

THE GREATEST TEACHER IN THE WORLD!

10 POWERFUL LESSONS ON
PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

UMAR SAEED IQBAL

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First edition

About the Author

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To my mother who sacrificed herself completely so she could send us to school, to my grandmother who never lost hope and embraced her personal greatness in her final years, and to my younger sister who taught me that we can be stronger than our circumstances

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

Walt Disney

Epilogue

The funeral took place on a Sunday morning.

Professor Izmir 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 Izmir had the satisfaction of living a full life. As she would have put it, she gave everything she had to give - she 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 Izmir 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 Izmir 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 Izmir'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 Izmir. We had gotten incredibly close 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 Izmir would patiently listen. She believed all that we sought was already inside us.

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

“No you carry on mate, I’ll see you later,” I replied with a warm smile. In Hassan, I saw another life that had been transformed by Professor Izmir. 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 place my hand on it, I read the epitaph that we had insisted on getting:

‘To the greatest teacher in the world, we will always love you and miss you.’

I wiped off my tears and after offering a silent prayer, I turned around to leave. I recalled Professor Izmir’s last words to me - *‘All your dreams can come true, if you have the courage to pursue them.’*

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 last name, Sarah McDonald.

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 insurance 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. 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 thought 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. Sarah’s voice interrupted my thoughts.

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

“Oh really? Personal development? Don’t waste your money,” I said condescendingly. “Are you seriously going to waste your money on some

pumped-up guy that screams out a few chants?” 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. 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? She went to Harvard from here?, I thought to myself.

"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 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.

“Well, that’s fascinating. Will you tell me what’s the pre-work for today?” I asked.

“I know you’ll be mad at me for saying this but seriously Ali, you don’t even do the work for your normal classes!” responded Sarah with a chuckle.

“Come on! What is it?” I asked again.

Sarah hurriedly pulled out her smartphone and went through her emails.

“Well,” she continued, “it’s essentially thinking of a person either living or dead who faced insurmountable obstacles and is now considered a success,” she answered, emphasizing the last word.

“Can’t I just select the Professor?” I smirked, realizing it was something I could easily spend a few minutes on before the session.

Sarah laughed before responding.

“Well, I didn’t expect anything else from you, Mister! Anyway, the class is at 2 PM. I’ll see you there?” she asked.

“Umm, yeah. Sure! What’s the worst that can happen?” I answered, trying not to sound too excited. However, deep down, I felt a deep sense of curiosity. Was this going to be the answer to the discomfort I had been experiencing?

I didn’t have a lot of childhood memories but from what I remembered of Mom, she loved me dearly. From what I could gather from my aunts and uncles, she used to tell them that I was a special child who would go on to achieve great things. However, all that felt like a distant reality. As I grew older, I had succumbed to the circumstances I found myself in. Failure

after failure had made me settle time and again for what I thought was realistically possible. I had become numb; I was comfortable with who I was and what I had accomplished. The lie I repeatedly told myself was that I had done all that there was to do. Dad wasn't much of a dreamer and after all, I was his son. The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, as I had grown up hearing.

"Well, that's a start. See you in class, partner!" said Sarah, interrupting my thoughts. She put her bag over her shoulder and turned to head towards the main building. As soon as she left, I picked up my phone and checked the campus roster. In all my questioning, I had completely forgotten to ask the name of the Professor or the location of the class.

As I browsed through the listings, I couldn't find anything on the roster that was remotely similar to the course Personal Development. There were the traditional core and non-core courses we were required to complete but even after skimming the list twice, I couldn't find what I was looking for. "Had Sarah made a mistake?" I thought to myself. She was usually rather meticulous in everything that she did.

Since I still had a little over an hour before the class, I decided to go to the Registration Office and figure out what was going on. As I entered the office, I saw a slightly overweight girl sitting leisurely behind the counter using her phone.

"Excuse me," I announced as I approached the front desk. The girl continued using her phone as if she hadn't heard me.

"Can you help me?" I added, a bit louder this time.

"Huh?" said the girl as she finally looked up. Then, annoyed at my interruption, she apathetically replied, "It's lunchtime, come back later," and went back to her phone. This girl was mistaken if she thought I was going to leave without an answer.

"Actually, I wanted to know whether there's a course called Personal Development being offered this semester?" I added as I raised my hands and placed them on the counter, demonstrating my resolve.

“Personal Development?” she inquired, to which I quickly nodded. A few seconds passed as she looked at me listlessly. I didn’t know whether she was going to comply with my request but to my delight, she finally kept her phone aside and switched on the computer screen.

“Well, let me check for you,” she said as she lazily typed something into the large archaic desktop computer.

“I see Personal Greatness by Professor Izmir. Is this the one you’re looking for?” she asked. “Finally,” I thought to myself! At least there’s something.

I quickly nodded, no idea whether that was the actual Professor. I had never heard of that course before so that was probably it. “I think so!” I continued. “Where can I get access to the course details? I wasn’t able to find the course on the roster,” I indicated as I took my phone out of my pocket.

“Yes, you’re right. Seems like they took the class off the roster because it’s oversubscribed,” she replied.

Oh no. I felt my heart sink. The administration was pretty rigid about class size and there was no way they were going to increase enrollment.

I tried one more time and asked her whether there was any possibility that I could attend the course to which she responded with a resounding “No!”. I began to wonder where that energy had been earlier. I looked at her frustratingly and then turned around to leave the office. Part of me couldn’t believe Sarah had worked me up into taking this course! I saw a vending machine on the side and stopped to get a can of Coke.

I guess this was it. No personal development for me this semester. As I entered the bills into the machine and took out the can, I started rationalizing why the course wasn’t great in the first place. Surprisingly, not a lot came up. All I could hear were some jumbled voices. I could hear the laughs of my best friend Furqan inside my head, “Personal Development? Dude, you’ve got to be kidding me,” said the voice.

I could visualize Dad’s reaction too. “Personal Development? You know better than that son. You’ve got a good job now, just get done with your

degree and start working. Don't waste any time learning more than you need to. You've spent almost 16 years in school, that's enough."

I tried to create an image of what Mom would have said had she been with us. This was something that I often did; I had used the conversations with my aunts and uncles to create a persona for her. It wasn't perfect, but it gave some comfort and hope. From what I knew, Mom had a lot of arguments with my Dad over my education. Mom believed that quality education was the biggest equalizer and that she wouldn't settle for anything less than the best when it came to my education. Dad felt differently.

He had insisted on placing me in a nearby public school, which was much cheaper and much more convenient, but Mom had managed to finally convince him and admitted me into a decent private school. Moreover, without my Dad's knowledge, she had started a savings account for my education. Her contributions had played a major role in me being able to attend college. To this date, I often thought about how life would have been like if Mom was here. Part of me felt guilty for letting her down. Would she be proud of the son I had become?

Lost in my thoughts, I quickly gulped the last few sips of Coke and threw the can towards the bin, clearly missing it by a margin. However, I decided to ignore it and move on. I had bigger things to worry about. I decided to go to the nearby ground and see whether anyone was playing. Perhaps that would help take my mind off things, I thought.

"Excuse me, young man," I heard a voice from behind me. I turned around to see a dark, elderly woman with a long dark cane bend down to pick up the can lying down next to the bin.

The woman seemed to be in her late 60s and during all my years on campus, I was pretty sure I hadn't seen her before. Despite her wrinkled face, I could see a gleam in her deep eyes. Her elegance suggested that she was a woman who had traveled the world and was rather affluent.

"I believe this belongs to you," she added in a deep voice, as she walked over in my direction and handed me the can. Then, without saying another word, she smiled and made her way past me towards the academic building.

If anything, I was startled. If there was one thing I knew about this school, the administration took pride in ridiculing the students. It had emerged into a vicious ‘us versus them’ situation as a result of the ongoing confrontations.

It took me a moment to register what had happened. Then it hit me! This must be Professor Izmir, the teacher Sarah had gone on and on about! I embarrassingly dumped the can in the bin making sure it went in this time, and ran after her.

“Excuse me! Excuse me, Professor!” I cried.

“Yes?” she replied before even turning around. As she turned and saw me, she smiled again. “How can I help you, young man?” she asked.

I heard no condescension in her tone whatsoever. It felt as if what took place a few minutes earlier hadn’t even happened.

“I’m sorry about the can,” I replied.

“Oh! The can!” she exclaimed excitedly. She seemed delighted that I had approached her and took a moment before responding. “Well, you know what they say, mistakes have the power to turn you into something better than you were before!” she said with a flooding smile.

Then, she proceeded to do something that no other teacher had done before - she reached out her hand and put it on my shoulder.

“It’s alright. We all make mistakes. Do better next time,” she said. With this, she turned around and stepped inside a classroom to the right.

As the door opened, I managed to take a peek inside and saw that it was extraordinarily packed. I guess this was the classroom I had been looking for, I thought to myself. But what was the use? There was no way I could attend an oversubscribed class!

“Look who’s here!” I heard a familiar voice from behind me. It was Sarah.

“Oh, hey Sarah,” I replied.

“Seems like you finally made it!” she said cheerfully. “Come on, let’s go inside.”

“I can’t. I mean, the class was oversubscribed. And you know the rules; the administration’s a stickler about this,” I said annoyingly.

Sarah thought for a moment and then replied.

“Umm, how about this. Do you know Shehryar from our cluster? He asked me to save a seat for him but he won’t be attending today’s session because he’s down with the cold. He didn’t even show up for Accounting class. Why don’t you take his spot for today and see how it goes?” she asked.

“Oh really?” I smiled, finally relieved at least I would get to see what all the fuss was about. “I guess I can do that,” I said.

I began to feel my heart race with excitement. Hurriedly, we made our way inside the classroom to the seats in the corner. Little did we know that we were going to begin our journey of personal greatness with the greatest teacher in the world.

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