

10 IDEAS THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

**A PERSONAL
DEVELOPMENT
HANDBOOK**

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A Personal Development Handbook

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*To my mother, who proved that we can be stronger than our
circumstances*

All our dreams can come true, if we
have the courage to pursue them

WALT DISNEY

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Epilogue

The funeral took place on a Sunday morning.

Professor Ismat passed away during the night in her sleep surrounded by her family and loved ones. According to those who were present, she had a smile on her face when she breathed her last. Those who truly knew her wouldn't have been surprised; Professor Ismat had the satisfaction of living a full life. As she would have put it, she gave everything she had to give - she lived full and died empty. She did justice to her potential and inspired us to do the same.

"Ali, you okay?" I heard Sarah's voice from behind me as she reached forward to hold my hand. We had gotten married last year and it was undoubtedly one of the best decisions I had ever made.

"Yes, thank you love," I said, trying to avoid making eye contact so she wouldn't see the tear rolling down my cheek.

As the cleric started reciting the funeral prayers, I looked around the room to see the many people whose lives Professor Ismat had touched. What a journey it had been, I thought to myself.

It had been slightly over two years since we had first met Professor Ismat in college when she had decided to leave everything behind and return to her home country. It was our great fortune that in the only semester she was able to teach, we had been her students. Little did we know that those were going to be the most important lessons of our lives.

Upon hearing of her death, many of her students had flown from all over the world. Many had even arrived early to help with the funeral processions, including Sarah and I. Once the procession was done, I asked Sarah to give me a few minutes and wait in the car. She reached forward to kiss me on my cheek and turned around to leave.

Deep in my heart, I knew that Professor Ismat's passing was just the beginning of a long journey. This was going to be one of many visits that I was going to make in the years to come.

After college, I had stayed in touch with Professor Ismat. I had gotten incredibly close to her and spent countless evenings at her place huddled next to the fireplace. Sarah would often join us. We would pour our hearts out while Professor Ismat would patiently listen. Then, in her characteristic style, she would challenge us to come up with our own solutions. She believed all that we sought was already inside us.

"Hey, you want to come with me?" asked Hassan as he brushed the dirt off his clothes.

"No you carry on mate, I'll see you later," I replied with a warm smile. In Hassan, I saw another individual who had been completely transformed because of Professor Ismat. He put a hand on my shoulder, nodded, and then headed towards the exit.

I spent a few minutes in prayer and when everyone had left, I approached the gravestone to say goodbye. As I bent down to

EPILOGUE

place my hand on it, I read the epitaph that we had insisted on getting:

'To Professor Ismat, we will always love you & miss you.'

I wiped off my tears and after offering a silent prayer, I turned around to leave. I recalled Professor Ismat's last words to me, words that would shape my outlook on life forever:

'Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.'

An Unexpected Encounter

“Do you know which courses you’re going to take this semester?” asked Sarah excitedly.

I knew Sarah had had a crush on me for as long as I could remember. Perhaps it was when we first started college and found ourselves seated next to each other in Economics class. I came to her defense when the other students were making fun of her. I intervened not only because I thought the joke lacked humor but also because Sarah was new to the city and I didn’t want her to feel alienated. I had felt the same way when we moved here 15 years ago after Mom’s death. It wasn’t a great feeling and part of me wanted to protect her. We quickly became friends after that episode and had been ever since.

“Not really. What about you?” I answered, trying to sound indifferent.

Lately, I had been beginning to feel a sense of desperation and anxiety; I just wanted to get done with this degree as soon as I could. I had interned at a small healthcare company this past summer and I had a job offer waiting for me after graduation. The pay was decent coupled with a couple of other benefits.

Dad had been really happy. The problem? I wasn't sure I was.

I had many questions that I sought answers to. There was a sense of meaninglessness that continuously pervaded my thoughts. Was this it for my life? Would I continue to work for the same company for the next 30 years as Dad had or was there more for me? I had thought that getting a job would make me happy, but it didn't. Things were just the same.

It was a compromise I had made and deep down, I knew it. It was killing me from inside, but I was trying desperately hard not to reveal it. Before my rumination could continue, Sarah's voice interrupted my thoughts.

"There's a new course on Personal Development that I'm really excited about! It's being offered here for the first time," she replied.

"Oh really? Personal development?," I said condescendingly. "Are you seriously going to waste your money on some know-it-all who thinks he has life all figured out?" I asked her. In my mind, I knew that Dad would have thought the same.

"Well firstly, it's a she," replied Sarah, seeming frustrated by my response. "And second, you don't know what you're talking about," she continued.

"Sarah, I'm serious. You would much rather benefit from taking a course on Corporate Finance or Strategy; at least you can use that in your job interview. Personal development? I don't think so," I told her, genuinely concerned for her welfare.

Sarah had been applying for various jobs but had received multiple rejections. I knew how worried she had been about securing a job and paying off her student loans.

"And still," I quickly added before she could respond, "If this professor was truly a role model for us, why would she even be teaching here? Our school barely makes it into the top 500 list,"

I responded wryly.

Sarah despairingly looked at me before responding. “Ali, I looked up the professor online before I decided to sign up for her course. You think I would just take a course without looking it up first?” she asked. I could sense the annoyance in her tone.

“Come on! You know that’s not what I meant! Anyway, tell me, found anything helpful?” I inquired.

“Well, for one, she attended Harvard,” responded Sarah with a smile.

“You can’t be serious!” I blurted out.

“Yes, she did. Magna Cum Laude, my friend,” said Sarah as she saw the expression on my face change.

“Moreover, the foundation she started has to date helped educate millions of children who were previously out of school. Is that role model enough for you?” she responded, her tone dripping with condescension to match the one I had used previously.

I thought about the 5-year old I saw begging every day on the traffic signal every day. He would come up to my window every morning barefooted in his ragged clothes and ask for a chance to wash my windscreen. Like Dad, I always tended to shrug him off without giving it another thought. After all, I shouldn’t be giving him money at such a young age and spoiling him as Dad had taught me, no? Moreover, what difference could I make?

“But why is she teaching here?” I asked, as my curiosity began to rise. I didn’t want to give the impression that I was startled by what I heard but I couldn’t help but want to learn more.

“I had the same question! Well, I did some digging and guess what? She’s an alum,” replied Sarah excitedly. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. An alum? Harvard?

“She grew up here but then moved to Washington,” Sarah

continued. "Her parents passed away in a car accident when she was 4 years old and she was sent to live with her grandparents. Since her grandparents couldn't afford her education, members of her extended family contributed money so that she could continue her education. If you ask me Ali, that was enough motivation for me to sign up for the course," she emphasized.

I felt my resistance begin to diminish. Perhaps there was something I could learn from this professor.

"But that's not all," said Sarah. "At the age of 8, she was sexually molested."

"Seriously?" I asked in disbelief, unable to hide my surprise.

"Yeah, I know. Considering where she started and what she's been able to achieve, it's unbelievable isn't it? That's why I took the course," she added with a smile.

"Anyway, I have to head to Accounting class. I'll see you later!" said Sarah as she picked up her bag from the ground and got ready to leave.

"No! Tell me more!" I responded quickly.

Sarah laughed as if I had just made a joke.

"Up until a few minutes ago you thought all this would be garbage and now look at you!" she exclaimed.

I made a face to express my annoyance at her remark.

"Okay, sorry! Take it easy, will you? I would really like to help but I have to head out right now. How about this, why don't you attend her first session today and see how you feel? She sent out an email with some pre-work though."

"Pre-work?" I asked, not sure what she meant.

"Yeah, I was surprised myself. It's some basic research that we have to do before every class. The moment I heard it I knew I was in for a ride. Guess she's going to run things her way!" she laughed.

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