

'Well-written with practical advice and great examples. *Your Life Plan* will help you achieve meaning and engagement in your work'

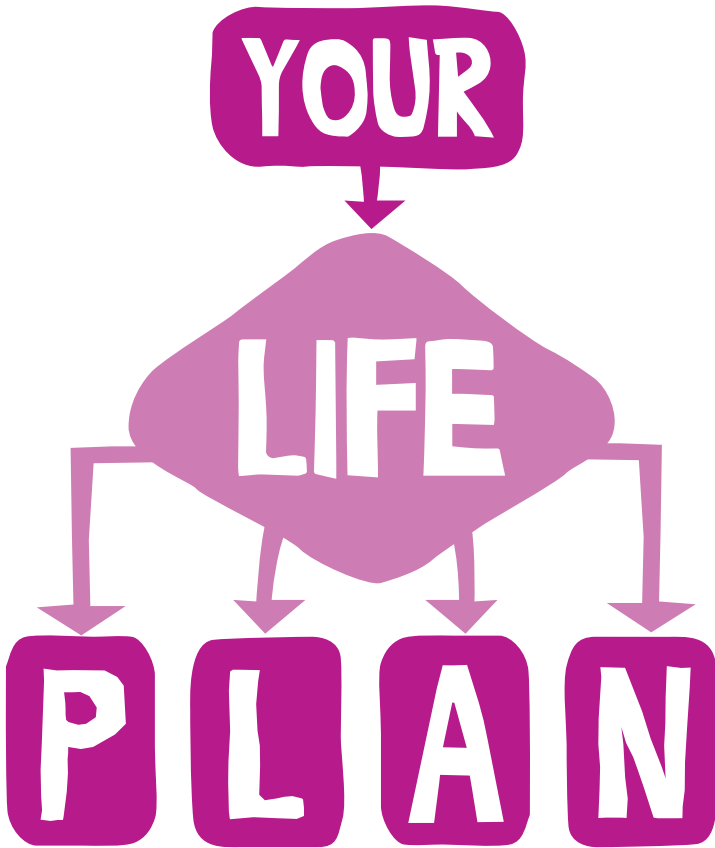
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**HOW TO SET YOURSELF ON THE RIGHT PATH
AND TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR LIFE**

ERICA SOSNA

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How to set yourself on the right path
and take charge of your life

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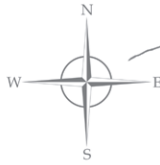
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**For my grandmother, Rima Sosna, whose love,
wisdom and experience has taught me courage.**

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INTRODUCTION

“ The art of navigation is to know where you are, where you are going and how to get there safely. ”
Sailors Almanac

Welcome to *Your Life Plan*. A practical book to help you navigate your life and be the hero in your own story.

How are you feeling today, right now? Disgruntled, tired, curious, excited, neutral? What created that feeling? How are you feeling about your life in general? About your existence, your contribution, your success, your relationships?

Stop a moment. Listen to your environment. See it in action around you.

How much of your life feels like your choice? How close is your reality to the life you would like to live?

This book is a practical course in how to choose and then live a life that is meaningful, exciting and adventurous for you. Everyone's life project is unique. Having a life project – a dream or goal that feels like a real challenge, can give you focus, energy and purpose.

If you set yourself a Quest to start today, right now, what would it be? If you are already on a journey toward a goal, what would be most helpful in getting you to your destination?

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These are the questions this book can help with.

My aim is to help you be the hero or heroine in your own life.

When I say hero, I don't necessarily mean the cape, the tights and the clenched fist. Only one of my heroes, Freddie Mercury, came with the full regalia. When we think about heroes or heroines, we think about people who took action on what they believed in, were courageous, determined, creative; people who changed themselves, their world or the environment in some lasting way. All of us possess the capability to do this in the right context and given the right support. If you are going to stretch for your dreams, you are going to need to awaken the hero (or heroine) within.

Being heroic doesn't mean you will always have a happy ending. I can't guarantee that if you use the tools in this book, everything will work out exactly the way you would like it to. What I can promise, is that the experience of setting out on a journey and taking steps to realize a dream or ambition, will bring you all kinds of benefits, adventures and value that you would not experience if you stayed where you are.

As a society, we love the idea of the hero. How many songs, from the sublime to the ridiculous, include this word? How many refer to it indirectly, the experience of doing something remarkable or unusual, perhaps once in a lifetime or as a way of living? So much of our film, fiction and theatre is all built around a central character who we root for and watch evolve over a period of time. And we humans love to share real life stories that speak powerfully about what we can achieve when we put our minds to it.

Over the last ten years, I have worked with hundreds of people of all ages, using the structure of stories, the idea of the hero, and the skills of project management to help them to find their inner hero and create what they want for themselves. I've helped people downsize, change careers, find a relationship, rebuild a relationship with a loved one, relocate across the globe, pass their exams,

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overcome anxiety disorders, set up a business, and find balance in their work lives.

There is nothing in the world that I am more passionate about, or good at, than helping people clarify and catalyze their own direction. That's my purpose in life . . .

. . . to help you find yours.

So, you are in good hands.

As a coach and consultant, I've found that seeing a client's life as a story can be a very effective tool for working on their life path and choices. When you begin to see yourself as a character and your life as a plot, you notice the patterns and the "plot line" in the journey you have taken so far. You begin to empathize with yourself as the hero, on an uncertain path, doing the best you can, and the themes and dreams that surround you take on a mythical quality. This sense of being part of a larger narrative, integral to the world around you, playing a part in the stories of others, connects us both with our ancestors and with the present.

Our story can help us to make choices about the changes we want to make or the adventures we want to go on. I've always loved a good story and I've noticed that whatever age we are, we become as rapt as children when someone offers to tell us a tale. When I trained as a storyteller for grown-ups, I noticed that stories could be educational, inspiring and even life saving. They often reflect universal truths about humanity and how life happens.

In every great story the world over, whether fiction or historical, there are heroes and heroines. Flawed, passionate human beings who take themselves on an adventure beyond the ordinary and every day. They overcome challenges, find love, learn new things and return transformed by their experiences. In this book, I will help you uncover your heroic nature, decide on a Quest and design and implement your own Life Plan. We will work together to find

and manifest your very own Heroes' Quest. I believe that inside, you are just as exceptional, able, principled and courageous as your most inspirational role models, from legend or from history, from sport, art or business. Your inner hero or heroine is just waiting to be given permission to shine.

As we progress through this book we will look at how others have used similar skills and tools to do things that seemed impossible to them. Heroes, real or imagined, experience struggle or challenge just like you. Their tasks and goals were no less daunting than the mountain you want to climb, the dream job you want to win or the love you long to find. The difference however, is that they had a plan; a method for making their Quest a reality, something doable.

And that's what this book will share with you.

I am a big believer in the value of a practical skill set for managing your life. Whatever we want to achieve in life, having the tools to plan, organize and focus our activity is crucial. Most Quests also require a bit of research, the ability to lead, inspire or influence others and the confidence to stay in the game when things get tough. The skill set you will acquire through this book will help you to get comfortable with change. It will also give you a better understanding of who you are and how you operate so you can find the best ways to be useful and happy.

The Structure of Your Life Plan

We will begin by learning about the Heroes' Journey. This cycle is the foundation of every great story ever told. It follows a simple pattern of ups and downs, of resistance and action and offers a model to help us understand how life happens. Once we understand its structure, we can use it to inform how we operate in the world.

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We will then take a look at who you are, in relation to your own Hero's Journey. We will explore how personality, motivations and talent entwine and give you clarity of purpose.

Once you have uncovered your Quest (whether big or small – some of the best Quests are known only to the hero in question – small can be very beautiful), we will move on to how you are going to get there. I will help you develop the project thinking you need to find the right people, process and plans to support you on the journey. I will show you how to build and lead a team, find mentors and champions and inspire others to join you. We will address the hero's nemeses – procrastination, doubt and fear – and you will discover how to break the patterns that keep you stuck and insecure. Together we will face the trials, tribulations and endurance tests that are part and parcel of transformation (and integral to any tale worth telling).

Out the other side, we will explore how to integrate your experience into the “new you” that emerges from the fire. You will also find ways to capture your experience and share it with others, so that you can be an inspiration and support to those that are struggling, stuck or feel that the Quest is out of their reach. This is the legacy of the Quest – once you have taken the journey, you are able to act as a light for others along the way.

As we progress through the book, I will introduce you to former clients, friends and colleagues who demonstrate the Heroes' Journey in action. We will hear stories from our real life heroes and heroines, as well as great examples from fiction to give us pointers about how Quests work. Each chapter will build your self-understanding, confidence and skill set and you will complete the book with a plan of action for your own unique Hero's Quest.

For the purposes of avoiding finger strain and the overuse of brackets, I am going to refer to “heroes” from now on. Heroines out there, know that I speak to you too, just in shorthand. The plentiful

tales of kick-ass, inspirational women you will meet in these pages will back me up on that.

As meaning-making machines, human beings seek to live a life of purpose. We want to know why we are here, we want to make a difference, we want to leave a legacy; we want to grow, learn, evolve and overcome. Understanding the structure of our own life story can give us a method to understand why we are here and what we are here to do. It works for big and small dreams too and I encourage you to explore the upcoming ideas by starting small and testing them out for yourself.

Using This Book as a Group or Team

Your Life Plan is written directly to you, as an individual. However, it works equally well to support families, groups or teams to work on a shared goal. Just take the exercises and tools and run them as a discussion. No hero ever succeeds alone.

We live in uncertain and uncommon times. Times in which we recognize that the old goals and the old ways won't work for us. What has got us *here* won't get us *there*. And in uncertainty, our natural inclination is to stay safe, to not take risks or face too many challenges. But anything worth doing or having was always going to be a challenge. If it's not the economy, it's the lack of time. If it's not the lack of time it's that you aren't educated enough, hot enough, clever enough. Blah blah blah. Maybe you are tired of hearing all the reasons why it's not a good time to grab hold of your ambitions and your dreams. I hope that this book will help you navigate these challenges, stay calm and cool while you do it and give you the tools to create a better world.

Welcome to your life plan. Let the adventure begin!

THE HERO'S JOURNEY

“ First they ignore you, then they laugh at you,
then they fight you, then you win. ”

Mahatma Gandhi

The art of a telling a good story is to keep the audience rapt and engaged – lost in the moment. There are a couple of skills that all storytellers have up their sleeves which will be really important for you to get to grips with to see yourself as the hero in your own life. The first skill is being able to recognize a polarity. The second is the ability to master and respect narrative flow.

The word “polarity” comes from the same root as the North and South Poles. A polarity means a contrast of opposites like hot and cold, dark and light or night and day. As human beings, our storytelling has focused on the contrast of good and evil, and love and loss. We recognize that to know what is good we must also know what is evil. To know happiness we must also know sorrow, one cannot make any sense of one without the other. We cannot always be happy, nor should we strive to be. When we look at any story of success, it always includes a period of doubt or of trial. This polarity is the nature of life and to avoid this is unhealthy. If we were always happy and had no polarity, life would be very boring indeed.

Have you noticed that all stories follow the same basic narrative? There is a beginning, a middle, and an end. We follow a character during a snapshot of their life. Sometimes their journey is tense

and tight, at other times joyful and expansive. For example, the narrative flow of Shrek is broadly similar to that of James Bond. There is a universal structure to stories which doesn't change whether the tale is told by the fireside or as a 3D blockbuster at the local cinema. This chapter will introduce you to this secret story structure and help you align it with your own life experience. Once we know the rules in which we operate, we can begin to play a bigger game.

The Hero's Journey

Once, not all that long ago, there was an American professor called Joseph Campbell. Joseph was a professor of literature and one of the pre-eminent thinkers on myth and legend. He was an expert in stories and collected them from all over the world, examining them to find out what they had in common. From the fairy stories in the UK to the Green Man stories of Arabia, and from the religious tales of the Buddha to the teaching stories of the Aborigines, there was no storytelling tradition in the whole of the world that Joseph didn't know about. When he looked at all these tales, he found something very interesting. Everyone, everywhere, seemed to know what a hero or heroine was. And these heroes were the focus of all kinds of stories, of battle, of adventure, of love, of learning.

Not only that, everywhere you went in the world, people also knew what a "Hero's Quest" was. The idea of going on a great journey, undertaking challenges and coming back transformed by your experience. Wherever you were in the world, local people recognized what a Quest involved.

The most interesting thing he learned was that really, when you looked at it, there was only ONE story. In all the stories from different cultures, belief systems and heroes, the essential structure of the tale told about the hero was the same. Because there was only one story, Joseph called this structure the "monomyth." The myth

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from which all other tales are derived. This structure eventually became known as “The Hero’s Journey.”

Why is this relevant to us, here in the real world, I hear you cry? Well, apart from the fact that this structure makes for a super story, the Hero’s Journey relates not just to fantasy and imaginary characters, but to REAL ones. This structure is actually a map for HOW LIFE HAPPENS. Once you can read this map, you are in a much stronger place to understand where you are in the process of change. We have a tendency to think that when things get hard, we are in the wrong place. We become uncomfortable. We want to stop or give up. We become disorientated. When you know where you are and appreciate that the polarity of easy/hard, strong/weak, lost/found is in operation, you can feel a lot more relaxed about the journey, knowing you are exactly where you should be and pressing on until the polarity in your story changes.

Not one to take things as given, I tested this idea out. Is it really true that anyone, anywhere can understand the Hero’s Journey and relate it to their own feelings and their own lives? I have now run workshops on this model for seven years sharing these ideas with hundreds of people across several continents here in the UK, in India, New Zealand, the USA and Kosovo. Every single person who I showed it to, from the very young to the very old, could relate it to their lives and experience.

Let’s take a look at the structure. To help us, let’s call on one of the best-loved cinematic stories ever told. The original *Star Wars*. In developing what was to become a film classic, George Lucas hired Joseph Campbell as a consultant to give him advice on the monomyth. No doubt the special effects, the whopping budget and some marvellous acting helped to make the film such a success. But it was the Hero’s Journey structure that made it possible to create such a memorable film. Lucas claimed that he knew the pieces of what made a classic tale, but wasn’t clear about the order they came in or how to make the most of them. *Star Wars* combines many of

the key elements of great storytelling – the hero we can relate to, enjoyable and likeable sidekicks, the rescue of a princess, the defeat of evil and the surprising turn of events. Let's look in more detail at what Campbell and Lucas created as we break down the Hero's Journey.

The Headlines of the Hero's Journey – the Path to the Quest

Part One – the Call

The hero is looking for something – either to leave an unsuitable situation or to move toward an exciting dream or goal. But they feel stuck. They know there is more out there for them – they want to stretch beyond the known, but it feels frightening. Then one day, for whatever reason, they are “Called” – something happens that makes them decide they must commit and take action. This usually takes quite a bit of courage.

Luke Skywalker is cleaning the robot R2-D2 when he accidentally triggers a hidden message from Princess Leia, who has been kidnapped by Darth Vader. The message begs for help and rescue. When Luke visits Obi-Wan Kenobi to tell him about the message, he asks about his father – who is he? Luke is now “Called” to rescue the princess.

Part Two – the Commitment

The hero crosses the threshold into the unknown. They leave behind what is familiar and commit to their Quest. In this time they receive support, mentoring and assistance. They make a plan and pull together the resources to get started.

Luke hires Hans Solo and Chewbacca to transport him to Alderaan, Leia's home world. Obi-wan Kenobi serves as his mentor and sidekick.

Part Three – the Quest

The Belly of the Whale: It gets dark and lonely, the hero feels lost. They wonder why they ever started and if they can ever complete their Quest. There are tests and trials that prove they are up to the Quest.

The Supreme Ordeal: They face a final battle or challenge that is often life threatening, or they do battle with their own limitations or fears. The hero's commitment and integrity is put to the test.

Obi-Wan Kenobi gets killed in a battle with Darth Vader. He makes the ultimate sacrifice to help the higher cause. Luke faces Darth Vader, in a great lightsaber duel and Darth reveals that he is Luke's father attempting to lure him to the Dark Side (Belly of the Whale). Luke returns to Yoda (his mentor) to complete his training and it is revealed that he will have to face his father to become a true Jedi. He discovers that Leia is his sister. A final battle ensues (Supreme Ordeal) and Luke overpowers Darth, but refrains from killing him. His father then saves him in a final act of heroism before he dies.

Part Four – the Return

Transformed by their experience, the heroic character needs time to recover. They then return across the threshold back into the "ordinary" world, able to share the gifts and wisdom they have accumulated through their Heroes' Journey. They are greeted with great joy and fanfare.

Anakin Skywalker (aka Darth Vader) dies in his son's arms. Luke graduates to become a Jedi Knight and the Death Star is destroyed. Luke returns home, a very different man to the one who began the Quest.

This structure can be found in any of the religious stories, fairy tales, in Disney and in Dickens. Writers have used it for centuries. Why? Because it echoes our own life experience. The Heroes' Journey is the structure of our life – when we change and learn, we move from highs to lows, from confidence to anxiety and we have to be persistent, against all odds or face giving up on our dreams.

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My grandmother was born in Russia and in spite of being a Jewish woman in a Communist state, became a very successful physicist. She loved her job. She was the only woman in Russia responsible for a scientific institute. But she, her husband, her mother and her son, dreamed of the freedom they might have if they lived in the West. Her husband, my grandfather, had lost his whole family in World War II in Poland. He was a Zionist and wanted the family to move to Israel where they could live safe from persecution. The family took the opportunity to apply to leave Russia. This was their Call. Everyone applied, steadily going through the paperwork and bureaucracy that was designed by the Communist regime to wear you down and make you give up. They waited and waited. The answer finally came back; only my father, her son, had permission to leave. The rest of the family were now "traitors" to the regime. There was a family conference and they agreed that my father, who was only 21 years old, would leave Russia. He began his own Hero's Quest that took him to Israel and then to England.

Life now became very difficult for my grandparents. My grandmother lost the job she loved. One day shortly after my father left, she went to work and there was someone else sitting at her desk. She was barred from the building and the world of work. My grandfather was accused of "making up" his medals won for courageous fighting on behalf of the Soviets. They were exiled from their country whilst still living there. With nowhere to go and in the Belly of the Whale, my grandmother joined the resistance movement, the Refuseniks, a community of activists who had been refused permission to leave Russia. She fought for the rights of others to leave the country, was arrested by the KGB and often did not know whether she would "disappear." Those were terrible times for my father, not least because my grandfather and my great-grandmother died during that time. Finally, after much campaigning and strain, my grandmother was able to leave. She, like my father before, had to leave almost everything behind, go to a strange country and start life all over again. She brought with her her courage, her expertise and her eccentricity. She is one of my heroes. Her story stands for me, for others and for anyone who has had to leave everything behind to be free.

Finding Your Direction

The Hero's Journey is our roadmap for life. Life is always giving us opportunities to respond and stretch and grow. There are Calls happening in our lives all the time. How we respond to the challenges helps us better understand who we are. As we deal with the challenges along the way, we shape who we are and we grow into a fuller version of ourselves. A bit like a snake shedding its skin as it outgrows it, we retain the basic essence of ourselves and we discard the life and habits that we have outgrown and no longer need.

When you look at your own life, where can you see the pattern of a Hero's Journey? Where have you outgrown an old skin, a place, a way of being and explored something altogether new?

Have you ever:

- Moved house?
- Had a family?
- Been in love?
- Ended a relationship?
- Started a new job? Left an old one?
- Started a business or a campaign?
- Passed an exam?
- Grown your own fruit or vegetables?
- Learned a new skill or hobby from scratch?
- Lived or travelled somewhere new?

All of these life changes and transitions constitute a Heroes' Journey.

Going Deeper

When we allow ourselves to believe that *our lives* follow the same story structure as the classic heroic Quest story, we can begin to use this structure to make sense of our experience. If we cultivate

the qualities and characteristics of successful heroes, this could help us develop and follow through on the kinds of plans that change our whole lives.

So, let's get into the detail of the four different stages of the Hero's Journey which make up the four main parts of this book.

Part One – the Call

Brrrrring, Brrring.

“Hello?”

“Quick! I need a hero!”

OK, so it may not happen exactly like the above phone call. It might be a text message, an email, a whisper, something you hear on the radio, something you read that inspires you; but somehow inside of you, something starts to shift. You begin to imagine a great goal or achievement, something you really want. Or you may decide that you won't allow something negative that has been going on for a long time to continue. We could say that being motivated to get rid of something is like a *push*, and being motivated to get something we do want, feels more like a *pull*. So the Call is a push or a pull that moves you in the direction of something different and inspires you to start on a journey. Examples of this might be:

- You decide you want to learn guitar/a language/a new sport.
- You decide that you want to work in a new field.
- You decide it is time to start a family.
- You decide that you will stop being a doormat in relationships or at work.
- You decide to get fit/get healthy/stop smoking/tackle an addiction.
- You decide to leave a job/relationship/life that is no longer working for you.

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- You decide to launch a magazine/DJ on the radio/start a charity/launch a campaign/start a business.

Sometimes we may resist a Call because even if we know that something would be a great thing to do, we don't want to be told to do it by someone else. Or we feel like what we are proposing is unrealistic, or not normal, or even impossible. We may be scared what the effects of the change might be in our lives or what other people might say or think. We are often held back by our own fear of failure. Sometimes change just seems plain inconvenient, awkward or uncomfortable.

Sooner or later though, a Call comes along that you just cannot resist. Either it becomes too painful to continue in a relationship/job/body/lifestyle that is not working, or you become overwhelmed by the feeling that if you don't give what you are dreaming of a try, you will regret it for the whole of your life. Once the Call is inside you, once the seed has been sown, it just keeps on coming up again and again until you throw in the towel and say "OK, I am going to give it a try." And that's when the magic starts to happen.

Part One will help you unlock your motivation, discover your talents and learn to hear your Call. We will address how to uncover your Quest and how to make the decision to commit.

Part Two – the Commitment: Letting Go of the Certain and Stepping into the New

“ And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom. ”
Anais Nin