

CHAPTER 38

Personal Influence

A real-life account: "Someone help, please!"

Waiting at a bus stop in a large city, a young woman stood with a modest bag over her left shoulder. The night air was warm, and the sky was dark with almost no trace of the stars. Only the streetlights and the neon signs of the shops lining the road lit the area. Cars raced past on the street in front of the young woman. People of all shapes and sizes passed as she waited. The city night was full of sights and sounds and the murmur of voices.

After watching dozens of people come and go past the stop, out of the corner of her eye she observed three young men approaching. Although the street was full of commotion, she noticed this trio immediately. She could see them whispering to each other and glancing around suspiciously. She clutched her bag more tightly and looked away from the men, who were now walking toward her. As they began to pass, one man stopped as if to ask her a question. Nervously, she looked into his eyes, preparing to respond. To her shock and terror, one of the other men suddenly lunged at her while the third man grabbed her arms and began to yank her bag from her shoulder.

In a panic, she began to scream. "Help! Help me, somebody! Please!" She was sure that someone would come to her assistance if they saw the situation. Still

there was no reply, but a small crowd had gathered to watch the struggle between the men and the woman. "Get off me!" she cried as she fought with all her strength to keep her bag. "Get off me! Get off me!" she pleaded. The men were now tearing off her necklace and her earrings. In a few moments, a bus pulled up in front of the growing crowd. A few people pushed their way out of the crowd and climbed the stairs to the bus, as did the three men, now carrying the young woman's bag and jewelry. Filled with helpless



rage, the woman watched the thieves ride away on the bus. They laughed and waved goodbye to her through the window as the bus pulled out of sight. The young woman, bursting with anger, stood alone at the bus stop. The crowd that had witnessed her humiliation dispersed, and the curious passers-by continued on their way.

What is it about this story that angers us? Why would anyone allow such a malicious assault to continue when they clearly could have helped the defenseless young woman? Her attackers had no weapons and could have been overpowered easily if those watching had tried to help. Why do such incidents occur so often? Can you imagine watching this scene? Can you imagine intervening?

Read the following situations and answer the accompanying questions:

You are on the escalator of a crowded metro station. You see a man in front of you taking the wallet out of a woman's bag. The woman does not notice the theft, and neither does anyone else (except you!).

- ✗ How would you feel if you were the one being robbed?
- ✗ Would you want anyone to intervene if you were the victim?

You are riding on a bus when you hear a young man making fun of two young, dark-skinned girls on the bus. He is with a friend, and the two are making mean jokes and racial slurs about the girls. The man tells them how he hates "their people." The girls sit quietly with their eyes cast on the floor.

- ✗ Imagine you were one of the girls. What feelings do you think you would have if someone were treating you badly because you were different?
- ✗ Do you think you would be grateful if someone stood up for you and told the young men that what they were saying was wrong?
- ✗ If someone said something in your defense, do you think you would remember that person's action for a long time, or would you easily forget it? Would it encourage or empower you to do the same?

You are with a big group of young people after school. Two boys in your group have a very difficult time getting along. They are always arguing and saying nasty things to each other. You see that today they are especially hostile to each other. You are shocked, however, when the two begin to punch each other and one of the boys pulls out a knife. He viciously stabs the other boy in the shoulder twice and then in his upper arm, and runs away. You and the rest of the young people are standing there in shock. The boy is lying on the ground bleeding profusely, but no one runs for help.

- ✗ Imagine you were the boy who had been stabbed. What would you want your friends to do?
- ✗ How would you feel if you were the boy and all of your friends only stood around and watched you bleed?

It is not easy to become involved in difficult situations and stand up for what you believe. Why should a person risk his life for the sake of another, especially someone he does not even know personally? Courage and compassion are two of the main qualities of a righteous person. Although it may be hard to imagine, hundreds of "ordinary" men and women have given their lives to stand up for what they believed.

In the course of human history there have lived billions of people. Some of them left such a significant trace that, even centuries after their deaths, they are remem-

bered by millions, while nothing is known about the lives of others. What made the difference between such memorable lives and those of other people? Who are those whom humanity remembers with gratitude? Why do some people leave a mark on history? How can the efforts of only one person change anything?

We started our discussion using some concrete examples of situations in which people (and you could well find yourself in their place) faced situations of moral choice. It's obvious that the role they played in those situations was directly dependent on decisions they made. The influence we have on the lives of others can be positive or negative. It can affect only ourselves, embrace our family and a few friends, or have an impact on the destiny of our country or even all of humanity. Let us try to discover what makes the difference.

Moral duty

Most of us would like to influence the lives of others in a beneficial way. We would like to be remembered with gratitude and not with a curse, to have our lives inspire others and not cause more despair. We would like to leave some memories in the hearts of people. How can we do that?

Those who affect the world around them have one feature in common: They are not indifferent. They are ready to get involved in complicated situations so as to help others. Why would someone act in a situation in which it is not required by duty?

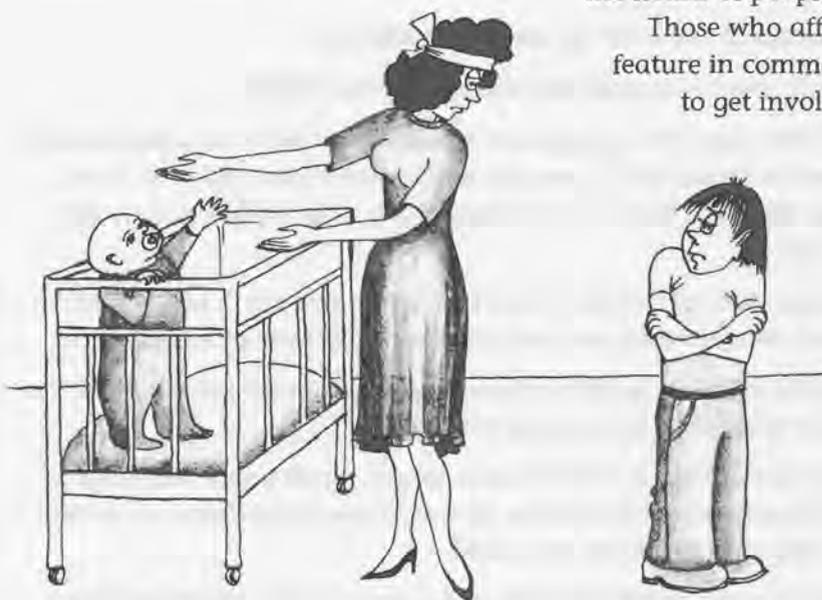
What is duty? Different people understand it in different ways. For some, duty includes only their own interests: "I have obligations only to myself; I am responsible for my own welfare." This is a rather egotistical outlook on life, not recognizing the connectedness one has toward others.

Others feel moral obligations toward their family and friends. For instance, imagine that a disreputable person was pursuing your sister or mother.

Would you intervene in this situation? Even if this person were much stronger than you, it is unlikely that you would simply ignore the situation. You would try in some way to help those you love. You simply would not be able to remain indifferent, and fear would not stop you.

Some people, out of a deeper sense of duty, are ready to help not only those whom they know and love but anybody in need, even if helping involves inconvenience and even risk to their own lives. Here we face the question: How broad is the circle of people whom we are ready to help? Students from my school? People from my city? Those of my nationality? Those whom I like? And what if a dirty beggar on the street needs my help?

When we speak about such a broad sense of duty, we first think of patriotism. All of us know about people whose sincere love for their country was a source of courage and heroism. During the Second World War, tens of thousands of people volunteered to join the army, motivated only by the desire to protect their homeland. They did it not because of an order, but out of conscience. Even in times of peace there always exist people who, from their love of country or of humanity, are ready to stand up for human rights and fight injustice. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Christian theologian,



gian who risked his life for many during the Second World War and ultimately died in a Nazi concentration camp, wrote:

When avoiding public fights, one hides within personal integrity. But one is forced to keep silence and to pretend that he doesn't see injustice around him. He doesn't make responsible actions, and his reputation remains unspotted, but the price for that is self-deception. Whatever he does, he won't be able to find peace because of the thought about what he hasn't done. He will either die because of this anxiety or will become a hypocrite.

What can I do?

How powerful is personal influence? Can one person change anything?

A person's power to influence others depends on only one thing — what kind of human being he is. If he is concerned about only his own well-being, he will not be long remembered in the hearts of others. He may bring suffering to other people. A self-centered person is especially terrifying when he has a lot of power. The history of the world is full of examples of rulers who caused great suffering for the sake of maintaining their own power. Personal influence of this kind may be impressive, but it benefits no one.

Many people think that real influence on the lives of others can come only from those who have power, money, and position. People with these attributes can indeed be influential. The more power one has, the easier it is to influence others. But there are many kinds of power — the power of money, the power of fear, and the power of love. All of us know about people who were born without advantages but who reached high achievement due solely to the power of their determination, talent and perseverance. If we decide beforehand that nothing good will come of us, then we limit our potential for influence.

Ultimately, the outcome of our life depends on the depth of our hearts. A deep heart can embrace many kinds of people and situations, expanding the sphere of one's positive influence. The more you love and the more generously you share your love with others, the more powerful will be your impact on the world. As we have seen, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. are examples of people who made a substantial impact on history.

Those who have chosen such a way of righteousness have faced many obstacles. The greater the person and the more his influence on the lives of others, the more opposition he faces. But a clear conscience will always be his reward. He will have the gratitude of those who recognize his purity and sincerity. Only history will judge his failings.

No human will be ever praised by everybody, if one is good, then evil people will find him bad and will either mock him or judge him. If one is evil, good people won't approve him. In order for one to be praised by everybody, one needs to pretend to be good in front of good ones, and evil in front of evil ones. But then both of them will see that he is false, and both will despise him. There is only one way — to be good and not to worry about the opinion of others, and to search for reward not in human opinions, but in oneself.

— Leo Tolstoy

The Decembrists

When we speak about personal influence in history, we face a question: If everything depends on personal integrity, why do failures take place? Sometimes, out of the most sincere motivation, people have tried to help their country, but their efforts resulted in complete disaster. How can we understand such people? Are their efforts useless?



In Russia, the “Decembrists” of 1825 are a good example of this kind of situation. A group of mostly young army officers organized a demonstration of 3,000 soldiers in St. Petersburg to call for a constitution and an end to serfdom. Seen as a dangerous threat to the tsar and autocracy, they were shot upon. About 50 demonstrators were killed and their leaders arrested. What did they achieve by their demonstration? Five of the leaders were hanged and dozens were sentenced to hard labor in mines, followed by exile in Siberia. As a consequence, their cause was weakened. The Decembrists were followed by a generation characterized by nihilism and lack of belief in the possibility of change. Only thirty years later, in 1856, the Decembrists were allowed to come back from Siberia. But only a few had survived. Was there no meaning to their idealistic efforts and their sacrifice?

Many questions have no easy answers. But think for a moment. Toward whom would you feel more sympathy: the Decembrists, or those who followed them a few decades later — terrorists who tried to eliminate the Russian monarchy with bombs?

Even in today’s Russia the lives of these Decembrists still inspire people. New books and movies about them continue to appear. One film, called “The Star of Happiness,” based on historical facts and actual documents, is a beautiful motion picture about true sacrifice, loyalty toward one’s country, and love.

Isn’t it clear that such people still have great influence years after their earthly lives came to an end?

What happened to the Decembrists was unfair and cruel. But can we consider their lives to have been without consequence? It is important to study what the Decembrists did while in exile, after they had been released from work in the mines—and about their wives, who followed them to Siberia.

While in Siberia, the Decembrists and their families were involved in education. They taught children, provided young people with books, and became the center of the spiritual and cultural life. Because of their influence many settlements in Siberia were transformed from tiny provincial villages into cities. The Decembrists brought with them a new spirit of freedom and a desire for knowledge. They established new traditions. This is the reason the Decembrists are still so respected in Russia.

And what about the wives of the Decembrists? Rarely can one find an example of a deeper, more sacrificial love than that shown by these courageous women. Let us read together a passage from the memoirs of one:

When I came to Chita, Princess Trubetskaya, Princess Volkonskaya, Muraviova, Naryshkina, Entaltseva and Davydova were already there. All of them had left their friends and families. Muraviova and Princess Volkonskaya had left also their small children — perhaps forever — and went to Siberia with a desire to share the destiny of their husbands, with the hope to live together with them; but even this hope wasn’t fulfilled. Having come to Chita, they had an opportunity to see their husbands only twice a week, each time for no more than a few hours. Every day they secretly tried to approach the walls to see their husbands, but even this often wasn’t successful. Soldiers were ordered not to allow anybody to come close to the prison, and it often happened that the soldier on guard, following the order, kicked the women out.

But even such circumstances could not stop these wives — ladies from the most aristocratic families of Russia. Our hearts cannot but respond to the lines Maria Volkonskaya wrote in her memoirs:



I think only about the minute when they will feel pity and imprison me together with my poor Sergei. To see him only twice a week is a torture. Believe me that one can find happiness anywhere, under any circumstances. It depends first of all on your conscience. When you follow your duty and do it willingly, you gain inner peace.

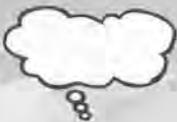
This woman had the right to write these words about happiness. For her they were not empty words or a slogan. Her life was encompassed in them.

One more example: After many requests, Pauline Gebl, a young Frenchwoman who couldn't speak a word of Russian, managed to get the tsar's permission to follow her bridegroom, Ivan Annenkov, to Siberia. Here is what their marriage ceremony looked like: "Joy and jokes disappeared when the bridegroom and two of his friends were brought to the church in their chains. The chains were taken off only at the church entrance. The ceremony wasn't long; the priest was in a hurry. After the ceremony all three — the bridegroom and his friends — were put into chains again and taken to prison." Thirty years of exile in Siberia were waiting for her. But here is what this amazing woman wrote in her memoirs about the time spent in Siberia together with the wives of the other Decembrists:

I need to say that there was a lot of poetry in our life. There were many difficulties, hard labor and sufferings, but also there was joy. We shared everything — joy and sadness. We were compassionate toward each other. We were connected by close friendship, and this friendship helped us to endure difficulties and forget about many things.

The personal influence of such people cannot be measured in words or compared to any external achievement. Wouldn't you also like to become an example of courage, self-sacrifice and love for others?

Something to think about



- Why do you think a person with high self-esteem is more likely to become involved in a situation like the one above?
- How can you tell if a person has high or low self-esteem? Does the way someone walks, talks and acts in general give you clues?
- What do you think of the expression "This person does not see himself as hopelessly controlled by his external environment, but in control of his own destiny"?

Interview



In pairs: Conduct an interview with a friend. Pretend that you are a person of great personal magnitude and that you have dedicated your life to the betterment of others. Decide what you have done and why. Share some of your experiences, and explain your outlook on life.

For Your Journal



Research the life of a historic person who fought for a righteous cause, trying to improve the lives of others.

- What was this person like?
- What did this person do?
- What did this person contribute?
- Imagine that you are this person. Why did you risk your life to help others?

What self-esteem looks like

People with poor self-esteem may ...

1. Believe deep down that they are not worth much.
2. Be frightened of making any mistakes.
3. Constantly wish for an "ideal" body.
4. Stay with activities and interests that are known and safe.
5. Be unable to accept compliments.
6. Be preoccupied with how they appear to others.
7. Either brag a lot and act superior or put themselves down and act inferior.
8. Either try to dominate others or let themselves be a doormat.
9. Engage in self-destructive behavior such as drug abuse and starvation diets.
10. Be either defensive to criticism or devastated by it.



People with healthy self-esteem can ...

1. Believe deep down that they are valuable.
2. Make mistakes and learn from them.
3. Accept their body even though it is not perfect.
4. Explore new opportunities and interests in order to grow.
5. Accept compliments.
6. Relate to other people spontaneously.
7. Be happy with themselves without feeling superior to others.
8. Treat others and themselves with respect.
9. Take care of themselves physically and emotionally.
10. Consider criticism as an opportunity for growth.