

# THE CHECKLIST<sub>OF</sub> CHAMPIONS

HOW TO BECOME THE BEST BY PLAYING AT YOUR BEST EVERY DAY



# MIKE LIPKIN



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PLAYING AT YOUR BEST EVERY DAY

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*The Checklist of Champions: How to Become the Best By Playing At Your Best Every Day*

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**WARM-UP..... 1**

IT MAY BE THE MOST WONDERFUL FEELING IN THE WORLD..... 3

YOU'VE SURVIVED THIS FAR. NOW IT'S YOUR TIME TO THRIVE ..... 5

THE RULES FOR THE CHECKLIST OF CHAMPIONS ..... 6

WHO ARE THE CHAMPIONS ..... 12

THE POWER OF A CHECKLIST IN THE AGE OF VUCA: "HELP ME THRIVE, NOT JUST SURVIVE" ..... 14

## 1

---

**IDENTIFY YOURSELF AS A CHAMPION..... 19**

I CAN BE THE BEST IN THE WORLD ..... 27

I HAVE A "UNIQUE VALUE PROPOSITION" THAT I CAN EXPRESS TO OTHERS ..... 41

I AM PASSIONATE ABOUT MY CAUSE ..... 47

I CAN THRIVE UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES ..... 62

MY BEST DAYS ARE ALWAYS AHEAD OF ME ..... 73

# 2

---

## **I DREAM LIKE A CHAMPION ..... 79**

I DREAM BIG ..... 85

I SHARE MY DREAM..... 90

MY DREAM IS ATTACHED TO A DEADLINE..... 95

MY DREAM STRETCHES ME TO DO MORE ..... 98

MY DREAM UPLIFTS OTHERS TO ACHIEVE  
THEIR DREAM..... 102

# 3

---

## **PLAN LIKE A CHAMPION ..... 111**

UNDERSTAND YOUR ENVIRONMENT: CONTEXT  
IS EVERYTHING ..... 130

BUILD A WINNING MINDSET: BE A “CERTAINIST” ..... 143

BUILD THE YIN AND YANG OF YOUR “PERSONAL  
BRAND PLAN.” ..... 152

A PLAN IS ONLY AS GOOD AS THE PEOPLE YOU  
ENROL IN THE PLAN ..... 161

AS THINGS CHANGE, CHANGE YOUR PLAN ..... 167

# 4

---

## **FEEL LIKE A CHAMPION ..... 171**

FIRST, CHAMPIONS WILL BE COURAGEOUS ..... 202

SECOND, CHAMPIONS WILL BE EXCITED ..... 202

THIRD, CHAMPIONS WILL BE ENGAGED ..... 203

FOURTH, CHAMPIONS WILL BE AT EASE ..... 204

FIFTH, CHAMPIONS WILL BE GENEROUS ..... 204

# 5

---

## **“PLAY LIKE A CHAMPION TODAY” ..... 207**

TRUE CHAMPIONS ARE AUDACIOUS  
(AWE-DAY-SHUS) ..... 222

BE RESILIENT - THE STARS ALIGN FOR THOSE WHO  
FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT AND STAY THE COURSE ..... 229

BE A CATALYST THROUGH COLLABORATION –  
MULTIPLY OTHERS' POWER SO THEY CAN  
MAGNIFY YOURS ..... 235

ACT YOUR ROLE ..... 238

REGENERATE YOURSELF ..... 241



# WARM-UP

IT MAY BE THE MOST WONDERFUL FEELING  
IN THE WORLD.

YOU'VE SURVIVED THIS FAR. NOW IT'S YOUR  
TIME TO THRIVE.

THE RULES FOR THE CHECKLIST OF CHAMPIONS.

WHO ARE THE CHAMPIONS

THE POWER OF A CHECKLIST IN THE AGE OF VUCA:  
"HELP ME THRIVE, NOT JUST SURVIVE."





*It may be the most wonderful feeling  
in the world.*

It's the moment we get it. We understand it. We appreciate it. We create it. We solve it. We complete it. We win it. We love it.

It may be a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, a phrase, an idea, an action, a person, a performance or a situation.

It's a perfection and connection that may last for a second, an hour, a day, a year, a decade or a lifetime.

It may be what drives us. It also may be what drives us crazy. It's what we need and it's what we want.

The lucky ones get it often. And they do it often. They're designed that way. They easily wow others and others wow them. They're smart. They're optimistic. They're balanced. They're beautiful. They're resourceful. They're charismatic. They're natural champions.

The rest of us have to work very hard to earn those states. Our gifts aren't automatic. Our gratification isn't instant. Our enlightenment doesn't happen with the flick of a switch. We need a manual – a set of instructions that is easy to understand and a pleasure to read.

As a social researcher, I listen to people for a living. I watch them. I talk to them. I learn from them. Every year I connect with over 100,000 people, in person and online. Names, places and details may change but the underlying themes are universal. It's about being human. It's about being appreciated and admired. It's about being valuable to people who are valuable to you.

That's why I wrote this book. Thousands of people mentored me on how to be a champion. Now I'm paying it forward.

## YOU'VE SURVIVED THIS FAR. NOW IT'S YOUR TIME TO THRIVE.

We're living in a world of mind-boggling complexity. Everything is linked to everything. Everyone is linked to everyone else. Change is exponential. Distinction becomes extinction overnight. Today's hero is tomorrow's zero. Every day is an entire career in miniature.

It can seem as though it's impossible to thrive in this constant storm. It can appear impossible to navigate your way through such chaos. It can look like the odds are always stacked against us. That may even be our past experience.

Yet we've survived. We've come this far. What's more, if you're reading this, you've done a lot more than just survive. You've survived well. You've proven you've got what it takes to stay alive in a scary environment. Congratulations.

I predict with certainty that you'll survive no matter what. You'll find a way or make a way to get by. You have the savvy, the sensitivity and the strength to make it through. But that's not what this book is about.

The Evolution Manual is simple: do whatever it takes to survive. Listen to your instincts. Procreate and protect your progeny. Preserve yourself. Stick together. It's all programmed into our DNA. But survival doesn't equal success and it certainly doesn't equal happiness. Success and happiness are conscious pursuits that must be made daily.

This book is about thriving. It's about living life like a champion. It's about realizing joy, freedom and full self-expression. It's about being in your sweet spot, buoyed by a sense of purpose and meaning. It's about creating a future by celebrating one day at a time.

## THE RULES FOR THE CHECKLIST OF CHAMPIONS:

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**Use your beginners mind.**

**Go slow.**

**Talk about it.**

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Life is a game that we all play. Sometimes we know the rules but often we don't. That's why we don't always win our fair share of victories. Playing a game without knowing the rules is like flying blind. We tend to crash into things.

So right up front, I want you to know the rules of this book and play by them. There are only three. I believe that the key to personal power is having fewer rules and living by them.

**Use your beginner's mind.**

Read everything like you've never seen or heard these insights before – even if you think you have. Be consciously fascinated. Consider the possibilities. Don't automatically agree but don't automatically disagree. Ask yourself the question, "What happens if Lipkin's right?" Let the insights in. Allow them to frolic in your brain. Who knows what magic they can create there?

**Go slow.**

Give it time. Let the insights breathe. Allow them to percolate. It took me two years to create this work, allow yourself a month

to consume it. Go slow. Involve yourself. Savour the satori – your moments of Zen awakening and ability to see your true nature. Practice the practices I share with you. Read it once. Read it twice. Read it three times over. Easy-does-it resolves hard-to-do.

### **Talk about it.**

We only know that we know when we can help someone else know. Yet until we can verbalize our thoughts in a way that others can understand, we cannot be sure we understand. What other people hear may not be what we say. Until we master our communication, we may be speaking a language that's foreign to everyone else. So talk about what you read. Share your learning and you'll learn more. Pay it forward and your payout will be even greater.

**When you're flying high, you never think you're going to crash. When you crash, you can't believe you'll ever fly again. Without a flight plan, there is no flight.**

I have flown as high as I dared to dream. For 23 years, I have made an extraordinary living by talking to people. As a global motivator, I have coached over a million people in 43 countries. I live inside conversations. I have learned how to speak in such a way that others want to speak to me.

Like you, I always have to be on. Every presentation is the beginning of a new stream of possibilities or it's the beginning of the end. Yesterday exists only in our imagination. Today is day one. Most the members of my audiences are seeing me for the first time. Many of them will never see me again. They take away an impression that could last a lifetime. They become passionate promoters or avid detractors. There is no middle ground. Every opinion counts because every opinion could be the one that matters.

I love the spotlight. But its glare is harsh. I have to act happy even when I'm far from it. When your role is to inspire people in difficult circumstances, alibis don't count because they're irrelevant. If people aren't inspired into action, I've failed. End of story.

The question is: who motivates the motivator when the motivator isn't motivated? And the answer is that sometimes there is no one to catch me when I fall. There is no hell like a private hell, especially when you're alone in a dark room in a strange city after a tough gig.

The road can wear you away. Fatigue can mess with your mind. Fear can run rampant when one's guard is down. And that's

what happened to me in March 2011. Doubt became my default position. I thought about all the ways I was becoming irrelevant, clichéd, unsexy and old. The more I thought about it, the more real my thoughts became. My unconscious mind filled me with worry that my conscious mind amplified.

I sounded hollow and unconvincing to myself when I tried to convince others. I fell into a funk. I lost my mojo. The scary thing is how fast the crash can happen. One week, you're cruising along in top gear. The next week, the wall seems to come out of nowhere. I hit it and I hit it hard. That's why walls are there – to stop things from going further.

So where do you go when you don't know where to go? What do you do when you feel like you've come to the end of the road? You've been there, right? You may think you can see it coming, but it's always a nasty surprise. And it's never like the one before.

If you're a professional, you keep on going. You play the part that you're paid to play. Collapse is not an option. But neither is going it alone. Sometimes we can call on the hero within and sometimes the hero within turns into an idiot. A troubled mind is never a source of great counsel, especially when it's your own.

The irony is that I hit the wall more often than most people. Often, to see how far I can go, I go too far. As a mentor once told me, you only know how tall you are when you get in over your head.

The depression that hit me in March 2011 wasn't my first rodeo. I have been through multiple depressions over the past 30 years. I learn from each one but not enough to prevent me from succumbing to the next. The difference is that my recovery time gets faster as I grow older. It's called resilience.

I reached out to my family doctor, Marla Shapiro. Marla is a medical marvel who has received the Order of Canada for her contribution to family medicine. I think she knows everything and everybody who knows anything. Marla referred me to a remarkable psychologist named Irwin Lieberman.

Irwin is a quiet introvert who is humble in style but bold in his insights. He has a unique ability to calm and excite you at the same time. Over the course of a few weeks, Irwin talked me back from the edge. He helped me make sense of my malaise and reignite my spark.

Irwin has the extraordinary ability to listen to people. He gets people talking. He becomes their co-pilot on their journey. He has the uncanny ability to see things as they see things. Then he refreshes their perspective and enables them to resume their flight.

He introduced me to the concept of a “mental lacuna”. That was a gap in my personal judgment. At certain times, I focused on my perceived failures to the exclusion of everything else. The truth is that they weren’t failures at all. They were the inevitable steps and missteps of life.

As a motivator, I coach people through exactly the situations that Irwin was coaching me through. The moment I laughed at the thought of being counseled by a psychologist on the exact issues I coach others on, I knew I was going to be ok. God has a sense of humour. I’m glad he gave me one.

There is no machine or drug that can help me like Irwin. There is no algorithm I can plug myself into. The power to connect at a deep, visceral level is essentially human. Machines and drugs can augment it but they cannot automate it.

Monthly meetings with Irwin are now one of the non-negotiable actions in my life. He has become one of the co-pilots who help me follow my personal flight plan for success. The truth is, that on average, any airplane will be off course for 95% of its flight. It's consistently coming back to its flight plan by recalibrating its trajectory. There is no flight without a flight plan. It begins long before the plane takes off. It continues at the moment of departure and throughout the journey. It doesn't even end on arrival. That's when all the data points are processed to ensure a superior flight the next time.

Your personal flight plan is the path that keeps you on track. It's the control and discipline that protects us against getting lost or distracted. It is a conscious set of hourly and daily actions required to move in the direction of your dreams.

It's the **Checklist of Champions**.

## WHO ARE THE CHAMPIONS

Champions see themselves as champions. They believe they can succeed and their belief becomes self-fulfilling. They are the ones they've been waiting for. They have their own date with destiny and they do whatever it takes to meet it. Champions don't give in; they dig in.

In my book, there are no ex-champions. Once a champion; always a champion. The fields may change, but the champions always rise to the top. They have a spark that burns forever. They go from *citius, altius, fortius* – faster, higher, stronger - to *anticius, sapientior, fortior* – older, wiser, stronger.

Champions are people who win. Their results speak for themselves. They are demonstrably superior to their peers. They consistently outperform their competition. Season after season they prove they are best in class.

Champions are inspired by their cause. They are animated by their purpose. Their enthusiasm energizes their actions. Passion is their high-octane fuel and they never run on empty. There's no such thing as an apathetic champion.

Champions are born *and* they are made. They have the gift and they become worthy of their gift. They plan their practice and they practice their plan. They do the right things right and they don't get the wrong things wrong. They dream but they don't daydream. They chase the big stuff and they don't sweat the small stuff.

Champions talk the talk and walk the walk. Their words inspire action. Every hour, every day, every week, every month, every

year, champions do what needs to be done. No alibis allowed, no excuses permitted, no easy ways out. Champions become the standard by holding themselves to a higher standard.

It's that simple but it's not easy. Like trains have a track, champions have a **checklist**. It focuses them while it sets them free. It's a way of being and doing at the same time.

I study champions for a living. I live with them. I work with them. I coach them. I brand myself as the *Championator*. My mission is to literally turn people into champions. I help people play at their best so they become the best. **In life 80% of success is not just showing up. It's learning to play at your best at what you can be the best at. Read that sentence again: 80% of success in life is learning to play at your best at what you can be the best at.**



So I will play at my best at communication and coaching because I can be the best in the world in those disciplines. That's the dream I'm chasing in this book. But I can only catch my dream if you catch yours. So let's go catch our dreams together.

## THE POWER OF A CHECKLIST IN THE AGE OF VUCA: “HELP ME THRIVE, NOT JUST SURVIVE.”

In the December 10, 2007 issue of the New Yorker magazine, Atul Gawande shares the modern origin of the checklist:

“On October 30, 1935, at Wright Air Field in Dayton, Ohio, the U.S. Army Air Corps held a flight competition for airplane manufacturers vying to build its next-generation long-range bomber. In early evaluations, the Boeing Corporation’s Model 299 had trounced the designs of Martin and Douglas. Boeing’s plane



could carry five times as many bombs as the Army had requested; it could fly faster than previous bombers, and almost twice as far.

The Boeing Model 299 test plane taxied onto the runway. The plane lifted off smoothly, and climbed sharply to three hundred feet. Then it stalled, turned on one wing, and crashed in a fiery explosion. Two of the five crew members died, including the pilot.

An investigation revealed that nothing mechanical had gone wrong. The crash had been due to ‘pilot error,’ the report said. Substantially more complex than previous aircraft, the new plane was deemed, ‘too much airplane for one man to fly.’

Still, the Army purchased a few aircraft from Boeing as test planes, and some insiders remained convinced that the aircraft was flyable. So a group of test pilots got together and considered what to do. They came up with an ingeniously simple approach: they created a pilot’s checklist, with step-by-step checks for takeoff, flight, landing, and taxiing.

With the checklist in hand, the pilots went on to fly the Model 299 a total of 1.8 million miles without one accident. The Army ultimately ordered almost thirteen thousand of the aircraft, which it dubbed the B-17. And the Army gained a decisive air advantage in the Second World War.”

In the age of VUCA, all our lives are substantially more complex than a Boeing B-17. **VUCA** stands for *Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity*. Everything is changing all the time. Just when you think you have a handle on something, it morphs into something else. Without a tool to guide us through the chaos, it’s impossible to guard against **OAF** – *Overwhelm, Anxiety and Fatigue*. That tool is **The Checklist of Champions**.

Just like you, I have a digital diary that reminds me of my daily activities and things to do. But my diary is merely there to ensure I don’t miss anything. I can have meetings that are all about nothing. I can have to-do lists that just address the basics. I can spend all my time doing what’s necessary and urgent. I can boast, “I’m so busy.” I can just let it all the activities sweep me along. At the end of the

day, I can be tired and frustrated in equal measure. I can make a lot of movement but not a lot of progress.

**The Checklist of Champions**, on the other hand, transcends the have-to-do's and the must-get-throughs. It focuses us on the crucial actions that transform the mundane into magic. It's a way of holding ourselves to account so we can count on ourselves. That's how we become consciously competent and purposefully potent.

There is no panacea that works perpetually. You have to improve on a proven process every day. That's the way it works in manufacturing. The Production Champions have taken the process to the level of Six Sigma. At many organizations, Six Sigma simply means a measure of quality that strives for near perfection. To achieve Six Sigma, a process must not produce more than 3.4 defects per million opportunities.

As humans, we don't live like that. We don't even aspire to come near that achievement. Throughout this book I will show you that raising your bar to the optimal level can generate optimal functioning. Yes, it takes discipline. But discipline is much easier when you have a process to follow and you can measure the results. A checklist also functions like a parachute or an airbag – it will prevent you from crashing too hard or getting really hurt.

Champions find the hours to find the inspiration. The ticket to mastery is work. It takes sweat of both the literal and figurative kind. It's not always pleasurable, but it always lead to pleasure. Pleasure is the prize for doing the work.

Here's a question for you: what do you believe is the number one struggle that torments people in North America? After researching tens of thousands of people over the past two decades, I've

discovered it's procrastination and its aftermath, regret. Putting things off because they seem too difficult is a guaranteed path to pain. **The Checklist of Champions will become your vaccination against procrastination. It will help you do as much as you can as soon as you can.**

The champions make an impact because they do what matters. They work on themselves as much as they work on their job. They have a ritual not just a routine. A ritual is a mindful rhythm that is deeply conscious. It's designed to connect you with your higher self and multiply your power. A routine, on the other hand, is automatic. It's a regular schedule that is applied mostly by habit. A routine alone will help you survive but not thrive. Thriving is the province of ritual.

### Perform your own personal haka.

Before every game, The New Zealand rugby team (AKA The All Blacks) publicly perform the *haka*. The haka is an ancient Maori war dance that is acted out ferociously by the players. It's a ritual that declares their intention to decimate their competition before every game. Translated from Maori, it says, "All Blacks, let me become one with the land. This is our land that rumbles. It's my time! It's my moment! This defines us as the All Blacks. It's my time! It's my moment! Our dominance, our supremacy will triumph. And will be properly revered, placed on high. Silver fern! All Blacks!"

While other teams are forced to watch the All Blacks perform their haka, with all its gestures and antics, the All Blacks are psyching themselves up for victory. It's no coincidence that they are the reigning world champions.

We all need our personal haka, AKA **The Checklist of Champions**. As a result of researching champions for over 25 years around the world, I have discovered that they continuously, and consciously take five actions that enable them to win:

**The five actions that enable champions to win:**

1. They identify themselves as a champion
2. They dream like a champion
3. They plan like a champion
4. They feel like a champion
5. They act like a champion

These are the actions we'll be exploring in these pages. You may already be a champion, you may be one move away from being a champion, or you may have miles to go. It doesn't matter. Champions know it's always day one. Every day it all begins all over again. As the Navy Seals say, "The only easy day was yesterday." So let's go celebrate the struggle.



# 1

# IDENTIFY YOURSELF AS A CHAMPION.

I CAN BE THE BEST IN THE WORLD.

I HAVE A “UNIQUE VALUE PROPOSITION”  
THAT I CAN EXPRESS TO OTHERS.

I AM PASSIONATE ABOUT MY CAUSE.

I CAN THRIVE UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES.

MY BEST DAYS ARE ALWAYS AHEAD OF ME.





## IDENTIFY YOURSELF AS A CHAMPION.

Who do you think you are? What are the your defining characteristics? What are the qualities that make you unique? When you look in the mirror, what do you see? How do other people perceive your personality? How are you benchmarking yourself against your environment? Are you growing wiser and stronger as you grow older?

Our identity is the essential way we define ourselves to ourselves. It's the expression of who we believe we are. Our self-belief is the filter through which we process the world. As a global coach, I'm constantly amazed at the power of self-beliefs. Often, the only difference between a champion and a middle-of-the-packster is their belief about their own capacity. It's not the size of the person in the fight. It's the size of the fight in the person.

We are all magnets. We become the perception we have of ourselves. We attract the things and people that reflect what we already are. Our inner world forms our outer world. As we think, so we become. We are all the writers, directors and producers of our own reality show.

We all have beliefs that limit our growth. Even the champions with whom I work have to work through their self-blocks. The difference is champions are willing to take on their bogeymen. They know success is binary: either it happens or it doesn't. It doesn't happen by degrees. Winners get it all. Losers lick their self-inflicted wounds.

**Your most dangerous, scary, daunting experiences have happened to you for one simple reason: to help you discover how powerful you really are so you can venture into the future with courage and confidence. Celebrate your greatness.**

Once upon a time, there was a young princess who had just completed her martial arts studies under a world-renowned teacher. Her reward for successfully completing her studies was the gift of five weapons from the school. Henceforth, she would be known as Princess Five-Weapons. Armed with her newly acquired knowledge and weapons, she set out on the road leading to the city of her father, the king. On the way, she came to a village at the entrance to a large forest. The people of the village warned her not to enter the forest. They pleaded with the princess,

“Princess, do not enter the forest. An ogre named Sticky Hair lives there. He kills every person he sees.”

But the princess was confident and fearless as a lioness. She entered the forest. When she reached the heart of the forest, the ogre showed himself. He was as tall as a palm tree. His head was as big as a house. He had the beak of a hawk. His eyes were black and bloodshot. His hair was as long and slithery as a thousand pythons. His belly was covered with blotches. His hands and feet were dark green. He gave off a rotting stench.

“Where are you going?” the ogre demanded.

“Halt!” shouted Princess Five-Weapons with great confidence,

“You are my prey, Ogre, be careful about attacking me. I have arrows steeped in poison. I will kill you where you stand.”

Having thus threatened the ogre, the young princess put an arrow to her bow and let fly. The arrow stuck to the ogre’s hair. The princess shot another twenty arrows at the ogre. All stuck to the ogre’s hair. The ogre shook his head and all the arrows fell to the ground. He advanced towards the princess. But the princess was not afraid. She threatened the ogre a second time and, drawing her sword, she delivered a masterly blow. Once again, the sword stuck to the ogre’s hair. Then the princess smote the ogre with a spear. That also stuck to the ogre’s hair. Then she smote him with a club. That also stuck right to his hair. Then she struck him with her hatchet. It too stuck to the ogre’s hair. When the princess saw that all her weapons had stuck to the ogre’s hair, she shouted,

“Master Ogre, you have never heard of me before. I am Princess Five- Weapons. When I entered this forest infested by you, I did not rely on my weapons to slay you. I relied only on myself. Now I am going to beat you and pound you into powder and dust.”

Having thus made known her intention, she struck the ogre with her right fist. It stuck to the ogre’s hair. She struck the ogre with her left fist. That also stuck. She kicked the ogre with her right foot. It stuck to the ogre’s hair. She kicked the ogre with her left foot. That also stuck to the ogre’s hair. Then Princess Five-Weapons said to the ogre,

“I will beat you with my head and pound you into powder and dust.”

She beat the ogre with her head. That also stuck right to the ogre’s

hair. Princess Five-Weapons, stuck five times in the ogre's hair and dangled from the ogre's body. But for all that she was unafraid. She was undaunted. As for the ogre, he thought:

“This is some lioness of a woman, some woman of noble birth. No mere woman. For although she has been caught by an ogre like me, she appears neither to tremble nor to quake. Of all the humans I have met and eaten, I have never, never known a woman like this one. Why is this woman not afraid?”

Not daring to eat the woman, he asked,

“Youth, why are you not afraid? Why are you not terrified of death?”

“Ogre, why should I be afraid?” she replied, “For in one life, one death is absolutely certain. What's more, I have in my belly a thunderbolt for a weapon. If you eat me, you will not be able to digest that weapon. It will tear your insides to tatters and fragments. It will kill you. If you eat me, we'll both perish. That's why I am not afraid.”

“What this youth says is surely true,” thought the ogre, terrified by the thought of death. “From the body of this lioness of a woman, my body would not be able to digest even a fragment of flesh as small as a kidney bean. I'll let her go.”

And he let the princess go. The princess then admonished the ogre. She warned him never again to eat humans. She transformed him into a spirit entitled to receive offerings in the forest. Then she went back to the village, told the people that the ogre no longer

presented a threat and went on her way.

I love this tale because it embraces the universal conflict between fear and courage, life and death, the known and the unknown, trusting yourself versus going with the crowd.

The princess in the story could only prevail because of the “Thunderbolt” she knew she possessed within her. This thunderbolt transcended her five senses. Her five senses were of no use against the ogre. All the training and skills she had acquired couldn’t prepare her for the unknown danger of the ogre. It was the princess’s innate confidence and courage that empowered her to outmanoeuvre the ogre. When all her external resources failed her, the princess went within. She never hesitated. At no point did she ever doubt that she would not only survive, but that she would subdue the ogre.

There is another reason why I love this story. Often, we only realize and use our power in the most extreme circumstances. Every day, we read about deeds of heroism performed by people who were pushed to the very edge. Until that fateful moment when they were forced to fly or die, these people may have let their power lie dormant within them. It took a colossal, life or death event for them to manifest their power.

Think about your own life. How many times have you been placed in extreme circumstances? Have you noticed that in hindsight everything seems to make sense? The difference between the heroes and the cowards is heroes know that ultimately the right outcome will occur. Cowards get caught in the terror of their worst fears. Bereft of faith, they die a thousand deaths. The hero dies but one.

So release your thunderbolt. Don’t wait for your circumstances to become extreme. Declare your identity. Start now. As Oliver