fulfilling their dreams and aspirations in life. Kramer's (2017) new method has been shown to cultivate *existential courage*, defined as the courage to pursue a meaningful and consequential life. His technique involves encouraging people to take psychological and social risks in the pursuit of desired but challenging future identities. Kramer's (2017) "identity lab" encourages people to (1) identify and research their desired future identities, (2) develop an inventory or assessment of identity-relevant attributes that support the realization of those desired future identities, (3) design behavioral experiments to explore and further develop those self-selected identity attributes, and, finally, (4) consolidate their learnings from their experiments through reflection and assessment. All of these activities have been shown to promote a strong heroic consciousness. Kramer's participants feel significantly more empowered, resilient, transformed, and efficacious in pursuing their heroic aspirations.

## 5 CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

---

In this article, I have argued that how we see the world matters more than what we see, and that heroes see the world through the lens of nondualism, transrationality, unification, and the wisdom of tempered empowerment. I will admit my trepidation in writing at such length about a phenomenon – consciousness – that may be “the greatest mystery of the universe” (Harari, 2018) and about which our best and brightest minds have yet to reach consensus. Jones (2019) has pointed out that consciousness is assumed by most scholars to arise from physiological processes, with each person's mind “a discrete and separate entity with communication only possible through the physiological senses; and that consciousness is limited to the time/space continuum” (p. 67). There are, however, a growing number of scientists who question whether consciousness is tethered to the physical realm.

Peter and Elizabeth Fenwick, for example, are neuroscientists who make the audacious claim that consciousness is not a property of the human body at all but is a property of the universe. The Fenwicks developed their theory after studying the near-death experiences of people who literally showed no brain activity yet still retained verifiable conscious awareness of their surroundings. Fenwick and Fenwick (2008) propose that the brain is not responsible for producing consciousness; rather, the brain registers only a narrow band of the universe's consciousness in much the same way that our eyes and ears only register certain wavelengths of light and frequencies of sound.

If this conception of consciousness is true, then according to Lazarus (2019), we may each have a built-in consciousness "filter" that can trick us "into perceiving a false dichotomy between oneself and others when in fact there is only unity" (p. 1). The Fenwicks reach this conclusion by observing the remarkable transformation shown by those who survived their near-death experiences. Many survivors report that they feel a union and kinship with other people that they never felt before their near-deaths. Whereas they once felt a sense of separateness from others, experiencing near-death made this sense of division disappear. Fenwick and Fenwick (2008) conclude that glimpsing death teaches us that we are not separate from the universe but a central, inextricable part of it. Upon death, "we transcend the human experience of consciousness, and its illusion of duality, and merge with the universe's entire and unified property of consciousness. So, ironically, *only in death can we be fully conscious*" (p. 1, italics added). It is important to emphasize that this conception of universal consciousness is entirely speculation. If the theory someday attracts supportive evidence, it can explain how those who have near-death experiences can reach heroic consciousness.

In the meantime, we are left to wrestle with our own imperfect, often unheroic consciousnesses, as well as the challenging, imperfect consciousnesses of others. Humans are drawn to storytelling and mythology because the heroes of these stories inspire us to strive

for more enlightened ways of seeing the world. I recently watched a movie entitled, *Blinded by the Light* (2019), in which the hero is a teenage boy named Javed who is torn between living a life that pleases his parents or living the life that he wants to live as a writer. I have argued here that heroes do not see the world in binary terms such as “right vs. wrong” and “win vs. lose”. Rather than operating with dualistic consciousness, heroes see the world in broader, deeper terms, going beyond binaries to find third-force solutions to problems. At first, Javed is slave to binary thinking, choosing to defy his father and pursue his own preferred vocation. But soon Javed heeds the advice of his musical hero, Bruce Springsteen, who once said “*Nobody wins unless everybody wins*” -- wisdom that reflects unitive, nondualistic thinking. Thus, rather than frame his life as either giving into his father or setting out alone as a writer, Javed senses heroically that he can find a third solution that allows him to remain loyal to his family without abandoning his own life dreams. Our hero Javed has transformed his consciousness from pre-heroic to heroic. In every good story, from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to *Harry Potter*, the hero undergoes this painful journey toward heroic consciousness.

As we move deeper into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it becomes more and more evident that our world can best undergo heroic transformation when our individual heroic consciousness joins forces with the heroic consciousnesses of others. Klisanin (2017) has championed the notion of a collaborative heroic consciousness and its synergies with the personal, social, physical, and technological realms. “Collaborative heroism”, she writes, “is a form of heroism arising in, and dependent upon, the networked society. It is emerging in a time of transition and supporting the evolution of higher levels of consciousness, themselves intimately entwined with the outering of our nervous systems and extension of our minds” (p. 292). Collaborative heroism “requires greater inclusivity” that is fully aware of the interdependence and unity of the human race (p. 286). A “transmodern psyche” may already be emerging as a result of

technological collaborations that foster a unitive consciousness (Klisanin, 2016). It is incumbent on us all to evolve into heroically conscious individuals who can work together locally and globally to help a troubled world so desperately in need of the consciousness of heroes.

## 6 REFERENCES

---

- Alanon Family Groups (2008). *How Al-Anon works*. Virginia Beach: Al-Anon Family Groups.
- Alicke, M. D., & Sedikides, C. (2009). Self-enhancement and self-protection: What they are and what they do. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 20, 1-48.
- Algoe, S. B. (2012). Find, remind, and bind: The functions of gratitude in everyday relationships. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 6, 455-469.
- Allison, S. T. (2015). The initiation of heroism science. *Heroism Science*, 1, 1-8.
- Allison, S. T. (Ed.) (2019). *Heroic transformation: How heroes change themselves and the world*. Richmond: Palsgrove.
- Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2012). The seven paradoxes of heroism. *Society of Personality and Social Psychology Connections*. Retrieved from <https://spsptalks.wordpress.com/2012/01/02/the-seven-paradoxes-of-heroism/>
- Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2014). "Now he belongs to the ages": The heroic leadership dynamic and deep narratives of greatness. In Goethals, G. R., et al. (Eds.),

*Conceptions of leadership: Enduring ideas and emerging insights.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2016). Hero worship: The elevation of the human spirit. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 46, 187-210.

Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2017). The hero's transformation. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*. New York: Routledge.

Allison, S. T., Goethals, G. R., & Spyrou, S. P. (2019). Donald Trump as the archetypal *puer aeternus*: The psychology of mature and immature leadership. In K. Bezio & G. R. Goethals (Eds.), *Leadership and populism*. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.

Allison, S. T., Goethals, G. R., Marrinan, A. R., Parker, O. M., Spyrou, S. P., Stein, M. (2019). The metamorphosis of the hero: Principles, processes, and purpose. *Frontiers in Psychology*. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00606

Allison, S. T., & Setterberg, G. C. (2016). Suffering and sacrifice: Individual and collective benefits, and implications for leadership. In S. T. Allison, C. T. Kocher, & G. R. Goethals (Eds.), *Frontiers in spiritual leadership: Discovering the better angels of our nature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Allison, S. T. & Smith, G. (2015). *Reel heroes and villains*. Richmond: Agile Writer Press.

Beggan, J. K. (2019). On the downside of heroism: Grey zone limitations on the value of social and physical risk heroism. *Heroism Science*, 4, 1-35.

Baumeister, R. F. (2012). Human evil: The myth of pure evil and the true causes of violence.

In M. Mikulincer & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Herzliya series on personality and social psychology. The social psychology of morality: Exploring the causes of good and evil* (pp. 367-380). Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association.

Bourgeault, C. (2013). *The holy trinity and the law of three*. Shambhala Press.

Bronk & Riches (2017). The intersection of purpose and heroism: A study of exemplars. In S.

T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*. New York: Routledge.

Burhans, D. (2016). The pursuit of wonder. In S. T. Allison, C. T. Kocher, & G. R. Goethals

(Eds), *Frontiers in spiritual leadership: Discovering the better angels of our nature*.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Campbell, J. (1949). *The hero with a thousand faces*. New York: New World Library.

Campbell, J. (1972). *Myths to live by*. New York: Viking Press.

Campbell, J. (1988). *The power of myth*. New York: Anchor Books. Campbell, J. (2001).

*Thou art that*. Novata, CA: New World Library.

Campbell, J. (2004). *Pathways to bliss*. Novata, CA: New World Library.

Efthimiou, O. (2016). The search for a hero gene: Fact or fiction? *Heroism Science, 1*, 1-7.

Efthimiou, O. (2017). The hero organism: Advancing the embodiment of heroism thesis in

the twenty-first century. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.),

*Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*. New York: Routledge.

Efthimiou, O. (2019). *Riding the blue moon: The heroic journey of healing ourselves and others*. Retrieved from <https://blog.richmond.edu/heroes/2019/07/23/riding-the-blue-moon-the-heroic-journey-of-healing-ourselves-and-others/>

Efthimiou, O., & Allison, S. T. (2017). Heroism science: Frameworks for an emerging field. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 58*, 556-570.

Efthimiou, O., & Franco, Z. E. (2017). Heroic intelligence: The hero's journey as an evolutionary and existential blueprint. *Journal of Genius and Eminence, 2*, 32-43.

Efthimiou, O., Allison, S. T., & Franco, Z. E. (Eds.) (2018). *Heroism and wellbeing in the 21st Century: Applied and emerging perspectives*. New York: Routledge.

Efthimiou, O., Bennett, D., & Allison, S. T. (2019). The role of heroic creativity and leadership in creative work. *Geographies of Creativity*. Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar

Esch, T., & Stefano, G. B. (2011). The neurobiological link between compassion and love. *Medical Science Monitor, 17*, 65-75.

Fagin-Jones, S. (2017). Holocaust heroes: Heroic altruism in non-Jewish moral exemplars in Nazi Europe. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*. New York: Routledge.

Fagin-Jones, S. (2019). Prosocialization: Lessons learned from the upbringing of Holocaust heroes. *Heroism Science, 4*, 1-16.

Farber, L. H. (1966). *The ways of the will*. New York: Basic Books..

Fenwick, P. & Fenwick, E. (2008). *The art of dying*. Bloomsbury: London.

Fiske, S., & Taylor, S. (2013). *Social cognition: From brains to culture*. New York: Sage.

Franco, Z. E., Blau, K., & Zimbardo, P. G. (2011). Heroism: A conceptual analysis and differentiation between heroic action and altruism. *Review of General Psychology, 15*, 99-113.

Friedman, H. L. (2017). Everyday heroism in practicing psychology. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167817696843>

Frimer, J. A., Walker, L. J., Lee, B. H., Riches, A., & Dunlop, W. L. (2012). Hierarchical integration of agency and communion: A study of influential moral figures. *Journal of Personality, 80*(4), 1117-1145.

Furey, S. (2017). *From hopeless to heroic: Discovering your power to improve your world*. Amazon Digital Services.

Gilbert, D. T. (1998). Ordinary personology. In Gilbert, D. T., Fiske, S. T., and Lindzey, G. (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology*, New York: McGraw-Hill.

Gladwell, M. (2007). *Blink*. Boston: Back Bay Books.

Goethals, G. R., & Allison, S. T. (2019). *The romance of heroism and heroic leadership: Ambiguity, attribution, and apotheosis*. West Yorkshire: Emerald.

Grof, S. (1972). Varieties of transpersonal experiences: Observations from LSD psychotherapy. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, 4*, 45.

Hanh, T. N. (1999). *The heart of the Buddha's teaching*. New York: Broadway Books.

Harari, Y. N. (2018). *21 lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.

Heroic Imagination Project (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.heroicimagination.org/>

Heschel, A. (1955). *God in search of man*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy.

Hewstone, M., Rubin, M., & Willis, H. (2002). Intergroup bias. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, 575-604.

Hofmann, S. G., Sawyer, A. T., Witt, A. A., & Oh, D. (2010). The effect of mindfulness-based therapy on anxiety and depression: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 78(2), 169-183.

Hogan, M.J., Staff, R.T., Bunting, B.P., Deary, I. J., Whalley, L.J. (2012). Openness to experience and activity engagement facilitate the maintenance of verbal ability in older adults. *Psychology and Aging*, 27, 849-854.

Jones, P. (2019). Mindfulness training: Can it create superheroes? *Frontiers in Psychology*, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00613>

Josipovic, Z. (2014). Neural correlates of nondual awareness in meditation. *Annual New York Academy of Science*, 1307, 9–18. doi: 10.1111/nyas.12261

Jung, C. G. (1938). *Psychology and religion*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Keltner, D. (2009). *Born to be good*. New York: Norton & Company.

King, M. L. (1958). *Stride toward freedom*. New York: Harpercollins.

Kinsella, E. L., Ritchie, T. D., & Igou, E. R. (2017). Attributes and applications of heroes: A brief history of lay and academic perspectives. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R.

- M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*. New York: Routledge.
- Klisanin, D. (2016). Collaborative heroism: An empirical investigation. *Heroism Science, 1*, 1-14.
- Klisanin, D. (2017). Heroism in a networked society. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*. New York: Routledge.
- Koch, C. (2018). What is consciousness? *Scientific American, 318*, 60-64.
- Kohen, A., Langdon, M., & Riches, B. R. (2017). The making of a hero: Cultivating empathy, altruism, and heroic imagination. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 59*, 617-633.
- Kramer, R. M. (2017). To become or not to become? Existential courage and the pursuit of desired identities. In S. T., Allison, G. R., Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kraft-Todd, G. T., & Rand, D. G. (2017). Adaptive foundations of heroism: Social heuristics push advantageous everyday ethical behavior to heroic extremes. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*. New York: Routledge.
- Lazarus, C. N. (2019). *Does consciousness exist outside of the brain?* Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/think-well/201906/does-consciousness-exist-outside-the-brain>

Loy, D. (1997). *Nonduality: A study in comparative philosophy*. Toronto: Humanity Books.

Martin, L. L., Conners, J. and Newbold, J. A. (2019). Evaluating Joseph Campbell's underexplored ideas in the light of modern psychology. *Heroism Science*, 4, 1-21.

McGuire, W. J. (1983). A contextualist theory of knowledge: Its implications for innovation and reform in psychological research. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 16, 1-47.

Morgan, M. (2014). *12 steps and the hero's journey*. Retrieved from <https://serenityvista.com/12-steps-heros-journey/>

Pendry, L. M., & Macrae, C. N. (1996). What the disinterested perceiver overlooks: Goal-directed social categorization. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 22, 249-256.

Piff, P. K., Dietze, P., Feinberg, M., Stancato, D. M., & Keltner, D. (2015). Awe, the small self, and prosocial behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 108, 883.

Roch, S., Samuelson, C., Allison, S. T., & Dent, J. (2000). Cognitive load and the equality heuristic: A two stage model of resource overconsumption in small groups. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 83, 185-212.

Rohr, R. (2009). *The naked now*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company.

Rohr, R. (2011). *Falling upward*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass.

Rohr, R. (2019). *Growing in Christ*. Retrieved from <https://cac.org/oneness-2019-03-29/>

- Ross, S. (2019). Who put the super in superhero? Transformation and heroism as a function of evolution. *Frontiers in Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02514>
- Shapiro, F. R. (2014). Who wrote the serenity prayer? *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Who-Wrote-the-Serenity-Prayer-/146159>
- Svoboda, E. (2013). *What makes a hero? The surprising science of heroism*. London: Current.
- Tenney, M. (2017). Why you should train for empathy, and how to do it. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/matt-tenney/why-you-should-train-for-\\_b\\_7485950.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/matt-tenney/why-you-should-train-for-_b_7485950.html)
- Tolle, E. (2004). *The power of now*. Vancouver: Namaste Publishing.
- Tolle, E. (2005). *A new earth*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Tolle, E. (2019). *The never-ending present moment*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jn706KxF-6k>
- Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1974). Judgment under uncertainty: Heuristics and biases. *Science*, 185, 1124-1131.
- van Gennep, A. (1961). *The rites of passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wade, G. H. (1998). A concept analysis of personal transformation. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 28, 713-719.
- White, B. (2016). *Recovery as a heroic journey*. Retrieved from <http://www.williamwhitepapers.com/blog/2016/09/recovery-as-a-heroic-journey.html>

Williams, C. (2018). The hero's journey: A mudmap to wellbeing. In O. Efthimiou, S. T.

Allison, & Z. E. Franco (Eds.), *Heroism and wellbeing in the 21st Century: Applied and emerging perspectives*. New York: Routledge.

Worthington, E. L. (2013). *Forgiveness and reconciliation: Theory and applications*.

New York: Routledge.

Worthington, E. L., & Allison, S. T. (2018). *Heroic humility: What the science of humility can*

*say to people raised on self-focus*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Wundrack, R. (2019). Commentary: The metamorphosis of the hero: Principles, processes,

and purpose. *Frontiers in Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01836>

## 7 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

---

*The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*