

THE POWER OF WILL: A LETTER TO MY DESCENDANT

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Dear Descendant X,

Over the course of your life, you undoubtedly will be faced with many challenges. They will vary in importance and in difficulty, and your resolve to handle them must not waver. People are defined by how they deal with challenges, and you have the ability to overcome anything if you are determined to do so and commit to your determination with focus and the power of your will. And if you bring humility to it all, to everything you do, because we are the change we need.

I feel fortunate to have been exposed to this understanding at a young age. One day when I was maybe 10 years old, I visited my grandparents' house as I did every weekend of my childhood. That day my *Zayde* (Yiddish for Grandfather) sat me down and told me his life story. He shared his story with intention, carefully going over every detail, making sure that what he said was landing, not just flying over my head, seeing to it that I was actually comprehending and internalizing what he was telling me--what he was *giving to me* I now see. It was from this life-altering conversation that I began to idolize my *Zayde*, that I became determined to work as hard as he does to be disciplined and achieve success as I work towards my own humility. My *Zayde* taught me that with a strong work ethic matched by a strong will, nothing is beyond my reach. He taught me that day not to underestimate the power of my own will, because, he shared, it is directly related to the success I will achieve in my life going forward.

There are people who disagree with me about this belief for various important reasons that I want to address in this letter. Some believe that willpower is an illusion, while others believe that the idea of strong will and a good work ethic leading to success only applies to those with privilege. I want to be clear in telling you that we must always acknowledge inequality as we discuss concepts like will or grit. It is clear even at my age that it's definitely easier for those born into privilege (e.g., race privilege, class privilege, gender privilege, etc.) to attain success and traditional achievements given that they face fewer obstacles and have more available opportunities due to structural racism and discrimination.

While acknowledging and addressing these inequalities, it is important for motivation reasons I think, that educators make it clear that individuals from under-served schools and communities (in the systemic sense) can achieve success if they are determined and supported, when they know that they can get the necessary support to work against an unfair system. So my point to you is that given that we understand now that it takes more work than someone with systemic privilege, and even though that needs to urgently change--as we see from the protests against racial inequality over the past four months--your generation has to help each other see that we still have to work hard, even when things may seem hopeless given everything going on in the world right now. But we need to work differently, and in a way that is unified.

The realities of structural racism and discrimination are discouraging, which is why those who want to reach their goals need support so that they can transcend any obstacle, big nor small, and reach their goals. Although they will face even more challenges along the way, we must work to show everyone that any challenge can be overcome with support and determination--I see this with my generation and how we are currently fighting the structures of racism rather than letting them stay in the harmful status quo. This is the power of will, applied to social justice even given all the barriers we face, and with it we can overcome racism and make a new world. This is motivating and important for us to know as a generation with so much going on that is problematic and harmful to us and future generations. We need our individual growth and will to work in diffusion effect to change the world.

These are hard times and it is hard to stay motivated. Many young people just do not see or value the power of will right now. I guarantee you that it is real, and those who disregard this are doing themselves a disservice. However, the power of your will is only as strong as you yourself believe it to be, want it to be. In *Growth Mindset* Carol Dweck (2016) states that people who believe that willpower is limited often find their own will is easily depleted. On the other hand, she asserts that those who believe in the strength of willpower find it to be self-renewing, meaning that through working hard, they become even more energized to

do the hard work; *that is, through resisting each temptation you become better equipped to resist the next. By doing the hard thing, you become better able to do it the next time.* Essentially, the news flash here is that exerting the focused and self-renewing power of your will in turn leads you to exert more will in the future.

In this sense, we could argue that willpower actually is a powerful illusion of sorts because it is all in your head, in the sense that you can control your will and apply it for your own good--what Dweck calls a growth mindset. You must believe in yourself and have a vision of your future in order to be able to strengthen your willpower and develop an effective work ethic as a mission mode. To grow from struggle, to grow during challenges, to grow from your mistakes, you must learn how to seek out the support you need to grow into the best version of yourself. No one else can do it for you, as my *Zayde* always says, you have to show up every single day to do the work, and the work pays off every day as well. You just have to have the right mindset. Which means you keep working on it.

*“Not I, not anyone else can travel that road for you.
You must travel it by yourself.
It is not far. It is within reach.
Perhaps you have been on it since you were born and did not know,
Perhaps it is everywhere on water and on land.”*
Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself* (Stanza 46, Page 49)

My *Zayde's* history shaped him. He grew up in a tiny one-bedroom apartment in Northeast Philadelphia with his Mother, Father, Aunt, Uncle, and 7 other relatives. His family fled religious discrimination in Russia and came to the United States with nothing but the clothes on their backs. His parents, aunt, and uncle only spoke Yiddish, and so he could not speak much English until he was already in school. They lived off of food stamps and charity from neighbors and often went to bed without knowing when their next meal would be or if they would need to flee in the middle of the night to evade being evicted because they did not have money for rent.

As he got older, *Zayde* began to go on long runs in the city to clear his head. Eventually, these long runs became somewhat of a metaphor to him. They began to represent how far his future was going to take him, and every day he pushed himself to run further than he had the last time. These runs and what they represented to him are what developed his ambition and will to succeed. His family's financial struggles did not discourage him. If anything, it gave him even more motivation to work hard and succeed. He was determined to do better. At his retirement party 50 years later, he would stare into a room of adoring colleagues and say "It's been a great run." His success and healthy living came together in this way, both through discipline and will.

Developing a solid work ethic is a very important process, and like anything important, it will take time and effort. However, one way to think about it is that the process is not that hard, it is just extremely tedious. Of the many elements that lead to creating a good work ethic, there are three that I, as my *Zayde's* grandson, consider to be integral. The first of the three is *the cultivation of self-discipline*, which is necessary to achieve anything that is worthwhile. You must train yourself to stay focused on the task at hand without getting sidetracked by being persistent and following through on goals you set for yourself, as well as goals others may require of you. The second element is *time management*. You must use your time wisely and complete tasks on time. Benjamin Franklin once said, "Never leave that 'till tomorrow which you can do today." This does not mean that you cannot ever procrastinate, for that would be impossible to ask of you. We all procrastinate sometimes, and that is alright, as long as you still get done what needs to be done. The third, and possibly the most important of these three elements is *maintaining balance* in your life.

As my *Zayde* taught me by story and example, having a good work ethic includes knowing when you need a break. You must take care of yourself in order to consistently function at a high level. Or, as poet Maya Angelou avers, "Nothing will work unless you do." To work in this way you must eat healthy food, sleep well, work hard and smart, take time to relax, and whatever else you may need to do to keep your life balanced like exercise, music, and friends. Knowing your priorities in life helps you keep a clear head. Find what motivates you, and whatever that may be, channel it into having self-discipline, managing your time well, and maintaining balance in your body and mind, in your habits of mind as well. Doing this will allow you to have a work ethic that is amongst the strongest that there are. Because you know when to work and when to enjoy the fruits of your labor, and when to share them so that others can thrive. *Zayde* is good at that, elevating the people around him and making sure everyone is okay.

These views of the power of will are an example of growth and fixed mindsets. Individuals with growth mindsets understand that through time and experience they can develop their intelligence and overall way of thinking. Further, they know that they learn from mistakes and struggles and so they bring a learning mindset to all challenges and distress. A growth mindset enables us to see ourselves as always in process so we strive towards reaching our potential even as we accept ourselves in the present. On the other hand, those with fixed mindsets believe their abilities, talents, and intelligence as well as their weaknesses and flaws

are set and cannot be changed, they see them as fixed, which prevents them from working to reach their potential (Dweck, 2016). What is important here is to understand the power of your own mindset, to know how much mindset matters, and to pause enough in your life to figure out your own mindset because it shapes your life. Every choice, pattern, and behavior today matters--it is who you are and who you will be. Always remember this, and always choose self-respect, kindness, and honesty.

Some people do not believe in the concept of growth and fixed mindsets, arguing that while it may be a helpful teaching tool, it will not necessarily help you succeed in life. My response to this may sound oversimplified, but the people who say this about fixed mindsets tend to have fixed mindsets! They do not believe that the way they think can alter the course of their life, and in this they are wrong, sadly to their own detriment. It can do exactly that, changing your mind changes everything. I have experienced this on countless occasions, and I am learning now how true it is as I prepare for college. With this said, those who believe in the power of their own will to change their lives tend to be people with growth mindsets, and those who do not are people with fixed mindsets. I strongly advise you to not make the mistake of being the latter.

*"Myself moving forward then and now forever,
Gathering and showing more always and with velocity,
Infinite and omnigenous and the like of these among them."
-Walt Whitman, Song of Myself (Stanza 32, Page 28)*

My *Zayde* attended Northeast High School in Philadelphia. While he was enrolled there, he also worked two jobs in order to support his family. By his senior year, many of his friends who were poor like him students had dropped out to work full-time, but not *Zayde*. While he felt like it was more important to make fast money for his family, he knew that if he dropped out he would never have an opportunity to reach the future that he dreamed of, one of more than a paycheck-to-paycheck cycle. Instead, he worked incredibly hard virtually around the clock, both in school and on the job, in fact multiple jobs, because he knew that he would not be able to attend college unless he earned himself a scholarship. He remained patient, and when the time came for him to graduate from Northeast High School, he had, with the help of his mother who spoke very little English, secured himself an academic scholarship to attend Temple University. Through an extraordinary work ethic and tenacious focus and willpower, he was able to overcome the adversity and struggle he was faced with in order to provide himself the means to create a brighter future for himself, one containing infinite possibilities.

I tell you this story about your Great-Grandfather Carl because there will be times in your life when you must put in a lot of time and work to do certain things when you think the time and effort could be better spent doing something else, something that may feel better in the moment but not be in your actual best interest. I understand the desire to not break your back over work that seems meaningless. Believe me, I have done a lot of this myself, and I continue to do so.

However, times like these are when willpower is most important. It is pretty easy to will yourself to complete a task that you are passionate about, or at least have a stake in, but is much harder to do the same when you do not understand why you must complete said task, and that is when you must exert the most willpower and stay true to your work ethic. While the benefits of doing these tasks may not be visible while you are doing them, they will reveal themselves later on, and you will be glad that you put in the work that you did. I know how difficult it is to put so much effort into things only for the potential benefits they may have in the future. If you are anything like me or your Great-Grandfather, you will constantly be bored, annoyed, and impatient in school, working your butt off just to get a diploma so you can move on with your life. As annoying as school can be, if nothing else, it will strengthen your work ethic and test your willpower. School is just one example, and throughout your life you will encounter many similar situations. It is in your best interest to never back down from these situations, never quit, no matter how difficult, boring, or pointless the task at hand may seem. I know through my own experiences that if you do not give up, and you are willing to put in the time and effort necessary, you can tackle any challenge that you are faced with. I hope you internalize the lessons in this letter as I internalized the lessons of my *Zayde*.

*"When things go wrong as they sometimes will,
When the road you're trudging seems all uphill,
When the funds are low and the debts are high
And you want to smile, but you have to sigh,
When care is pressing you down a bit,
Rest if you must, but don't you quit.*

*Life is strange with its twists and turns
As every one of us sometimes learns
And many a failure comes about
When he might have won had he stuck it out;*

*Don't give up though the pace seems slow—
You may succeed with another blow.*

*Success is failure turned inside out—
The silver tint of the clouds of doubt,
And you never can tell just how close you are,
It may be near when it seems so far;
So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit—
It's when things seem worse that you must not quit.”*

-John Greenleaf Whittier, *Don't Quit*

While I do not know you yet, we are connected by lines--those we inherit and those we make ourselves--and so, Descendent X, I wish you the wisdom of knowing how little we know and yet how much we can do with it. I wish you the lessons of my *Zayde*.

Yours across time,
Ari Burstein
Philadelphia, PA, USA

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