

Chapter 11: The Waves of Change Created by Outstanding Personalities

In times of utmost darkness in the history of mankind there have appeared certain geniuses whose names shine on the forehead of the proud pages of history. With their outstanding spiritual qualities, these historic men could bring about great changes on the stage of human life. They dazzled the world with their actions as if their very being were like a brilliant torch whose light would endure forever.

At times the waves of change created by outstanding personalities who enter the social arena are so wide and extensive that they encompass all human societies and they make an intense and far-reaching impact on the ideas of mankind. In fact it is these brilliant figures who change the countenance of the world and they even conquer weak and feeble temperaments with their powerful influence and draw them after themselves, giving them morale and the light of hope.

On the contrary, there are many people whose arena of activity in life is very limited and confined. The book of their life draws to a close with feeble movements and their lives terminate in oblivion. The flickering and slim candle of their existence is at last extinguished in total darkness.

The difference between these kind of personalities is to be sought in their ethos, because the variance in the levels of persons depends on the extent and scope of their spirits and the amount of their inner power.

What is the relation between personalities and social change? Are persons a product of the world's events or is it that the events are brought about by outstanding individuals? Scientific studies show that the individual and society reciprocally influence each other, and while man is influenced by environment, he also brings about changes in the environment. It is not possible to study the individual by placing him outside the environment of social life. However, at the same time, it is individuals who can change the conditions of their environment with their spiritual power and transform the face of society.

The basic factor in social changes and relations is the power of will, whether it belongs to an individual

or to a community. But the significance and value of the individual is greater, because it is the leaders who guide the national potentials towards desirable goals and lead the destiny of society towards a shining and glorious future.

In order that we may be able to carry out the judgements of reason, our being grants us a faculty called will. The human will is the resultant of two forces that act upon it. On the one hand is the force of instinct that acts upon it. On the other it is influenced by the intellect and reason.

The inability arising from the weakness of will is the result of the opposite forces within man. Inability does not mean that one is totally devoid of the power of decision making. Rather, he is capable of carrying out any act that he wants. But he has no power to translate his intentions from the stage of the mind to that of external reality.

There are many individuals who suffer with the inadequacy of an inner light. They might possess extensive means in life. However, despite their capabilities and the special and valuable opportunities that may arise for them, they are not very effectual, although they have fixed their gaze on a higher plane of life. They lack the power and determination to climb the ladder of progress and expect others to perform hard and taxing tasks for them, tasks which are themselves the means to growth and development. If they do not themselves take an initiative to realise their goals and endeavour for their sake, what else can help them in materialising their hopes?

Often they make beneficial and profound plans, but they fail to obtain any kind of results. They draw up great practical plans which never reach the point of implementation.

Lack of Will Power, the Obstacle to Success

With a weak will, one's life in its different aspects is sure to end in defeat. Misfortunes multiply as a result of an inert will, and neither talent nor genius can be substitutes for a powerful will. What is the use if one possesses outstanding talents and gifts but is unable to employ them beneficially in reaching his goals? Knowledge and learning are useless when one cannot employ these assets fruitfully with the help of will in reaching one's goal.

Think what would have been the state of man if he had been devoid of the faculty of will and determination. What would have been the state of the world and what results would have been achieved by the law of evolution and progress? A study of history reveals the fact that basically all human inventions and discoveries have been due to men of determination, who overcame all the obstacles and hardships in their way through perseverance and an unflinching determination, as a result of which they attained brilliant victories. Problems and hardships are bound to vanish before the genius and determination of someone who does not know defeat.

When Napoleon wanted to take his heavily armed forces through the dangerous and difficult pass of

Saint Bernard, he consulted his military experts. He asked them if it was possible to get through the pass. The experts went into deep thought and they replied with doubt and hesitation that there might be a very slim chance of getting through the pass. On hearing their statements, Napoleon made a firm decision, and with a strong determination and without loss of time he gave the orders to advance.

England and Austria considered the decision of this powerful French general as a form of madness and recklessness, for it seemed improbable that he would be able to cross the Alps with all his equipment, heavy artillery and sixty thousand soldiers. But Napoleon had in his mind Messina, which was then under siege and the Austrian forces also threatened Nice.

When this dangerous and most difficult operation was carried out successfully and Napoleon crossed the Alps with his armies, some said that what Napoleon had done was not a difficult task after all. Others said that if they had done it before Napoleon, they would certainly have succeeded.

Many military commanders had the capacity and adequate power like Napoleon to carry out such an amazing operation. Only they lacked the necessary determination, and uncertainty, doubt and vacillation kept them from taking a decisive step and utilising appropriate opportunities. Instead of advancing they retreated, while Napoleon's firm decisions and quick movements earned this great French general such victories which left the world in amazement and wonder. The extraordinary volume of his daily work amazed everyone who knew him. He had the power to instil dynamism in the most dispirited of soldiers and to put the spirit of courage into the most timid of individuals. He would often sit through the night reading reports and answering letters.

There is no secret formula of success. Rather success is the natural result of effort and endeavour in carrying out one's work. The foremost of persons in this world who overcome obstacles and difficulties are those who have a strong will power and who, like the eagle, make use of strong winds to climb to elevated heights. For this kind of individuals, who have initiative, no difficulty can cause them to abandon their decisions; rather, they consider defeat as a bridge to victory. Their morale grows in the midst of hardships and whatever the stage of life they may be in, they can always make a mark in the world.

Vigilance in the Midst of Problems

Basically some persons do not come to themselves and wake up unless confronted with hardship. A tree that has been forced to make a place for itself in the midst of rocks grows to be hardy and strong due to its constant struggle against unfavourable factors. It will be able to withstand storms and resist unfavourable conditions.

A psychologist writes:

Young people should be made to understand that in order to achieve their goals, they should not expect a smooth ride over a well-paved road. Few have ever gotten anywhere without facing disappointing

obstacles. Whenever we confront problems in the right spirit, not only they will not be a hindrance but will be helpful to our progress. No exercise is more beneficial than the effort to overcome problems.

The psychologists have shown that more than thirty-five per cent of ordinary people do not make use of the years of their lives. Even those who are conspicuously active and attain to considerable positions and ultimately obtain success, make use of only a fifty per cent of their lifetime.

There are some people who cease making progress on reaching a certain stage and they cannot extend the scope of their activity to advance beyond the point they have reached to a higher altitude or a more distant horizon. This kind of persons actually possess the essential merits necessary for growth only to an inadequate extent and their capacity for progress is limited. One's ability and will power are the greatest asset for progress and development, and one may either squander this capital or invest it with profit.

Every step that one takes is the product of one's ideas, will, and determination. If these are weak and insignificant, the product of one's work will also not be significant or valuable. When persons with a weak will make a decision, they are shaky and beset with doubt and hesitation. A small remark from others makes them change their mind and revise their plans. Weak persons are perpetually vacillating and of a divided mind. With their uncertainty and flickering character they prove that they are not their own masters and, like a leaf carried about by the wind, have to follow the will of others in all situations. Hesitation and indecision are often equal to failure.

One who constantly wastes his time worrying about trifling details and delving on insignificant matters, only fretting and brooding over his problems under the influence of diverse motives without taking action, certainly wastes his ability, energy and time by delay and procrastination. He will be unable to reach the sources of success.

How often it happens that precious time and valuable talents are wasted as a result of indecision and delay, and a promising life is turned into defeat and failure! When one falls victim to such a fruitless and sterile spirit, what power can help him overcome the obstacles faced in life? Imagine a contrary situation, of someone who is not of a divided mind and stable in his decisions. He does not waste his time waiting for some favourable accident to occur. Rather, having a determined faith in his own ability, he does not abandon his righteous goal due to the objections of critics. Nothing can make him turn away from the path that he has chosen rightly. He discards any kind of stray thoughts and plans contrary to his goal which may cross his mind. On encountering such persons in life one can well appreciate the strength of their character and the great value of the achievements of those who combine within themselves the power of several individuals.

In any case, success is not possible without decisiveness, because faith in one's success is itself half of success, and victory comes to those who are determined to be victorious.

There are many people who cannot pursue a task to its end due to indecision. For instance, if they are

attracted by a profession and trade, for some time they pursue it with great interest and enthusiasm. But as soon as they face difficulties, their interest and enthusiasm disappears and they become disappointed. Next time they take up some other trade that has brought success and advancement to some people.

Thus they remain shaky and uncertain all their lives and constantly keep on shifting from one profession to another. While selecting a profession or trade they do not make use of their minds and their power of judgement. Before they can discover the secret behind others' success and evaluate their own performance and achievement in life, suddenly it dawns upon them that they have spent a lifetime in learning and abandoning various trades. That is because they could not remain firm in their decisions or persevere in their work until the final fruitful stages. They discover that throughout life they have missed all the appropriate chances and opportunities, which arise only rarely.

One of the afflictions of the person with a weak will is that he is always subject to his desires and caprices. He might be able to distinguish the right way, but unfortunately what he chooses is a deviant path. He continues on a course of action so long as his desires and appetites do not dissuade him. Moreover, even a minor accident is sufficient to render him helpless and despondent and to bring him on his knees.

We need a strong and steady will in order to resist the pressure of misleading and destructive desires. A basic condition for being able to derive a right and desirable result from our will is to follow the dictates of reason in our decisions and exercising our will. There is a world of difference between a higher will reliant on reason and conscience and an impulsive will that acts under the impulses of perverse feelings, pride and egoism. While the first is the source of human felicity and happiness, being fundamental to success, the other leads to wretchedness and degeneration.

One who employs his will to satisfy his selfish motives and to commit all sorts of offences and acts contrary to human dignity is in fact devoid of freedom and is a captive of carnal appetites. One comes across many dark and bloody pages in the history of mankind which are a consequence of this kind of unruly will.

The person who resorts to suicide on encountering the slightest hardship in life has a weak intellect and lacks courage and manliness. That is because he succumbs to the problems and difficulties of life, which proliferate in all spheres of human life, and confesses to his own weakness and abasement by his action.

The Scope of Human Possibilities

Everything in the realm of being has to begin its journey on the path of growth and development and advance towards perfection in order to be able to realise its capacities and potentialities to the highest degree. Man is also not an exception to this general law.

One of the fundamental problems of the human being is how is it to develop its essential being during different phases of life in order to attain to the highest degree and peak of humanity. Before everything else man should become aware of the extent of his capacities and potentialities that lie latent in his being. He should realise that he has all the worthiness to acquire the greatest gifts that God has bestowed upon him. In that case the very foundations of his self-confidence would be more stable and firm. His latent energies and faculties would awaken and become active. These faculties have an extraordinarily great power in broadening the scope of life and have sufficient capacity for growth and edification.

The lack of self-confidence on the part of most persons is not due to the lack of possibilities but due to the absence of self-knowledge. There are some people who have useful and effective scientific ideas, but due to the lack of confidence in their innate gifts and capacities, they never cross the threshold of their thoughts. Doubt, uncertainty, and fear of defeat are signs of weakness. How often has this lack of confidence buried talented and innovative minds and what great innovations and original and profound ideas have been buried under the ashes of oblivion!

When one realises that every task and activity involves a new power, an asset which one never imagined that one possessed before it came to one's knowledge, its manifestation paves the way for further progress and one becomes ready to acquire more significant powers. Hence one who wants to draw the maximum benefit from life and to benefit from every opportunity must first acquire confidence and will power and then devote himself to developing and strengthening it.

Alexis Carrel says:

For the preservation of life it is not enough to protect it; rather, life must be made simple, more profound, dynamic and noble. That is, we must increase our physical and psychological activities in respect of intensity, quality, and quantity. Only strength leads to edification. The power that we need is not like the muscular power of an athlete or the spiritual power of an ascetic, or the mental power of a philosopher and scholar. The power that we seek is the harmony as well as the endurance of physical organs and the mind. Also the capacity to endure fatigue, changes of weather, hunger, lack of sleep, grief, suffering, and ultimately the will to hope and act, a physical and mental strength immune to defeat, and a joy that fills all our being.

How can we acquire this power? The only way to attain it is daily and regular moderate effort. That involves the involuntary effort of all the bodily organs and the voluntary effort of will and intelligence. In the course of daily and regular exercises one must gradually learn how to create discipline in life, how to follow the said principles and become master of oneself.

Similarly, with brief and regular effort one must try to master one's emotions, anger, indifference, lethargy, pride, desires, fatigue and pain. This exercise is necessary for all civilised people and the great error of modern education is to ignore it. One cannot extend the scope of the force of life within oneself without the intervention of the will. 1

Some people do not wish to pay the appropriate price for a brilliant life. They are always after some quick and simple means, although its outcome and product should be of little significance and worth. They refrain from endeavouring for what may give dignity and brilliance to life. They avoid the responsibilities which play a basic role in improving their selves and purifying their souls and which would broaden their mental horizon and pave the way to success.

However, those who have trained themselves to shoulder various responsibilities become fitter and their state would be many times better than of those whose lives revolve around petty responsibilities. They have a much wider field open before them and can traverse the various levels of advancement more easily.

The higher one's ideals are, the greater is the power that drives one towards his goals and this depends on his faith and on the extent of the effort that he makes for their realisation. Ultimately, it is here that one must seek the secret of man's triumph over obstacles and hardships.

The capacity to distinguish between what is good and bad and the understanding of vices and virtues is not solely sufficient for the attainment of felicity. Rather, that which is of utmost importance is to possess the power of action in life. A person may know perfectly what is good and bad and may even consider himself responsible in relation to the various duties that surround him and feel the necessity of fulfilling them scrupulously. But at the same time he may lack the power to carry out these duties and the necessary determination to put his intentions into effect.

The most basic duty of everyone is to be constantly and continually vigilant of his conduct, to reinforce his creative powers, and to avoid negative and vicious factors that destroy his positive powers, so that it becomes his second nature to rely on his power of will in times of necessity. That is because a firm will would keep one steady in critical moments of life and while making sensitive decisions, when the least amount of infirmity and laxity might be awfully dangerous.

Moreover, one should not plunge into a course of action without paying attention to its consequences and sufficiently examining its various aspects. Otherwise he would be like a mariner who sets out on the sea without a compass. It is a mistake to take the ship of life without a compass into the ocean of being. One must know the direction in which one is moving and where his actions and efforts would take him.

The Criterion of Responsibility in the View of Islam

In Islam the will is considered the axis of duty and the focus of all human affairs. It is what distinguishes the human being from other animals. The will is the sole means for checking the excesses of carnal drives and with it man can resist his violent urges and guide his energies in a beneficial direction.

Ultimately, he is free whether to attain real human perfection by overcoming his unruly ego, or to wander in the realm of bestiality by giving a free rein to his animal urges and to become an unruly beast that knows no restraints.

There is no exaggeration in the adoption by Islam of this criterion of distinction between man and other animals, because the meaning of humanity is nothing except this, and basically persons without a will are not human in the real sense.

Islam is not at all unaware of the reality of human nature and the various faculties and constitutions that lie within it. Similarly, it has a clear and precise view of man's capacity to pursue the higher ideals and the possibility of his fulfilling the duties required of him. It summons man to rise above the animal plane with all his faculties in the shadow of will, asking him to attain to the highest degree of perfection possible to the extent of his powers and potentialities. One who forfeits the real distinctive criterion of humanity and surrenders himself totally to subversive impulses has his faculties polluted and disabled, and his thinking faculty is severely damaged. As a result he would be incapable of achieving the real goal of life.

The exercise of the soul appears to be a difficult in the beginning. But with some mental effort the obstacles are gradually removed and the way is opened to the fulfilment of various duties. When the will, which is the guarantee of progression in life and the means of advancement and edification, is employed in the way of sacrifice, sincerity, and any kind of sublime feeling and sentiment, it will contribute to the person's greatness. When one acts with such a spirit he would obtain wonderful results whatever his field of activity, and will leave luminous pages in the book of his life.

Under the inspiration of the educative programs of Islam, individuals in society are motivated to employ their will power for the realisation of the higher objectives of life. From the viewpoint of psychology also the consequence of a resurrected will is positive and strong motivation.

Mann writes in The Principles of Psychology

That which is usually called will power is in the view of the psychologists the relative power of motives. Decision-making in a given case is the resultant of motives in a dynamic equilibrium.

In other words, in every case the alternative chosen is one which satisfies our motives to a greater extent in respect of natural drives and previous experiences. For instance, when the Japanese soldier is defeated in battle and he finds resistance to be useless, he is confronted with two alternatives. One is to surrender and to save his life. But he has been trained since childhood to believe that by surrendering to the enemy he would be compromising his honour in his own eyes and those of others as well as before the spirits of his ancestors (whom he believes to observe him). The other alternative before him is to kill himself and to find everlasting honour and dignity in the life that he has been promised after death. That is why he prefers to kill himself. As we have had a training different from the Japanese, we cannot properly understand his way of thinking. But in fact anyone under the influence of the same factors as the Japanese soldier would hardly do anything else.²

The Firm Support of Will Power

In every task, the will needs a strong support to lean upon. That firm support of will is faith. Faith and will are interdependent. If one were to possess faith without employing will to fulfil it and without making effort, he would never achieve his goals. That is because everyone's success depends on his efforts. The Qur'an says:

[Or has he not been told of what is in the scrolls of Moses, and Abraham] ... that a man shall have to his account nothing but his endeavour? (53:39)

On the contrary, if one were to possess will power without the effective weapon of faith, he would not cease making effort until he reaches a dead end in life. But when he finds that natural factors and causes have frustrated his efforts and he encounters problems and obstacles that cannot be overcome, the fire of hope and confidence begins to die out within his spirit. In such testing conditions nothing except faith in the eternal power of God can rescue one from anxiety and anguish. The person possessing faith and the asset of a firm will relies on God in the toughest of moments and conditions. The light of hope is never extinguished within him and he always seeks assistance from the infinite grace of the Almighty.

God instructs the Noble Messenger of Islam that whenever he were to resolve on accomplishing a task he should pursue his goal single-mindedly with trust in the eternal power of the Almighty.

So when you are resolved, then put your trust in God. (3:159)

In order to weaken the determination of a person in carrying out some task, it is sufficient to weaken his faith in relation to it.

If one were to understand and believe that every effort and endeavour that he makes is affirmed by the Almighty, Who governs the entire order of existence, he would pursue his goal with constancy and perseverance. He would discover the basic source of success and, with such a spirit, he will overcome all obstacles and hardships in the way that he has chosen, as if the obstacles were actually the steps to his upward ascent. Dangers will add to his courage, and failures will multiply his efforts, and whatever the obstacles he would not abandon his path.

A study of history introduces us to persons who have contributed to the advancement and felicity of mankind with their firm determination and high goals. They did not abstain from any kind of effort and struggle meant for the sake of the progress and edification of nations and, in fact, they made their way through hardship and persecution.

Foremost among them are the elect of (God and men of saintly excellence and freedom. The courage, perseverance and invincible will of these individuals, employed in the way of the deliverance of mankind and for the sake of their sacred goal, serve as a sublime and radiant example for mankind in general

and their followers in particular. It were these outstanding religious figures who despite the torture and torment faced by them at the hands of their contemporaries are today regarded as holy by the human community.

'Ali, may Peace be upon him, was a perfect example of an undefeatable human being. In one of his precious sermons he declares:

*By God, if all the Arabs were to join together in battle against me, I would not withdraw from it.*³

In the sermon addressed to Humam, he says:

*O Humam, the spirit of the man of faith is tougher than granite.*⁴

In the Battle of the Camel, when the forces of those who had broken their allegiance were prepared to confront 'Ali's army, he gave the banner to his son Muhammad ibn Hanafiyyah, and taught him the lesson of decisiveness and strengthened his will power with these words:

*Even if the mountains were to crumble, you should not tremble. Clench your teeth tightly (so that spirit of determination takes hold of your entire being); pledge your skull with God; and let your feet be nailed into the ground. Cast your sight on the furthest fringes of the enemy and overlook (whatever may be an unpleasant sight), knowing that victory is from God, the Glorious (and our duty is only to pursue our goal resolutely).*⁵

Tenacity and Victory

A leader's iron will and tenacity of purpose can bring about a sudden change in the course of events and mobilise the masses in a wonderful manner. The resoluteness of such men in the way of their goal removes great obstacles from their path, as if there were something iron-like within them. At times their courage and alacrity often averts dangerous crises when the smallest delay and uncertainty would cause them and others to perish.

At the time of the conquest of Spain by Islamic warriors, Musa ibn Nadir was the chief commander of the Islamic armies in north Africa. For the conquest of Europe, he dispatched his slave Tariq ibn Ziyad towards Spain to gather intelligence concerning the enemy forces and to report to the chief commander. When Tariq arrived with his small force at the point of his assignment and made a reconnaissance of the position of the enemy, he found that it was an opportune time to attack. He thought that if he were to report to the headquarters and wait for orders, the enemy would be alerted and prepare for battle. The moment of decision had come.

In order to make his soldiers abandon all thoughts of possible retreat, he ordered all ships with which he had crossed the sea to be burnt. When the ships were burnt down, all hopes of retreat disappeared. In answer to those who were dismayed by his action and were critical of it he said: "The Muslim is not a

bird to have a nest of its own." Then standing at the foot of the mountain known today as 'Jabl al-Tariq' (Gibraltar) and facing the roaring waves of the sea, he delivered a speech. He said:

O People! There is the roaring sea behind your backs and the enemy's army in front of you. The stores of the enemy are full of weapons and food supplies while you have recourse to nothing except what you may seize from the enemy with your iron will. You do not have access to any weapon except the swords that you carry. Now there you are and the strong enemy!

This fiery and impassioned speech of Tariq gave the soldiers the resoluteness and courage for a decisive battle. Then with appropriate tactics, he launched a terrible offensive and fought unflinchingly until victory.

Self-Suggestion

Self-suggestion is one of the means for strengthening the will to realise goals. Possessing higher aspirations and fixing one's gaze on the shining horizons of life induce one to make a wilful and persisting quest for attaining those goals.

Imam 'Ali, the Master of the Pious, said:

Vie with one another in acquiring worthy qualities and merits, in possessing great ideals, and in entertaining majestic thoughts, so that you may receive their mighty reward and attain their momentous results.⁶

Jagot says:

So long as you think that you cannot and that you do not have the capacity, the chances of success are small, and even if you possess the most brilliant of talents, they would come to nothing. Conversely, someone who is of ordinary intelligence and ability but is self-confident will be successful. He would succeed because in the course of his quest and endeavour to realise his plans, he will discover the source of the qualities that he needs after making some effort. He succeeds due to his confidence in his progress and is not discouraged by the failure of others. He begins his work by utilising his experience, and rest assured that he would succeed much sooner and in a better manner than you ever imagined. In order to have the courage to launch a project, drive away doubt and hesitation from yourself. Perhaps others, out of caution and sympathy, may want to make you doubtful and hesitant about your own capacities. But don't you have doubts about the correctness of their prophecies? Will you permit everyone to put any suggestion that he likes into your mind?

Listen to others with an intelligent ear, but continue to develop and strengthen your courage. Observe those who possess this precious quality and make an analysis of it. Every night reassure yourself with a series of far-reaching suggestions and imagine yourself to be in the skin of the courageous person that you would soon be. Whenever you get an opportunity—and be boldly innovative in creating one—take up

a task that involves the making of decisions, and in testing times remember this suggestion: "I can and I will!" If you resolve upon an important task involving problems you are well familiar with, tell yourself that you can do it. Raise your vigilance to the required pitch and you will become used to confronting them.⁷

In the same way that pessimism is a kind of negative self-suggestion in the view of psychologists that leads to worry and anxiety, optimism is a self-suggestion to reinforce one's spirit and to make up for inadequate will power. Accordingly, Imam 'Ali, may Peace be upon him, said:

Be optimistic about the future in order to succeed in overcoming obstacles.⁸

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1. Alexis Carrel, *Reflexions sur la conduite de la vie*, Persian trans. *Rah warasm-e zindagi*, p. 87.
 2. Mann, *The Principles of Psychology*, Pers. Trans. *Usul-e rawanshendsi*, p. 145.
 3. *Nahj al-balaghah*, ed. *Fayd al-Islam*, p. 922.
 4. *Bihar al-anwar*, vol. 15, p. 94.
 5. *Nahj al-balaghah*, ed. *Fayd al-Islam*, p. 53.
 6. *Ghurur al-hikam*, p. 355.
 7. Jagot, Persian trans. "Talqin be-nafs," pp. 212-213.
 8. *Ghurur al-hikam*, p. 347.

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