

Did You Make Someone Else Better Today? Grit, Leadership, and Being Human

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Give your best shot in the fight. I invite you to be the CEO of your success. Warren Buffett once said, "The best investment by far is anything that develops yourself, and it's not taxed at all." That wisdom still holds. Not all heroes wear capes. As Cleveland celebrates the release of a new Superman movie, the birthplace of the character, let me introduce you to a few real people with superpowers.

Take Dr. Fatima (not her real name). As a child, she was unable to attend school for years. After fleeing war with her family, she sold hand-knit socks and gloves on the freezing streets of Pakistan. On July 1st, 2025, she began her dream fellowship in Haematology-Oncology. Her white coat carries many stripes: post-doctoral training at MD Anderson and the Cleveland Clinic, a master's degree, multiple publications, and now, a new chapter of service and learning. I salute her.

I'm reflecting on snapshots of extraordinary lives. Dr. Iqbal, originally from Sialkot, could have taken the path of least resistance. His father, a factory worker, earned just enough to survive. His mother, a homemaker, held the family together. But Iqbal chose a different route. He worked hard, broke norms, and this July, he graduated from a prestigious fellowship in Chicago. He begins a new job and a lifetime of service and impact.

Then there's Dr. Mustafa. Labelled as having low literacy and placed in the lowest academic track in the Netherlands, he was told he'd never go to university. But after losing his baby sister to meningitis in a refugee camp at age ten, he made it his mission to become a doctor. "I studied hard," he says. "They moved me to the highest level." He was accepted into one of Europe's top medical schools and earned a research scholarship at Johns Hopkins. "I've been told I'm not a traditional applicant. But I'm grateful for my journey. I speak six languages and am learning Arabic from my wife, my seventh. My experiences have shown me the endless possibilities." After a medicine residency in Pittsburgh, he is now a fellow at an Ivy League medical centre.

A few weeks ago, I was asked to help write the obituary of a dear friend, Dr. Gohar Dar. Once a house officer at Holy Family Hospital, he served for 25 years at the Cleveland Clinic's main campus, specialising in critical care and cardiac anaesthesia, and was the founding Program Director of its elite Cardiac Anaesthesia Fellowship. "Gohar," which means "precious gem," truly captured how he lived and served. I met his childhood friends, who flew in from around the world to honour him. One of them said, "I met Gohar on the first day of medical school and laid him to rest on his last day on Earth. For 40 years, we laughed at the little things until people thought we were high." Gohar was a brilliant physician, a devoted husband and father, and a beloved friend. Known for his clinical precision, humility, and radiant smile, he brought calm to the most critical moments. A man of deep faith, he embodied the Islamic virtue of *ihsan*, excellence in action, worship, and character. He recited the Qur'an for guidance, strength and clarity. He welcomed guests with warmth, mentored younger colleagues without fanfare, and brought people together with gentle humour and a love for cricket. His home radiated joy and hospitality. His legacy of excellence, service, and unwavering trust in Allah (SWT) endures. *Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un*.¹ As the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, "Shall I not tell you whom the Fire is forbidden to touch? It is forbidden to touch a man who is accessible to others, gentle, soft-hearted, and easy-going." Gohar taught us how to live a full life, and what is important in life: love, humility, friendship and family.

It all begins with a seed. Consider the towering coastal redwoods of Muir Woods (*Sequoia sempervirens*), the tallest trees on Earth. They all started small. As Adam Grant writes in *Hidden Potential*, people often judge your future by your peaks. One ace from Serena Williams is enough to show her potential. Steve Jobs is remembered not for his failures, but for the Mac, the iPhone, and his "connecting the dots" speech to Stanford graduates. Stephen Hawking chose to study time itself after being diagnosed with ALS and told he had two years to live. His curiosity kept his mind alive long after his body failed.

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The antidote to decline is curiosity and the internal drive that money can't buy. Let's go beyond scores and GPAs. Let's be intentional. Let's think long-term, even past the next exam or semester, because the goal is to live fully and serve meaningfully. We may not be Superman, but we all carry an X factor. You, the tired first-year medical student: take a deep breath, and nurture that X factor. Greatness and nearsightedness are incompatible. As Daniel Pink writes in *Drive*, purpose matters more than pressure. Be ready to say what Bhulay Shah said: Merā rāñjhā hun koī hor.

Let's build lives worth remembering, not just for what we achieve or earn, but for how we help others grow. Let's show humility as a tribute to our parents and grandparents. Let's demonstrate integrity as a sign of the greatness of our teachers. Let's read and write consistently, because healing humanity requires communication and empathy.

Those who cannot read and those who choose not to read are, in effect, the same. As Admiral McRaven said in his "Make Your Bed" speech: "The only thing that matters is the size of your heart."

I vividly remember my late mother's kindness and compassionate smile, and my father's unwavering conviction in his Creator and his quiet integrity. We owe it to our loved ones to honour their sacrifices through lives of meaning.

What would I change if I could go back a few decades? My mindset. I would dream bigger, adopt an *I-can* attitude, and be more proactive in seeking mentorship and wisdom. I would spend less time hesitating and more time *doing*. President Roosevelt said, "Believe you can and you're halfway there." So don't stop at the next assignment or exam. Go beyond the bare minimum. The shadows of ignorance and disease are vast, and the need for action is urgent.

I'm here to give my best. I may not know everything now, but I know I can learn. I can ask questions. I can challenge the status quo. "Is this the best way? How can I do it better?" Mastery is a mindset. It requires deliberate effort, deep passion, and often, a thousand mundane repetitions. The incubator of innovation is built on the questions of *what* and *how*. From before kindergarten to after the doctorate, let's pursue greatness by holding tightly to one powerful question: *Why*?

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