

10 IDEAS THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

**A PERSONAL
DEVELOPMENT
HANDBOOK**

UMAR SAEED IQBAL



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UMAR IQBAL

10 Ideas That Changed My Life

A Personal Development Handbook

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First edition

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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

Contents

1	Epilogue	1
2	An Unexpected Encounter	4
3	A Lesson on Personal Responsibility	15
4	A Lesson on Personal Greatness	32
5	A Lesson on Focus	54
6	A Lesson on Belief	76
7	A Lesson on Integrity and Character	88
8	A Lesson on Persistence	102
9	A Lesson on Goals	113
10	A Lesson on the Right Company	123
11	A Lesson on the Impermanence of Failure	130
12	The Final Lesson	146
	<i>Author's Note</i>	153
	<i>About the Author</i>	154

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.

“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 quickly spend a few minutes on before the session and still fit in a work-out.

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.

“Perfect!”, said Sarah, as she turned around and headed towards the main building.

Now that I didn’t have to maintain a façade anymore, I had some time to think. Deep down, I couldn’t help but feel a deep sense of curiosity about the class. 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 my Mom, she loved me dearly. From what I could gather from my aunts and uncles, which wasn’t much, she used to tell them that I was a special child who would go on to achieve great things. I had a photo of her holding me in

her arms next to my bed and I often wondered how she would feel if she saw me today. Would she be proud? Would she be proud to call me her son who she had fought valiantly for?

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.

I glanced at my watch and figured I should check the class location before heading to the gym. In all my questioning, I had completely forgotten to ask the name of the Professor or the location of the class. I took out my phone and scrolled through the campus roster. However, 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, can't you see? 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. Guess my persistence had paid off.

"Well, let me check for you," she said as she lazily typed something into the archaic computer.

"I see Personal Greatness by Professor Ismat. 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 recalled my earlier success 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! As I walked out of the office, I saw a vending machine on the side and stopped to get a can of Coke. Keep 'em calories coming, I figured. 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."

Despite these loud inner voices, 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 relatively decent school.

Moreover, without my Dad's knowledge, she had started a savings account for my education. Her contributions had played a major role in my ability 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.

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 gym. It was leg day. I truly hated it, but it might help take my mind off things, I thought. Moreover, I was done with these chicken legs.

"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 Ismat, 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. There was a calmness in her voice that surprisingly reminded me of mother.

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. Before I could process what had happened, I managed to take a peek inside and saw that it was extraordinarily packed. Another eureka moment!

I guess this was the classroom I had been looking for, after all! 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 is 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 with the greatest teacher in the world.

A Lesson on Personal Responsibility

Thank you for taking out the time to be here,” said Professor Ismat with a pleasant smile. Her wrinkles and deep eyes exhibited a life full of experience and adventure.

“Your time is valuable, and I will make sure that your being here is worth your while. However, in return, I have two requests,” she added as we all quickly glanced at each other, not sure what to expect.

“First, discard from your mind the idea that I have all the answers. I don’t. And mind you, nor does anyone else. There is no *one* answer,” she emphasized.

“Countless philosophers have come and gone trying to figure out the meaning of life. Many spent their entire lives chasing one principle or approach that would solve all of mankind’s problems. From what I know, no one really figured it out. But they taught us something valuable instead,” she continued.

“The journey that you undertake in finding those answers is more meaningful than the answers themselves. There is a reason why these questions have been handed down to us

through the ages: we have to figure out our own answers. We have to put in the hard work. Yes, it's good to acquire all the knowledge that you can but then, you have to decide for yourself what makes sense to you. So stop looking for a savior or a quick fix," she continued with a warm smile on her face.

"Now second, as we spend time together, you will come across some ideas that will be uncomfortable. Very uncomfortable. These ideas might contradict everything that you've been conditioned to believe. My only request is that you keep an open mind and when you sense that discomfort, you let it sit with you for a while. Does that sound reasonable?" asked Professor Ismat. The class nodded.

"Great, let's jump right in then," continued Professor Ismat confidently as she pulled out a file from her bag.

As she went about setting up the class projector, I tried to get a sense of her as a person. She was dressed immaculately, with a light blue dress alongside an elegant pearl necklace. She had wrinkles on her face but her spirit shone with a ferocity that was unmistakable. From what I could gather, she seemed like a woman who knew what she was talking about. Unlike most of the other teachers, she didn't pause to seek our approval. She knew what she was here to do and more importantly, she seemed fiercely determined to do it.

"Does anyone want to start us off with something or someone that inspired them?" she asked, keeping aside her class notes.

A couple of hands shot up.

It suddenly hit me! In the events of the past few hours, I had completely forgotten to do the prework. I shrank in my seat hoping she wouldn't call me out. It seemed like an eternity before the Professor finally settled on someone in the first row.

"Mahnoor?" the Professor asked, taking a close look at the

name card on the desk.

“Yes,” came back a timid voice. I knew Mahnoor from another one of my classes. She barely ever spoke in any of the other classes, so I was rather surprised to see her raise her hand.

“Why don’t you go ahead and share with us what you have?” said Professor Ismat with a smile.

“Umm, sure. Though I’m not sure if everyone is familiar with the person I’m going to talk about,” responded Mahnoor as she stood up in her seat.

“Oh dear, don’t worry about that. Who is it?” asked Professor Ismat.

“It’s Oprah Winfrey, an American show host. Does anyone know her?” asked Mahnoor not expecting to get a response. To her surprise, a few students raised their hands. This gave Mahnoor the inspiration to move on and she took out a piece of paper to refer to her notes.

“Okay. So for those who don’t know, Oprah Gail Winfrey was the richest African American of the 20th century and North America’s first black multi-billionaire who first became famous for her talk show, ‘The Oprah Winfrey Show’. She was ranked as the most influential woman in the world and dubbed as the “Queen of All Media”. Today, she is considered as one of the greatest philanthropists of all time,” said Mahnoor as she turned over the page.

She looked up from her notes if everyone was following, but the students seemed disinterested. Before proceeding further, Mahnoor glanced in Professor Ismat’s direction to assess whether she was on the right track. The Professor smiled and Mahnoor continued.

“What most people don’t know is that Oprah was born into rural poverty in Mississippi to a teenage single mother who

worked as a housemaid,” said Mahnoor.

“Growing up on welfare, Oprah till the age of 6 lived with her strict grandmother who was reportedly so poor that Oprah’s school dresses were often made of potato sacks,” she added.

I could sense the curiosity in the room beginning to rise as more and more students expectantly began to look at Mahnoor, waiting to hear what she was going to say next.

“Her grandmother would often beat her up and in the words of Oprah herself, ‘She whipped me so badly that I had welts on my back and the welts would bleed. So then I got another whipping for getting blood on the dress.’” said Mahnoor as she flipped another page.

“Later, Oprah was sent to live with her coal miner father in Nashville and at the age of 9, she was raped by her cousin. Subsequently, she was raped by her uncle. After that, she was raped by a family friend. But this wasn’t enough. She got pregnant at 14 because of the abuse but her was born prematurely and died at the hospital shortly after being born,” continued Mahnoor.

Everyone stayed glued to their seats. For the first time in my life, I experienced what pin-drop silence felt like. After a brief pause, Mahnoor continued.

“Despite all these obstacles, Oprah flourished at school. She won a full scholarship to Tennessee State University and then went on to occupy several successful professional roles. Today, she is a globally renowned world icon,” said Mahnoor as she turned another page.

“I wanted to share a few of her sayings if that’s alright,” continued Mahnoor, glancing in Professor Ismat’s direction. Professor Ismat quickly nodded, delighted to see the amount of effort Mahnoor had put into the assignment. Mahnoor

continued.

“In one of her talks, this is what Opera said. ‘I’ve always had the deep understanding for myself that if anything was going to move forward in my life, I was going to have to be responsible for making that happen. You are responsible for your life. And if you’re sitting around waiting for somebody to save you, to fix you, to even help you, you are wasting your time because only you have the power to take responsibility to move your life forward. And the sooner you get that, the sooner your life gets into gear.’”

Mahnoor paused for a moment and then went on.

“It does not matter where you come from. It doesn’t matter what your Mama did. What matters is now. This moment, and your willingness to see this moment for what this is, accept it, forgive the past, take responsibility, and move forward,” said Mahnoor as she concluded and sat back on her seat. She nervously folded the piece of paper she had been using and placed it on her desk.

No one spoke for what seemed like an eternity. Professor Ismat didn’t intervene either. I tried to comprehend what I had just heard. I had always been holding myself back for reasons that seemed largely insignificant and irrelevant in comparison. It didn’t make sense.

When had I imposed these limitations on what was possible for me based on where I came from? I shuddered to truly answer that question for the fear of what it might reveal. Finally, sensing our confusion, Professor Ismat stepped in.

“Thank you Mahnoor. You must have worked hard and practiced this story multiple times to deliver it so fluently. Keep it up,” said Professor Ismat as a faint smile appeared on Mahnoor’s face. Then, turning towards the entire class,

Professor Ismat began her first masterclass.

“Today, all of you have made a very important decision in your life. If you want, this can be the moment that changes your life forever,” she continued.

“You’ve started a journey for personal greatness. If you decide to pursue it despite all that you’ll encounter, you’ll discover that it’s worth more than your wildest dreams. It’s worth more than anything you can imagine. But let me emphasize, this is only the beginning,” she added.

“What you get out of this experience will depend on how much you put into it. It’s not going to be easy, but I know all of you have potential inside you that even you can’t see, yet,” stressed Professor Ismat.

“I don’t know what you’ve been through in life. I don’t even know what you’re going through right now. If there’s anything I do know, it’s that life is hard, and it hurts. However, despite what you’ve been through and what you’re going through right now, the most important realization you can have is that you absolutely and always have the power to become greater than your circumstances. You have the power to change your life one choice and one moment at a time,” said Professor Ismat confidently.

“These moments are what I refer to as micro-moments. These are the everyday moments when you make snap judgments about what you will do or what you won’t do. These moments might be a few seconds long or shorter, but they’re there. And this is where your power lies,” she stressed.

“If you’re not where you want to be in life, it all comes down to your choices at these micro-moments. At these micro-moments, you’re choosing to do one thing when you should instead do another. It might be snap judgment to leave your

homework for tomorrow or to order that cookie that you know isn't good for you. These are the moments when you make a decision that you wouldn't have made if you truly cared about yourself. Ask yourself, if you truly cared about yourself as you would care for another person, would you go through with the same choices that you've been making at these micro-moments?" asked the Professor.

"Of course, the situation you find yourself in has its own role to play. But the power you have over these micro-moments is completely your own. You can let your situation define the kind of life you will live, or you can actively challenge the situation you're in. And remember, no other person in the world can do this for you; you must do it for yourself. You can recognize the power of personal greatness that many before you have recognized and your ability to turn your life around," she continued.

"Does anyone know who Benjamin Disraeli was?" she asked as she pressed the clicker and a black and white picture appeared on the screen. It was of a solemn looking man with a bowtie. I often wondered why people never smiled in old photographs, but Sarah had answered that question for me. It was because it took so long to capture a photograph back then that it was almost impossible for people to hold a smile for that long. Amusing.

"I think he was a British Prime Minister?" said someone from the third row.

"Correct. More importantly for our purposes perhaps, he was Britain's first and only Jewish leader. He became Prime Minister at a time when Jews were discriminated against and excluded from hotels, resorts, and many neighborhoods while also facing limits on access to jobs and education. Non-Jewish

hotels regularly posted signs such as ‘No Dogs, No Jews, No Consumptives’ so that they could keep Jews out. However, Disraeli did not let all this discourage him and instead, this is what he had to say,” said Professor Ismat as she pulled up a slide. *“Nothing can resist the human will, that will stake even its existence on its stated purpose.”*

For the first time during my time at college, I felt an urge to take out a pen and paper and take notes. I decided to wait and see. The professor’s voice interrupted my thoughts.

“You see, the greater the obstacles that you’ve faced in life, the greater your comeback will be,” said Professor Ismat. “It doesn’t matter where you are right now; what matters is where you want to go from here. What matters is not how much you’ve been hurt, but rather how you channel that hurt and pain to bounce back even stronger,” she added.

“Your circumstances don’t determine your destiny; they only determine where you start. Your circumstances and background have undoubtedly affected who you are but you, and no one else, is responsible for who you become,” she emphasized.

“I’m glad that Mahnoor brought up Opera. There’s so much for all of us to learn from her story. This is one of her quotes,” said Professor Ismat, revealing the next slide.

“Turn your wounds into wisdom.”

“If you hadn’t faced all those obstacles, you wouldn’t have the untapped strength that you have within you today. Whatever you have faced up to this point in your life is a part of your own story. It is what it is and there is nothing you can do to change the past. You can’t change where you were born or who your parents were. You can’t change your race or your color. More often than not, despite how hard you try, you can’t even

completely change the way you look,” said Professor Ismat as a few girls in the front row giggled. Professor Ismat smiled and then continued.

“What you can do is accept where you are today and then start taking action to change your life. The pain and hurt will be there. However, what you can change is how you approach life and the attitude you adopt. What you can change is what you do about your circumstances. Every setback you face has the potential to make you or break you. You have to decide which one it’s going to be. You can stay stuck or you can decide to become better. I don’t think anyone will hold you accountable for living a mediocre life,” said Professor Ismat as she paused to take a sip of her coffee.

“Your attitude and mindset influence almost everything you do. Would you believe it if I told you that your mindset even influences how smart you think you are?” asked Professor Ismat with a sparkle in her eyes.

A student raised his hand.

It was Zeeshan. I was surprised to see him in a Personal Development course. Zeeshan was the college bully, notorious for making fun of other students and attending class just to distract them from studying. We had got into a big physical fight once because he was picking on one of my midget friends. With his big biceps and my chicken legs, I was of course, no match for him. No wonder I wanted to work out so bad. Truly, lower body strength was equally important.

I was pretty certain we were going to be kicked out but his father was a rich businessman and thanks to his intervention, we were both allowed to stay. Many believed that the only reason that Zeeshan got admitted in the first place was that his Dad had made generous contributions to the school endowment.

“Yes?” asked Professor Ismat pointing in Zeeshan’s direction.

“You’re saying that dumb Hassan here can change how smart he is?” asked Zeeshan, pointing towards the corner of the room where Hassan was seated. A few of his friends seated around him laughed. “With all due respect, he can barely do simple arithmetic, Professor,” he continued.

Everyone’s eyes turned to Hassan as he shrank further down in his seat. I didn’t know much about Hassan but from what I did know, Hassan was just one of those kids who found themselves at the butt-end of most jokes. Since he never retaliated, Zeeshan seemed to enjoy picking on him. It took Hassan longer to understand some topics and while I didn’t see any issue with it, apparently not everyone felt that way. From a curious student asking dozens of questions when school first started, Hassan had gone on to become incredibly aloof. He was always sitting alone in the corner, both inside and outside the classroom.

The professor slowly turned in the direction Zeeshan was pointing at as if to make out who he was referring to. Once she figured who Hassan was, she kept down her clicker and slowly approached Hassan’s desk. Then, as she had done with me earlier, she raised her hand to keep it on Hassan’s shoulder. She smiled at him for an instant and then continued.

“Hassan? What a beautiful name! You know it means handsome in Arabic, don’t you?” asked Professor Ismat. Hassan looked up, not sure how to respond. He stayed silent.

“Well Hassan, the great physicist Einstein once said that everyone is a genius. However, if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that is stupid,” she gleamed.

For the first time, I saw Hassan smile.

“Young man, I’m glad to have met you and I am certain you have tremendous potential inside you. However, no one will believe in you if you don’t believe in yourself,” she stressed. Hassan nodded.

“There is one thing I want you to remember before we move on though,” she continued.

“Yes, Professor?” asked Hassan with a timid voice, earnestly looking into the professor’s eyes.

“Don’t ever let anyone’s opinion of you affect your reality,” emphasized Professor Ismat, as she tapped on Hassan’s shoulder a few times before stepping back.

Satisfied that she had made her point, Professor Ismat now turned her full attention towards Zeeshan and continued in a grave tone.

“Zeeshan, is it?” she asked, trying to read Zeeshan’s lopsided placard.

“Yes,” responded Zeeshan flamboyantly.

“You have the right to have your opinions. But this behavior will not be tolerated in this classroom,” she continued. Zeeshan sat still, unsure how to respond. His arrogant smile quickly disappeared.

“The next time I hear such a derogatory remark, I will expel you from my class and possibly from the school. Is that understood?” said Professor Ismat sternly. Zeeshan quickly nodded his head. He couldn’t afford not to. So close to graduation, he knew his father wouldn’t be too happy about it if it came to that. Also, the gravity in the professor’s tone was indisputable.

“Be better next time,” continued Professor Ismat as she paused to take a sip of her coffee.

“Now, get up from your seat and go sit next to Hassan,” the

professor said with a pleasant smile as if nothing serious had happened.

Without resisting, Zeeshan quickly picked up his bag and went to sit down next to Hassan. Despite sitting in the corner, I could see the broadening smile on Hassan's face. Zeeshan meanwhile, crossed his arms like a bossy two-year-old.

"Now, where were we," said the Professor as she moved back to the center of the class.

"You were telling us how our attitude determines how smart we think we are," came a voice from the front row. It was hard not to sense the optimism in the student's tone.

"Ah, yes! In a way, you can. But child, we have a lot of time before we get to that. For now, just remember that you have the potential to change who you are. I must tell you though that it will be incredibly difficult at first because the people in your life will see you for what you have been, rather than what you can be! They will judge you based on your present circumstances when in reality, where you are today doesn't even matter! Also, remember the micro-moments I told you about earlier? They're a result of habit and certainly won't be easy to change. However, it is possible. It will be hard, but it will work if you want it to work," stressed Professor Ismat.

"I know it's hard to believe but I want you to simply take my word for it right now. Can you all do that?" asked the Professor. The students nodded their heads.

There was certainly something different about Professor Ismat. There were a self-assuredness and calmness that most of us seemed to yearn for. She made you feel special; it was as if she saw potential in you that you weren't able to see yourself. Despite her surprising sternness with Zeeshan, the class seemed hooked on to every single word that she said.

As Professor Ismat raised her mug to have another sip, I couldn't help but think about what Sarah had told me about the Professor's background. It had certainly been a long journey for her. She wasn't born with a silver spoon in her mouth and I found myself wanting to believe in her.

"Thank you," she said with a smile before continuing.

"Children, at the end of our lives, when all is said and done, it comes down to this important principle - will we have reasons for why we didn't do what we could have, or will we have results?" she added as she paused and glanced around the room.

"This is a difficult principle to grapple with. It took me a lot of time to finally accept it myself," added Professor Ismat with a soft chuckle.

"As the best-selling author Jack Canfield would put it, it essentially comes down to realizing that regardless of whatever happens to us, we have to take 100% responsibility for our life. The good, the bad, and the ugly. It demands that for things to change for us, we must first change. To have more, we must first become more," she continued.

"Despite what you are made to believe, success and failure in life are not giant cataclysmic events. They're a result of the actions we take daily. They're a result of the micro-moments you encounter everyday. They're a result of whether we decide to take personal responsibility and do what we know is hard in the short run but will help us in the long-run. Our results in life are not instant; they accumulate until the inevitable day of reckoning finally arrives when we must pay the price or reap the reward for the choices we've made," stressed Professor Ismat.

"As I mentioned earlier, at some point we have to recognize and accept that no one is going to come save us - we must do it

for ourselves! Alternatively, we can continue to live the lives we've been living. There's no savior. Everyone else is too busy figuring out what to do with their own life. No one can do this job for you but you," she emphasized.

"As much as I wish to help you, I can only help you see the path. Most, if not all of the hard work, has to be done by you. And that's not an easy road," said Professor Ismat as she paused to take another sip of coffee.

"You will notice that people raise a family, earn a living, and then die. They stop learning. They stop growing. Most people have done all that they're ever going to do. As the motivational speaker Les Brown would say, these people stop developing themselves and trying to figure out how much-untapped potential they have inside them. You know, it takes no effort to stay at the bottom. However, for people who are running towards their dreams, life has a special kind of meaning," she emphasized.

"Very soon after you graduate, no one will hold you accountable for your learning. No one will hold you accountable for living a mediocre life. You will have to do it for yourself. You will have to be responsible for your motivation," continued Professor Ismat as she took another sip.

"To improve, we first need to take full responsibility for where we are in life today and how we chose to respond to what life threw at us. We're often led into believing that things are outside our control. We're made to believe that it's the economy, the government, the family, or even the neighbors that are the problem; we're made to believe that if only these factors were different, our life would be different," she added.

I couldn't help but think about my Dad who always complained the taxes were too high. He didn't think too favorably

of our extended family either. And the government? Well, let's just not go there.

"See for yourself. See the kinds of lives these people are living and then decide for yourself whether you want to listen to them," continued Professor Ismat.

Dad had been with the same company for over 40 years and from what I knew, he loathed going to work every day. I always wondered why he never chose to do something else instead of spending most of his time doing something he hated. I thought that was just how things were.

"We're made to believe that if things were better, our situation would be better. Our life would be better. Rarely, if ever, are we asked to look in the mirror and take full ownership of the position we are in life. Millions, if not billions of people have settled with living mediocre lives because they never believed they had the inner potential to take control of their destinies," emphasized Professor Ismat before pulling up the next slide.

"We are all self-made, but only the successful will admit it."

Earl Nightingale

American Radio Speaker and Author

She continued once she was sure everyone was done taking notes.

"Undoubtedly, like we discussed, where you are today has in large part been influenced by where you grew up or what race or class or sect you belong to. Life can be unfair, and it beats down the best of us," she stressed.

"However, you have to realize at this point that even though all the cards might have been stacked against you, how you choose to respond now will make all the difference. What you do in those micro-moments will change it all. It's simple, but it's not easy. This is because what's easy to do is often easy not

to do,” she said persuasively.

“Knowing what you know today, do you want to have the same story 10 years from now for why you’re not succeeding? Are the poor choices you’re making today worth the suffering you will encounter 3 months down the road?” asked Professor Ismat.

For the first time, I sensed sadness and regret in her voice.

“Don’t let life get the better of you. Accept that if 10 years from now we have the same reasons as to why we’re unsuccessful, no one is to blame but ourselves. That is what Oprah means by taking full responsibility,” she continued.

The students continued to nod, hanging on to Professor Ismat’s every word. After all, in all our years of schooling, not once had anyone talked about taking personal responsibility.

“How many of you have watched the movie Rocky?” the professor asked.

Around a dozen students raised their hands.

“For those of you who haven’t, I want to share a dialogue from the movie which strongly resonated with me. And after that, we can end today’s session. You have had a lot to think about today and it’s not easy. Life is not easy. In one way or another, life is suffering. But once you recognize that it’s supposed to be hard, you will increase your personal power. Once you recognize what kind of a life justifies that suffering, life will be meaningful. It will take you some time to understand the gravity of what I said but for now, just keep it at the back of your mind,” she continued.

I checked my watch and was surprised to find that an hour had already passed. I had been so engrossed in what the professor had to say that I barely noticed the time go by. The professor pressed a clicker and a slide pulled up on the screen.

"The world ain't all sunshine and rainbows. It's a very mean and nasty place, and I don't care how tough you are, it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently if you let it. You, me, or nobody is gonna hit as hard as life. But it ain't about how hard you hit. It's about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward; how much you can take and keep moving forward. That's how winning is done!

Now, if you know what you're worth, then go out and get what you're worth. But you gotta be willing to take the hits, and not pointing fingers saying you ain't where you wanna be because of him, or her, or anybody. Cowards do that and that ain't you. You're better than that!"

As the students took notes, Professor Ismat quietly put her notes back into her bag and slid it over her shoulder. Once everyone was done reading, she continued.

"If you take what you have learned today and apply it to your own life, honestly and impartially, you might not find what you like. That's why, for the next class, I want you all to go read about the Stockdale Paradox. Think about your own micro-moments and if there is anything I can help you with, please do not hesitate to reach out to me. Have a wonderful rest of the day and I will see you soon," said Professor Ismat with a warm smile as she elegantly walked out of the classroom.

"Wow!" said Sarah as she took a deep breath. "That was something, wasn't it?" she exclaimed.

"Yeah, it certainly was," I replied, not sure what else to say.

"Are you going to attend the next class?" Sarah asked excitedly.

There was no doubt in my mind that I wouldn't.

A Lesson on Personal Greatness

I spent most of the week thinking about what the Professor had said. As part of the course requirements, we had to complete a reflection paper after every session. This included reflecting on what we were learning, how we could apply it in our own lives, and some additional ideas to experiment with.

It also entailed becoming mindful of our micro-moments and taking forcing ourselves to make decisions that we wouldn't ordinarily make. It was an experiment at trying to live more consciously by thinking through our decisions and mode of action instead of giving in to a habit. It involved thinking about the personal freedom we had to choose how we were going to respond to everything that was happening around us.

As I tried becoming more conscious of what I thought and how I responded to the things around me, I began to realize how difficult it was. As I better identified these micro-moments, I began to understand what the professor had said: it was all up to me.

I didn't have to continue reacting the way I had in the past.

People in my orbit were going to be surprised at first but they would adjust accordingly. The idea was scary, but it was also liberating.

Moreover, it wasn't easy to put the 100% responsibility principle to practice. After all, I had spent years placing blame outside instead of taking a hard look inside the mirror. It hadn't made my life any better, but I had continued to seek the answer to my problems elsewhere. I figured that was something I couldn't really do anymore, or I would be lying to myself.

However, by trying to take more responsibility for what was happening in my life and by living more consciously, I began to feel small a sense of control which I hadn't felt in a long time. If there was one thing that kept coming back to me from the last class, it was the idea that no one was going to come save me. There was no use waiting. As Professor Ismat had bluntly said, there were no saviors. If my life was going to change, I was going to have to do something about it. Part of me wished that I had had this courage and realization earlier.

Perhaps I would have pursued that journalism degree I was passionate about. Perhaps I wouldn't have readily accepted the first job offer that came my way. If only, I thought. Things would have been different for me.

As I began to think about my life, I couldn't help but feel despondent. If what the professor had said was true, hadn't I wasted over 20 years of my life? Perhaps for the very first time in my life, I began to feel a sense of deep regret.

I chose not to talk to my Dad about it. I didn't even tell Furqan for a change. I wasn't sure they would understand. Moreover, if what Professor Ismat said was true, I was beginning to realize that my immediate circle of family and friends wasn't perhaps the best source of advice. I recalled what she had said – 'people

judge you based on where you currently are in life instead of what is possible for you.'

There was some truth to that. I recalled time and again sharing my ideas with those around me only to be shrugged off. It was always too outlandish or too difficult or too impossible. If there wasn't one thing, there was another. With the passage of time, I had stopped even sharing my ideas. The worst part was when I saw someone else actually going ahead with that idea and succeeding! Oh how I would curse myself for listening to 'them'!

I wondered why the people closest to us were often our biggest dream killers. Instead of being on our cheerleading squad, they would join the discouragement squad. And it was that quiet insinuation that made all the difference, didn't it?

The more I thought about it, the more I began to realize that contrary to what I believed, I had been living a mediocre life because I accepted my limitations. If others could go through much worse and still succeed, why couldn't I? If Oprah and Disraeli could, why couldn't I? I couldn't find a compelling reason.

I sent a text message to check with Sarah if Shehryar would be attending the next session. I had reached out to the Registration Office once again earlier, but they refused to budge from their stance of not increasing the student enrollment. It had seemed like an eternity before Sarah replied but to my delight, I found out that Shehryar was still confined to his bed. While I knew I shouldn't have been taking delight in his illness, the excitement of attending another session with Professor Ismat overrode all that guilt. The night before class, I tossed and turned with these questions in my head. It was only after many perturbed hours that I was able to get some sleep.

* * *

On the day of our next session, I arrived early only to find that most of the students were already in their seats. The students excitedly chatted away, barely noticing my entrance. Sarah, as promised, had saved a seat for me right next to her.

“Hey, look who’s here!” she exclaimed as I walked in. I raised my eyebrows in surprise and smiled back.

“Good to see you too, Sarah,” I responded with a cheekiness in my voice. Before Sarah could respond, the door opened and Professor Ismat walked in.

A hush fell over the classroom. Ordinarily, professors usually had to spend at least a minute or two asking the class to settle down so we could start. But then again, this was different. This was Professor Ismat. We knew better than to mess around with our own Thatcher.

She kept her bag to the side and turned towards the class. She looked as elegant as always in a light gray dress and an emerald necklace.

“Good afternoon, children,” she said, taking a sip of coffee. “I’m delighted to see so many of you today,” she smiled, as she looked around the classroom. She was right. I had expected many students to drop out but if anything, the class felt even more packed today.

“So, who would like to build on Mahnoor’s brilliant work the other day and start us off today?” she asked. I glanced at Mahnoor to see a smile on her face.

Immediately about a dozen students raised their hands.

The professor called out on a student in the 3rd row who got up in her seat and pulled out her notes. She flipped a few pages and then began speaking. Professor Ismat meanwhile pulled a

chair to the side with her frail hands and took a seat.

“As you all are aware, Professor Ismat asked us to find out more about the Stockdale paradox,” said the student as she glanced at the professor to make sure she was on the right track. Professor Ismat responded with a quick smile, encouraging her to continue.

“The author Jim Collins in his research for the best-seller *Good to Great* came across an example of Admiral James Stockdale to illustrate a concept called the Stockdale paradox. Admiral James Stockdale was a former U.S. vice-presidential candidate and was the highest-ranking naval officer during the Vietnam War,” she continued.

“Held captive as a prisoner in Vietnam for over 7 years, Stockdale had no reason to believe that he would make it out alive. However, despite the grim reality, Stockdale found a way to stay alive through accepting the harshness of his reality alongside a balance of healthy optimism,” the student said as she paused to turn the page.

“This is what is today referred to as the Stockdale paradox, the concept of confronting the most brutal aspects of your existence while also having the belief that you will succeed at the end,” continued the student.

“To quote Admiral Stockdale, ‘You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end — which you can never afford to lose — with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.’” she added, before taking her seat.

The students turned their eyes towards Professor Ismat who took another sip and slowly got up from her comfortable position. After applauding the student’s effort, Professor Ismat turned her attention to the entire class.

“Students, if you have been thinking about what we discussed last time, it is natural to feel a bit disappointed,” said the Professor. You bet, I thought to myself.

“It’s hard recognizing and then accepting that in getting to where you are today, you played a role. It’s hard to accept that we created our current present circumstances by our past choices,” stressed Professor Ismat.

“The reality of your current situation may seem incredibly bleak. However, this discomfort is good. It tells you that you have more inside you that you still have to explore,” she added.

“But regardless of how you feel, there are hundreds if not thousands of individuals who have been in worse situations than you are but chose to make the most of their lives. They started much later in life, with little or no money in the bank. More often than not, they didn’t have any support. Many of them didn’t even have a quality education,” continued Professor Ismat as she took another sip.

“What they did have was a strong desire to make the most out of themselves. What they did have was the courage to confront the most brutal aspects of their existence and then take responsibility for it. The desire and courage to take full responsibility encouraged them to change their lives. If I take full responsibility for my life, then I, not someone else, has the power to change it for the better. It is an empowering feeling, isn’t it? It’s also scary, but no doubt empowering,” said Professor Ismat. She took a deep breath and smiled as if the idea reminded her of a personal experience.

“The reason I asked you to look up the Stockdale paradox is that it’s important to consider the brutal facts of your existence and not lie to yourself about where you are and what you lack. It takes a lot of courage to objectively look at who you’ve become

and what it will take to get to where you want to go. You've got to be brutally honest about where you are in life and what you lack. It is awful tasting medicine, but the patient needs it," she continued. I couldn't help but smile at this description.

"No one can do this assessment for you. You'll have to do it for yourself. And please, don't lie to yourself," stressed Professor Ismat.

"However, as you begin to take 100% responsibility for what happened to you and perhaps the role that you played in arriving where you today, while it is important to confront the most brutal facts about your existence, it is also absolutely important to have faith that in the end, you will persevere!" emphasized Professor Ismat with a vigor that was downright contagious.

"While you must have the discipline to confront the most brutal facts that you face, you must also have unwavering faith that you will find a way to prevail in the end. Whatever situation you are in, you can get yourself out of it. Tell yourself that you got yourself here, you can get yourself out, and most importantly, that you're now getting out! Learn the lesson and move on!" she added, as she pressed the clicker and projector screen lit up.

"What doesn't kill you, only makes you stronger."

Friedrich Nietzsche

20th Century Philosopher

"If where you are is rock-bottom, then you can only get better from here no?" asked Professor Ismat. "You are not your past. Remember that. Regardless of where you are today, remember that your current situation is not representative of your potential. It is only a representation of who you are today. It doesn't matter where you are as long as you know where you're going. That's the only thing that matters," she added.

It was enough. For the first time in two years, I finally took out my crumbled notepad to take some notes. Sarah gave me a wry smile.

What a powerful idea, I thought to myself; it doesn't matter where you are as long as you know where you're going. Realizing I didn't have a pen, I plucked one out from Sarah's case and began writing. She nodded her head and kept writing. Professor Ismat continued.

"Equipped with the knowledge that only you have the power to turn your life around, you can begin immediately. Today can be the first page of an entirely new chapter in your life if you choose to make it so. You can choose to become all that you can be, or you can choose to become less than you can be. No one else will do it for you. It will be hard and require a lot of courage on your part, but the journey will be worth it," said Professor Ismat as she pressed the clicker again.

"It takes courage, to endure the sharp pains of self-discovery rather than choose to take the dull pain of unconsciousness that would last the rest of our lives."

Marianne Williamson

Author

She took a sip before continuing.

"While the inertia to change can feel overwhelming, ask yourself a question: if not now, then when?" said Professor Ismat.

"Don't settle for anything but the absolute best for yourself! Imagine what is possible for you. You have one life and it belongs to you! You're not here on this earth to live up to someone else's expectations!" she emphasized.

"Your destiny is in your hands and you have the power to do something about it. It all starts with taking a hard look in

the mirror and courageously figuring out what it will take for you to turn your life around. You have to impartially reflect on what you have been doing thus far and then start doing more of what works and less of what doesn't. It's really that simple!" she exclaimed.

"Taking self-responsibility can be a transformative and empowering experience. Once you begin to accept the harsh reality that you have agency and you have consciously or unconsciously played a major role in shaping the life that you currently have, you can now begin to take control. If you were to disregard this principle force, you will continue to seek external forces to change your life for the better," she added.

"However, with this reality-check, you can develop the inner strength that you need because you recognize that when all is said and done, you are responsible. If things are to get better, you will have to get better," stressed Professor Ismat.

"The power to change is in your hands and your hands only. You can *now* do something about it; you can take action. It is often said that true change takes place when the pain of staying the same becomes greater than the pain of changing," added Professor Ismat as paused to take another sip.

I felt my phone vibrate. I chose to ignore it. Every word that Professor Ismat uttered was too precious to neglect. Besides, I was too hooked to her magnetism to even bother who was at the other end. Before proceeding, she pressed the clicker again to pull up another slide.

"The major key to your better future is you."

Jim Rohn

Motivational Speaker and Author

"You know, deep down, you know this stuff already," said Professor Ismat.

A student in the first row hesitatingly raised her hand.

“Professor, no one has ever taught me things such as micro-moments or taking 100% responsibility,” she said. I agreed with her.

“My child,” responded Professor Ismat with a smile. “Before I answer, love the vocabulary you’ve been using.’ The students laughed.

“I agree with you. No one probably did. Things aren’t as great as they should be, especially our education system. However, what I meant to say is that deep down, we all recognize that if things are going to change, we must first change,” she stressed.

“It is the lies that society tells us about what is possible for us that we must guard against. We are told to seek the answers to our problem out there when all that you seek is already inside you,” continued Professor Ismat.

“Our conditioning has strengthened and accumulated over years and years and it will take a lot of effort to change it. It will take a lot to change how we think about life and most importantly, how we choose to now respond to it. It will require repetition and persistence. It will require pain and suffering. However, you must be confident that your inherent greatness lies within you and not out there. Realizing your personal greatness is the answer to everything that you seek. You have to listen to the little voice inside you that guides you in the direction of your dreams,” she added.

“Professor,” continued the student, “I see what you mean. However, I’m afraid my friends and family don’t think that way.” Without pause, Professor Ismat approached the student’s seat and characteristically put her on the girl’s shoulder before speaking.

“Again, I agree with you. And it is okay to feel that way. I wish

it could be better but unfortunately, it is a battle that we must all face. As you embark on this journey of personal greatness, you have to recognize that your life belongs to you. You have to do what gives your life meaning and value, rather than what others think is right for you. When writing the story of your life, you have to make sure that no one else is holding the pen,” she stressed.

“You are first and foremost responsible to yourself. If you don’t take care of yourself and seek what gives your life meaning and value, who do you think will do it for you? Who will take care of you? You have to prioritize yourself. You owe this to yourself,” she added as the students hurriedly took notes.

“Have you ever seen a rocket take off? The most resistance and stress will be encountered during take-off. It’s the same with the people around you. These will be times when you tear down all your false beliefs and start consciously living your life. When you take conscious control of your micro-moments. Times when you will pay more importance to what you think about yourself than what others think,” she added before pulling up another slide.

“In the inner courtroom of my mind, mine is the only judgment that counts.”

Nathaniel Branden

Self-Esteem Expert and Author

Professor Ismat returned to the front of the classroom before she began speaking again.

“Now, before I move on, I want you to remember something. During our time together, I want you to be a student. I don’t want you to be a follower,” she paused before continuing.

“In every class that you go to, you’re told to blindly follow what is being taught. I am not here to question that logic; I

am sure there are reasons for why things are the way they are. However, I am responsible for this course and I want you to know that even though I've spent my entire life discovering and refining what I'm sharing with right now, I still want you to be critical of everything you hear," stressed Professor Ismat.

"Take what works for you and discard what doesn't. What I'm sharing has worked magnificently for myself and others but each of us is different and special. You need to decide for yourself what makes sense for you," she added.

The students nodded in unison.

"Think about the countless number of people who have come and gone in your life. Perhaps at the time, it seemed that nothing was more important than their presence. However, today, they might not even be a part of your life. And children, I will come and go too," she said with a smile before continuing.

"However, if there is someone that is still with you and you can be certain will be till your last breath, it's you. Why not then consider yourself as your highest priority and consider what you think valuable? That is one person you should listen to" she added as she pressed the clicker.

"It never ceases to amaze me: we all love ourselves more than other people but care more about their opinion than our own."

Marcus Aurelius

Roman Emperor

She took another sip before continuing.

"Remember all the crises you've lived through and survived. Have faith in yourself and realize that whatever comes your way, you will be able to handle it. Why not do the things that you want to do? If the fear of failure is preventing you from taking action, remember that you can fail at what you don't want probably just as much, if not more, at what you do want,"

she emphasized.

“How many of the people that you have around you today will be with you 5 years down the road? 20 years? 50 years? You don’t want to look back and regret having wasted away your life for people who may or may not be a part of your life,” she continued.

“There are millions of individuals who are living lives of *‘what if’* wondering what life would have been like if they had been courageous enough to truly recognize their greatness. They’ve settled for a life of mediocrity. If only they had chosen to listen to themselves instead of what others thought was best for them, they wouldn’t be living what the American poet Henry David Thoreau calls ‘lives of quiet desperation.’ Can you imagine how beautiful the world would be if everyone dared to follow their dreams?” asked Professor Ismat.

“You don’t want to look back and regret not giving in to your purpose. Find your purpose and then lose yourself in it. And don’t worry, we’ll talk about how to do that later,” she continued.

“A life of discipline lived in the pursuit of your dreams is better than a life of regret. The pain of a life of discipline is far less than the pain of a life of regret,” added the professor before pulling up another slide.

“What if you live your whole life only to discover it was wrong?”

Les Brown

Motivational Speaker

She paused for a few moments for the words to sink in and then continued.

“What if you live your whole life to realize that you didn’t accomplish what you could have? That you sold yourself short only because you were too concerned with what other people

may or may not think about you?” she asked.

“People you don’t know but more importantly, people who you *do* know. You are not responsible to anyone but yourself for pursuing the burning desire that is in your belly. Don’t ignore it. Don’t throw away your talents because of what other people will say, other people will say what they want to say regardless. And anyway, most people are more concerned with what is happening in their own lives to worry about what’s happening in yours. This is what the First Lady of the United States had to say about this,” continued Professor Ismat as she pressed the clicker. It was clear to the class that her presentation was timed to perfection.

“You wouldn’t worry so much about what others think of you if you realized how seldom they do.”

Eleanor Roosevelt

First Lady of the United States

“Do what gives your life meaning and value and don’t worry about what others think,” repeated Professor Ismat.

“Today, not tomorrow is the time to change. Your friends and family may be surprised by the changes they see in you but recognize that you’re doing it for yourself. You owe this to yourself. You can only control yourself, not what others choose to think about you. Don’t worry about what they think! Not everyone is meant to be a part of your life. Changing your life for the better is hard, but it is a price that you must be willing to pay if you are to discover what you can become!” she emphasized before continuing.

“For things to change, we must change. We can have much more than we’ve got because we can become much more than we are. The seeds of personal greatness lie within every one of us but unless we choose to take responsibility for harnessing

them they will lie dormant. This quote is often attributed to Mark Twain,” said the Professor as she pressed the clicker again. *“Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn’t do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.”*

“Regardless of what anyone might say or what you’ve been led to believe, there’s greatness within you. It doesn’t matter what you’ve done in the past; the potential for human greatness lies within all of us,” said Professor Ismat in a matter-of-fact tone.

“All of us were put on this planet to serve a purpose - a purpose that gives our lives meaning and value. We might have to spend our entire lives discovering that purpose but once we do, we must fully hand ourselves over to it,” she added.

As I glanced at my notes, I realized that I already had taken over 4 pages of notes. This was more than what I had managed to accumulate over the entire semester. Sarah, on her the other hand, had already filled a dozen or so pages. What a nerd, I thought to myself.

Professor Ismat put down her coffee mug and pressed the clicker again.

“You were designed for accomplishment, engineered for success, and endowed with the seeds of greatness.”

Zig Ziglar

Author and Speaker

When Professor Ismat was satisfied that everyone had read the quote, she pressed the clicker again.

“Never underestimate the power of dreams and the influence of the human spirit. We are all the same in this notion: The potential for greatness lives within each of us.”

*Wilma Rudolph
Olympic Champion*

“I share these quotes with you because I want you to recognize that these people are no different than you are,” continued Professor Ismat. “They’ve all had their journeys to complete and even today, despite having achieved ‘success’ in the eyes of the world, they are continuously working to develop themselves,” she added.

“You must recognize your worth! There is no one like you in the entire world!” she exclaimed enthusiastically.

“Really, there is no one else like you in over 7 billion people! Moreover, there never was another you before, and there never will be another you again! Your life matters and there is a reason and purpose why you are here,” she continued.

“I want to share a poem with you today that caught my attention,” said Professor Ismat as she pressed the clicker.

*Before you were born,
And were still too tiny for
The human eye to see,
You won the race for life
From among 250 million competitors.
And yet,
How fast you have forgotten
Your strength,
When your very existence
Is proof of your greatness.
You were born a winner,
A warrior,
One who defied the odds
By surviving the most gruesome
Battle of them all.*

*And now that you are a giant,
Why do you even doubt victory?
Against smaller numbers,
And wider margins?
The only walls that exist,
Are those you have placed in your mind.
And whatever obstacles you conceive,
Exist only because you have forgotten
What you have already
Achieved.
Suzy Kassem
American Writer*

As the class took notes, I couldn't help but feel something inside me begin to shift.

I don't know whether it was the professor's presence, the way she repeated certain phrases, or the quotes that she was sharing, but she was certainly having an impact on me. My earlier despondency began to fade away. I felt a sense of hope. It felt as if Professor Ismat was igniting a flame of optimism and purpose inside me that I hadn't felt in a long time. My rumination was interrupted by Professor Ismat's voice.

"You are the most valuable currency that you have. Regardless of whichever country you take this currency to, you will be able to reap rewards in accordance with how much you've invested in yourself," said Professor Ismat as she took a sip.

"You have gifts and talents inside of you that you're not even aware of. However, you and no one else must take the responsibility of developing your gifts. Again, don't be afraid of what others around you might think – you owe it to yourself to see what you can become. By not persisting to discover who you are, you are doing an injustice not just to yourself but the

entire world. You are doing an injustice not just to the people on this planet right now but all those who are yet to come!” stressed Professor Ismat as browsed through her notes.

“Before we proceed, can anyone tell me the richest place on earth?” she asked.

“America,” immediately responded a student sitting in the front.

“Saudi Arabia”, “Germany”, said a few other students.

“China!” said a student from the back. Without saying anything, Professor Ismat smiled and pressed the clicker.

“The richest place on earth is the graveyard because it is here that you will find all the hopes and dreams that were never fulfilled, the books that were never written, the songs that were never sung, the inventions that were never shared, the cures that were never discovered, all because someone was too afraid to take that first step, keep with the problem, or determined to carry out their dream.”

Les Brown

Motivational Speaker

“Not quite what you were all expecting, were you?” asked our 63-year-old professor with a childlike enthusiasm.

“The novelist George Eliot says that it is never too late to be what you might have been. The last chapter of your story hasn’t been written yet. It doesn’t matter what happened to you in the past; what matters is what you’re going to do about it! Make the rest of your life the best of your life! Think of it this way: your turnaround will be much more meaningful than if everything had been going your way!” she added.

A student raised their hand.

It was Afzaal, the oldest student in our class and perhaps the entire campus. From what I knew, Afzaal had dropped out of school due to a family emergency many years ago but after

being stuck in a low-paying job with no prospects for growth, he had decided to come back and finish his degree.

“Professor Ismat, my name is Afzaal Altamash. I want to firstly thank you for sharing all this with us today,” said Afzaal as Professor Ismat nodded.

“As you can see, I am much older than many of the students here. Would you say all this applies equally to me? I mean, I’m already in my 30s,” he added.

“Absolutely!” responded Professor Ismat without blinking. “Afzaal, I am in my 60s and I still believe there is so much more left for me to achieve! It doesn’t matter what your age is; if you would have known better, you would have done better. In fact, let me share something I came across a long time ago,” said Professor Ismat as Afzaal looked at her ardently.

“The author David J. Schwartz provides a powerful example in his book ‘The Magic of Thinking Big’ of how we often have more time than we think we do. He argues that the productive age of a healthy individual is from 20-70 years of his or her life. Wouldn’t you agree?” she asked before continuing.

Afzaal quickly nodded. Maybe a few years here and there but on the whole, it seemed reasonable.

“Great,” continued Professor Ismat. “Therefore, if you are 30 years old, do you realize that you still have a staggering 80% of your productive life left! Even if you’re 50 years old, you still have a wonderful 40% of your productive life ahead of you! It is never too late for you to start!” exclaimed Professor Ismat as a slow smile began to appear on Afzaal’s face.

I quickly did the Math in my head and was surprised to find that it all worked out. However, what surprised me more was Professor Ismat’s mental faculties at the age she was in.

I was 21, soon to turn 22. By these calculations, I still had

about 96% of my productive life ahead of me and here I was regretting wasting the past 20 years of my life! I'll be damned if I sit here feeling sorry, I thought to myself.

"You have a wonderful life waiting ahead of you," continued Professor Ismat. "Who knows who you can become? Who knows what you can achieve? Who can estimate the tremendous impact you can have on this world?" asked Professor Ismat before pulling up another slide in her characteristic style.

"It's time to start living the life you've imagined."

William James

American Philosopher and Psychologist

"Don't do an injustice to the world by not following through on the dreams that were given to you," added Professor Ismat. "As Les Brown suggests, all of us were given dreams for the very purpose of accomplishing those dreams. The only reason you see a dream is because at some level you believe it is possible for you. It is better to fail at something than to never try at all," said Professor Ismat as she pressed the clicker again.

*"For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: 'It might have been!'"*

John Greenleaf Whittier

Poet

"And when it comes to what others think, it is better to cut off ties with people who can't imagine a better you than try to seek their approval by fitting in. Don't compromise your greatness by settling and accepting things the way they are. This is what the author Nathaniel Branden had to say about this," continued Professor Ismat as the slide flicked.

"The greatest crime we commit against ourselves is not that we may deny or disown our shortcomings, but that we deny and disown our greatness. If our liabilities pose the problem of inadequacy, our

assets pose the challenge of responsibility.”

“Don’t short-change your greatness. Don’t be afraid to live your life,” said Professor Ismat as she pressed the clicker again. *“Life is too short to be little. You must enlarge your imagination and then act on it.”*

Benjamin Disraeli
British Prime Minister

As I read the quote, I began to realize that Professor Ismat seemed to be deliberately repeating certain words and phrases. It didn’t take me long to figure out why. Our previous conditioning had been so strong that it would take repetition and massive action to recondition ourselves in the direction of our dreams. The journey wasn’t going to be easy, but Professor Ismat was starting to plant the right seeds.

“Children, if fitting in was working, it would have worked a long time ago,” continued Professor Ismat. “The people who truly love you will accept you and what you choose to do. You have a duty to develop your gifts. Take a moment to answer these questions by Les Brown,” said Professor Ismat as she pulled up the next slide.

“Imagine if you will being on your deathbed – and standing around your bed – the ghosts of the ideas, the dreams, the abilities, the talents given to you by life. And that you for whatever reason never acted on those ideas. You never pursued that dream. You never used those talents. We never saw your leadership, you never used your voice, you never wrote that book. And there they are standing around your bed looking at you with large angry eyes saying ‘we came to you, and only you could have given us life! Now we must die with you forever.’

The question is – if you die today, what ideas, what dreams, what books, what music, what leadership, what voice, what abilities, what

talents, what gifts, would die with you?"

I glanced across the room to see Hassan's eyes glued to the projector screen. As the students were going through the slide, Professor Ismat placed her file back in her bag. Then, satisfied that we were done, she pressed the clicker again and continued.

"This is the last slide for today. I want you to honestly ask yourself this question over the weekend. Spend some time with it," she stressed. I decided to continue taking notes.

"For next week, I want you to look up something called the growth mindset," she continued, sliding her bag across on her shoulder. "You've had a lot impressed upon you today, haven't you?" asked Professor Ismat with a warm smile.

A few of the students laughed.

"Fortunately, you have the weekend to sink it all in. As for those who reached out to me, I will try to get back to you as soon as I can. Meanwhile, take care and I'll see you all next week," she said as she picked up her mug and elegantly walked out of the classroom.

Once I finally finished writing, I reoriented myself to look at the final slide on the screen, curious what was going to keep me up this weekend.

"How long are you going to wait before you demand the best for yourself?"

Epictetus

Greek Stoic Philosopher

A Lesson on Focus

On the morning of the next class, I didn't need an alarm clock to wake me up. If anything, I had been thinking continuously about what Professor Ismat had said.

Success and failure were not giant events; they were the eventual consequence of what I did or didn't do every day. I began to identify certain patterns in my choices as well as the small things I was doing everyday that were affecting my beliefs about myself. It was those micro-moments that were shaping my life, day after day. I began to recognize that if I kept doing the same things, I was going to continue getting the same results.

I tried to apply the concepts to my Dad's life, and it made sense.

Dad was never a fan of personal development seminars or adult education; he was content with how things were and he had accepted his life for what it was. He hated what he was doing but he continued to do it. Life didn't change for him. Even my best friend Furqan had decided not to go to school but run a grocery store and true to Professor Ismat's word, his

life hadn't changed that much.

However, while all of this perplexed me, it also gave me hope. At least I was beginning to see what I could do. If other people could do it, I could do it too. If it was possible for them, it was possible for me.

As part of this week's reflection paper, we were required to record our predominant thoughts. By the time it was done, I was surprised to see how much I had written. I didn't realize but I had far exceeded the page limit. There was a burning desire to let it all out. There was a burning desire to identify everything inside me that was holding me back. There were many jumbled voices that compelled me to act in a certain way but very few of those voices actually helped me in achieving my goals. I had to stand guard at the door of my mind and take charge of my thinking.

But as I became more conscious of my thoughts, I began to recognize the daily struggle of standing up to the disempowering voices in my head and choosing to believe in myself. It wasn't going to be easy.

On the morning of the next class, I hurried out of bed and caught the bus to make sure I wasn't late. According to Sarah, there had been so much demand for Professor Ismat's class that the Academic team had decided to reschedule the class for a morning time slot. A larger classroom had been allotted to facilitate the increased demand.

Instead of staying at home coordinating over email, I waited for over an hour outside the Registration Office and refused to leave before I got a seat. I had to make sure I got the course; this was too important to leave to chance. My persistence paid off when after multiple exchanges with the administrator, I finally became a 'registered' student in Professor Ismat's class.

* * *

“Hey! Want some coffee?” I heard a familiar voice as I was about to enter the classroom. It was Sarah, holding out a cup of coffee.

Well, she is pretty great, I thought to myself. If it wasn’t for her, I would have never even considered this course.

“Yes, thank you! Ready to go?” I asked excitedly as I held open the door for her.

“You bet!” she responded with a smile as we both entered the classroom.

* * *

“Good morning!” said Professor Ismat with an energy that was contagious.

Unlike many other morning classes, this class was full. It seemed like Professor Ismat had struck a chord.

“Today, I want to talk about focusing on the right things before we move on to the growth mindset. A good place to start would be to see what the Roman Stoic Philosopher Seneca said hundreds of years ago,” continued Professor Ismat as she pressed the clicker and the projector screen lit up.

“He suffers more than necessary, who suffers before it is necessary.”

We suffer more often in imagination than in reality.”

Professor Ismat picked up her coffee mug and continued.

“There’s a tendency for all of us to keep thinking about the past and things that didn’t go right. We think about what someone said or how we responded, or even how we might have done things differently if we could go get the opportunity again,” said Professor Ismat as she paused to take a sip.

“Often, we focus too much energy focusing on the wrong

things. As the author Earl Nightingale suggests, the amount of time we spend on different worries falls somewhere along the following lines,” said Professor Ismat as she pulled up another slide.

Things that never happen: 40%. That is, 40% of the things you worry about will never occur anyway.

Things over and past that can't be changed by all the worry in the world: 30%.

Needless worries about our health: 12%.

Petty, miscellaneous worries: 10%.

Real, legitimate worries: 8%. Only 8% of your worries are worth concerning yourself about. Ninety-two percent are pure fog with no substance at all.

She took another sip before continuing.

“According to the author Bob Proctor, while all the greatest leaders in the world virtually disagree on everything, they agree on this one thing. They agree that we undoubtedly become what we think about!” emphasized Professor Ismat.

“The National Science Foundation reported that the average person has about 12,000 to 60,000 thoughts per day. Of those, 80% are negative and 95% are repetitive thoughts. Can you imagine the impact your negative thinking can have on our subconscious mind? From worrying about what someone said to us to how something might shape up, we spend more time dwelling in the realms of negativity rather than focusing on the things we want to achieve,” said Professor Ismat with a concerned expression.

“As we grow older, we often become our worst critics. We spend so much time with ourselves that we see our flaws as clearly as night and day. If you don't build up your self-esteem, who else will? The world is too busy to be concerned about

the problems in your life - most of them don't care and the others are glad it's you that's facing those problems rather than them. You have to be your greatest supporter and motivator; you have to be someone who will always be there when times get tough. Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not with what someone else is today. Be your own cheerleader. You have a responsibility to keep your mind fixed on the things that inspire you and keep you in the realm of positive thinking," she continued.

"Our conscious mind is a wonderful mechanism. However, it is also something that needs to be properly programmed. If we let it wander, we will often find it roaming amidst self-doubt, fear, and negativity. You will often have to fight these negative tendencies and clear your mind to make room for positivity. What you listen to or think about has a tremendous impact on your conscious mind and eventually your life. Could you keep dumping negativity and self-doubt into your conscious mind and expect to live a happy, positive and fulfilling life? Certainly not!" she exclaimed.

"Always try to stay in the realm of positive thinking. To change your life, you must first change your mind. This does not imply that you ignore the problems that you face in life but rather that you have a self-reinforcing belief that regardless of whatever you face in life, you will be okay. You have made it so far despite all the challenges you faced - there is no reason to believe that you won't make it moving forward. Having this belief is also the root of self-confidence; you know you will be alright no matter you're your current situation is. Spend some time every day on positive affirmations and visualization - the utility of the exercise is in the reinforcement it will provide your subconscious mind alongside giving it ideas for attaining

whatever goal it is that you've set for yourself," continued Professor Ismat.

"How you talk to yourself and what you say about yourself is essential on your journey; you have to love and respect yourself before others can love and respect you. You have to expect great things of yourself and believe in your potential before others can do the name. Finance Gurus will tell you about the transformative power of compound interest; can you imagine how your self-talk day in, and day out has affected and shaped who you are and how you think? It shapes almost everything you think and do! The cumulative effect of your beliefs and actions have made you the person you are and the habits that you've developed. Look at what the writer Samuel Johnson wrote," said Professor Ismat as she pulled up the next slide.

"The chains of habit are too weak to be felt until they are too strong to be broken."

"You have to develop positive thinking like a muscle. The more you challenge yourself, the more you will grow. The more you visualize, the more clearly you'll see what you need to do to get to where you want to go," she continued.

"Imagination is more important than reality,' as Einstein rightly pointed out. Imagine the kind of life you want to live; not only will it counter the negativity and pessimism that tries to enter your mind, but it will also give you a positive ideal to strive towards!" said Professor Ismat as she paused to take another sip.

"Now, instead of wasting time on what we have no control over, we should instead concentrate our attention on things we can influence. I know it's difficult, but can you imagine the worry and stress you would be relieved from if you only focused on important things? If you told yourself that enough

is enough?” asked Professor Ismat with a smile.

“Learning to differentiate between things you have control over and things you don’t is one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself. This perspective is also demonstrated in the well-known serenity prayer by the American Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr,” continued Professor Ismat as she pressed the clicker again.

“Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

“When we focus on the things we cannot control, we needlessly add to our worries and disturb what the ancient Stoics would refer to as tranquility,” added Professor Ismat before taking another sip.

“In his wonderful book, ‘A Guide to the Good Life’, Author William B. Irvine provides an interpretation of how the ancient Stoics would put this to use in today’s world. He argues that the kind of control we have over things can be broken down into a trichotomy,” said Professor Ismat as she moved on to the next slide.

- 1) *Things over which we have complete control (this includes the goals we set for ourselves, our values, our character, and our opinions). We have the agency to decide these things for ourselves.*
- 2) *Things over which we have no control at all (this includes things like the weather). Since these things are outside our control, it would be unwise to waste time on them.*
- 3) *Things over which we have some control (this includes aspects such as winning a tennis match or getting that coveted job). We can exert some degree of control, but external aspects might also be at play.*

“It is worth considering the third branch of the trichotomy,” continued Professor Ismat.

“Even though we’re not certain that we can win the match, we can hope and through our efforts try to influence the outcome; we, therefore, have some but not complete control. As a result, the Stoic will be careful in setting their goals as they realize that their tranquility could be disturbed if the goal for them is to win the match,” emphasized Professor Ismat.

“However, this is where the important distinction comes in; a Stoic will be careful to set internal rather than external goals. Therefore, the goal of the Stoic would be not to win the tennis match, over which they have limited control, but to play to the best of their ability, over which they have complete control. The goal of the Stoic would not be to get that job; the goal of the Stoic would be to prepare for the interview process as best as they can,” she continued.

“Internalizing goals in this manner gives you control over events. It helps you maintain your tranquility, and more often than not if you give your very best, you end up realizing the external success that you seek. Another way to understand this principle is in the words of Helen Hayes, an American actress whose career spanned 80 years and who was one of 15 people to have won an Emmy, a Grammy, an Oscar, and a Tony Award,” said Professor Ismat as she pulled up the next slide.

“My mother drew a distinction between achievement and success. She said that ‘achievement is the knowledge that you have studied and worked hard and done the best that is in you. Success is being praised by others, and that’s nice, too, but not as important or satisfying. Always aim for achievement and forget about success.”

Professor Ismat took a sip of her coffee before she continued.

“However, as you go about setting goals for yourself, it is worth considering a basic tenet of human nature: hedonistic adaptation or what is also referred to as the hedonistic treadmill.

This is our tendency to swiftly return to a relatively stable level of happiness despite major life changes or positive or negative events. This means that despite whatever goals you set for yourself, once you reach them, you will strive for something else! There never will be enough!” exclaimed Professor Ismat as the students leaned forward in their seats.

“The author Louis Binstock in his book “The Power of Maturity” provides various examples of this basic human tendency to always want more and to add conditions to our happiness. One example he provides is of a mother who believes that she’ll be happy once her child gets out of elementary school and for a certain period, she is. The next belief is that she’ll be happy once the child graduates from high school and for a certain period, she is. The same process is followed with her child’s college graduation, their marriage, or the birth of their first child when she becomes a grandmother. She falls into this trap of seeking happiness in the next big thing instead of realizing that her true happiness lies between these special blessings!” continued Professor Ismat.

“If you think about your own life, you will unfortunately see a similar pattern playing out. If you believe that you will be happy when you achieve success or the next big thing you’re striving for, you are walking down this hedonistic path,” stressed Professor Ismat.

“Do not tie your happiness to your success; your happiness is your responsibility! It is not a result of where you live, the job you have, or the clothes you wear, but who you are as a person. Tie your happiness to progress and the person that you become. The seeds of happiness are inside yourself. It is a personal matter and ultimately, your life is a result of what you make of it. This is how Mark Twain put it,” added Professor

Ismat as she pressed the clicker.

“You are about as happy as you make up your mind to be.”

“It is vital to set goals and see big dreams for yourself. However, take a moment to be grateful for what you currently have and as the ancient Stoics would put it, think about how you would feel if you lost what you currently possess,” continued Professor Ismat.

“Despite your current circumstances, there are millions of individuals who would do anything to have the life that you have. Millions! Millions like you and me! Can you imagine how they feel when they see you wasting what you have? Don’t let the things you want make you forget the things you have. You have enough and more importantly, you are enough,” stressed Professor Ismat as she pressed the clicker.

“A man is as wretched as he has convinced himself that he is.”

Seneca

Roman Stoic Philosopher

“William Shakespeare, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world’s greatest dramatist has a timeless line in the play Hamlet,” continued Professor Ismat as she pulled up the next slide.

“For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”

“The way you see your life greatly influences what you do. Be careful with how you talk to yourself and the image you have of yourself,” she added as she pressed the clicker again.

“A man is but the product of his thoughts and what he thinks, he becomes.”

Mahatma Gandhi

Indian Lawyer and Anti-Colonial Nationalist

“A man is what he thinks about all day.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

American Essayist and Philosopher

“Be careful of what you allow yourself to think; it may be the single most important factor in determining your destiny. According to the Harvard psychologist William James, our greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another,” emphasized Professor Ismat as she took out her water bottle and took a few sips.

“Does this all make sense so far?” she asked. The students nodded their heads in unison.

“Good,” continued Professor Ismat with a smile.

“Now, where’s the person who was concerned whether we could get smarter?” said the professor with a big smile. Zeeshan meekly raised his hand.

“Well, you are in for a ride today!” exclaimed Professor Ismat as Zeeshan responded with a half smile.

“So, who wants to start us off with the growth mindset?” she continued.

More than a dozen students raised their hands. Professor Ismat picked a student towards the front.

“Thank you,” said the student as he stood up with his notes and started reading.

“In her revolutionary book ‘Mindset’, Carol Dweck discerns between two attitudes: the fixed mindset and the growth mindset. People with a fixed mindset believe that talent is everything that matters. They believe that intelligence is static. They believe that their qualities are carved in stone and they cannot change as individuals. People with a growth mindset desire to appear smart and therefore avoid challenges that might make them seem otherwise,” said the boy as he turned a page.

I was reminded of my dislike for Calculus; was it because the subject was pointless or was it because I was afraid to admit

that I didn't know?

"People with a fixed mindset give up easily, consider effort to be fruitless, and ignore negative feedback. Other peoples' success threatens them. They believe that they're failures if they're not talented at something and since they believe they're largely unchangeable, they never try to improve themselves. This deterministic view of the world implies that such individuals plateau early and achieve far less than what they're capable of achieving," he continued.

"In contrast, people with a growth mindset believe that they can cultivate their basic qualities through effort. They believe that their intelligence can be developed. While these individuals believe that people vary significantly in terms of aptitude and skill, they also understand that everyone can develop and grow as a result of continued application and experience. They have a desire to learn and grow and therefore they embrace challenges that will help them become better. They embrace effort as a path to mastery and persist in the face of challenges," he added, pausing to make sure everyone was following.

"Criticism helps people with a growth mindset learn what they lack, and other peoples' success inspires them. This growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts and as a result individuals with a growth mindset reach ever-higher levels of achievement," concluded the boy as he sat down in his seat to small applause from the class.

Professor Ismat took a moment to appreciate the boy's effort and then turned her attention towards the entire class.

"My children, your attitude towards yourself might be the most important factor in your success. Your attitude and choices will determine the kind of life you live," she said as

she moved to the next slide.

“The greatest discovery of my generation is that a human being can alter his life by altering his attitudes.”

William James

American Psychologist

“We can’t outgrow the limits we impose on ourselves. Your view of yourself, your beliefs, and your values influence almost everything that you do,” continued Professor Ismat as she pressed the clicker again.

“Success or failure in business is caused more by the mental attitude even than by mental capacities.”

Walter Scott

Historical Novelist

“As the industrialist Henry Ford used to say, if you think you can, or you think you can’t, you’re right. Believe that it is possible for you and go for it,” she continued.

“Do not confuse talent with skill. You are not fixed. Your potential is not fixed. Don’t be afraid to take on a challenge for fear of failure. If you read Dweck’s book, and I recommend that you do, you will find dozens of other examples of individuals who passed up opportunities that would in the long-term improve their life success. These individuals had a limited view of themselves and their potential and therefore they stopped attacking the things they were afraid of. As a result, it almost became a self-fulfilling prophecy. These individuals never faced their fear, which is nothing but ‘False Evidence Appearing Real’, and therefore it kept tugging at them to the point that they became paralyzed,” continued Professor Ismat.

“According to Dweck, we might have different mindsets in different areas of life and whatever mindset we have in an area will guide us in that area. It is not difficult to see

how drastically different the consequences of thinking your intelligence and personality as something that can be developed will be as opposed to believing that they're fixed and deep-seated!" exclaimed Professor Ismat.

"Develop a growth mindset and see the challenges you face in life as opportunities for becoming better. Understand that you are on a learning curve and you will only get better from here if you let yourself! Excellence takes time. And most importantly children, as I said earlier, do not confuse talent and skill," she stressed before moving on.

"How many of you know the actor Will Smith?" asked Professor Ismat.

Almost every student in the class raised their hands. We loved Will.

Professor Ismat smiled.

"Wonderful! I hope his words will strongly resonate with you then," said Professor Ismat as she switched to the next slide.

"The separation of talent and skill is one of the greatest misunderstood concepts for people who are trying to excel, who have dreams and who want to do things. Talent you have naturally, skill is only developed by hours and hours and hours of beating on your craft.

I've never really viewed myself as particularly talented, where I excel is ridiculous, sickening, work ethic. You know while the other guys are sleeping, I'm working, while the other guy's eating, I'm working. I realized very young that there's no easy way around it, no matter how talented you are your talent is going to fail you if you're not skilled, if you don't study, if you don't work really hard and dedicate yourself to being better every single day you'll never be able to communicate with people with your artistry the way that you want."

“You are on your own learning journey, no one else’s!” emphasized Professor Ismat as she continued. “You don’t need to compare yourself to others. Don’t let your mistakes or the desire to appear perfect stop you from challenging yourself,” she added.

Satisfied that the students were done taking notes, Professor Ismat pulled up another slide.

“It does not matter how slowly you go as long as you do not stop.”

Confucius

Chinese Philosopher

“Surprisingly, once you’re successful, people rarely remember your failures. People don’t believe it when I show them this,” paused Professor Ismat before pressing the clicker again.

“I’ve missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I’ve been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.”

Michael Jordan

Professional Basketball Player

“The master has failed many more times than the beginner has even tried; failures are inevitable on your path to personal greatness. You’ve got to keep at it. Care more than normal and more than necessary about the things that you want, and you will be successful,” continued Professor Ismat.

“You will fail time and again but in those failures, you will find the power to succeed and grow. Your failures will either make you or break you,” continued Professor Ismat as she pressed the clicker.

“The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.”

Ernest Hemingway

Novelist

As the students were taking notes, I glanced in Professor Ismat's direction. For a moment, I felt as if she looked right into my eyes as if emphasizing that what she was now going to say would be especially useful for me.

"Another thing that I wanted to talk to you about was the voices you hear inside your head," continued Professor Ismat.

I kept my pen down and gave her my full attention.

"It is certainly difficult to face reality. Often, we are our worst critics; we don't need someone else to do it for us, do we?" she asked.

"We keep punishing ourselves long after something has happened even though it serves no valuable purpose in our lives. As Thomas Paine put it, our greatest enemies, the ones we fight most often, are within," emphasized Professor Ismat before continuing.

"Why do you punish yourself over and over again for a mistake you carried out once? Do you think that is fair? Don't be too harsh on yourself; remember that you are human after all. Many talented people have wasted their talents only because of self-doubt! And many people don't know this but there is no person in the entire world who does not have such feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt!" she emphasized.

"Develop compassion for your human defects - you're never going to be perfect! If you would have known better, you would have done better!" she paused, taking a sip of her coffee.

I raised my head to see Afzaal intensely taking notes.

"Sure, there have been times when you've been unwise. However, have you never been wise? I doubt it. Don't shortchange yourself - you have all you need to succeed inside you. There are many voices in our heads that shape the way we

act daily. They may be shaped by the people you grew up with or the life experiences you've had. Learn to recognize whose voice it is and the message that it's giving you. Recognize it for what it is: just a voice," stressed Professor Ismat.

"You can decide whether to follow it or not. You are in control. Actively challenge any negative beliefs that you have about yourself and realize the power that you now have," added Professor Ismat.

Before proceeding, she paused for a moment and took a deep breath as if the thought reminded her of her own past.

I sensed pain in those deep brown eyes but more importantly, I sensed strength and resilience. Suddenly, with a big smile on her wrinkled face, she pressed the clicker to pull up the next slide and began to recite the poem as if she knew it by heart.

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.
In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.
Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.
It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.
William Ernest Henley*

Poet

“Children, it’s time to leave the baggage of the past and redesign a new life for yourself!” she continued. “Accept who you are today and then take responsibility for who you want to become tomorrow. Be mindful of your self-talk; does it hinder you from achieving your goals or is it building your confidence and self-belief? Your current situation says nothing about the trapped potential inside you; it only tells you where you are today! It does not indicate what you can become! The possibilities for you are endless!” she emphasized.

“Your failure does not define you. Sure you have failed, but so has every successful person on this planet! Many more times than you can imagine! Separate who you are from what you’ve done. Only you know what you can become and that in itself is an unending challenge: to discover what you can possibly become!” continued Professor Ismat.

“You are truly the most precious commodity on the planet. You have untold potential that no one can bring out but you. Just because you’ve had a few bad chapters doesn’t mean it has to be the full story,” said Professor Ismat as she paused to take another sip.

“Today, you can start writing an entirely new chapter in your life. You do not have to let the past hold you back. Forgive yourself and move on. Be kind to yourself. If you would have known better, you would have done better. As it’s often said: writing the story of your life, don’t let anyone else hold the pen. You don’t want to look back 50 years down the road and regret not pursuing what gave your life meaning and value. Don’t wait for tomorrow, start today!” she said excitedly, before pressing the clicker again.

“Do not act as if you were going to live ten thousand years. Death

hangs over you."

Marcus Aurelius

Roman Emperor

"You might feel that you don't deserve success. After all, you may be someone others know to be mediocre," continued Professor Ismat.

"You may be someone who makes the same mistakes repeatedly. You may be someone who has unnecessary arguments with your loved ones who in turn make you feel ordinary and average. It might feel that you require another person's expressed approval to pursue excellence. However, success by its very virtue requires stepping out of line and away from the pack! This is how Thoreau put it," said Professor Ismat as she gave Hassan a warm smile and pulled up the next slide.

"If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."

A small smile began to appear on Hassan's face.

"According to Immanuel Kant, one of the world's most influential philosophers, we have a duty to ourselves to develop our natural talents. He imagines a world where no one developed their talents and settled for mediocrity - would that be a world anyone would want to live in?" she asked.

The students shook their heads.

"In the words of Dr. Keith DeGreen, a preeminent author and speaker, while you may encounter others who you believe are more deserving of success, you need to recognize that no one is inherently more deserving of success than another. You might think that others are smarter, younger, more educated, or better looking. However, don't shortchange yourself. You have a claim to success as much as anyone else does!" she stressed.

“Dr. Keith further suggests that your success is not measured relative to what others around you are doing. It doesn’t matter what they’re accomplishing, saying, or doing. It doesn’t matter how amazing they are. Your success is merely the extent to which you utilize the potential that you possess. How about that as a comparison?” she asked.

“All your imperfections are simply a part of your Personal Potential Package and make you no less deserving of success. It is merely a part of the total you. We are by nature imperfect and therefore the results we obtain are going to be imperfect as well! However, imperfect results are much better than no results at all! I pulled up one of his quotes for you all,” continued Professor Ismat as she pressed the clicker.

“The characteristics of others remain irrelevant to your success.

While the tendency to compare ourselves to others may be overwhelming, it is not against them we compete. It is only our tendency not to utilize all the potential we possess against which we must constantly fight.

Success is not something that must be deserved or earned. It is more an inherent right - an inherent responsibility. The only qualification for success is that you be you, that you utilize whatever combination of talent you possess to the fullest extent possible.”

Professor Ismat continued.

“Don’t wait for anyone’s permission to start your journey. Don’t spend your life waiting for that big break. Challenge yourself when such negative thinking begins to take over. You are not destined for mediocrity. You must take control of your life instead of letting it go to waste. All the answers you seek are already inside you. We don’t imagine the things we cannot accomplish. We already have the potential inside us. As the author Napoleon Hill put it, whatever the mind of man or

woman can conceive and believe, he or she can achieve!” said Professor Ismat with a smile.

“We all recognize that it is always easier to put off things until tomorrow. The world is filled with people who keep putting things off and never accomplish anything. These might be the same people who delight in your imperfections,” she said, shaking her head disapprovingly.

“However, all that is asked of you is that you do your best, imperfect though it may be. You might be scared to start for the fear that you won’t be perfect or that the cost of change is too great, and that’s okay. Before a speaker delivers a speech that is worth listening to, she delivers several that aren’t. Before an author writes a book that is worth reading, she writes several that aren’t. It is a part of the process and the price you must pay! If you don’t pay the price now, you might have to pay twice later,” emphasized Professor Ismat.

“You have to take the leap and create your circumstances, for now is the only time that we have,” continued Professor Ismat as she pulled up another slide.

“I don’t believe in circumstances. The people who get on in this world are the people who get up and look for the circumstances they want, and, if they can’t find them, make them.”

George Bernard Shaw

Playwright

“Children, the future is promised to no one. Start rebuilding your life today. The potential for you is unlimited!” she continued.

“I will show you our last quote of the day and then we will end today’s class. A few of you have requested slides and I will be uploading them afterwards,” she said as she quickly took a note in her journal.

“For next week, I want you to read up on Jim Carrey’s wonderful story. Till then, take care of yourselves and I look forward to reading your reflection papers,” said Professor Ismat as she pulled up the next slide to end the session.

“You can’t change the past. You can’t even change the future, in the sense that you can only change the present one moment at a time, stubbornly, until the future unwinds itself into the stories of our lives.”

Larry Wall

Author

A Lesson on Belief

“Hassan?” Professor Ismat called out as she put her purse down.

“Yes Professor, I’m here,” replied a surprisingly confident voice from the corner.

Hassan stood up in his seat, picked up his notes from the desk, and walked to the front of the classroom where Professor Ismat was standing.

“Students, Hassan volunteered to share with us Jim Carrey’s story,” said Professor Ismat as she gave Hassan a warm smile. “As you requested, I have added the slides to my deck,” she continued, handing over the clicker to Hassan and heading to sit in his seat. I had never heard Hassan deliver a presentation, so I was naturally curious how this was going to play out.

Everyone turned their eyes to Hassan. For a minute, I thought he would fumble. A few seconds passed. Nothing happened.

We looked at the Professor to see whether she would do something. She refused to intervene and kept looking at Hassan with a confident smile.

Hassan looked down for a moment, raised his head, and then

smiled. It felt as if he had finally come unto his own. With a renewed sense of confidence, he raised his notes in front of him and began to read.

“James Eugene Carrey,” said Hassan clearing his throat.

His voice was calm and confident.

“James Eugene Carrey, otherwise known as Jim Carrey, is a Canadian American actor, comedian, writer, and artist who first gained acclaim for playing lead roles in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*, *The Mask*, and *Dumb and Dumber*. Today, Carrey has countless awards to his name. He’s considered the epitome of what’s funny in American culture, shaping countless narratives with his incredibly popular roles,” added Hassan as he paused to ask the class a question.

“How many of you first heard about Jim Carrey because of *The Mask*?” he asked.

A few dozen hands shot up, giving Hassan the confidence to continue.

“Good. However, most of us don’t know what it took for Carrey to get to that point. Not many people are aware that in his early years at school, Carrey was quiet and didn’t have many friends. He was kind of like me, you know,” he added with a smile, not at all apologetic for who he was.

There was a sense of inner confidence in Hassan that I had never witnessed before.

“Growing up in poverty, Carrey was forced to get an after-school factory job at the age of 12. When he was 14, his father lost his job and his family had to live in a Volkswagen van on a relative’s lawn. According to Carrey, his father’s failure taught him a valuable lesson,” continued Hassan, pressing the clicker hoping it would work.

The projector screen lit up.

“You can fail at what you don’t want, so you might as well take a chance on doing what you love.”

Confident that the class was following him, Hassan turned to the next page of his notes and continued.

“The actor we know today actually did multiple stints as a security guard and janitor. However, he didn’t let this dampen his dreams. Carrey relentlessly pursued his dream of becoming a comedian in Toronto despite the challenges that he continued to encounter along the way,” added Hassan.

“Moving to Los Angeles to follow his dreams, Carrey was penniless. However, he saw these obstacles as challenges that were testing his resolve. He would drive up to the top of Mulholland Drive in LA every night and visualize what we wanted for himself as an actor. In a 1997 interview with Oprah Winfrey, Carrey shared his approach to dealing with this adversity,” continued Hassan, pressing the clicker again.

“I would visualize things coming to me that I wanted. And I had nothing at that time, but it just made me feel better, at that time all it really was, was kind of just, making me feel better. I would drive home and think ‘well I do have these things, and they’re out there, I just don’t have a hold of them yet, but they’re out there.”

Satisfied that the students were following him, Hassan continued.

“In 1992, Carrey wrote himself a check for \$10 million dating it three years in advance for ‘acting services rendered’. Keeping it in his wallet as a reminder, Carrey sincerely believed in his vision and his dream,” added Hassan as he paused and turned to what seemed to be the last page of his notes.

“Eventually, Carrey’s persistence and determination paid off when on Thanksgiving 1995, Carrey received \$10 million for the box office hit *Dumb and Dumber*. Since then, Carrey

has gone on to win various awards - People's Choice, Golden Globes, and Teen Choice Awards just to name a few," concluded Hassan, as he folded the notes in his hand and made his way towards his seat.

To his surprise and my own, the entire class started applauding. Professor Ismat got up and patted him on the back for a job well done. She took the clicker from Hassan and moved to her usual position at the front of the classroom.

"Children, the reason I asked you to learn about Jim Carrey's story is not to impress you but to impress upon you that you can do whatever it is that you want to do. You need to recognize the power of your capacity to dream and achieve the goals you set for yourself. Remember what I said, all your dreams can come true, but only and only if you have the courage to pursue them," emphasized Professor Ismat before continuing.

"Carrey is only one among thousands of individuals who chose to stick to their dream long enough without giving up. They knew that what they were doing brought their life meaning and value and therefore, what the world thought about them or their work didn't matter. It was a personal responsibility to themselves that these individuals sought to fulfill. As you embark on your own personal journeys, you will have to believe in yourself" she paused, as she took a sip of water.

"Carrey chose to go ahead and believe in himself even when things weren't right. And guess what? They never will be. You will never be perfect. It will never be perfect. The fact is that regardless of whatever we do, where we do it, or when we choose to start, we will never do it perfectly. When you want something in life, you cannot wait for things to be just right. Things will never be ideal," stressed Professor Ismat.

“You have to set a dream for yourself and then do what you can with what you have to make your dreams a possibility. As we discussed, all we can do is our best, imperfect as it may be. It is much better to try and reach an imperfect result than to not attempt at all. This is what President Theodore Roosevelt had to say,” continued Professor Ismat as she pressed the clicker.

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

A girl in the first row raised her hand and the professor signaled her to continue.

“Professor, how do I know what it is that I can achieve?” she asked earnestly.

The students leaned forward in their seats to pay attention to what Professor Ismat was going to respond. Professor Ismat smiled for a moment and then continued.

“That’s a very insightful question and a wonderful transition to what I want to talk about next. How do you know what’s expected of you?” she asked, pausing for added emphasis.

“To the best of my ability, I can tell you that all that is expected of you is that you do the best that you can do. No one, and I repeat, no one can ask any more of you but that you do your

best. And my child, only you know what your best is. That is something that you have to figure out on your own,” she added as the students took notes.

Professor Ismat pressed the clicker.

“All you can do is all you can do and all you can do is enough. But make sure you do all you can do.”

Art Williams

American Billionaire

I continued to expeditiously take notes as Professor Ismat paused to take another sip. All I can do is all I can do, and all I can do is enough, I thought to myself.

“You need to develop the everyday courage to see failure in the eye day in and day out and keep pushing forward. If you change your attitude, you will see that every failure has in it the seed of an equal or greater benefit. I want to repeat, all your dreams can come true if you have the courage to pursue them. Even the Bible teaches us the value of having faith,” she added as she pulled up another slide.

“You must have the faith to call for those things that be not as though they were.”

“Find something that you can contribute to. Find something you can make a difference in because you can. Figure out what you’re called to do on Earth and then do it. Believe that all your dreams can come true regardless of all the obstacles that you face. These challenges are nothing but building blocks on your journey that will make you a much stronger person in the pursuit of your dreams,” stressed Professor Ismat.

“Now some of you may ask how long you have to work to achieve success or as I like to call it, personal greatness,” she said with a smile.

“Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian lawyer and anti-colonial na-

tionalist who brought the mighty British Empire to its knees, once said that you should live as if you were to die tomorrow and you should learn as if you were to live forever! The journey for personal greatness is an ongoing process; it never ends!” exclaimed Professor Ismat as she paused to take another sip.

“Despite all the ideas you come across during our time together, it will not change your life permanently. It will put you on the right path but to become the best you can be, you have to continuously learn and grow. Repetition is your friend,” she stressed.

“Like the great abolitionist Abraham Lincoln, you have to develop a ‘love for knowledge and an insatiable appetite for learning’. You have to believe as Lincoln did: ‘I will study and prepare myself and perhaps my time will come’” said Professor Ismat as she slowed down, cognizant that students were diligently taking notes.

I barely had time to look up at her myself as I filled page after page of my notepad.

“You must read all the books you possibly can. Continuously expose yourself to ideas that challenge your thinking. Know what you don’t know. Brick by brick, you will begin to see the transformation within yourself. Opportunity waits for no man or woman. It is worth paying the price for your development today or you will pay twice later in the form of missed opportunities. Remember, a life of discipline is always better than a life of regret,” repeated the professor before pulling up a slide formatted slightly different than her original style.

“It is better to be prepared for an opportunity and not have one than to have an opportunity and not be prepared.”

Whitney Moore Young Jr.

Civil Rights Leader

"The future belongs to those who prepare for it today."

Malcolm X

Minister and Human Rights Activist

Professor Ismat put her bottle down before continuing.

"According to Tony Robbins, world-class life coach, author, and philanthropist, life change comes down to this - you must *raise your standards*. It's about turning your 'shoulds' into 'musts'. Whether it's earning more money, losing more weight, or having a better relationship, Robbins goes on to say that people rarely accomplish their 'shoulds' but they absolutely accomplish their 'musts,'" she continued.

"If something is a *must* for you, you will accomplish it no matter what. According to Robbins, human beings absolutely follow through on who they believe they are! What do *you* believe is possible for you?" asked Professor Ismat before pulling up another slide.

"The strongest force in the human personality is the need to stay consistent with how we define ourselves."

Tony Robbins

"You will never be able to overcome the constraints you put on yourself. If you want to change your life, you must raise your standards and believe that you have what it takes to succeed. Believe that whatever you want to achieve is possible for you and that you will do no matter what it takes to accomplish it. If you argue for your limitations, you get to keep them," she emphasized.

Do you know the story of Roger Bannister?" asked the Professor as the class stayed silent.

"For years, experts believed that the human body was simply not capable of running a 4-minute mile. According to them, it was not only dangerous but also impossible for a human

to achieve this feat. People had tried and failed for at least a thousand years to break this barrier and when the mile record for pushed to 4:01 in the 1940s, it stood there for 9 years. Almost all runners accepted that the experts were right; the human body had reached its limit,” said Professor Ismat as she paused, adding to the suspense.

“But on May 6th, 1954, Roger Bannister broke the impossible 4-minute barrier. However, what’s remarkable about this story is that within two years of this accomplishment, 37 other people ran the 4-minute mile! When no one in history had ever done it! Today, even high-school children have run 4-minute miles! Now, what happened? It was all about the power of belief and what the human mind believes is possible,” stressed Professor Ismat.

“Now, many of us get easily distracted by everything that is available to us today. According to author and speaker Eric Thomas, we must distinguish the wheat from the chaff. We need to identify the things that are adding value in our lives and the things that aren’t and then consciously choose to focus on the former. In his words, ‘don’t let the distractions distract you.’ He goes on to illustrate the power of focus through an example,” continued Professor Ismat before pressing the clicker.

“If you hit an oak tree a thousand times in a thousand different spots, what’s going to happen? Absolutely nothing. But if you hit an oak tree a thousand times in the exact same spot, you know what’s going to happen. You’re going to bring it down; you’re going to do the impossible.”

“Don’t spread yourself too thin; there is only so much energy that you have. Here is Tony Robbins again,” added the professor as she pulled up another slide.

“One reason so few of us achieve what we truly want is that

we never direct our focus; we never concentrate our power. Most people dabble their way through life, never deciding to master anything in particular.”

“The world is full of distractions; your generation perhaps knows that better than I do,” added Professor Ismat with a smile. Our times were simpler when there wasn’t so much going on,” she continued with a soft chuckle.

“But, if we want to get ahead, we need to consciously focus on the things that will help us get towards our goals and ignore everything else. Don’t let anyone disturb your peace of mind or as we talked about earlier, your tranquility. Recognize that there will be distractions, but you have the power within you to be stronger than your circumstances. Nothing has the power to truly harm you if you don’t let it. You should listen to what the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius said hundreds of years ago,” she continued.

“Begin each day by telling yourself: Today I shall be meeting with interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill-will, and selfishness – all of them due to the offenders’ ignorance of what is good or evil.”

As I read the quote, I wondered how different my life would be if I adopted this practice. I imagined what my daily interactions with other people would look like. And reading this quote, it began to seem as if my problems weren’t that new or different after all. Many had faced similar problems before me, and many would continue to after me.

“It is a hefty price to pay but if it was easy, everyone would do it. As it’s said, if you don’t sacrifice for what you want, what you want becomes the sacrifice. At the stage of life you’re in, many temptations keep tugging at you. How many of you know the business magnate Warren Buffet?” she asked.

A few students raised their hands.

“This is what Buffet, widely considered one of the most successful investors in the world, has to say about distractions,” continued the professor.

“The most dangerous distractions are the ones you love, but that don’t love you back.”

“Focus your energy on one thing and make it your priority. Your focus will more often than not determine your reality. A laser-like focus on achieving your goals gives you power. Once you focus on what you want, what you don’t want will automatically wither and disappear. It might seem hard risking everything on a single thing but that’s how true greatness is achieved,” said Professor Ismat as she pulled up another slide with more text than usual.

“I don’t care how much power, brilliance, or energy you have. If you don’t harness it and focus it on a specific target, and hold it there, you’re never going to accomplish as much as your ability warrants.”

Zig Ziglar

Author

“The world makes way for the man who knows where he is going.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

American Philosopher and Poet

“I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times.”

Bruce Lee

Actor

“Before I move on,” she added. “I want to note that many of these quotes are male-centric which though unfortunate, reflects the state of the world we have been in for some time,” stressed Professor Ismat gravely.

“However, how do you now say it nowadays, *‘the future is*

female'?” asked Professor Ismat as the students started clapping and cheering.

Professor Ismat warmly smiled and then asked the students to settle. She then checked her watch and realized that we were almost out of time.

“Well, we’re a time boundary for today. In our next session, we’re going to talk about one of the most important aspects of personal greatness – your integrity and character. Before coming to next class, please read about the 2005 tennis match between Andy Roddick and Fernando Verdasco,” she said as she put her water bottle into her bag.

“As always, I look forward to reading your reflection papers,” she concluded with a smile.

A Lesson on Integrity and Character

“Ali?” I heard a familiar voice as I was standing in the hallway with a can of Coke in my hand. I turned around to see a gleaming Professor Ismat.

“Hello, Professor!” I replied with a smile.

“How is everything coming along?” she asked enthusiastically.

To be honest, things had been going pretty great. It had been difficult changing my old habits but day by day, I was beginning to see progress. I knew I was never going to be perfect so I discarded that unrealistic standard; instead, I focused on doing the best I could do.

My attitude towards success and failure had also changed. I understood that if I had to be successful, the price that I would have to pay in personal development would need be up front. I would have first sow in order to reap.

I had been reading more than usual and paying more attention in my classes. I had been working harder on my chicken legs and while I was sore more often than not, I was undoubtedly seeing results. I felt a sense of progress. If I wanted things to change, I would have to change. If I wanted things to get better,

I would have to get better. That had been my motto for the week.

“Everything is wonderful, Professor! Thank you!” I responded.

She glanced at the can of Coke in my hand and smiled which instantly reminded me of the first encounter we had in the hallway.

“Oh, by the way, I’m sorry about the first interaction we had! I hope you didn’t get a bad impression of me!” I quickly blurted out.

“Oh no dear!” she exclaimed as she put a hand on my shoulder in her characteristic style.

“We all make mistakes. Did you not listen to what I said last time?” she asked.

I nodded, not sure what she was referring to. Fixed mindset taking over.

“I’m easily thrice your age Ali, and I fall short of my standards every single day!” she said with a soft chuckle.

“Plus most importantly, if we judge ourselves by our aspirations while we judge other people by their conduct, we will soon reach a very warm conclusion!” she continued. “That’s Calvin Coolidge by the way, if you’re interested!” she added with a big warm smile.

I smiled back, not sure what to respond.

“Come on, let’s go to class. You will enjoy what you learn today,” she said as she patted me on my arm and headed towards the class. I had no doubt in my mind that I wouldn’t.

* * *

“Okay, so who wants to start us off today?” asked Professor

Ismat as she put her purse down. She pulled a chair to the side and took a seat.

A couple of students raised their hand and she called on someone in the second row.

To my surprise, it was Zeeshan. He stood up in his seat and took out a piece of paper from his jeans pocket.

“Thank you, Professor. Before I share Roddick’s story, I wanted to take a minute to apologize to Hassan in front of the class,” said Zeeshan, as the students stared at him in stunned disbelief.

“I have been thinking a lot about what you said. Our conditioning, our company, the voices in our head, and all that stuff. I realize what I did was wrong. Hassan,” he continued, as he turned in Hassan’s direction.

“I’m sorry mate,” he added genuinely.

Hassan looked up, smiled, and gave Zeeshan a thumbs-up sign. I could see a sense of pride in Professor Ismat’s eyes. Zeeshan responded with a smile and then turned his attention towards the rest of the class.

“Alright. So last week, Professor Ismat asked us to research the tennis match between Andy Roddick and Fernando Verdasco. Let me take you back a few years,” he said, as he unfolded a piece of paper in his hand.

“In May 2005, Spain’s Fernando Verdasco was serving to Andy Roddick, America’s top player. Having lost the set, Verdasco was down 5-3, love-40. Triple match point. He hit deep on the second serve,” continued Zeeshan.

“The line judge called the ball out and Roddick was awarded victory. The crowd started cheering him and ran to the net to shake his hand. However, Roddick saw things that others didn’t - things that neither the umpire knew, nor Verdasco. The

serve hadn't been out but was in fact on the line, thus making it in. Instead of keeping this information to himself, Roddick informed the umpire that there was a slight indentation of the clay court and that the ball was in fact 'in'. He said that Verdasco's serve had nicked the line," said Zeeshan as he piqued my curiosity.

"Stunned, the umpire let Roddick overrule him and awarded the point to Verdasco. And that's when things get really interesting!" said Zeeshan with a broad grin.

"Verdasco made the most of his second chance and came back to win the game, the set, and the match, allowing him to win a highly improbable victory," he continued before turning the page.

He looked around to make sure everyone had followed the story.

"While honesty cost Roddick 'tens of thousands of dollars' according to sportswriter Frank Deford and probably much more had he gone on to win the tournament, Roddick chose to prioritize integrity and character over winning. While he lost a tennis match, he won the hearts of people around the world as well as set a great example of sportsmanship for competitors across the globe," concluded Zeeshan, as he sat down on his seat to applause from the class.

It had almost become an unspoken norm now that was rare in other classrooms; students would encourage each other whenever they spoke. The professor had succeeded in enabling the right holding environment.

After praising Zeeshan, Professor Ismat slowly got out of her seat and stepped towards the center of the room.

"Children, we've been talking about success and failure but before we move on, I want to emphasize the value of developing

your character. Not for others, but for yourself,” she continued.

“In the end when all is said and done, the most important judgment that will be passed on you is your own. If you don’t feel good about yourself, it is very hard to feel good about the things that you accomplish. The freedom that you get from living a life of integrity is worth the price that may be asked of you. It gives you a peace of mind that is invaluable,” she added as she pressed the clicker.

“Integrity is the best of all protectors; we cannot be more secure than when fortified by a good conscience.”

John Calvin

French Theologian, Pastor, and Reformer

“Who will hold you accountable for all the actions and decisions you take on a day to day basis?” she asked. “Regardless of who you are, you will admit that only you have complete visibility as to what you do when no one is watching. Often, we do things differently when we’re alone versus when we’re in the company of others,” continued Professor Ismat.

“It’s natural to be concerned about what other people think of you, but it’s more important to be concerned about what you think about yourself. It’s one thing to live up to and adhere to the standards society has imposed on you, but it’s a completely different thing taking out the time to think about which standards, principles, and values you personally cherish the most,” she continued.

“In the words of Jim Rohn, ‘Everything matters. Everything affects everything else,’” emphasized Professor Ismat. “We may falsely believe that doing something when we’re alone will have no impact on how we come across when we’re in a crowd. However, it is those decisions that you make when no one is watching you that have the greatest bearing on your personality.

Life changes take place everyday in those micro-moments. It shapes your opinion of yourself which in turn influences how you act,” she continued.

“Be careful with all your disciplines. The more often you do something, the more your personality takes shape to revolve around it. You probably read about Aristotle in your philosophy course?” she asked, as most of us nodded.

“This is what the philosopher Aristotle said hundreds of years ago and is as true today as it was back then,” said the professor as she pulled up a slide.

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

Professor Ismat continued as the students took expeditiously took notes.

“Develop your moral code and then stick to it. Aristotle would put it this way; if one of your principles is being just, practice being just regardless of whatever you face in life. With time, you will find that your capacity to be just greatly increases. The same could be said for any other principle or value, positive or negative,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“No one can tell you what it is that you should value. Figure that out for yourself instead of blindly following what’s been passed down to you through the ages. You need to remember that everything you see around you was created by people no smarter than you,” stressed Professor Ismat as a couple of students nodded their heads.

“Once you’ve determined which principles or values are of importance to you, you try your best to incorporate those principles in every conversation you have and every decision you take. Hold yourself accountable every week – did you live up to your own standards of excellence? You might fail at the

start as your old habits kick in, but you should have the faith that you've taken a pathway that will only contribute towards your personal development in the long run. Begin your mornings by reviewing those principles and how you might go about applying them during your day," she continued.

"At night, whenever you get a chance, think through your interactions and decisions in the day from the lens of these principles and assess your performance. You can use these questions if you like," she said as she pulled up a slide.

1) Am I living in alignment with my true self?

2) Where did I go wrong in the application of my principles?

Satisfied that the students were done taking notes, Professor Ismat continued.

"We will talk about this further later if we have time, but personal development can never be measured. You remember how we talked about success not being a giant event that happens but an ongoing process of refinement?" she asked.

Certainly, I thought to myself. I had been rather preoccupied with the idea all week.

"Success is refining yourself day in and day out to gradually realize the worthy ideal you've set out for yourself. And when it comes to practice, one of the best ways I have found to hold myself accountable to my principle-oriented compass is something that comes from ancient philosophers. It has helped me, but it is up to you whether you want to follow this approach or not," she continued.

I recalled what Professor Ismat had said earlier; be a student and not a follower.

"The idea is to imagine that regardless of whatever you do, either alone or in the company of others, there is a 'noble force' watching over you all the time. This 'noble force' believes in

your capacity to be good and stay true, and it will help you in differentiating right from wrong. It is almost like an angel looking over your shoulder and believing in you completely that you will do the right thing,” continued Professor Ismat.

“However, as you begin to use this approach, you might often forget about this force altogether. Don’t worry. As with many other things that we’re discussing, the more you practice it, the more it will become an integral part of your life. Repetition is the mother of skill,” she added as she picked up her water bottle and took a few sips.

“All of you have it in you to be successful. The problem with most of us is that once we achieve something, we start chasing the next thing without appreciating what we currently have. When our delight from the next achievement fades, we start chasing something else. Remember the hedonistic treadmill?” she asked.

The students nodded their heads.

“It is important to recognize that the person you become in the process of achieving your dream is more important than the dream. You can lose everything you achieve but the person you become - that truly is your most precious possession. Integrity allows you to live your life with freedom. As the author Zig Ziglar puts it, integrity provides you with real freedom. Since you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear!” exclaimed Professor Ismat.

“Every decision you make influences the person you end up becoming. Don’t take shortcuts that perhaps help you get there faster but compromise your integrity and self-respect. It may be convenient in the short run but will hurt you in the long run. Look at what the American football player and coach Tony Dungy has to say about this,” added Professor Ismat as

she pressed the clicker.

“Integrity is the choice between what’s convenient and what’s right.”

“Sometimes, choosing to do the right thing is incredibly hard,” she continued.

“However, you always have it within your power to do so. The guilt of not doing the right thing isn’t worth it. Don’t be concerned too much with what your friends might think of you; it is *you* who has to face the true consequences at the end. Wrong is wrong, even if everyone is doing it; right is right, even if no one is doing it,” stressed Professor Ismat.

“Those who don’t value integrity and character might attack you. In fact, you can rest assured that they most certainly will. The consequences of sticking out your neck might hurt you in the short run, but it will pay off in the long run in the form of the person that you will become and the character that you will develop. As the author Napoleon Hill said, ‘when you are able to maintain your highest standards of integrity - regardless of what others may do - you are destined for greatness,’” she added with a smile.

“Now, children,” continued Professor Ismat. “As you realize the value of integrity and character when it comes to achievement, let’s talk about how you can actually go about achieving your goals. Have you ever heard the expression don’t reinvent the wheel?” she asked as the students nodded.

“Whatever it is that you’re trying to achieve, there is someone out there who can help you get farther ahead on your journey that you would be able to alone. There are best practices out there that can help you save a lot of time on your journey. There are professors and teachers who have devoted their entire lives to mastering their craft. Why not use their contributions to propel your success? According to the American lawyer Mark

McCormack, ‘You don’t have to reinvent the wheel, just attach it to a new wagon!’” added Professor Ismat as a couple of students laughed.

“Don’t take your education for granted. Pay attention to your teachers and learn from them. There are millions of children who dream of being in your position,” continued Professor Ismat gravely.

I recalled her work with out-of-school children and the foundation she had started. According to her website, there were still 258 million children out-of-school left behind. Professor Ismat’s voice interrupted my thoughts.

“More importantly, don’t only learn from their triumphs. Learn also from their defeats. Let’s go back to Warren Buffet and see what he has to say,” she added before pressing the clicker.

“It’s good to learn from your mistakes. It’s better to learn from other people’s mistakes.”

“Accelerate your success. Find out people who have already done what you want to do and then reach out to them. Don’t let your ego stop you from reaching out,” she emphasized.

“More often than not, people will be willing to help you because they’ve been on a similar journey. However, don’t forget to do as much preparation as you can at your end first. Learn as much as you possibly can! Read as much as you possibly can! Prepare as much as you possibly can!” she stressed.

“Preparation at your end demonstrates that you are serious about the endeavor you want to pursue,” she added.

Before proceeding, she took another quick sip from her water bottle.

“Now,” she continued. “As you go about establishing your

values and setting goals for yourself, make sure that you incorporate pragmatism in your approach. Dream pragmatically, as the English philosopher Aldous Huxley would say,” she continued.

“It is important to be realistic and to correctly anticipate the roadblocks on the journey ahead. There will be a lot that will be asked of you. There will be unexpected challenges along the way that will interfere with the goals you’ve set out for yourself. You will have to make hard choices,” she added.

“However, remember this – ‘Easy choices, hard life. Hard choices, easy life’. And most importantly, if the *why* is powerful, the *how* is easy. As Nietzsche said, he who has a *why* to live can bear almost any *how*” said Professor Ismat with added emphasis before continuing.

“There will be people who will discourage you and get in your way. There will be politics. Some people will hate you for who you are and what you represent. Look at what the author Zig Ziglar had to say about this,” she paused as she pulled up another slide.

“Don’t be distracted by criticism. Remember, the only taste of success some people have is when they take a bite out of you.”

As I read the quote, I couldn’t help but think about Furqan. He had been one of my closest friends since childhood. However, he didn’t seem too pleased when I told him repeatedly over the weekend that I wouldn’t be able to hang out with them. He told me I was changing; he said he was disappointed that I wasn’t the same person anymore.

Surprisingly, I was inspired by what he said.

That’s what I was striving for, to change and become a better version of myself. One of the reasons why I had decided not to spend time with him was because I wanted to make sure that I

wasn't falling back into my old patterns of operating. I had to cut off everything that was taking me away from my goals. I had to be able to sacrifice at any moment who I was, for what I would become.

I had to leave that part of my life behind. I had to expose myself to the right ideas and then ingrain them through ongoing effort. Professor Ismat had helped me get started on journey; however, it was now my responsibility to continue exposing my mind to the right ideas and beliefs.

Professor Ismat's soothing voice interrupted my thoughts.

"Children, you must recognize that most importantly, you are doing what you're doing because it gives your life meaning and value. You believe in the value and service it will provide to yourself as well as the world. Don't be ashamed of your greatness. As the Stoics would put it - be ashamed of what's truly shameful! If you know you are doing the right thing, what others may think of you doesn't even matter," she continued.

"Basing your worth on other people's opinions is like looking into a broken mirror that changes every time you look into it. You will find your people; people who will love you for what you're doing and the service you're providing. You don't need to have everyone on your side. Don't disregard your inherent value for what others might say," she stressed.

"Most of you probably read Harry Potter as children?" asked Professor Ismat.

The students nodded their heads. As a child, I had naively waited many countless nights for Hagrid to show up.

"Even the author J.K. Rowling once said that for some to love you, some must loathe you," continued Professor Ismat. "Believe in who you are and what you offer to the world. Let them say what they want to; you focus on *you*. Don't let

what they say about you change what you think and feel about yourself,” emphasized Professor Ismat as she pulled up another slide.

“I have often wondered how it is that every man loves himself more than all the rest of men, but yet sets less value on his own opinions of himself than on the opinions of others.”

Marcus Aurelius

Roman Emperor

“Recognize the potential for these distractions but then have a plan ready to tackle these when they emerge. Treat these encounters as opportunities to become the best version of yourself. It could be the mindset you adopt or simply how you respond,” she added as she took another sip.

“The writer Elbert Hubbard said that the final proof of greatness lies in being able to endure criticism without resentment. How you handle this will influence how you handle everything else. Remember what Jim Rohn said?” asked Professor Ismat.

“Everything affects everything else!” responded a couple of students in unison.

“Correct!” responded Professor Ismat with a smile before continuing.

“Remember that taking off takes the most energy. It took years to get you to where you are today; personal greatness will take time. It will require patience with those micro-moments. Focus on what you can control and then commit to doing your very best!” she emphasized. Before continuing, she glanced at the clock on the wall.

“Now, we are almost at a time barrier. I want to share a final slide with you and then we will stop for today. For next week, we will be talking about resilience and persistence; both these attributes will be vital on your journey. Till then, I want you

to take care of yourselves as well as each other,” said Professor Ismat as she pulled up the last slide and concluded another masterclass.

“You can achieve anything you want in life if you have the courage to dream it, the intelligence to make a realistic plan, and the will to see that plan through to the end.”

Sidney A Friedman

Writer

A Lesson on Persistence

In her typical style, Professor Ismat placed her bag to the side and turned her full attention to the class. There was a fierceness and resolve in her eyes that was unmistakable.

It was going to be a long lecture, I thought to myself.

“Just by taking this class you have proven that you are different than over 90% of the people who inhabit this earth,” she began.

“There are millions of people who refuse to learn and grow. You, on the other hand, are searching for more from your life instead of settling for a life of mediocrity. You, it seems, are searching for something more from life!” she exclaimed as the class buzzed with energy.

“However, as you embark on this journey, recognize that this is just the start. There is no successful person who hasn’t faced countless barriers to become who and where they are today. They had an inner drive, a passion that forced them to keep going regardless of what they faced. They kept at it despite their perceived limitations. They kept pushing. Look at what Mark Twain says,” continued Professor Ismat as she pressed

the clicker and the projector screen lit up.

“There is nothing training cannot do. Nothing is above its reach. It can turn bad morals to good; it can destroy bad principles and recreate good ones; it can lift men to angelship.”

“Nothing else mattered to these individuals,” she continued.

“They took risks and went beyond their comfort zone. They knew that if they kept at it, they would eventually accomplish their goals. They understood that progress equals happiness; for them to realize true happiness, they have to continue making progress day in and day out. Remember, often, with enough persistence, most things that initially seem impossible become possible,” said Professor Ismat as she pressed the clicker again. *“Nothing in the world can take the place of Persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and Determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan “Press On” has solved and will always solve the problems of the human race.”*

Calvin Coolidge (1872 - 1933)

30th President of the United States

Once she was satisfied that the students were done taking notes, she continued. “I also brought a few more quotes from your favorite actor,” she added with a soft chuckle.

Greatness is not this wonderful, esoteric, elusive, god-like feature that only the special among us will ever taste - you know it’s something that truly exists in all of us. It’s very simple, this is what I believe and I’m willing to die for it. Period. It’s that simple.

The first step, before anybody else in the world believes it is you have to believe it. There’s no reason to have a plan B because it distracts from plan A. I think that there’s a certain delusional quality that all successful people have to have. You have to believe that something

different than what has happened for the past 50 million years of history, you have to believe that something different can happen. Don't ever let somebody tell you you can't do something. Not even me. You got a dream, you gotta protect it. People can't do something themselves they wanna tell you you can't do it. You want something, go get it, period."

Will Smith

Actor

"And now, it's time for one of my all-time favorites," she continued as the students leaned forward in their seats.

"When I was your age a couple of decades ago," she laughed before continuing. "I came across a poem by Berton Braley that gave me strength time and time again. It helped me get back up after every defeat. I hope it will do the same for you," she continued as she pulled up another slide.

*If you want a thing bad enough
To go out and fight for it,
Work day and night for it,
Give up your time and your peace and your sleep for it
If only desire of it
Makes you quite mad enough
Never to tire of it,
Makes you hold all other things tawdry and cheap for it
If life seems all empty and useless without it
And all that you scheme and you dream is about it,
If gladly you'll sweat for it,
Fret for it,
Plan for it,
Lose all your terror of God or man for it,
If you'll simply go after that thing that you want.
With all your capacity,*

*Strength and sagacity,
Faith, hope and confidence, stern pertinacity,
If neither cold poverty, famished and gaunt,
Nor sickness nor pain
Of body or brain
Can turn you away from the thing that you want,
If dogged and grim you besiege and beset it,
You'll get it!"*
Berton Braley
American Poet

Professor Ismat raised her mug to take a few sips of coffee as the students read intently. I scanned through the poem quickly a couple of times. I knew I would get the slides later, but I tried to copy as much as I could.

Just as Professor Ismat was about to continue, there was a loud sob from the front of the class. A girl in the front row began crying upon reading the poem.

Professor Ismat put down her mug immediately and made her way over to where the girl was sitting. She signaled the student to stand up and after wiping her tears, Professor Ismat gave her a tight hug.

As she pulled back from the embrace, she looked straight in the girl's eyes and emphasized, "Child, things will get hard. They will get very hard. But you must never, and I repeat never, lose faith! It is easy to have faith when things are going your way; however, it is when everything is tearing you down that you must search for the inner strength to keep going," she continued.

The girl responded with a sad smile and sat down. The girls sitting next to her began to console her as Professor Ismat walked back to the front.

“You are all very special, children. Never forget that,” said Professor Ismat, as she wiped a tear off her cheek. “I want you to keep dreaming despite how hard life hits you,” she continued. “Having a dream gives you something to look forward to; a dream gives you the motivation to wake up in the morning and get out of bed.”

A student raised his hand and Professor Ismat signaled him to continue.

“Professor, how do I know what my dream is? There’s a lot of things I want to do” said the student.

“Sure, great question. Let’s talk about that for a bit,” said Professor Ismat as the students got their pens ready.

“In my experience, it boils down to asking yourself what gives your life meaning and value. What, if anything, could you accomplish in life that would give you satisfaction on your deathbed? What would make your sacrifices of time, energy, and commitment worth making? What would justify your priceless tears?” stressed Professor Ismat in an empathetic tone.

“As director Steven Spielberg says, your dream always whispers. It never really shouts. He says that ‘Dreams come from behind you, not right behind your eyes.’ Therefore, you’ll find that you’ll have to listen very hard to figure out what gives your life meaning. However, once you find what it is, go after it with all you’ve got. You only have one life,” emphasized Professor Ismat.

“Now, as you said,” continued Professor Ismat pointing in the direction of the student who had asked the question, “you may find that there are a couple of things that inspire you and that’s alright. At this point, you may benefit from using the regret minimization concept,” said Professor Ismat.

The students studiously gazed at her.

“What are some things that you would regret not doing at age 80? As the American business magnate Steve Jobs said, ‘Remembering that you are going to die is the best way to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart’” stressed Professor Ismat.

“This approach and mindset allows you to cut off unimportant things from your life,” she continued, as she took another sip.

“We’re not going to be here forever so we might as well do the things that truly matter, don’t you think?” she asked the student.

The student nodded his head and Professor Ismat continued.

“Now, we’ve talked a lot about persistence and how to figure out what gives your life meaning and value. Let’s talk a bit now about success and what constitutes success,” said Professor Ismat as I picked up my pen.

What does success mean? According to Dad, success meant having a secure and high paying job, a nice car, a big house, and at least one vacation every year.

“The best definition of success I have come across so far was shared by Earl Nightingale in one of his rare recordings and now I want to share it with you,” said Professor Ismat.

“Success is the progressive realization of a worthy ideal,” she added before taking a pause and putting down her mug. Sensing the dumbfounded expression on our faces, Professor Ismat continued.

“Children, success is nothing more than the progressive realization of a worthy ideal. What this means is that any person who knows what they are doing and where they are

going is a success. Any person with a goal towards which they are working is a successful person. And I want to emphasize the word *progressive*,” said Professor Ismat with added emphasis.

“It doesn’t matter how much you work towards your dream as long as you keep working on it. In my personal experience, I have found that the best way to start working on a goal or dream is to start small and gradually build on it. You don’t have to necessarily make a lot of progress in the first few days, weeks, months, or even years - all you have to do is commit to the process and convince yourself that you will accomplish that dream no matter what. Nothing can be accomplished without fully committing and dedicating yourself. You may be lucky at times but more often than not, the harder you work, the luckier you’re going to be!” she exclaimed.

“Jim Rohn, who we came across before, used to say that success is looking for a good place to stay. He used to say that if someone gives you a million dollars, it was best that you became a millionaire quickly!” gushed Professor Ismat which got a few laughs from the students.

“I think what he meant to say was that everything you get in life, you must deserve. It’s never about what you want but what you’re willing to give in order to achieve. The next time you’re upset at your current situation in life, ask yourself what you can do to develop yourself and give more value to the world. The more valuable you can be to the marketplace, the more rewards you will reap,” declared Professor Ismat.

She paused to take a sip.

“A related concept when it comes to value is suggested by leadership coach John Maxwell who suggests that every morning before you get out of bed, you should ask yourself – ‘Who you can add value to today and how?’. He further goes

on to say that you should end your day by asking - 'Who did I add value to today and how?', which allows you to evaluate the value you are bringing to the world," continued Professor Ismat.

"Now, if I was to ask you what the most valuable currency is, most of you would come up with different currencies. But my dear children, in reality, *you* are the most valuable currency that you will ever have!" she exclaimed.

"Regardless of wherever you take this currency in the world, you will be able to reap rewards in accordance with how much you've invested in yourself," continued Professor Ismat with a smile.

"Tell me something, if you are pursuing this degree and know where you're headed, wouldn't you consider yourself a success?" asked Professor Ismat.

The students nodded their heads in unison.

"Correct! As long as you know where you're going and you're making daily progress in that direction, you are a success in my dictionary. If you know that your job is helping you move in the direction of your dreams, you are a success. Now, the goals and direction you set for yourself depend on what you believe is possible for you and what gives your life meaning and value," she continued.

"I have a lot of faith in you all. As I said, the reason you are here today is that you don't want to wake up one day and realize that you let the opinions of others and your indifference stop you from doing what truly mattered most to you. As you go about setting your dreams, keep the timeless words of Thomas Paine in mind," added Professor Ismat before picking up the clicker and pressing it.

I do not choose to be a common man.

*It is my right to be uncommon ... if I can.
I seek opportunity ... not security.
I do not wish to be a kept citizen,
Humbled and dulled by having the State look after me.
I want to take the calculated risk,
To dream and to build. To fail and to succeed.
I refuse to barter incentive for a dole;
I prefer the challenges of life to the guaranteed existence;
The thrill of fulfillment to the stale calm of Utopia.
I will not trade freedom for beneficence
Nor my dignity for a handout
I will never cower before any master
Nor bend to any threat.
It is my heritage to stand erect, proud and unafraid;
To think and act for myself,
To enjoy the benefit of my creations
And to face the world boldly and say:
This, with God's help, I have done.
All this is what it means to be an Entrepreneur.*

Professor Ismat took a few more sips of her coffee before continuing.

“It might not be abundantly clear what it is that you want, but you will never find out unless you throw some bricks against the wall and find out for yourself. Just go ahead and do it, and more importantly, stick to it instead of immediately moving on to the next thing the moment you encounter resistance!” she stressed.

“Go back to these wonderful authors and personalities to remind yourself in the darkest hours that you are not alone in what you feel. The problems you faced have plagued civilization for thousands of years. Draw inspiration from these women

and men who chose to become great despite all the obstacles that they encountered. Here's some more inspiration by the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow," continued the professor as she pressed the clicker again.

"The heights by great men reached and kept were not attained by sudden flight, but they while their companions slept, were toiling upward in the night."

"All of this is nothing new," said the professor as she turned towards the class.

"As I said, these principles have worked for people for over 6 thousand years of recorded history and will work for you if you let them," stressed Professor Ismat before continuing.

"Many decades ago, these individuals inspired me to overcome my own boundaries and challenge my way of life. They gave my life meaning and value and I sincerely hope they will do the same for you," said Professor Ismat as she stopped to take another sip.

Part of me was hoping that she would talk more about her past, but she swiftly moved on.

"Throughout our time together I share quotations and sayings from across the globe. However, you are free to attribute your own interpretation to all of them or build on the ones reflected in our discussions," she said.

Be a student and not a follower, I recalled.

"We discuss stories because I personally believe that we learn best by examples. You'll see that these individuals are no different than you are, or I am, or anybody else. As you listen to their stories and learn about these principles, mark what you like and come back to it often. Take what works for you and discard what doesn't. These stories are in no way perfect and never will be. Success is often a compilation of multiple factors

intermingling with one another, but I hope these stories will inspire you to recognize the greatness that is inside you,” said Professor Ismat as she put down her mug.

“Someday, I sincerely hope, these stories might include you. However, I must emphasize that you have to be willing to change your ways if you want your life to change. Remember, for things to change, you must change. No one can do the hard work for you. The onus of responsibility is on you and you alone,” she declared.

“As William Ernest Henley put it, you must be the captain of your fate and the master of your soul!” she maintained with a smile.

“Now, next week we’ll talk about the art of setting goals and the importance of surrounding yourself with the right people. It might be another long session so come prepared!” she remarked before picking up her bag and sliding it over her frail shoulder.

A Lesson on Goals

“**T**oday’s class is part workshop and part lecture,” said Professor Ismat as she entered the classroom and handed out copies.

“The first part of the class will be a hands-on exercise where you spend time working on setting goals and dreams. In the last part of the class, we will be talking about things that can help you get to your goals. Are you ready to start?” asked Professor Ismat with contagious enthusiasm as the students excitedly responded in the affirmative.

“As the American author Stephen Covey said, you must begin with the end in mind. Goals help you do that. A long time ago, a man named Jim Rohn changed the way I set goals and dreams for myself and I want to share that approach with you,” said Professor Ismat as she put aside her notes.

“It is a blueprint for designing your future. When you know where you’re headed, the journey gets easier. As it’s often said, if you don’t know where you’re going, any road will take you there!” exclaimed Professor Ismat as she picked up her mug to take a sip.

“Goals can be divided into long-range goals and short-range goals. Long-range goals are your dreams for the next few decades. They are your dreams for the rest of your life. And as I said earlier, make sure that you continue to dream! You’ve got to have dreams in order to make your dreams come true! The dreams for your family, your work, and your future. The dreams for what you want to become on this journey called life! These are important dreams,” continued Professor Ismat with a smile.

“Short-range goals, on the other hand, are goals for your immediate future. The goals for tomorrow, this week, this month, and this year. These are goals that will boost your confidence as you achieve them. Achieving these short-range goals will give you the fuel to work towards your long-range goals and dreams,” added Professor Ismat as she took another sip.

“As it’s often said, the devil is in the details. Make sure you are as specific and detailed about your goals as possible. Know exactly what you want, when you want it, and how you’re going to go about accomplishing it,” she stated. “Your goals should be divided further into categories to make sure they are holistic and covering everything that’s meaningful to you. The first category is economic goals or your goals for money, business, and income. How much do you want to earn? What kind of lifestyle do you want to live?” asked Professor Ismat. “These are questions that you will have to answer for yourself,” she added.

“The second category is things, or essentially the stuff that you want. Make sure to write down both the small stuff and the big stuff. As Jim Rohn used to say, part of the fun should be checking off the items from your list!” she gushed.

“Also, once you achieve a goal, make sure to reward yourself!

We tend to grow in two ways, either from the pain of losing or the joy of winning. Amplify both of these as much as you can. Reward yourself for winning but then at the same time, make losing painful. If you don't achieve something you wanted to achieve for yourself, add a price that you must pay," she emphasized.

"The third category of goals is personal development or in other words, the kind of person you want to become. This is different for different people. It could be as diverse as becoming a better speaker to learning a new language," continued Professor Ismat as she put her mug down.

"Before we move on, does all this make sense to you?" asked Professor Ismat as she looked at the students expeditiously taking notes.

The students were so caught up that they nodded in unison without even raising their heads.

Professor Ismat laughed and then continued speaking.

"Great!" she said.

"Now, the first step that I want you to take is take the piece of paper I handed out and write down 5 things you've already accomplished that you're proud of. The reason why we do this is to take credit for things that we've already accomplished on our own," she continued with a smile.

As Sarah handed out the paper to me, I noticed that it was titled 'Vision Board'.

Professor Ismat continued speaking.

"Sure, other factors may have contributed along the way, but you were more often than not the primary driving force behind these accomplishments," she added.

A few seconds passed. I glanced around and noticed that the students had already started jotting down their accomplish-

ments. The problem was, I didn't know what would constitute an accomplishment in my case. Should I mention the job? The A grade I received in my high-school English paper? Anything?

Professor Ismat's voice interrupted my thoughts.

"Now, you've all accomplished some things in life but the problem with your approach is that you've done it haphazardly," continued Professor Ismat as she wrote the letters A and B on the board and drew a dangly line between them.

"Once you learn a systematic process for achieving your goals, imagine how much bigger and better your accomplishments would be! They could easily be 5 times, 10 times, 20 times bigger than what you've currently accomplished!" exclaimed Professor Ismat excitedly as she picked up a different colored marker and drew an unswerving line between the two points.

"Remember, the most important reason we set goals is what they will make of us in the process of achieving them," she continued. "The goal is important, but who you become in the process is even more important," she emphasized in a matter-of-fact manner.

"Now, the next step that I want you to take is to quickly write down 30-50 goals that you want to achieve in the next 10 years. This might seem excessive but remember, this is your life we're talking about! You cannot afford to take it easy!" emphasized Professor Ismat.

Her energy was truly contagious. Without resistance, I began writing.

"Once you're done with that, add 1, 3, 5, or 10 in front of the goal that you've written down. This is a measure of how long you think it will take you to achieve that particular goal," she added as the students continued writing.

That's a lot of goals, I kept thinking to myself. I put my head

down to concentrate and started writing down what came to my mind.

I had always wanted to become a writer. I noted that down. I wrote down the CGPA I wanted to graduate with. I noted down the kind of life I wanted to build. Interestingly, as I began to imagine the possibilities for myself, my old self-talk got activated.

Who was I to write something? Did I even have something valuable to say? Who did I think I was to accomplish all these things? Others would soon find out what an impostor I was! A long time ago dad had shut me down when I had told him about my dream of becoming a writer. He had instead made sure that I worked towards what he considered was a 'real career'.

With a lot of mental fortitude, I consciously interrupted my self-talk and continued to write down my goals. I had to guard my mind against my self-imposed limitations before I replaced it with more positive beliefs. As Professor Ismat had said, I had to continuously stand guard at the door of my mind. I had to stop the weeds from taking over.

A few minutes passed. I continued writing speedily for a while as Professor Ismat pulled a chair to the front of the classroom and took a seat.

I was surprised to find that as I gave myself the freedom to dream, the goals kept coming! I was already at goal 32 when I heard Professor Ismat's comforting voice.

"Now, if you need time, remember this is an ongoing process and you can come back to it later. It is your list and it is up to you how often you want to revisit and revise it," she said as some of the students hesitatingly put down their pens.

"Let's now talk about the most important part of the puzzle. Highlight your top 4 1-year goals and mention why you want

to achieve those goals. Jim Rohn used to say that when the *why* got stronger, the *how* got easier. Once you know why you want something or in other words the purpose behind driving your goals, you almost always figure out the ‘how’. The price gets easier when the prize gets larger!” exclaimed Professor Ismat.

As I followed her instructions, I began to evaluate why I wanted to achieve all these things that I had written down. I recognized that almost every item on the list gave my life meaning and value. I was doing it for myself for a change, not for someone else. I was living up to my expectations for a change, not my Dad’s. Maybe Mom was in there somewhere, but I knew this was what I wanted for myself. That mattered more than anything else.

“Now,” continued Professor Ismat.

“Take a quick look at your goals and make sure you have a good balance between the different 1,3,5, and 10-year goals that you’ve set. If you have too many in one category, make sure to add some more in other categories once you get home,” she insisted.

I took a quick note in the margins to remind myself.

“We now come to the most challenging part of the exercise,” declared Professor Ismat.

The students leaned forward in anticipation.

“Take a look at your goals and then on a separate page, write down the person you must become to accomplish those goals,” stressed Professor Ismat as she paused to take a quick sip from her mug.

“What skills would you have to acquire? What talents would you have to develop? Who would you have to reach out to? Achieving goals takes hard work. If it was easy, everyone would do it. Write down what comes to your mind right now; you can

revise it when you get home,” maintained Professor Ismat.

“Figure out the exercises or actions that you need to do every day that will help you move in the direction of your goals. And children, continue to revisit this. Life change is a daily process,” she added.

The class buzzed with activity as the students followed the professor’s instructions.

“Keep going back to your goals and if possible look at them 2-3 times every day. Morning, noon, and night. Write your goals down in your journal and revisit them. This process will not only help you stay on track, but it will also allow you to understand yourself better. You’ll find out what you value in life and what you don’t. You’ll figure out the patterns in your choices and what you want. Your goals affect you so make sure you set goals that help you become the person you intend to become!” exclaimed Professor Ismat excitedly as she put her mug down.

“Regardless of how big your goal is, once you break it down into small and manageable pieces, it gives you the courage to attain that goal,” she added.

“When Jim Rohn was asked how much time was to be spent on each sub-goal, he had a wonderful answer which he called ‘Reasonable Time,’” said Professor Ismat with a smile.

“If a thing takes time, put in the time. If a thing can be done immediately, do it immediately. ‘Reasonable Time’ is a good measure for you to assess how much time you should be spending on each phase of the process,” she continued.

“It is also important to recognize that how you do something is almost always how you do everything. Everything affects everything else. Be mindful of how you cater to the small stuff, it will influence how you do everything. Don’t wait for life

to grant you bigger responsibilities; work with what you have today. As Jim Rohn used to say, 'If you're disciplined and faithful when the amounts are small, then life will see to it that you get what you deserve.' Do as little or as much as you can, but don't stop!" insisted Professor Ismat.

"Ambition is a minute by minute thing; hold your head up and keep going after the things that you want. Whatever happens, happens to us all. How you react to adversity is more important than the adversity itself. You will inevitably face setbacks but a year from now, the joy of persisting in the face of difficulty will be worth any price that you have to pay. As the revolutionary leader Dorothy Height said," continued Professor Ismat as took out the clicker and pressed it.

"Greatness is not measured by what a man or woman accomplishes, but by the opposition he or she has overcome to reach his goals."

"Believe in your ability to turn it around because you can! As Will and Ariel Durant wrote in the classic *Lessons of History*, "To endure what is, we must remember what was, and dream of things as they one day will be.'" continued Professor Ismat with a smile as I frantically took notes.

"However, keep evaluating your strategy to assess whether there's a better way to get to where you're going. Do you know what Einstein said about insanity?" she asked.

A boy raised his hand in the front row and Professor Ismat signaled him to continue.

"Didn't he say that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results?" the boy continued.

"Yes, well done!" she exclaimed.

"There is a difference between sheer persistence and sticking to a strategy despite it not working. Evaluate your situation, yourself, and the tools that you're using to get to your destina-

tion. Assess what works for you and what doesn't. Some of us need hard deadlines to accomplish something; some of us prefer to wait for inspiration to strike. You know what works for you; make it work. And remember, no one else can do it for you," she continued.

"When things go wrong, don't go with them. When we're doing well with a certain goal in life, the moment we get off track a little, we tend to lose all momentum. Doesn't this happen to you when you set new year goals?" she paused to see if everyone was following.

"We believe that we need to be perfect in the attainment of every goal when in reality that's ineffective at best and futile at worst. Maintaining momentum is key," declared Professor Ismat.

"Let's take an example. If you're trying to lose weight by following a strict diet, the moment you cheat on your diet a little bit, you'll more often than not feel like disregarding all the progress that you've made that day and decide to start again tomorrow. And as we talked about earlier, the problem with tomorrow is that it never comes. As Jim Rohn would say, today is yesterday's tomorrow! Things are bound to go wrong regardless of which path you take, but the real challenge is sticking to the course once those mistakes have been made. That is the mark of true champions!" emphasized Professor Ismat.

"Don't throw away all the effort you've put into developing yourself for momentary pleasure. Treat these setbacks as opportunities for bouncing back. Your personal greatness does not lie in your perfection; it lies in the handling of your imperfections! The joy you receive from becoming a worthy individual and the contributions you're able to make

will far outweigh any temporary discomforts you will have to experience,” said Professor Ismat.

Just as she was getting ready to speak the next sentence, she was interrupted by the alarm on her phone. This had been an action-packed lecture but the time had flown by.

“Well, I guess we won’t have time today to talk about the importance of surrounding yourself with the right company!” said Professor Ismat with a soft chuckle.

“However, I do hope thinking about your goals and dreams will keep you occupied over the weekend. I will see you next week. Till then, take care and dream big.”

A Lesson on the Right Company

“So, are you ready for today’s lecture?” asked Professor Ismat as she took out her notes.

The students responded with a resounding yes!

“It’s good to see your enthusiasm, you might not feel the same way by the time you leave the room,” said Professor Ismat with a laugh.

The class erupted in laughter.

“Alright then, let’s get started!” said Professor Ismat as she put her mug down.

“If I was to sum up today’s lecture in a sentence, it would be this - do the things today others don’t do in order to have the things tomorrow others won’t have,” she paused, waiting for the words to sink in.

“Everything matters. Take a moment to analyze why some people tend to do better than others. You may come across two individuals who are the same age, were born in the same neighborhood, went to the same schools, and even work for the same companies, but one might be making twice or thrice as much money as the other one. What contributes to this

difference between people? As we talked about earlier, it's the value each of them brings to the marketplace," said Professor Ismat in a matter-of-fact tone.

"The more value you add to the marketplace, the more value you can get in return. The more you develop yourself, the more value you're able to add. But then again you may ask - if the answer is so straightforward, why isn't everyone commanding tremendous amounts of value from the marketplace?" she said with a puzzled expression, trying to challenge our thinking.

After a brief pause, she continued.

"The simple answer is that not everyone is willing to commit themselves to a regimen of self-development. The things that are easy to do are also easy not to do. Some people would spend the entire weekend lounging around and doing nothing rather than developing a skill that they know will help them move forward in their careers. Successful people know that to have the things they want tomorrow they must do the things today that other people aren't doing. They recognize that they cannot afford to get complacent because the wolf climbing the hill will always be hungrier than the wolf on the hill!" emphasized Professor Ismat.

"They will read that book regardless of their schedule! They will go to the gym despite being tired! They will continue to persist in the face of difficulties and hardship! It's an ongoing process of trying to identify your shortcomings and then deliberately working to overcome them. Of course, the temptation to lounge around will certainly be there; however, how you subjugate this temptation to your principles will make the difference," continued Professor Ismat as she picked up her coffee mug to take a quick sip.

"Learn to say no to things that don't add value to your life.

If it upsets someone in the process, then let it be. Tomorrow, when you're living a life that's aligned with your worthy ideal, all these sacrifices will be worth it. You will know that your success was hard-earned because you said 'no' to the things that mediocre men and women would have been tempted to do. Instead, you said 'yes' to the things that truly matter," stressed Professor Ismat.

I looked around to see the students hurriedly taking notes.

"This brings me to the concept of surrounding yourself with the right people. I couldn't agree more with what the 50-billion-dollar man Dan Peña said," said Professor Ismat as she pulled up a slide.

"Show me your friends and I'll show you your future."

"Out of all the people you spent time with over the past week, how many of them actually contributed towards the goals you've set for yourself?" she asked.

"Children, it is vital to choose the right group of friends to hang out with. Jim Rohn says that you're the average of the five people you spend the most time with. You subconsciously incorporate their habits and their perspectives on life. The people around you subconsciously influence what you believe about yourself and who you become. Doesn't this call for thoroughness and relentlessness in deciding who those individuals will be?" she continued.

Professor Ismat's words reminded me about Furqan and how I had gotten into trouble because of him repeatedly. With time, I had simply chosen to ignore things about him that I felt were questionable as I believed friends weren't supposed to judge each other. Things had to change despite the cost, I thought.

The professor continued, breaking off my thoughts.

"We spend so much time trying to get people to like us not

realizing that what's more important is whether we like them or not and whether they can help us become better individuals. We have a personal responsibility to ourselves to expose ourselves to the best individuals and ideas. Make sure you're fulfilling that responsibility by keeping the right people in your life. You are a valuable commodity. Don't shortchange your value. Not everyone is made for you and nor are you made for everyone," emphasized Professor Ismat as the students continued to take notes.

Not everyone is made for me, nor am I made for everyone.

"Find your people and stick with them - your circle should be helping you gravitate upwards rather than pulling you downwards. And don't worry, you will find your people. Keep Les Brown's advice in mind as you go about selecting your friends," continued Professor Ismat as she pressed the clicker.

'If you're the smartest one in your group, it's time to change your group.'

"While this may sound harsh at first, you're doing an injustice to yourself by sticking with people who will not contribute to your personal development. It's hard to let some friends go but then again, it's not easy to become a high-performance person. You have to make sacrifices that the vast majority of people are unwilling to make. As I said, you have to do the things today others won't do in order to have the things tomorrow others won't have," stressed Professor Ismat before pausing to take another sip.

Noticing that the class was hungry for more, Professor Ismat continued.

"Also, recognize that at times there will be individuals in your life including not only your friends but also your family and loved ones who will fail to understand and comprehend what

you're trying to achieve in your life. It's most definitely a lonely feeling," said Professor Ismat despondently.

"Someone once said that those that we care the most about have the most power over us. Isn't that true?" she asked the class.

"Anything negative these people say hurts us the most. It doesn't matter whether it's members of your family or your closest friends, rarely if ever will you find these people being able to see beyond their current perception of you. They will give you advice that will be well-meaning but ill-serving; after all, how can someone who has never been in your shoes give you advice about what will give your life meaning and value?" declared Professor Ismat gravely.

"Some people don't dream big. As indicated earlier, they've settled for mediocre lives. You have to go to the right people for advice. Sometimes we reach out to anyone we can find and then let their judgments influence our decision making," she added.

"You will recognize the futility of this approach when you consider where these individuals are in life and whether it even made sense in the first place to take advice from them. Everyone enjoys giving advice and feeling smart; the world is full of people who will be willing to chip in their two cents at every step of the way. Remember, it is your responsibility and yours alone to separate the wheat from the chaff. You know better," continued Professor Ismat.

"Now, I am not preaching separatism. If there are people that you absolutely cannot do without, there is time for that as well. You may have responsibilities that you have to cater to. If possible, follow the 80/20 rule or the Pareto principle wherever you can. But after all said and done, you ought to

remember that the key to your better future is you. You know your circumstances best and more often than not, you do have an idea as to what you need to do to improve. Don't let inertia stop you. Moreover, keep your professional and personal lives separate. It will yield massive contentment in the long run," stressed Professor Ismat as she took another sip.

"If you want to be a high-performance person, you have to surround yourself with high-performance people. Birds of a feather flock together - if you run around with losers, you will end up a loser. People say that you become the things that you think about but perhaps equally important is the fact that you become like the people you hang around with!" she exclaimed.

"Rarely will you be able to develop further amid people who will only pull you down rather than help you go forward. You may feel good about yourself while you're with them, but it's not helping you achieve your goals," continued Professor Ismat.

I realized that subconsciously, one reason I had stayed friends with Furqan for so long was that he made me feel good about where I was in life. After all, I wasn't doing great, but I was still much better off than he was.

Professor Ismat's voice interrupted my thoughts.

"Once you choose the right group, you may feel nervous or insecure among such individuals but in the long run, all this uneasiness will be worth it. Success leaves clues ladies and gentlemen; you assimilate the habits and mindset of those around you. Again, if you want to become successful, stay around successful people," said Professor Ismat as she glanced at her watch.

"Now, I recognize that we're a time boundary for today's session. As I said, if there's one thing you want to take away from this lecture, it is this," she added as she pulled up another

slide.

“You must be willing to do the things today others don’t do in order to have the things tomorrow others won’t have.”

Les Brown

Motivational Speaker

“It is time to make hard decisions and I will help you as much as I can. But in the end, it is a choice that only you can make for you,” she added as she put the notes back in her bag.

“Now, we only have two more sessions together!” continued Professor Ismat with a sad smile.

“I will cover some other principles which I believe will serve you well but if there is something you would like me to discuss with you, do let me know. I look forward to reading your reflection papers and seeing you next week,” concluded Professor Ismat with a smile.

It was hard for me to believe how far along we had come on the journey.

A Lesson on the Impermanence of Failure

“I’ve been very impressed by your reflection papers,” said Professor Ismat with a smile before starting our penultimate session.

I thought about how I had spent the better part of the weekend working on it.

“Based on where we are in our journey, this week I want to talk about some quick strategies that you can implement that can get you going on your journey. Subsequently, I want to talk a little about the ‘breaking point,’” she added as she pulled out her notes.

“Deep down, most of us know what it is that we need to do to succeed. As we discussed many times, success and failure are not catastrophic events. They’re a result of following, or in some cases, not following a set of daily disciplines over time. This is how Jim Rohn eloquently put it,” she continued as she pulled up a slide.

“Success is nothing more than a few simple disciplines practiced every day; while failure is simply a few errors in judgment, repeated

every day. It is the accumulative weight of our disciplines and our judgments that leads us to either fortune or failure."

"Jim Rohn also said that everything matters. Everything affects everything else," continued Professor Ismat. "This is so important that this is worth repeating. We can't expect to ignore one aspect of our lives saying that this is the only area we'll neglect while we excel in others. Don't let neglect destroy your life; as we talked about, the things that are easy to do are very often the things that are also easy not to do. That is why a lot of people fail to follow through on their dreams," said Professor Ismat gravely.

"Your disciplines from one area of life are bound to trickle down into others. You cannot be undisciplined in one area and disciplined in another. Maybe you can pull it off for a while but in the long run, your lack of discipline will catch up with you!" exclaimed Professor Ismat.

Sensing a few puzzled faces, she continued.

"What does this principle mean from a practical perspective? It means that you don't change your personality and attitude towards things based on how important they are. Attempt everything as if it is a representation of you; everything you do should be done to the best of your ability because it is a representation of who you are. Do your best to excel in every area of your life, not just the ones you prefer excelling in. Recognize that it won't be perfect, but the journey is more or less the same for everyone so the earlier you start, the better your chances," she added as she flipped her notes.

"Now, on a more positive note, Jim also says that all new disciplines affect all other disciplines. If you incorporate a positive and healthy habit into your lifestyle, the boost of confidence that you get will affect your commitment to all

your other positive habits. Your self-esteem will improve, and you will be more inclined to achieve all your other goals,” said Professor Ismat with a smile.

“Discipline empowers rather than restricts. When you trust yourself to follow through on your daily disciplines, you have more time to consciously spend on other areas of your life,” said Professor Ismat as she took another sip.

“Based on the goal-setting exercises we’ve done; we can figure out what most of us need to do to progress. However, the problem comes when we have to actually start doing it!” she remarked as the class cracked up laughing.

“I want to share some ideas with you that you can benefit from immediately. Something I initially disregarded as being too trivial to be true was the 5-second rule popularized by Mel Robbins. Mel found herself trying all sorts of things but unable to succeed in life. Even waking up in the morning on time was a struggle. Probably most of us can relate to feeling the power of inertia and bad habits when we decide to change, huh?” asked Professor Ismat as the students nodded.

“Change is hard, and we humans don’t really like change unless it’s good for us. We often want to stay in our comfort zone and keep doing what we’ve been doing all these years. However, this is where Mel’s brilliance comes in. She recognized the power of our subconscious mind and how giving herself a ticking bomb deadline would work. Here’s what she said,” continued Professor Ismat as she pressed the clicker.

If you don’t start doing the things you don’t feel like doing, you will wake up one year from today and be in the same place. So here’s the one-liner definition of the 5 Second Rule: If you have an impulse to act on a goal, you must physically move within 5 seconds or your brain will kill the idea.

“Every time we hesitate before doing something, we should count backward from 5-, 4-, 3-, 2-, and 1 and then immediately take action. This is especially important because we should continuously attack what we’re afraid of. Fear acts as a compass, telling us what we need to work on next,” continued Professor Ismat.

“One example that Mel provides is about speaking up in meetings. You can think of it as speaking up in class if you want to. We have a wonderful idea, but the fear of appearing stupid or what others will think often discourages us from saying it out loud,” she stated.

A few students nodded.

“The next time you feel something similar, count backward from 5 and simply raise your hand so that you’re forced to speak. The more you start taking action, the more courage you’ll have. As always, it’s not as much about the action you take but the person you become in the process,” emphasized Professor Ismat.

“Another example from Mel herself is how she struggled to wake up in the morning. The next time you’re struggling to get out of bed because it’s cold outside, count backward from 5 and then jump out of bed. This may sound too simple to be true, but I have found that it works for many people. However, as with most other principles, you need to work it in order for it to work,” said Professor Ismat with a smile as she flipped another page of her notes.

“Now, this next idea may be useful to a few of you. A related principle that I came across in a wonderful book, ‘Psycho-Cybernetics’, is the idea of subconsciously repeating the phrase ‘Cancel’ whenever a negative thought enters your mind. Force yourself to think positive and constructive thoughts. This is

what Jim Rohn says,” said Professor Ismat as she pressed the clicker.

‘Every day you must stand guard at the door of your mind.’

“Mental health is incredibly important. It’s vital that you only allow those things to enter your mind that will serve you well on your purpose. If something says something discouraging, rephrase it in your head or tell yourself that things aren’t as bleak as someone else makes them out to be. Stay cautious about the company you keep and whether it adds value to your life. As the old African proverb goes, ‘when there is no enemy within, the enemy outside can do you no harm,’” continued Professor Ismat.

“Often, we are our biggest critics because we spend every second of our lives together and have a clear idea of everything that we do. We feel that others are perfect and that there must be something wrong with us. Wrong!” she exclaimed.

“All of us are humans and make mistakes. Most, if not all of us, struggle with self-esteem. Deep down, all of us want to feel that we’re important. We’re not as different as we think we are, you know,” she continued.

“We are too critical of ourselves simply because we spend the most time with ourselves and have limited or no information about the struggles of other people,” said Professor Ismat ardently.

“The next time your mind says something negative to discourage you, repeat ‘Cancel’ and replace that negative thought with a positive affirmation. For instance, if your mind plays the old repeated tape that you are boring and don’t deserve anyone’s attention, immediately say ‘Cancel’ and change it with a positive affirmation! One example could be realizing that you’ve made mistakes in the past but that you’re an interesting person and

that you can be a wonderful friend,” she continued.

“If you want, you can set reminders on your phone that will keep you centered. It could be anything that works for you. It doesn’t matter what the affirmation is as long as it positively influences your self-image. Self-talk is more important than you realize. Perhaps once you’ve repeated this affirmation, you could incorporate the 5-second rule and take action before your mind convinces you otherwise. It’s a daily if not hourly process of seeking to become what you can be and these ideas can help,” continued Professor Ismat.

She paused to take a sip of her coffee.

“Now, since we have a longer session today, I also want to spend some time talking about a principle I refer to as the impermanence of failure. There will inadvertently be times in your life when nothing goes to seem right. You will feel that all the energy you have to spend on achieving your goals is not worth it. These are times referred to as ‘breaking points’ and it is crucial you understand their significance,” she paused, making sure the students understood what she meant.

“It is natural to feel overwhelmed when life is kicking you from all directions. However, you must remember that it doesn’t take any effort to stay at the bottom. If things are getting hard, it is proof that what you’re doing is working. This will be a fight, but it will be your fight. You’ve got to do what it takes even when you don’t feel like it. You may not get everything you fight for but everything you get will be a fight,” she continued.

“You’ve got to keep coming back no matter how hard you’re hit. Don’t quit until you win. You’ve made it thus far and there’s no reason that you won’t make it here onwards. There may be moments when you won’t want to get out of bed or step out of the house. There will be times when as Les Brown says,

everything that can happen will happen! Murphy's law will be in full force!" she exclaimed.

"However, you must remember that it is in these moments that real growth takes place. This is a breaking point that you must master in order to get to the next level as the author T.D. Jakes would say. These difficulties are there for a reason. As it's often said," continued Professor Ismat as she pressed the clicker.

"To whom much is given, much will be required."

"If you seek to attain personal greatness, you will have to pay the price. All your heroes in life have failed repeatedly; the only difference between them and millions of others is that your heroes kept at it. They didn't let setbacks stop them. Here's Lincoln again on failure," she added as she pulled the next slide. *"My great concern is not whether you have failed, but whether you are content with your failure."*

After taking another sip, she continued.

"Failure and setbacks can either make you or break you. You have to decide which one it's going to be. Success requires ongoing work; on your journey of personal greatness, you are never really done. It's a beautiful adventure to keep on discovering what you can become. You've got to be fanatical about achieving what gives your life meaning and value. You've got to say enough is enough and that you will do it or die!" declared Professor Ismat with a contagious enthusiasm.

"It's as simple as that. If you're willing to give everything you've got, nothing can stop you. Nothing *will* stop you. And if you encounter failure in the way, you'll recognize that it's just a part of your journey! When you decide to commit no matter what, the universe will respond to you. Go for it and control your destiny. Never be afraid. Be willing to fail and be rejected.

Be alone sometimes, if required,” she continued solemnly.

“However, never turn around without attaining your goal. Never give up because you didn’t do your best. Nothing can resist a person that has that kind of a commitment,” said Professor Ismat with a smile.

“Learn from the experience and move on. Use your past as a lesson, not a weapon. Jim Rohn says that life is like the seasons; opportunity follows difficulty. Winter follows fall. Some winters will be long, painful, and rough, but while you can’t change the seasons, you can change yourself,” said Professor Ismat as she moved on to the next slide.

“Don’t wish it were easier, wish you were better. Don’t wish for fewer problems, wish for more skills. Don’t wish for less challenge, wish for more wisdom.”

“Remember that if it was easy, everyone would do it. The strong habits that you’ve developed for yourself, follow through on them despite how bad or down you feel. The boost you feel in your self-esteem the next day will prove to you that success and failure are nothing but temporary; what matters is who you become in the process,” she continued.

“Another way to look at all the difficulties that we go through is to consider them as proof of our success. They’re our footprints of success that we can look back on and cherish because we understand that we were willing to do everything it took to get to where we wanted to get to even when it was hard to see the finish line. These obstacles and your willingness to climb over them will only reflect your tenacity and the strength of your purpose,” she added.

“Moreover, considering the obstacles that you encounter as a series of challenges or levels is another valuable paradigm. At every obstacle that you encounter, many individuals trying to

achieve what you are trying to achieve simply get left behind because the obstacle is too overwhelming for them. They refuse to go all in. When you decide to carry on regardless of what you're facing, you're already moving farther away from the competition. I'm reminded of a short quote here," said Professor Ismat as she picked up the clicker and pressed it.

'There's no traffic on the extra mile.'

"If you didn't have a good day, believe that you can still turn it around as long as you stay committed. At the end of the day, your emotions and how you feel about your life is in your hands. You can take action and do what needs to be done, despite what your feelings and emotions tell you. The worst of events in life may not even affect you if you train yourself that way. It's how we perceive something that influences how we feel; if you control how you interpret events, you can control to a very large extent how you feel. If it's all in your mind, why not use it to your maximum benefit?" she asked.

"And children, I am over 60 so believe me when I say this: even if you fail in the end, the journey will be worth it! If you follow through on your dreams, you will find that even though things haven't gotten any easier, you would have developed the strength and character to face them. Again, the person you become in the process is more important than anything you end up accomplishing!" emphasized Professor Ismat.

"The person you will become in the process will justify every failure and setback that you've encountered along the way. See what the physician William Osler had to say," she continued as she pulled up the next slide.

"To have striven, to have made an effort, to have been true to certain ideals — this alone is worth the struggle. We are here to add what we can to, not to get what we can from, life."

She took another sip before continuing.

“Now, since failure is impermanent and a part of the process, it doesn’t matter whether you’re externally succeeding or failing as long as you continue to work on yourself. Achievement of your goal doesn’t matter,” said Professor Ismat before pausing to see if the class was in unison on this important principle.

Satisfied at the response, she continued.

“Don’t be too harsh on yourself. If you’ve internalized your goals and given all that you have, when all is said and done, you will have the satisfaction of telling yourself that you tried magnificently. That you were truly immersed in the effort and even though you failed, you are proud of yourself for the courage that you demonstrated,” she added.

“Failure is impermanent and a necessary step on your journey. Treat it for what it is and no more,” continued Professor Ismat as she put down her coffee mug.

“Now, let’s wrap up today’s lecture with spending a bit more time on reflection and renewal,” she said as the students excitedly leaned forward in their seats.

“The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once said that life can only be understood backwards but it must be lived forwards. In the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Stephen Covey spoke of a high-power individual who spent every Saturday reflecting on how his week went. His family and friends knew that he was not to be disturbed during that particular period on Saturday night which he would spend locked up reflecting. According to this individual, this single exercise of weekly reflection has yielded more benefit to him than anything else,” she added.

“Reflection is a key part of almost every great individual that I know. You cannot find out what you’re doing well and what

you need to improve unless you spend time reflecting on what you've done. As you're starting, it may be difficult to reflect every night but make it a priority to at least spend some time every single week reflecting on the week that went by. To get the most of your life, maintain a journal. A life worth living is a life worth documenting as Jim Rohn would say," exclaimed Professor Ismat with a smile.

"Imagine for a moment that your life will be magnificent and successful; would you not want your future self 50 years down the road to enjoy the pleasure of going through your life through your journaling? Would you not want your kids and grandkids to benefit from the wisdom that you've accumulated over the years? Look at what the novelist Anaïs Nin wrote," said Professor Ismat as she pressed the clicker.

"We write to heighten our own awareness of life. We write to lure and enchant and console others. We write to serenade our lovers. We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospection."

"Life has a way of passing through before our eyes," continued Professor Ismat. If we don't take control of time, we will end up with regrets for not making the most of our lives," she added.

"As Socrates said, 'The unexamined life is not worth living.' There are a couple of questions you can ask yourself during your reflections," continued Professor Ismat as she pulled up another slide.

- 1) *What went well this week? What failing have I resisted?*
- 2) *Where was I wrong? Where can I show improvement?*
- 3) *Am I living in alignment with my values and principles?*

"As with most things that we've discussed, you are responsible for managing your self-motivation," declared Professor Ismat.

"Don't be too critical of yourself as you're starting off but at the same time, don't be too lax as to not hold yourself

accountable. Consider yourself consciously responsible for being the driving force behind all the decisions and actions that you take - why not try for the best representation possible? Why not go for it all?" she asked.

"As we discussed, learn as much as you possibly can. One way to supplement your learning is to devote one hour every day towards personal renewal. It's said that during the first 10 minutes after waking up, your subconscious mind is the most impressionable. Anything you listen to or focus on is imported directly into the subconscious. Why not instead of reaching for our phone right after waking up, we exercise self-control and start our day positively by reading or listening to something inspiring?" insisted Professor Ismat.

"Regardless of how pressing something maybe, you won't be able to give it your best until you're in the right frame of mind. And again, it is up to you to do this for yourself. Do what works for you and discard what doesn't," continued Professor Ismat as she took another sip.

"Similarly, the few minutes right before going to bed are again a time when the subconscious mind is most impressionable - why not listen to something positive and inspiring right before going to bed? How about some positive affirmations? Your self-esteem, after all, is largely a result of your image of yourself in the subconscious mind," she added before taking another sip.

"An approach popularized by the author Robin Sharma to improve your productivity right after waking up is the 20/20/20 formula which says that right after waking up, you should spend 20 minutes engaged in intense exercise, the next 20 in reviewing your goals, and the last 20 in reading or learning something inspiring. This will help start your day with the right mindset," continued Professor Ismat.

“Another productivity technique that Robin talks about is spending the first 90 minutes of your work focused on the single most important opportunity in your life right now - something that working on would lead to an overall gigantic improvement in everything else,” she added.

For me, it would be that book I always wanted to write.

“The older I get, the more techniques I come across that can help you become better every day. It is a wonderful time that we live in. Believe me when I tell you that in your lifetimes, you will also come across many ideas that can do the same for you. Personal greatness is humankind’s ongoing effort to discover its potential. The only question you must answer is whether you will continue to search and then benefit from what you learn,” stressed Professor Ismat.

“Don’t let the craziness of the world suck you in,” she emphasized.

“Especially when it comes to dealing with failure, develop sanctuaries where you can go to restore and recharge yourself. For some people it might be taking a long walk, meditating, or working out; for others, it might be pouring your heart out to a trusted partner or friend. Know what works for and make sure you give yourself top priority. If you don’t take care of yourself, who will?” asked Professor Ismat solemnly.

“Incorporating this ritual early into the day ensures that regardless of whatever life throws at you that day, you will be prepared. You have an inherent self-belief that you can handle it. Why not try it out for yourself and see whether it works?” she asked before taking another sip.

“Again, remember that it’s completely up to you whether you want to improve yourself regularly or not. No one can be as committed to your self-development as you can be. Why do

you have to do it for yourself?" she asked.

"Because no one else will do it for us!" responded the students in unison to which Professor Ismat smiled. Her constant repetition and persistence was finally beginning to pay off.

"You have greatness within you. However, it will never reveal itself to you unless you commit to finding it. It's in these moments when you're all alone that your character is developed. Remember, people get rewarded in public for what they practice for years in private. Once you get this private aspect of your life sorted out, you will automatically develop the courage to handle the public aspect. This is what the Spartan warriors used to say," continued Professor Ismat before pulling up a slide.

'Sweat more in training and you'll bleed less in war.'

I looked to my left to see Sarah raise her hand. The professor motioned her to continue.

"But Professor Ismat, what about sleep?" she said playfully. Professor Ismat characteristically chuckled before responding.

"That's a great question, Sarah! You know Jim Rohn used to say that we should make rest a necessity, not an objective. Powerful words, no?" she asked.

Sarah nodded.

"Dear, figure out what works for you. Some of us need 6 hours of sleep to function properly. Some of us need 4. I'm not a sleep expert so I don't want to lead you down the wrong path" she continued empathetically.

"As your classmates rightly noted a moment ago, no one will take responsibility for changing your life; you have to do it for yourself. Sleep and rest are important but don't let them become objectives in themselves. Let me pull up a beautiful piece from the writings of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius who wrote about this in his Meditations hundreds of years ago,"

said Professor Ismat as a slide appeared on the screen.

At dawn, when you have trouble getting out of bed, tell yourself: "I have to go to work — as a human being. What do I have to complain of, if I'm going to do what I was born for — the things I was brought into the world to do? Or is this what I was created for?

To huddle under the blankets and stay warm?

So you were born to feel "nice"?

Instead of doing things and experiencing them? Don't you see the plants, the birds, the ants and spiders and bees going about their individual tasks, putting the world in order, as best they can? And you're not willing to do your job as a human being? Why aren't you running to do what your nature demands?

You don't love yourself enough. Or you'd love your nature too, and what it demands of you."

"Is helping others less valuable to you? Not worth your effort?"

Satisfied that the students were done taking notes, Professor Ismat continued.

"Children, you are all meant to achieve great things; don't shortchange yourself. Often we don't want to get out of bed because the pull of our dreams is not strong enough. Make sure you figure out what you truly want and then go after it with all you want. It will give you the motivation and energy to get out of bed every single day," she added.

"Now, did I answer your question child?" said Professor Ismat as she turned towards Sarah.

"Yes Professor, thank you! I'll keep Marcus in mind next time I want to sleep late!" replied Sarah with a big smile on her face.

"I'm glad," responded Professor Ismat with a smile.

"Now," continued Professor Ismat glancing at her watch. "We have far exceeded our time boundary for today, but I hope it was valuable for you. Next week we have our final session

where we talk about some other principles such as avoiding complacency and gratitude. I will see you soon. Till then, make sure to take care of yourself and others,” said Professor Ismat as she switched off the projector and walked out of the classroom.

The Final Lesson

“**C**hildren, in our final session, I want to talk to you about hunger. Not the hunger for food though, but the hunger for your dreams!” exclaimed Professor Ismat as the students laughed.

Slowly but surely, Professor Ismat had become an important part of our lives. She had shown us what was possible for us. As our time together neared an end, I couldn't help but feel a sense of despondency.

“I do not doubt for a second that all of your dreams will come true if you have the courage to pursue them. However, there's a tendency for all of us to become complacent once we've achieved our goal. Someone rightly said – ‘it's not about achieving success but maintaining it’. That's the hardest part, children. When you're starting to work towards a goal, it's often easy to push ourselves because we're all pumped. Perhaps we want to prove a point to someone who underestimated us,” she continued.

“Perhaps it's a personal goal that we think will bring us joy. However, once we achieve our goal and the drive and hunger are

no longer there, we tend to go easy on ourselves and decrease the effort we're putting in. We've already attained success; why strive for more?" asked Professor Ismat rhetorically.

A couple of students nodded their heads.

"Remember that the opportunity that you have today will not last forever unless you commit yourself to it. You don't want to look back 5 years down the road and hope you had stayed on the track that brought you success rather than becoming complacent. I've seen children with a tremendous amount of potential who after achieving something magnificent become complacent. For others, it's when they land their dream job," she added.

I recalled what Dad had once said. Get a job with a big company and you will be set for life. Thankfully, I didn't let that negative thinking influence me anymore.

"They believe that life will now work out for them solely on the virtue of attaining that position. It's a fallacy; remember, you get value for bringing value to the marketplace. You know the bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger?" asked Professor Ismat.

The students nodded their heads. The Terminator!

"This is what he had to say," continued the Professor as she pressed the clicker.

"While you're out there partying, horsing around, someone out there at the same time is working hard. Someone is getting smarter and someone is winning. Just remember that."

"The moment you get complacent, you die!" exclaimed Professor Ismat.

"Keep in mind what the actor Denzel Washington said – 'ease is a greater threat to progress than hardship'. Out of complacency is born a life of quiet desperation," she continued.

“Considering the pace at which scientific breakthroughs are taking place, you’ve got to be an expert in your field. Don’t just lay back and hope that things will work out. You know your method of attaining success has worked. Repeat it. First, you must set the standard, then you must raise the bar,” she added, moving her slender hands to make her point.

“And even if life miraculously works out for you, imagine the opportunities that you will miss out in the process if you become complacent?” she asked.

“Imagine the impact you could have if you took the same hunger and drive you used to get into college or land that job to everything you did?” she added.

“Upon achieving success, you will realize that there are more opportunities that need your time and attention. As Nelson Mandela once said, ‘After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.’ Discovering who you can become and what you can achieve is a never-ending process,” she paused and took a sip of her coffee.

“Remember the hunger you felt when you weren’t the top dog. When people thought you wouldn’t be able to accomplish something because they couldn’t see beyond their perception of you. Remember that hunger, and let it drive you forward!” exclaimed Professor Ismat.

“However, do it for yourself. You owe it to yourself. You are competing against no one but the best you can be. That should be your goal,” said Professor Ismat with a fierce determination in her eyes.

She paused for a moment to take out her water bottle from her bag. To our horror, she lost her balance and cracked her skull against the floor.

* * *

“You couldn’t have enough of me, could you?” a weak Professor Ismat asked jokingly as she lay in the hospital bed.

The room was full of students, most of them sitting on the floor. Professor Ismat had to be moved to a different room just so that everyone was able to fit in a room together. The doctor had complained about Professor Ismat having too many visitors, but the school was finally able to convince the administration. Professor Ismat’s permission had certainly helped.

“Professor, we couldn’t afford to miss your last session,” lamented Hassan despondently.

Deep down, we all felt the pain of seeing the professor this way. She had a big bandage on her head and tubes connected to her arms. Her fall wasn’t life threatening but after all, Professor Ismat wasn’t as strong in body as she was in mind and spirit. I saw Sarah shed a tear and I clutched her hand.

“I see, Hassan,” responded Professor Ismat with her characteristic chuckle.

Despite her weakness from the fall, Professor Ismat’s face still glowed. She took a moment and then recognizing her personal accountability to us, she looked at all of us with the reinvigorated energy we were used to encountering in class. It was as if her being in a hospital bed with tubes connected to her body barely mattered. Her students were here, and she was going to do the best she could.

“Alright then,” she continued after coughing a few times.

“But I must warn you, these medications have been making me very drowsy, children. Your professor might doze off in the middle of the lecture, so bear with me,” said Professor Ismat with a teasing smile.

Her strength and resilience were inspiring.

“So, to finish our time together, I want to talk about gratitude and the value of loving yourself,” she added as the students took out their journal and began to take notes. Surprised to see her students carrying notepads, she smiled. She had successfully ignited in us a thirst for learning and a hunger for knowledge.

“When I was very young,” said Professor Ismat before she paused to take a cough. “I came across a quote that said that everything you seek from others you must give yourself.”

She looked around to see if we understood what she meant. Recognizing our eager expressions, she continued.

“For the longest time, I couldn’t figure it out. But eventually, I made sense of it. Wisdom can come to you from the strangest of sources. It can come through your affirmations, it can come through a book, it can even come through a conversation with a friend. You know what kind of friends I have in mind, don’t you?” she asked with a smile.

There were smiles across the room. Of course, birds of a feather flock together!

If we wanted to be successful, we would have to surround ourselves with other successful people. Professor Ismat took a few sips of water and after a brief pause, continued speaking.

“To come back to what I was saying,” said Professor Ismat. “Give yourself all the things you want from other people. Respect? Admiration? Love? These are the things you seek, don’t you?” she asked feebly. “Even if others don’t understand or love you, you can understand and love yourself,” she stressed before she moved on.

“Why are we so quick to see the value in other people and yet so reluctant to see it in ourselves? Self-love is a beautiful thing. You have to love yourself before you love anyone else. You have

to cherish and treasure yourself like no one else does because you know that you have worth. You deserve to be treated with respect,” added Professor Ismat.

“Of course you make mistakes but then again, don’t we all do? You have to be your biggest ally - be gentle on yourself when you make mistakes, recognizing that it’s an innate part of being human. Personal fulfillment is ever more valuable and satisfying than any gratification you can get from others. It comes from a deep sense of respect, love, and gratitude for oneself,” she continued with a smile.

“As I told you, there are thousands if not millions of individuals who would give anything to have the life you have right now,” she paused and took a deep breath before continuing.

I was again reminded of the out-of-school children Professor Ismat’s foundation had worked with. I promised myself that I would take responsibility and help as much as I could.

“In the frenzy of life, we often forget to take a step back and reflect on how blessed and privileged we have been in various areas of our life. An attitude of gratitude will not only attract more blessings in your life but also help you build optimism. It doesn’t matter what you believe in as long as you believe in something. Be grateful for who you are and what you represent. Make yourself your highest priority,” she continued as the students took notes.

“There is a rabbi saying that has a profound impact on my life and it goes like this. If you are not for yourself, then who will be for you?” she asked gravely before continuing.

“But, if you are only for yourself, then who are you?” she said, pausing for added emphasis.

I couldn’t help but think again about other out-of-school children I could help. I was part of the solution. I could

make a difference. Professor Ismat's weak but calming voice interrupted my thoughts.

"And most importantly children, if not now, then when?" asked Professor Ismat despondently.

"Remember, if you don't stand for yourself, if you don't respect yourself, if you don't love yourself - how do you expect others to do that for you?" she asked as a tear rolled down her cheek.

"If you don't do the same for the causes you believe in, you will let evil triumph over the good we have on this beautiful planet. Be willing to die for what you believe in!" declared Professor Ismat with all the strength she could muster.

"Remember that no matter what happens in our lives, we will be okay. I might be on my deathbed, but I will have the satisfaction of dying empty. I will have the satisfaction of having lived a full life according to my principles and that's all that matters," she continued.

"Children, we have to always support us and stand by us. We have to stick to our principles and defend our minds from the roots of negativity. We have to accept ourselves fully aware of our flaws," she continued, as another tear rolled down her cheek.

Sarah quickly moved forward to wipe it with a napkin, unable to hold back her own tears.

"We must appreciate who we are and how we were designed. We must live our lives as a testament to the greatness that resides within us. We must love ourselves. Children, if we begin from home, we can really change the world," said Professor Ismat as she closed her eyes, giving herself completely once more and finishing her last lecture.

Author's Note

Thank you for taking out the time to read my book. I hope these ideas touched your soul the way they touched mine.

*If you loved the book and have a minute to spare, I would really appreciate a short review on the page or site where you bought the book. Your help in spreading the word is greatly appreciated. Reviews from readers like you make a huge difference to helping new readers find stories like *10 Ideas That Changed My Life!* For your convenience, I have shared the link to Amazon and Google below which will take you directly to the review page.*

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Umar Iqbal

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The author is currently a graduate student pursuing his Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree from The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and his Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. If you liked this book, please take a moment to share your feedback at uiqbal@wharton.upenn.edu or share a rating on Amazon or Google.

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