

How To Be An ‘A’ Student

CHAPTER ONE

LIKE YOUR TEACHER

Student: This year I made a resolution that I intend to keep. I am determined that nothing is going to come between my goal and I.

Teacher: What is this goal?

Student: To be a star student.

Teacher: I must commend you. It is a worthy and great ambition. Your goal is very much in line with what we have always tried to inculcate in you students, namely that you should not just be content to be one in the crowd in all you do. You should always aim at standing out of the crowd. You must detest the “I also ran” syndrome.

Student: What is that, sir?

Teacher: Never mind. It is just a way of describing people who participate in something without any conviction or mark; so that no one really remembers that they ever participated because they were just statistics in the crowd.

Student: I see.

Teacher: The saying is meant to discourage people who participate in things without merit and quality, ending up merely making up the numbers.

Student: I understand, sir. I am determined not to be an “I also ran”. But to achieve my aim of becoming a star, I need guidance.

Teacher: We do give you guidance.

Student: Yes, sir. I know you give us guidance as students in general. But what I am now asking for, sir, is in-depth, personalized guidance. I would like

you to share with me some of the secrets that made you a star in your days as a student. We hear legendary stories of your unbeatable records in schools you attended. Please sir, share some of your personal tips and secrets with me.

Teacher: Hmmm...

Student: *Please, sir.*

Teacher: I hesitate, not because I am in anyway reluctant to do as you have said, but because I am deeply touched by your thoughtfulness and determination to achieve your new goal.

I must confess that I am thoroughly impressed with you. Luckily, since we are on vacation from today I will be glad to discuss at length with you anytime, even if daily; for what is the use of the tips that helped me if I cannot pass them to serious students like you.

Student: *I am grateful, sir.*

Teacher: It is nothing. I am glad to do it.

Student: *Thank you so much, sir. Let me confess that I was not so sure that you would accept. But I had to come to you because I like you very much, sir, as a person.*

Teacher: It is nice to hear that. Indeed, the first lesson I probably have to teach you in our series of discussions that may follow is that it pays to like your teacher.

Student: *Really, sir.*

Teacher: I mean it. It pays to like your teacher for your own good. Let me tell you a short story. Once upon a time there was a very bright boy who, right from nursery school, was outstanding.

He kept up the record well beyond primary 4, I believe. Everybody in the school knew him for his brilliance. He was simply fantastic. His parents were very proud of him. So were his teachers. Everyone loved Obuoma, for that was his name.

He stood out a shinning star, a shinning example for all in the school. But things changed when his father was transferred to another country. I

believe it was to Ghana, on the West African Coast. Obuoma easily gained admission, of course. But there soon ensued an unusual problem.

Student: What was it, sir?

Teacher: Obuoma did not like the accent of the Ghanaian teachers, and he made a big fuss of it. The intonation of the Ghanaians was markedly different from what he was used to. So he did not find the foreign accent acceptable at all. Because of this problem, Obuoma ended up not liking the teachers except for one who was from his native country and therefore spoke as he was used to.

Student: Did it matter that he did not like the accent or intonation of his teachers?

Teacher: Ordinarily it would not have mattered. The reason it became an issue was that Obuoma allowed his dislike for the accent to rub off on his love or liking for his teachers. He ended up disliking the teachers.

Student: But why would it matter, sir?

Teacher: It mattered because his dislike for his teachers in turn created a dislike for the subjects that those teachers taught. Because he did not like the teachers, he also disliked what they taught. This led to his doing very badly in their subjects.

Student: Oh, I see. But does it follow, sir?

Teacher: My dear Kudo let me assure you that it does most of the time. I do not know whether there is any scientific explanation for this but I can tell you from experience that most students do not do well in subjects taken by teachers who they do not like. You can check this out.

Student: I think you are right, sir. At least I can tell from my own experience.

Teacher: There you are. Lesson 1: Whatever you do make a deliberate effort to like your teacher, otherwise you jeopardize your chances of doing well in his subject. It is probably an unwritten law that students must first

buy into their teachers, before they buy what their teachers have to say. Again, love makes the difference.

CHAPTER TWO

POWER OF ATTENTION

Teacher: Today, I would like to look at what we can do to keep our goals in focus, because attention makes all the difference in our every endeavor.

Student: Yes, attention makes all the difference.

Teacher: If not all the difference, at least a critical difference between our achieving a goal or not.

Student: How?

Teacher: I would just allow you to experience this yourself in the course of your life and, hopefully, establish the truth for yourself.

Student: Please explain a little, sir.

Teacher: Anything you put your attention on is what you tend to attract.

Student: How is that?

Teacher: Even if I knew, as I said earlier, I would not like to go into the theory of it. My preference would be to let you come to that conclusion by yourself.

Student: *How, sir?*

Teacher: By your own experience. Choose any two possible but similar goals, for instance. Make sure you are continuously reminded of one only. And see which of them you are likely to progress more on.

A friend of mine illustrated this to me in a funny way. He showed me a composite picture of 5 persons and then asked me to focus on any particular person for a considerable length of time, and then tell him what I observe.

Student: *What did you find?*

Teacher: I found that the one on which I put my focus tended to become clearer, while my vision of the rest became blurred. I also noticed that the one on which I had my attention seemed to grow larger and nearer to me than the rest. It brought home to me, the power of attention.

Another friend of mine illustrated this fact to me with a story of a warrior who was killed in a war against a neighboring country or community. As he lay dying he instructed his two wives, for he had two, to always remind their children of how he died; especially what caused his death, the enemy. The two women heard him alright but only one actually implemented the instruction.

Student: *What did she do?*

Teacher: She had only one child who happened to be a male. Before every meal, breakfast, lunch or dinner, she would remind the child of the enemy who killed his father. She would repeat the same as she put the child to sleep and first thing when he woke up.

Student: *Incredible.*

Teacher: According to the story, she did this continuously until he became a young man who then got married and moved out to his own home. Even then, the mother did not let up of her husband's instructions. She hired a servant, who continued the job of reminding her son, at every meal, before bed, and first thing in the morning about the enemy. Continuously the boy had this on his mind.

Student: *What did he make of it?*

Teacher: Not surprisingly, he too became a warrior and rose to the rank of a General. All the time, he had only one thought: To eventually crush the enemies that killed his father. In the end he accomplished that. And he ruled over one of the largest empires in the world. Asked in his last days what the secret of his conquering success was, he surprised everyone with his typical taciturn answer: ATTENTION. Upon this he paid wonderful tribute to his mother and attributed all his achievements to her.

I repeat this story to you, not because I am persuaded that the emperor did the best thing or chose the right vocation. I repeat this to underline the importance of attention in any endeavor including your school career. You could employ the power of attention to wonderful results in academics, too.

Student: *How sir?*

Teacher: Devise a means that would remind you of all you would like to achieve, say by the end of the term, or in your external examination, for instance. Your goal could be, just as an example: **To be the most outstanding student this term.** It could be detailed in terms of the scores you actually would like to see in each subject as your grade. For instance you could have: Mathematics A, Biology A, English A, Chemistry A, Physics A, History A, etc.

Having decided on the goal, the next thing is to ensure that you are always reminded of them, as many times a day as possible, before you sleep and as you wake up. My suggestion is that you create a small poster for yourself with your goals, and then put it up where you can see it regular, but privately.

Student: *I do not understand that. Please explain "regularly but privately".*

Teacher: Well I assume you know why you should see your small poster regularly.

Student: Yes, sir. It is really the privately part that I do not understand.

Teacher: If people saw your goals what do you think most of them were going to do? Encourage/support, discourage/mock, be jealous/obstructive.

Student: In all sincerity I think most would be negative.

Teacher: You have answered your own question.

CHAPTER THREE

TOO DIGNIFIED TO CHEAT

Teacher: Something that runs common among outstanding students is their penchant for fairness in exams or, better, their disdain and disgust for exam malpractices like cheating.

Student: Are you saying that outstanding students do not cheat?

Teacher: In all my schooling up to the doctoral level I have never seen a truly outstanding student who cheats.

Student: Really, sir?

Teacher: Positive. Do you have contrary information?

Student: No, sir. I cannot think of any myself. It's just that it had never hit me as such. But it seems true.

Teacher: I know it is true. And in my opinion there are several reasons why outstanding students are not drawn to cheating.

Student: What are these reasons, sir?

Teacher: Let me tell you a story of how a fine teacher in one of the highly regarded private secondary schools in my city was fired in disgrace. He was well respected by his peer teachers throughout the state, but this incident caused him so much shame and pain that he had to return to his home country; for he was a foreigner.

For years he had served as an excellent chemistry teacher in this school until this day, when a chemistry competition was set up between his school and two other top schools. There was a special scholarship award at stake. Dogo, as he was fondly called, badly wanted his students to win all the five slots at stake.

He wanted to win for the good of the students, but also to prove that he was indeed the best chemistry teacher in the state. That would be in consonance with his already acquired reputation. I believe he also wanted to enhance the rating reputation of the institution that he worked for. As with most serious external examinations, none of the concerned teachers and students in the schools had any prior knowledge of the exam questions until the time for the paper.

An external examiner was posted to each of the competing schools to ensure that nobody cheated. It turned out that the examiner posted to Dogo's school was particularly active, booking any nonsense or interference by anybody.

As the examination started, Dogo now had the privilege of seeing the exam paper. He quickly noticed that one compulsory question was on a topic that he had overlooked and not taught his students. He was troubled. He felt guilty and had an irresistible urge to make amends in order to improve his students' chances of winning. He contemplated several options including confessing to the examiner so he could be aloud to say a word to help the students; but the demeanor of the examiner plus the consequent risk of dismissal if it all went wrong, discouraged him.

He eventually came up with an idea, quickly dashed off to the nearby stores and soon returned with a nice cold bottle of soft drink, which he offered the examiner. He said it was a mere solidarity to a fellow teacher and

also a mark of respect and hospitality. The examiner was touched by his kindness and gladly accepted the drink.

Dogo offered to serve him and reached for the key holder in his pocket to open the drink, while the examiner still focused on the candidates to ensure none was cheating. About five minutes after taking the soft drink the examiner suddenly fell asleep on his desk.

Dogo's plan was working. He quickly emerged in front of the students to draw attention to the problematic compulsory question, solving it in the full glare of the students and commanding them to copy. All the students obeyed, grateful to their teacher, and scribbled away, except two – Chilaka and Shanti. These two would have nothing to do with the blackboard and whatever Dogo had written on it for them to copy. They simply refused to look up.

These were precisely the best two chemistry students with the best chance of getting the scholarship of all the calls. Dogo particularly looked out for them, to make sure that they were copying. But they obviously were not. He was livid and matched off to the duo that happened to be sitting close to each other.

"Why are you so stupid? Can't you see what I have done on the board for you to copy? Are you mad?"

"I am not interested", Shanti coldly responded.

"Me too," added Chilaka.

This incensed Dogo the more and he went berserk raising his voice to cajole the students to comply, knowing that the examiner was deep in slumber.

The commotion must have lasted for quite sometime. But it all came to an abrupt end when the proprietor of the school, a no-nonsense disciplinarian, walked in sneakily, as was his tradition, and caught Dogo red-handed trying to force Shanti and Chilaka to cheat. Both held on to the fact that it was forbidden by their faith and by all their parents taught them about fairness in competitive circumstances like exam.

They said they would rather fail than cheat. In no time the proprietor had unraveled everything that transpired. He was left with little choice but to sack Dogo, in order to remedy the good name of the school. For their principled resistance, the sponsoring organisation for the scholarship singled out Shanti and Chilaka for an elongated scholarship program that would lead beyond the intended university bachelor's degree education to PhD level.

This was more in recognition of their character than their score in the exam. I personally take the view that outstanding students are generally too

dignified to stoop to cheat. This sense of dignity forces them to do the necessary hard work that would ensure their excellent grades. In sum, outstanding people are generally too proud to cheat or beg.

I believe outstanding students also cherish the distinction which cheating tends to obliterate, lumping the dull and bright together in one dumpsite of guilt. Because they would rather fail a test on their own steam, than cheat. The outstanding students always end up correcting themselves, and painstakingly learning the examiner's trick before major examinations. They know that they have only themselves to rely on; while the cheats seek the lazy way out, hoping to cheat the outstanding ones dig in deep.

The outstanding ones easily come to learn the lessons and reap the gains of self-reliance much faster than most of their peers. It is therefore not a wonder that they do so well for they rely on something they know would not fail them – themselves. As their self-confidence grows, so also their ability.

CHAPTER FOUR

MISTAKES ARE FRIENDS

Teacher: Kudo let me ask you. How do you feel when you make a mistake in class?

Student: *I feel bad especially if the mistake is made before an audience like the whole class. You know how it is, people laugh at you.*

Teacher: And you do not like that?

Student: Who does?

Teacher: I do.

Student: What do you mean, sir? You like to be mocked? You like to make mistakes and have your peers laugh at you?

Teacher: It is not as if I like to be mocked, but I have found that one of the secrets of great and outstanding students who rise to make their mark in the world is the quality of never being intimidated by the possibility of making mistakes. In fact, many, if not all, of them are grateful for the opportunity to make a mistake while trying to do something worthwhile.

Student: I do not understand sir.

Teacher: Let me tell you the story of Kukuye. He was not a bright student. So my story has nothing to do with any form of academic brilliance. In fact, I am not sure if he ever made it to the university. But he rose to be a national star, as a soccer player. He is the one that you all call KK. We knew him as Kukuye.

Student: Really?

Teacher: Yes. Kukuye and I were in the same class. We both enjoyed playing soccer. He was a skilled player from the onset and he set his eyes on spot kicks. He enjoyed taking free kicks. As far as I was concerned, I thought he did that purely because he was not a very enterprising player. So the free kicks gave him a chance to at least play some notable roles in the game.

Student: Did this include corner kicks and throw-ins?

Teacher: All spot kicks including penalty kicks. Most often, Kukuye would force himself to play it. He would argue and insist. Sometimes while somebody else was getting ready to play after having been chosen, Kukuye would quickly take the spot kick. He fluffed most of the time, to everybody's annoyance.

Student: What do you people then do?

Teacher: Of course, we would rain all manner of abuses on him because as he missed the target most of the time he wasted chances. But Kukuye never stopped insisting. I will never forget when we got to the finals of the

state's secondary schools soccer competition and Kukuye caused a most painful loss.

Student: What happened?

Teacher: Within minutes to the end of the match we had a golden chance of direct free kick, as it was then known, just outside the 18-yard box. It was goalless at the time, and the stadium was on its feet. We consulted quickly amongst ourselves on the field and agreed that our skipper was going to take the shot. But Kukuye seized the ball and refused to release it because we did not agree that he should take the kick.

Student: Incredible!

Teacher: Yes, incredible. First there was a tussle between him and Yebo, our captain. Then a fight ensued between them. Tempers were high and so the referee had little choice but to send out both players. Another player who was completely unprepared for spot kicks finally took the kick. He ballooned the ball miles over the bar. So we lost the chance.

Student: What a shame.

Teacher: Shame indeed and worse, playing now 11 against 9 it was easy for the opponents to overrun us. That was how we lost 1-0. Till date, many of us believe that it was all the fault of Kukuye.

Student: Of course, it was.

Teacher: But our numerous losses from Kukuye's free kicks have turned into necessary gains for our national pride and position in world soccer. Thanks to Kukuye's persistence and lack of shame in making mistakes. He learnt from all his many errors as a rookie, transforming into national hero and expert in spot kicks for our national team.

Student: Oh, now I see where you were headed. His learning from his many mistakes, in spite of the numerous disappointments he caused you his schoolmates, is what today has translated into experience, leading him to world-class standards as a spot wizard.

Teacher: You get it. Ever heard the saying, experience is the best teacher?

Student: Yes, Sir.

Teacher: This is what is meant. It is in doing and making mistakes that we really learn. Everything else is mere shallow intellectualism and book knowledge, which does not make any sense in practice. But practice is what counts. For, nothing is ever truly known until it is practiced. True knowledge must come from personal experience. And since experts in any field or area cannot be born or made overnight, it therefore takes practice.

Practice entails making mistakes. It is in making those mistakes that true knowledge and expertise come. So those who do not have the courage to ignore the possible embarrassment that comes from making mistakes cannot end up outstanding in anything; certainly not in academics. This is why I say that mistakes are friends. They help us grow. They help us achieve mastery. They help us achieve our goals. Every great mathematician must not be ashamed to try practicing as many problems as possible; while making mistakes and learning in the process.

Those classmates who laugh at you because you attempted a problem of any sought and failed in class can remain in their ignorance, if they like. No expert has ever emerged in any discipline without the gladness to accept corrections that come from making mistakes. Mistakes are builders, not destroyers.

Mistakes are part of life's protein for development and growth. Love to hug them and learn from them. They are part of the essence of your experience. And experience is always the best teacher.

CHAPTER FIVE

BE BOLD AND ADVENTURESOME

Teacher: An old priest once told me that only the bold and adventuresome would find heaven.

Student: *Why?*

Teacher: Because heaven is often hidden behind fear.

Student: *Did he mean that literally or metaphorically?*

Teacher: I am not so sure which. But what I have found for myself is that to achieve anything great or good requires courage, among others. Moving from the known to the unknown is like moving from a familiar to an unfamiliar territory. At times it might even appear like moving from light to darkness. So courage is necessary.

Student: *I don't get it.*

Teacher: Ok, let me take your mind back to your first days in primary school if you may recall. For most children this is usually a frightening experience. They cry and cry and cry because of having to leave the familiar to the strange. Some children take a long while to conquer this fear of school.

Student: *I never thought about it in those terms.*

Teacher: An old woman once told me that it was for the similar reasons that children cry when they are born. Leaving their familiar and loving home in heaven to live in mortal flesh in a new abode of fear, darkness and uncertainty called earth causes so much fear that all wail on arrival. She made me wonder about conquering fear, for to achieve anything worthwhile requires this victory over fear.

Student: *But can one actually conquer fear?*

Teacher: I see what you mean. For me conquering fear means acting in spite of fear. The fear would be there, but one must subdue it by acting boldly nevertheless. I recall my experience when learning how to swim. It was one of the most frightening experiences of my life. There is a big river in my village where I grew up. It is ordinarily a very beautiful and velvety river.

Fetching water or bathing in its sandy banks, shallow and clear, was always fun.

Student: I can imagine.

Teacher: Being thrown into the deep dark end was extremely frightening. I would scream from fright so much that I would convulse. The deep end was dark green velvet, grim and fearsome probably concealing the imaginable. Not able to swim as a child then, I faced the prospect of drowning as I was being taught how to swim. It was so frightening that I swore never to swim. But they would not let go. My uncles would take me by force and simply throw me at the deep end to scramble for life. I would splash violently, gasping breathless for air until a strong arm saves me but not before having gulped some pints of the water, eyes red, nose running.

Student: It must have been a real nightmare.

Teacher: It was. But today I thank God I am a good swimmer; many thanks to those ‘wicked’ uncles. Today, I am a fearless swimmer having eventually overcome my fear of the dark deep ends of the river as I learnt to float and then to swim.

Student: Now I am scared.

Teacher: Why?

Student: Because I was thinking of learning how to swim this vacation.

Teacher: Oh, why not. I am sure you would even be learning in a more controlled environment like a pool, probably with a swimming instructor beside you.

Student: Yes, sir.

Teacher: So what is there to fear?

Student: I am afraid of drowning.

Teacher: But your instructor would be there.

Student: But can I fully entrust my life in his hands?

Teacher: Well, that is a question that only you may have to answer for yourself. In my case, I was forced to trust my uncles. But to learn how to swim, you must take that risk sometime. As I said earlier, anytime you must learn something worthwhile you need courage.

Student: *I believe this applies no mater what - physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics, philosophy, history, music, geography or even goalkeeping. At the point you confront an unknown with no skills, the tendency is to turn away from it. Because you are so clueless about the subject at hand you appear small before the problem, an effect of fear. Only courage helps you to accept the challenge in spite of the fear.*

Teacher: If you are lucky to have a great teacher, he would shed and try to dissipate the darkness of ignorance that shrouds the subject and scares you. But he can never completely drive away the fear for you. Only you can do that for yourself. Nothing can truly dissolve fear except your own personal experience. It is in learning, trying, working, failing and trying again until you master the subject that the fear can be conquered. Only knowledge by personal experience fully conquers fear.

There are three keys to that all-important personal experience namely: Practice, practice and more practice. I recall when Mike (not his real name), a friend of mine who eventually became a national goalkeeper, first ventured into goalkeeping. We had an excellent soccer coach. What this coach told him I would never forget.

He said: "Mike, you have no skills. But I don't care for I find in you what I am looking for in a potentially great goalkeeper: Courage. With that jewel in your heart you would one day be this country's number 1.

It came to pass.

CHAPTER SIX

DO IT YOURSELF

Teacher: How do you do your homework, or what some of you call take home assignments?

Student: *When I was much younger, I used to have my parents do them for me. Or rather, my mother was always there to help out. She would normally do the assignments for me and then I would copy them into my schoolbook. But now, I do them with my circle of friends in class. We gather after school to jointly do the homework.*

Teacher: Has this worked for you?

Student: *Yes, of course. It generally has because I earn good scores from the assignments.*

Teacher: But if I confronted you alone with those assignments would you cope?

Student: *I would try. But I do not think I would do that well; at least not as well as I usually do with help from my parents or my friends.*

Teacher: Well that is honest.

Student: *Let me confess however that I am today the worst fine artist in my class because through primary school my mum drew all my homework. The teacher was usually quite impressed with my home assignments thinking that I drew them myself. In a way I regret it because today I cannot draw well at all.*

Teacher: I believe you have summarized today's lesson. When people do things for you they reinforce your inability and deepen your ineptitude. Of course, this ordinarily does not appear so in everyday practice because we often distinguish between academic and everyday skills.

Student: *I don't understand.*

Teacher: For instance, one easily sees the import of learning to drive by doing it himself. He must get on the driver's seat to learn. His instructor may demonstrate the skill but he must also take the steering before he can learn.

Student: True. I can tell from personal experience.

Teacher: I am glad you can relate to that easily.

Student: Yes, I can, sir. I am currently hoping to earn my driver's license before next year.

Teacher: Very good. I am particularly impressed that you used the word "earn", which means to get something on merit, by personal qualification. But when it comes to academics the case is often different. Homework becomes a ritual not necessarily requiring merit or personal sacrifice. At best it becomes a means of posting scores to the report card, and not necessarily a deliberate act leading to the acquisition of a specific everyday skill like driving.

Student: But our subjects are not meant to teach skills that we use, are they?

Teacher: They are.

Student: Sir, how? How can I compare the direct usefulness of driving, for instance, to a subject like history or chemistry?

Teacher: This is precisely the point. Because you do not see the relationship between your subject and an everyday skill, the subject is truly mere academics, an abstract knowledge, not really relevant to daily existence.

Student: I am sorry to say that you have actually described how most of us see schoolwork. It is something we have to do so that we can pass to the next class. It is something we have to do so that our teachers would not punish us. It is something that we have to do so that our parents would not be ashamed of us.

Teacher: I know. I understand. I was once like you so I really do know where you are coming from and let me confess that sadly for me, it was not until my days at the university that I began to see the practical relevance of some of the subjects we were taught in school.

Student: *Really, sir.*

Teacher: You can quote me. I was a very good student but my motivation to work hard was not the relevance or the application of the subject to our everyday life but the kudos that I received from my parents, my teachers, and my peers. I loved to bask in the glory of academic excellence. That was the prime motivation, not necessarily any clear and palpable way.

Student: *What a relief! Your confession, sir, has washed away all the guilt that was building up in me in course of this conversation.*

Teacher: No need to feel guilty at all. But if you must I believe we the teachers should share from it because it is in our place to point out the immediate and remote relevance of whatever we teach.

Student: *Thank you, sir.*

Teacher: Why are you thanking me? I am telling you all this to reassure you that whatever you learn has everyday application. If for any reason the teacher fails to make the link or rather assumes that you should know, never hesitate to ask. Always try to find out why you have to study anything, that way you have an additional incentive. You would be amazed at how much inspirational and motivational impetus it would add to your study.

Student: *Sir, what if the teacher does not explain it in a way that I fully understand.*

Teacher: Then seek elsewhere. Check books, check the Internet; ask your friends, your uncles and aunts, your parents, or any adult whom you believe should know. Always try to see how the subject affects you personally – how it affects your life and the lives of those around you. It makes a world of difference in your study when you know why and how it applies to you.

When I was first introduced to phonetic symbols in Oral English, for instance, I made so much jest of the ‘nonsense’ until someone pointed out

that the symbols were useful in helping me dramatically improve my spoken English. He told me that I could become a presenter on television, which was an experience I wanted!

His words truly and dramatically changed my view of phonetics. I delved deep into it, even deeper than the teacher taught because I now had a personal interest in the matter. So I tell you, do what you can do to locate a personal interest in what you learn and you would be amazed how much it would motivate you to do your homework yourself.

To be sure, there is nothing wrong with help from your teacher, parent or friend if it is homework; but always make sure you learn the subject yourself privately, so you can make the learning personally.

CHAPTER SEVEN

POLISH YOUR SCRIPT

Teacher: I would like to talk to you about double-checking your work.

Student: *What do you mean, sir?*

Teacher: It is what is expected but....

Student: *But what, sir?*

Teacher: It is what is expected, but more. You must compare your answers to tests, assignments or exams to the work of an artist.

Student: *How sir?*

Teacher: Every artist finishes his work in phases. Some would even argue that a true work of art never really finishes, in the final sense of the

word. They argue that no matter how good a work of art is, there is always room for its improvement. So, generally, left with no pressure of time, finance and the like, a true artist may keep working on an art work forever.

Student: Really?

Teacher: Yes, but of course it does not happen so in real life, for a time comes when the artist must let go his finished work, whether or not he sees room for continuous improvement. Anyway, do not lose sight of the point I am making, namely, that you should see your answers as a work of art. Whether the subject being tested is mathematics, physics, or literature, you should maintain the view that the answer is akin to a work of art.

Student: In what sense, sir?

Teacher: In the sense that you must never rest to say that an assignment has been finished, in a final sense, except constrained by time or other pressures.

Student: I do not understand, sir.

Teacher: Imagine for instance that you were given a test to write a composition on *My Future Career*, and allotted a time of 90 minutes within which to submit your essay. Where you know what and how to present your facts you may end up finishing your first draft within 60 minutes, leaving you with 30 minutes extra. Let me put another way. Suppose you were actually the one involved in this case what would you do, having finished 30 minutes before the allotted time?

Student: I would submit my paper and go out to play or do something else. It is usually a thing of pride or competition, in fact, to see who would finish any test or exam first. We see the early finishers as the brilliant ones.

Teacher: And you regard all those who finish much later as dull?

Student: Yes, sir.

Teacher: I may be harsh to say that what you do is silly. I quite honestly believe that to think as you do is either childish or plain stupid.

Student: What do you mean, sir?

Teacher: The outstanding student knows that the test is like a work of art, which must be continuously honed for improvement. Having therefore finished such a test with extra time in his hands he would deploy every remaining minute to ensuring his work is as good as it can be given the time limit.

Student: *How, sir?*

Teacher: Having written the essay, he would consider it a draft, and then begin to actively and painstakingly look for errors – in spelling, syntax, fact, presentation, etc. Meticulously, he would check and correct. If the problem were a scientific or mathematical one, he would check every step to ensure that no mistake was introduced. Calmly he would scrutinize his script, pick up the errors and correct them.

A friend once called this painstaking error finding duty ‘polishing the script’. Where he finds certain pages dirty as a result of cancellations or erasures he may even choose to copy onto fresh sheets, organizing his answer in a better, more presentable way. The whole idea is to use the extra time to move the script from good to better, and from better to best.

Let me confess, for I was one of them, such students are often thirsty for marks. They are students that always want the full marks or as close as possible for every test. For them, every mark counts. Indeed from my experience every mark does count; even fractions make all the difference sometime. There were classmates in my time that lost scholarships or repeated classes, or missed prizes because of fractions of a mark.

Outstanding students are very aware of this, so they strain to make sure that no silly avoidable error leads to loss of marks. Their opportunity to ensure this comes with those extra minutes left after they have finished the first draft of answers. This is their chance to polish the script.

Conversely, for the foolish the extra time is misused. Often he jumps off the exam hall to give the impression of having had a simple test, which he did not require all the time allotted to deal with. This for him is evidence of his brilliance, so he wants to show off, like all stupid people.

Sometimes it is not just plain stupidity, I should admit. It could also be mere impatience. The extra time that could have been used to improve his work and increase his marks may appear an eternity because of impatience. Of course, the eventual result shows the failure following from mistakes that could easily have been avoided, if only he had the patience to polish his script at extra time.

CHAPTER EIGHT

STRIKE IT HOT

Student: Sir, I have a complaint.

Teacher: What, son? What is the matter?

Student: I am sorry to bother you with this, but I need to talk to someone I trust.

Teacher: Please, go ahead.

Student: Sir, it's my parents. They are fond of punishing me even when I am not guilty.

Teacher: Take it easy. Cool down and tell me the story.

Student: I have a younger sister, Beli. She is very troublesome, and is forever taunting me and misusing my things without my permission. Each time I react and lash out at her, my parents would punish me.

Teacher: Why?

Student: They either accuse me of unmanly behaviour of hitting a lady or of not behaving like her elder brother. I am just fed up of it. Why do I have to be blamed all the time when I do not start any trouble? I have tried to talk to my parents about this but they just keep blaming me unnecessarily.

Teacher: I am sorry you are so upset. Calm down. After all Beli is your own sister.

Student: But she must stop being such a fish bone in my throat.

Teacher: I understand. I understand how you feel. I also grew up with very troublesome sisters who, I must confess, held their own and presented me with both intellectual and spiritual challenges. By their virtues they challenged and shattered the so-called male superiority myth, which I know now as a fallacy. Maybe that is part of what you are wrestling with. Who knows, some of her challenges may have been more acceptable or tolerable to you if they were coming from a younger, but fellow male.

Student: I think so, sir.

Teacher: Perhaps you are right. But I am more interested in what your parents tell you when you react to her “trouble”.

Student: That is really the annoying part. They tell me that being older I should exercise restraint, and not react immediately. They say I should always take time to chew over my reactions, even overnight, before I react if I must. But I find that unfair and almost impossible.

Teacher: I know how you feel. But I can also appreciate the training your parents are trying to give you. They really mean well. In time you will understand. If you really imbibe this training you will save yourself and very many others a lot of trouble and hurt. Trust me. But let me seize this opportunity to point out at least one area where your tendency for immediate reaction can serve a very useful purpose.

Student: Where, sir?

Teacher: In your studies. Never allow any topic taught by your teacher an overnight rest before you revisit it. Revise and exercise with problems related to the topic. People have used this ‘strike it when it is hot’ strategy to amazing effects in school. I speak from personal experience.

Student: Really sir? How did you do it?

Teacher: It was generally easy for me because, I guess, out of habit classmates always approached me for my experience of lessons taught. I never failed to latch on the opportunity. Once the teacher is out of the class I begin to almost verbatim regurgitate what the teacher had said. I pretend to be the teacher and begin to teach exactly what had been taught; the way it was taught.

Where I did not have a chance to do this during school hours I do it after school. I always had the opportunity of acting teacher to my friends. You would not believe this, sometimes alone I would pretend to be teaching what the teacher had taught that day in class. I would revise it and tackle the problems. For the lesson still fresh on my mind makes them easy to deal with.

I must say the teacher-mimic practice left me with some by-products of being a good actor; for I would mimic the teachers' every gesture even as I repeated the lesson to my friends. Now I believe it was the acting part that drew my classmates to my fake classes.

I can swear to you that the practice served me better than I can ever relate. I learnt by it that you remember things taught more easily if you repeat them or discuss them shortly after they have been taught, when it is fresh on your mind. With the repetition the fresh teaching sinks deeper into your brain, making it difficult to forget.

A friend of mine put it this way. He said when you first learn something it is like writing faintly on sand on a busy street. Generally, before morning you have difficulty reading it at all. He said an early revision preferably that same day, is what etches it into the brain.

My friend added that each revision is like etching further and deeper into the soil with larger and more effective instruments like diggers and shovels, so that it would require an extra special effort, maybe the employment of caterpillars and the like, to ever fill and obliterate the learning. He however emphasized that the most important repetition was the first one after the lecture, when the writing is still very faint on the ever-busy brain. The fresher it is on the brain, the better for the first revision. That way the details are retained, to a large extent, intact. Subsequent revisions now reinforce those details.

CHAPTER NINE

HOLIDAY HARVESTS

Teacher: So you are now on holiday?

Student: Yes, sir.

Teacher: Holidays are always the best times for students. I know how much I looked forward to them myself.

Student: I am happy you say that, sir. Otherwise I would have felt guilty because I really love holidays, when I have to drop all my academic cares and enjoy with my folks and friends.

Teacher: I know what you mean.

Student: Holidays are really my best periods.

Teacher: I imagine it is so for you because you make good results normally.

Student: What do you mean, sir?

Teacher: Parents are often not too glad to allow their children or wards that failed exams or did not perform well, to fully enjoy the holiday time as they ordinarily would have.

Student: That's right, sir. It is very much that way in my family. Anyone who does not do well in the term preceding the holiday is generally the butt of jokes for that period. He is mocked and as often as possible reminded of his poor performance.

Teacher: So rather than be happy such students end up being melancholy and miserable.

Student: Let me confess, sir, that I have myself suffered this way. This was some years ago. After that experience, I vowed that it would never reoccur. I am glad that by God's grace, it has not reoccurred.

Teacher: I am very happy to hear that. May it never happen to you, again.

Student: Amen.

Teacher: I did not mean it that way but if that's the way you take it, fine. However, always remember that you are the master of your destiny, the architect of your fate.

Student: Sir, we hear this kind of quotation very often, but is it really true?

Teacher: Yes, it is true.

Student: How?

Teacher: Ah, that will take us far a field. Maybe, another time. But for now know that you shape your life, your destiny, your future, by what you think, what you feel, what you do and what you say. A lot depends on you, some would say; and I believe that too, that everything in your world depends on you.

Student: I am confused, sir.

Teacher: Now you understand why I said we could leave this for another time? For now let us just return to our interesting discussion on holidays.

Student: Alright, sir.

Teacher: I particularly like your interpretation of holiday.

Student: You mean as a time to enjoy?

Teacher: Well, yes. But that is not all that I understand from your interpretation. What I hear from what you have said is that holiday is a reward for good performance. Am I correct?

Student: You have put it better for me, sir.

Teacher: That is a very beautiful way to review holidays, as something that you earn, something that you deserve, but only after you have done a good job. In this case, only after you have delivered good results that you and your folks are happy with.

Student: Very correct, sir.

Teacher: But I view holidays slightly differently.

Student: How, sir?

Teacher: For me holidays are like breaks between sessions. I liken holidays to the break at half-time during a football match. It is a time to reevaluate what happened in the first half, and then re-strategize and re-energize physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.

The holiday for me is like one of the stops made by racing cars, to refill, recheck and correct weak links before speeding up again. Holidays are periods for filling knowledge gaps and stretching expertise, so you can improve on even your best previous performance.

You do all this a bit more leisurely, in-between rest and enjoyment, but never grinding your studies to a halt, for the same reason that a long distance runner never quite halts until he finishes. He may slow down or even jog on the spot because he knows that it takes greater energy to get back into the running rhythm if he were to stop completely.

Less effort is always required to keep a moving object going than to start the same object from rest. So, enjoy your holiday but never stop studying.

CHAPTER TEN

WRITE, SPEAK CLEARLY

Teacher: There is something special I would like us to dwell on today.

Student: *Which topic, sir?*

Teacher: Communication.

Student: *Communication skills, sir?*

Teacher: Yes, but not in broad sense of the word. I would like us to dwell on communication as it strictly pertains to your performance in school.

Student: *Yes, sir.*

Teacher: Let me ask you: how would you rate your oral communication skill? Or better still, how does your Oral English teacher rate your speaking ability?

Student: *She rates me very well on phonetics, especially transcription where we have to write everyday English words in phonetic symbols.*

Teacher: That is very good. It shows you have technical knowledge of the subject.

Student: *My rating when it comes to speaking is however not very good. She insists I have to work on my speech.*

Teacher: I think she is right. I do not know how you did but you certainly picked a very nasal accent, which makes it sometimes difficult to understand some things you say.

Student: *Sir, I was born abroad, and actually did my primary school up to a certain level before my parents relocated here. So I imagine the vestiges of that still remain.*

Teacher: Please get me correct. I pass no judgment on your accent. My interest is in the clarity of what you say. If for instance you were facing an oral exam, which would happen anyway in course of your years as a student - that is if it is not already happening now, and your teacher or professor has to strain or continuously ask you to repeat before getting what you are saying; then you are likely to pay the price through mark reduction, one way

or the other. If ordinarily you were an A student, you might then find yourself dropping to a B for reasons that may not be clear to you.

Student: So what do I do, sir?

Teacher: This is precisely why I thought we should discuss this. You need to make deliberate attempts to speak clearly. How I would put it is this: try to give respect or due recognition to every syllable in a word. Do not swallow syllables or letters in a word except those that are conventionally meant to be silent.

Student: Sir, can I have an example please?

Teacher: You can have as many as you want. Take the word, “**want**”, for instance. Many people, even so-called well-educated and exposed people, would pronounce the word as “**won**”. Such that you generally pick up the meaning of what is said by the context in which it is said, not necessarily by the full identification of the word through the speaker’s pronunciation.

As you can then guess, where the context can admit both “**want**” and “**won**” and still make sense within the frame of the conversation, the audience or listener immediately has problem; for he is then left wondering whether what was meant was “**want**” or “**won**”. Once you begin to give your examiner that kind of headache, you are running the risk of losing marks, and detracting from your possible “A” grade.

Student: I see. So what do I do, sir?

Teacher: That is the second time that you are asking precisely the same question. The simple answer is: *Speak Clearly*. Do not swallow letters in any word, except it is meant silent, like “H” for example, in the word “**Honorable**”. Make the effort.

Also observe good speakers. If you cannot identify one ask your parents and teachers. In particular listen to excellent broadcasters. Many who broadcast to international audiences are generally very good in whatever language they are communicating, especially newscasters. Their job is to lift the word from the paper, to the ears of the listener.

Student: Would you want to recommend any radio or television stations?

Teacher: No. I would suggest you ask your Oral English teacher, she can tell. But there is something possibly even more important in communicating in school, which you must give all the attention you can muster.

Student: *What is it, sir?*

Teacher: Writing clearly. I am referring here to writing well, or writing good English, or writing in a manner, which grips the reader. That is a different skill for another time. What I refer to here is writing CLEARLY. Do not try to imitate adults who jumble the letters in their words. Perhaps they can afford to do that. After all they have left school and probably would not need to be graded again.

That is not the case for you. Your results depend on the grade that the examiner gives you. That grade is often dependent on what he reads from your script or answer. If your writing is so clumsy, cluttered and untidy that he has difficulty discerning between your “**L**” and “**T**”, between your “**S**” and “**Z**” and so on, then you are in trouble.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PARTICIPATE ACTIVELY

Teacher: There is a particular attribute of yours, as a student, that I admire and enjoy.

Student: *Sir?*

Teacher: I said there is something you do in class which I would like you to keep up and indeed commend to your friends and classmates.

Student: *What, sir?*

Teacher: It is your enthusiasm in class. I like how you participate actively in class.

Student: *Sir, I am very happy to hear that. I did not know you liked it that much.*

Teacher: Of course you would not because you were not doing it to impress me. You were simply being yourself, enjoying learning. I find the attitude highly commendable. I believe this is an attitude every teacher wants to see in his class.

Student: *I never realized it was important to teachers that we participate actively in class.*

Teacher: Very much. That is why the teacher is forever asking for feedback or contribution from students. That way he can tell whether the students like what he is teaching, whether they are following; and above all whether they are actually learning.

Student: *So teachers care that much?*

Teacher: Yes, of course. At least good teachers do. A good teacher is very much like a good parent, who wants the very best for his child. A good parent, like a good teacher, always desires the child to do better than he did in every way. He always desires the plus element in his children. So he wants to see the signs of that potential displayed as he teaches in class daily.

Student: *But I could be following a teacher and not participate actively in class.*

Teacher: Generally, teachers do not like lukewarm students. Teachers are first and foremost, communicators. They desire not just to pass information but to engage the students. They are therefore happy when

students show signs of not only following but hooked onto what is being taught. That is the kind of feedback a teacher craves for.

Student: It almost sounds as if you believe that active participation in class by students is for the benefit of the teacher.

Teacher: To some extent it is, because the teacher gets the satisfaction of having delivered his goods. He actually gets the satisfaction of a salesman who succeeded in selling his wares to his customers. It gives him a sense of achievement. He goes home happy to have done his job well. Why do you think a good teacher is often sad when his students perform badly in a test?

Student: Why?

Teacher: Because he shares the sense of failure with the students. He also feels that he, too, had failed. It is exactly the way a coach feels when his players flop in a match they were expected to win. It is usually not a very pleasant position to be in. You need to experience it to feel the pain.

That is the kind of pain a teacher feels. He has a sense of emptiness; a sense of having wasted his time and energy; in some cases even a sense of self-doubt, as to whether he actually is a good teacher. That is how much a good feedback or result means to a teacher; especially a good teacher.

Student: I see.

Teacher: But the point to bear in mind is that the ultimate beneficiary in all these is the student. Yes, the participation is good for the teacher's sense of well-being, relevance and accomplishment, but it is the student that is being improved. The teacher is imparting what he already truly knows. It is the student that does not know it. It is the student that needs to learn it to be better than he is.

My point would probably be better appreciated against the background of students who do not enjoy class participation. Maybe you can help me here. What kind of response would you expect from such students? Try to see from the Teacher's view.

Student: It is difficult to see from the teacher's view but let me try.

Teacher: Go on.

Student: I think such students would not respond to questions in class. They would not participate in class projects. They would not even listen with full attention to what the teacher is saying.

Teacher: Well said. So who would be the loser in such a case? Teacher or student?

Student: Student, of course.

Teacher: Why?

Student: Because in not showing enthusiastic interest in what is being taught, he cannot fully follow in detail the logic of the teacher. He would easily forget what is taught because he is not repeating according to the teacher. But we know that by repeating we retain things better in our minds. Also, by not participating actively in class projects he loses the chance of putting into practice what is taught which would have enabled him better understand the topic and its application to the world.

Teacher: You have said enough for yourself and for your friends. Thank you.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DON'T BE INTIMIDATED

Student: Sir, there is an issue I would like you to address because it is something of great concern to me and, I believe, to quite a lot of students.

Teacher: I am all ears.

Student: Sir, let me preface what I have to say with the fact that most teachers are good and kind-hearted.

Teacher: You mean it?

Student: Yes, sir. I mean it. Most have been kind to me as an individual. I can speak from my own personal experience.

Teacher: Good.

Student: But what I would like you to kindly address affects us badly. Let me speak for myself. The particular behavior of some teachers which I am alluding to affects me badly. Terribly, in fact.

Teacher: That bad?

Student: Yes, sir.

Teacher: What can this be?

Student: Sir, it is the tendency of some teachers to intimidate students. I have suffered from this behaviour tremendously, especially as a much younger student. Even in primary school!

Teacher: Really?

Student: Yes, sir. I recall a particular year when I was so intimidated by my teacher that I lost confidence in myself. Of course it immediately affected my result. I dropped from being the outstanding best in class to second or third place. On one particular occasion, while reciting a poem on stage I was so engrossed watching for acceptance in the face of that teacher that I forgot my lines; and even forgot the cue for my group to leave the stage. That is how adverse teacher-intimidation can be.

Teacher: This is strange.

Student: It is strange, sir. But it happens. It is happening!

Teacher: Why would a teacher resort to intimidating students?

Student: *I do not know, sir. But I imagine it would be for his personal reasons. I recall that the experience I narrated about my intimidation in primary school was associated with an approach my mother made to the teacher. I come from a background of parents who are particular about our studies as children. So they scrutinize report cards to understand everything written on them, along with their implications*

On this occasion my mother noticed that in one particular subject I was supposed to have been first but was graded fourth because there was a mistake in summing up the scores. She showed it to my father who insisted that she must return to the teacher so the corrections could be made. My mother complied.

I took no part in the discussion. But my mother returned cheerful because the changes were made, apologies rendered and more importantly I retained my expected first position. But that event became a watershed for me in that class.

From that point on I noticed that the teacher changed his attitude towards me drastically. He threatened me at will, picked on me for every negative trait, freely reported me to the supervisor, easily made me scapegoat for every offence and I was the butt of his jokes and abuses. He kept me really miserable. He even encouraged friends and classmates to distance themselves from me.

Teacher: Really?

Student: *Yes, sir. Believe me, sir; it is happening to students at various levels even now, including our school. Students endure enormous suffering quietly and fail to report to anyone for fear of even worse repercussions, including malicious fabrications against the student that could lead to expulsion.*

Teacher: No, you cannot be serious.

Student: *Sir, I am very serious. It has happened to a girl I know.*

Teacher: Why did the teacher do that?

Student: Sir, I do not know. All I learnt was that the teacher wanted a favour from her and she refused, so he concocted a very negative story which implicated the girl and she was sent packing by the school authorities. Worse, her sponsors, for her parents were poor, illiterate and lived in the village, did not believe her plea of innocence. Today, I do not know what has become of her. So, sir, it is a very serious problem amongst students; and, I would add, at all levels.

Teacher: This is sad; very sad. Listen, fight is not often good; but once in a while it becomes inevitable for you to stand and fight. If there is anything worth your fight, son, it is your freedom. It is your freedom to be yourself. Let no one, let no teacher intimidate you into surrendering that. Respectfully raise your voice and report to all who can listen including your parents, before you are trapped by intimidation and related machinations.

Your early warning through complaints to relevant authorities would likely push back the impending threat and you would be treated cautiously by that teacher. Have no apologies for protecting your freedom. You have a God-given right to be who you are. Report any sign of intimidation. Don't harbor it and do not be afraid to fight it when it becomes absolutely necessary. Wisely resist any attempt to enslave you through intimidation of all sorts. Report! Raise your voice. And raise it early. Someone will hear and force amends. Otherwise down goes your self-esteem, your academic performance and above all your God-given freedom. Never let it slip. Never!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

RESPECT INSTRUCTIONS

Teacher: I was really shocked to find that you barely passed the test I gave you students last week.

Student: *Me too, sir.*

Teacher: It was very much unlike you!

Student: *I am ashamed of my performance. I am really sorry.*

Teacher: What happened? You answered the questions like one in frenzy and therefore made all kinds of stupid errors.

Student: *That is correct, sir. I was too much in a hurry because I thought there was no time to do justice to the questions, so I tried to hurry through them.*

Teacher: But that was not the case. There was time.

Student: *I know, sir.*

Teacher: I would not set questions and not allow enough time for them to be answered.

Student: *I should have known that. But somehow I did not carefully read the instructions. That was my bane.*

Teacher: I am glad you are learning this lesson early enough in life. There are many before you who have failed major exams in school and in life generally just because they did not carefully read the instructions. In cases, the instructions were read but probably misunderstood or not understood at all.

Student: *I can imagine, sir.*

Teacher: Many brilliant ones have floundered in various ways because of this. Being very sharp, they know the answers to the questions and are thus eager to demonstrate their knowledge by rushing to answer, only to end up failing.

Student: *Now I know that from personal experience.*

Teacher: In fact one of the best students in my time had to repeat his final exams a year later because he failed a compulsory subject leading to his chosen field of study. He failed, not because he did not know the answers to the questions but purely because he misread the instructions.

To illustrate, I believe the compulsory question in the biology paper which he failed had to do with mammals. If I recall well enough the question was about characteristics, illustrations, diagrams or the like of non-mammals. The question had read something like: Describe 3 of the species that are not of the mammal family. But somehow, in reading the instructions and in his eagerness to demonstrate his knowledge of the mammal family he did not see the word "not", and therefore ended up writing a most impressive treatise of the very opposite of what was required. Being a compulsory and very important question carrying nearly 50 percent of the marks, it was no surprise that he failed.

The result came to all of us as a rude shock, that Salem, for that was his name, had failed biology. I particularly thought there must have been an error because he was an excellent student of the subject. The rest of us who were not as good as he was scored 'A's. It was therefore difficult to believe that Salem would score anything less. But not only did he score less, he failed the subject.

At first it sounded absolutely incredible. That was how much faith we all had in the ability of Salem. The Biology teacher was even more incensed, knowing how good the young man was. But after investigations we were to learn what the matter was. Salem had carelessly misread the instructions and had ended doing the very opposite of what was required. So he failed.

Student: I am glad that I am learning this lesson at this level, when I can still make amends without a major set back.

Teacher: That is the spirit. Learn the lesson and try not to repeat the mistake. Never be in such a hurry to exhibit your expertise or knowledge that you rush over instructions governing a body of questions or procedures. To do otherwise can in some cases be suicidal.

Student: That bad, sir.

Teacher: Yes, that bad. Notice that exams are only a minute aspect of life, but it generally elicits the core habits of candidates. The case of Salem brought this point home to me in an unforgettable way. As I said, Salem was

very brilliant, but in our daily lives as students he was very careless and pretty much absent-minded at times.

Because he was so sharp we actually used to call him the absent minded professor. That was his popular name. For instance, Salem would come to class with several pencils, but would hardly find one at the end of the day because of the rather careless manner he would keep them; making it easy for other students to pilfer them, or borrow them with an intention to return them but hardly do. Then Salem would be close to tears. His parents would replenish. But almost exactly the same would reoccur. He was that careless. But because he was so brilliant he often got away with the flaws.

Even before a teacher would finish asking a question to test understanding in class, his hand would be up, eager to respond. If the teacher stopped the question half-way to give Salem a chance to speak Salem would often get the answer right. This impressed the teachers tremendously. But see what price he had to pay in the end owing to his absent-mindedness.

Still I would consider him lucky if he really learnt the lesson. Imagine that he did not and at one time fell ill, and he needed to see a doctor. Just imagine. He gets drugs but is impatient to fully read and digest the accompanying instructions. Hurriedly scanning the drugs, he comes to the conclusion that the whitish one must be a pain reliever and so takes a couple to relieve this discomfort, only to drown to death because what he took were concentrated sleeping drugs.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

EXPECT MORE

Teacher: How many academic prizes did you have last year.

Student: Only two.

Teacher: In which subjects?

Student: In English and Chemistry.

Teacher: That's good.

Student: But I was not satisfied. In fact, I was not happy that I received only those two prizes.

Teacher: How many were you expecting?

Student: Five subject prizes, at least.

Teacher: I love the use of "at least" in that sentence.

Student: Why?

Teacher: It smacks of greater expectation!

Student: Greater expectation?

Teacher: Yes. It's like being greedy for the positive things of life. Why not? Be greedy for marks. Be greedy for prizes. Be greedy for excellence. Be greedy for good behaviour.

Student: That sounds nice.

Teacher: I really mean it. I can use a personal experience to illustrate this. Years ago in primary school, my father threatened to take my school to court for not awarding me my well deserved prizes. In fact, he had one of his lawyer friends threaten the school, set to go to court.

Student: What happened, sir?

Teacher: It was in the promotional exams to primary two. I had scored 100% in at least half of the twelve or thirteen subjects taught. Let me

confess that my father was a connoisseur of his children's academic prizes. Almost everything was premised on whether prizes were brought home or not. For instance, he once cancelled a pre-arranged overseas holiday trip because not all of us brought prizes home at the end of that session.

Student: That must have been very painful.

Teacher: Oh yes, it was! I just never understood why he was that strict. But he would dance and make merry in public once we brought home prizes. If he was abroad or elsewhere when the result was announced, he would go out of his way to buy all the presents you never even expected. To really please him was to bring prizes home. Then you were his friend. But if you didn't you were not and it showed.

Student: But certainly that was not the case, in this event that you are narrating.

Teacher: No, it wasn't. The exam answer scripts returned to us already gave him an idea of how many prizes he was expecting from me that session. He figured that as I had scored 100% in 6 subjects, he ought to be expecting at least 6 prizes.

Student: Did you get the 6 prizes?

Teacher: No. That was the crux of the matter. I was only given two prizes by my teacher. One for mathematics or arithmetic, as it was then called. The other was for being the overall best student in class. I came back home and reported to my father. He was not happy. He was sorely disappointed and figured there must have been an error. So he asked my mum to accompany me to see the teacher the next day. The teacher had what he considered genuine explanations.

Student: I wonder what they might have been, considering you recorded 100% in 6 of the subjects.

Teacher: The explanation of the teacher was that he gave me only two prizes, so as to give others a chance of winning prizes as a way of encouraging them to do better, rather than have only one student out of 30 in the class cart away 7 of the prizes, leaving only 5 for the rest of the 29

students. From the teacher's point of view it was somewhat unfair to allow me take all those prizes.

Student: Unfair?

Teacher: Exactly my dad's reaction when we relayed the explanation to him. He was mad. He said it was the teacher that was being grossly unfair in denying me of prizes that I roundly deserved only to pass them on to others who never won them.

Predictably, the next day he left off going to work early and stormed the school. He was polite but left the school head in no doubt as to the action he would take if remedies were not made. He later backed up his threat with a letter from his friend's law firm, threatening to sue. I believe when the lawyer's letter got to the principal the latter realized just how serious my dad was and immediately arranged for all the prizes that I had won to be delivered to our home, as we had vacated.

My dad seized the opportunity to hammer into our heads, his children, that if there was anything we should be greedy for, it was the prize for any subject we were being taught. He urged us to claim all the prizes. He said in doing so we would always come home with some prizes, no matter what. I must say his advice had always worked for me. For not once, throughout my primary, secondary and tertiary education did I not come home without prizes. I commend the same advice to you.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DON'T BE A COCKROACH

Student: Sir, you seem a bit tired today.

Teacher: Why do you say that?

Student: Your eyes. They are not as bright. I would say they are even somewhat red-shot.

Teacher: Oh, is it so noticeable?

Student: Yes, sir.

Teacher: I did not realize. I thought I was putting up a good enough face.

Student: You are, sir. But I have known you enough to notice minor changes.

Teacher: I see.

Student: What happened, sir?

Teacher: Nothing really. It is just that for some awkward reason I did not sleep early last night. At least, not at my usual time.

Student: I would like to share the reason, if you may.

Teacher: Why are you so inquisitive? Are you going to end up a journalist like your uncle? Anyway I will tell. It's no big deal. It had to do with cockroaches.

Student: Cockroaches?

Teacher: Yes, cockroaches.

Student: Cockroaches kept you awake at night?

Teacher: You could say that. But what actually happened was that my wife had continuously complained that she sees them in the kitchen. I did not quite realize how serious the problem was until last night. Perhaps even my wife did not realize the matter was that serious.

Student: What happened, sir?

Teacher: Quite unusually I felt like nibbling at something before finally retiring for the night. I had worked late in my study and felt like topping up my energy level before sleep. So languidly I sauntered into the kitchen. All the lights downstairs were off, including that in the kitchen, as is the practice before retiring to our private living rooms upstairs.

So I had made my way to the kitchen with the help of the lit bulb on the staircase. But the light was not enough to lead me into the kitchen which was pitch-dark. So I felt for the switch on the wall and put the light on. What I saw dazed me. Cockroaches! There were at least a dozen of them latched unto the wall. Perhaps because of the light, they appeared frozen in their tracks. I was miffed. I swore to war.

Student: What?

Teacher: War, I said. I dashed upstairs and reached for the carton of insecticide spray. I pulled out my armory and headed straight for the kitchen, freely unleashing the bullets with venom. I was mad at those cockroaches.

I finished with the kitchen, having emptied a full can there, and progressed to the store and other rooms including my own. Whether I physically saw cockroaches or not was immaterial. Having satisfied myself that I had done enough battle, I stopped and found that I was now reeking of insecticides. So I needed a bath. But my room was already so poisoned with the insecticide that I could not enter it for a long while. I then realized that in my rage I had punished not just the cockroaches but myself.

It was quite a while before I could re-enter my room, have the bath and sleep. The result, of course, is what you have noticed: Tiredness.

Student: So sorry, sir.

Teacher: Nothing to worry about. After all it is holiday time. I can always go back to bed later, to make up for lost hours.

Student: But if school was in session and you had to teach you may have....

Teacher: Surely, I would then be teaching with reduced capacity. That is why keeping late night is not good at all for anyone, especially students. I

recall that in my school days there were certainly fellow students that we referred to as COCKROACHES.

Student: *Why, sir?*

Teacher: Precisely because they behaved like cockroaches. It was at the time that normal people would have turned off their lights to sleep that they resumed activity. That was when they preferred to do their homework, for example. That was when they preferred to read. So having worked through the night when normal people were resting you can imagine how tired they usually were during classes.

The result was that they were always in class with grossly reduced capacities to absorb what was being taught and to participate actively because their brains were tired and so were their bodies. They often ended up always playing “catch up” with their studies. For, not being fully alert in class, they would need to do extra work in the night to try to fully understand what was taught in class. Many times they never quite succeeded, at least not as much as the students who always slept early and woke up early - happy, healthy and ready for the day’s work.

Student: *Were you ever a cockroach?*

Teacher: Never. I always tried to work within the normal study time of the day; so I could rest and be 100% ready for the new day’s work. I urge you to do the same. NEVER BE A COCKROACH. It saps your energy, reduces your absorption in class, and turns you into a mental and physical dullard.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MIND YOUR HEALTH

Teacher: There is a factor in academic excellence which never plays up in consideration for students.

Student: *What factor, sir?*

Teacher: Health. Health is a prime contributor to success in any human endeavor of worth. Health is particularly critical for any pursuit of excellence. Academia is no exception to this rule.

Student: *I never considered health so primary, I must confess.*

Teacher: You are not alone in that omission. We all are like that. Health is something we all take for granted no matter what we do or plan to do. A housewife preoccupied with the good of her children forgets her health. She is too focused on her subjects of attention that she could have her health slide to points of danger, becoming even incapable of helping herself.

Student: *That example is real to me because I recall it happened to my mother years ago. My mother dotted on us her children so much that she hardly paid any attention to her health. In one instance when we were at a hospital to visit a relative, a doctor fortuitously asked her to check her blood pressure. It was incredibly high, we were made to understand.*

The doctor thought it was serious enough to admit her immediately. But she pleaded that it would be impossible for her to submit herself to admission abandoning her children. The doctors scoffed at her excuses and insisted; but she would not yield. She however succeeded in tricking them, under the guise that she would return that evening.

Of course, she did not return. We, her children, would not hear of our mother going anywhere and abandoning us to mercurial house helps. But the truth was that for over a month she had been complaining of serious headaches, aches, pains all over her body. I believe her complete devotion to us, her children, kept her going somehow.

In spite of the doctor's alarmist warnings, she was ready to carry on. But something, which today I understand as pure grace of God, intervened. She came down with chicken pox and was forced to be quarantined in her room, to avoid affecting any of us, her beloved children. For over a week my mother had nothing to do with us. She would only occasional speak to us through her window. She was strict on not making any contact with us for fear of spreading the disease.

We never thought we could do without our mother for even one day! And she never thought we could be alright without her support for half a day! But guess what, we survived. And we survived well. Even my little brother who was then only 18 months did very well. Our father stepped in to take on most of her duties in addition to his. The house helps were also understanding and kind. After nearly 10 days ordeal she was fit again to rejoin the family, and we had all been fine. For me, it was a major first lesson in the ability of the human being to adapt.

The conditions had put a strain on our father but the fact that we could do without our mum for so long: go to school, do our homework, play and partake in all activities as at when due really amazed us. They especially amazed my mum. But my greatest take from that experience was that the chicken pox saved her from possible disastrous health consequences. Chicken pox forced her to take a holiday and rest; something the doctors had said she badly needed.

Teacher: Kudo, you have made my point well beyond my intended illustration. Now imagine your mother was preparing for exam; and had to fall ill the week preceding her exams. Imagine the illness was so serious that she was unable to write the papers. Imagine for instance that it was the final year external exam. Imagine that she eventually survived and returned to school a month later. What would then be her status with regard to her school work?

Student: *Clearly she would have lost a year. Her classmates including those far less academically endowed would have gained a year advantage over her. She would be in the same class as those who had failed previously and had to repeat.*

Teacher: And all that would be because she was lucky and survived the illness. For it could have been worse, but for the grace of God.

Student: *I see the point.*

Teacher: Hardly do we all see the point, because the pursuit of whatever ambition we have set our minds on is usually so overwhelming, and so blinding that we never spot health as a major factor in the equation. As it is for teachers, so for students, so for businessmen, so for politicians, so for

even doctors and indeed for anyone who pursues any endeavor with passion.

Let me add that indeed no life endeavor, including studentship, is worth anybody's while except pursued with passion. That fact should stand out loftily, proudly, unimpeachably. But the point I make is that the passion to excel must include the passion to be healthy. For without health, the very vehicle that is required to carry us to success would prove incapable of making the journey.

We would be like the wise celebrity safari car racer who did all to put himself in a spiritual, mental, and physical top shape to win any race; except ensure that the vehicle in which he was to race was in good shape. The car engine malfunctioned half way and that ended his ambition. All his preparations and investment to prepare himself for the great event went to waste.

Student: He must have been the most stupid of all stupid men.

Teacher: I am glad you say that yourself; for that statement may well hold true for many, if not most of us.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

OPERATION WALL GECKO

Student: Sir, why are you staring at the wall?

Teacher: Come and see.

Student: *Sir, but it is just a plain white wall.*

Teacher: No, look again. Be quiet. No noise.

Student: *I see nothing, sir, but a plain blank wall.*

Teacher: Do you see a small reptile.

Student: *Yes, sir. I see a wall gecko.*

Teacher: What else?

Student: *In front of the wall gecko, there is something that looks like an ant.*

Teacher: Is there a relationship?

Student: *One looks like an imminent prey and the other a predator.*

Teacher: Excellent. Now watch.

Student: *Watch what, sir?*

Teacher: Watch the predator in action.

Student: *Ok, sir.*

Teacher: Can you guess how long I have been here, watching?

Student: *I have been watching you for at least 5 minutes.*

Teacher: That is certainly more time than I have been watching this wall gecko.

Student: *What is so fascinating, sir?*

Teacher: Just keep watching.

Student: *Oh! What speed! Sir, did you see that? The wall gecko that appeared to be barely breathing suddenly sprang to life!*

Teacher: Did it succeed?

Student: *Clearly, sir. The prey is right now inside its mouth. It is incredible, the speed. Sir, is that what you were looking forward to seeing?*

Teacher: You have never seen the gecko in action before, apparently.

Student: *Never, sir. Not like this. I have never noticed that the gecko could be such an incredibly sharp predator.*

Teacher: Well, there you saw it. I always enjoy watching the gecko about to pounce on a prey. Learn to observe nature around you. There is a lot that the simple things around you can teach. I know for sure that I have learnt a lot watching the gecko.

Student: *What could you have learnt, sir?*

Teacher: You know, watching the gecko and its potential prey reminds me of golfers. A good golfer gets all his concentration to bear on the single little ball in front of him, completely oblivious of everything else. He rests his entire attention on the round object, aims slowly, and then sweeps suddenly; just like the wall gecko.

Student: *Exactly, sir.*

Teacher: I am glad you see the similarity. But why do you think the golfer and the gecko, for that matter, invest all their attention on the single object in front of them.

Student: *I believe so that they do not miss. They want to take precise shots that hit the ball or object exactly where it is best.*

Teacher: Correct.

Student: *Sir, you say there is a lesson in that?*

Teacher: Isn't it obvious?

Student: *It is not to me, sir.*

Teacher: Is there any successful project in life that did not require a successful step at a time?

Student: *Ok, now I get it. It is like giving all my concentration to every teacher as he comes to teach, giving my every concentration to every period of every subject. It is like not letting my attention drift to the past or the future, but giving it to the present all the time. It is like making the most or getting the most of the present, always.*

Teacher: I could not have said it better. Can you imagine what you could achieve if you could give your very best everyday? Can you imagine what you could achieve if you gave all your attention to every class?

Can you imagine what you could achieve if you gave all your attention, at a time, to every exam or test? That is probably the secret of making 'A' grades in all subjects. Something some think impossible. But now you have the key.

Focus on the present. Give it your all. Never be distracted by either the past or the future. Learn from the gecko and your greatness is guaranteed.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WATCH YOUR FOOD

Teacher: I have a story for you today.

Student: *Is it something you just remember? You sound thrilled.*

Teacher: It is a story which I would really like all my students to hear.

Student: *I am all ears, sir.*

Teacher: It is a story of Yogoyogo.

Student: *What, sir?*

Teacher: I said, Yogoyogo.

Student: *What's yogoyogo, sir?*

Teacher: Oh, I am sorry - a name so strange, ought to be introduced.

Student: *So it is a name?*

Teacher: Yes. Yogoyogo is the name of the subject of my story today. It was not his real name, but that was the name by which he was popularly known.

Student: *I understand, sir.*

Teacher: Now to the story. Returning from a mid-term break, Yogoyogo arrived with a band of native doctors from his village. The rest of us arrived to the spectacle of four bizarre looking characters, dancing round a boiling pot in front of our hostel. It was a free show which no one could miss.

We all gathered in a very wide semi-circle round the performance. Sitting next to the pot was young Yogoyogo, whose youth stood in poignant contrast to the elderly dancers. It took the concerted effort of the school authorities, police from town and pleas from Yogoyogo's tribesmen who lived in the town to move the native doctors from the school. They left but I believe not before they had satisfied themselves that they had fully accomplished their mission.

Student: *What mission were they on? To disrupt the school or scare the students?*

Teacher: Perhaps those were subsidiary missions, for they also achieved those goals. But what we gathered was that their primary mission was to exorcise from Yogoyogo, who had had to repeat class one three times, the spirit of exam failure.

The story was that Yogoyogo was being held back intellectually by some black magicians and enemy spirits in the boarding house who did not want their son to progress from class one. After a careful analysis of the problem by Yogoyogo and his folks, this was the ingenious decision that was taken, to have juju men come to the school to drive away the evil spirits from interfering with Yogoyogo's progress.

We learnt that the spirits against the young man were responsible for his penchant for falling asleep each time he was in the library or the reading room to study. I can bear witness that Yogoyogo, who was once my classmate was never able to keep awake in the library or in class during prep periods either in the afternoon or at night.

The argument was that because these evil spirits hounded him to sleep every time, he could not study to pass exams. To the gullible many this sounded credible. But what most like me did not understand was why the solution was thought to lie with three smelly, dirty, old folks who certainly had tremendous challenge in conducting their lives out of crass ignorance.

But who were we to question the wisdom of Yogoyogo and his folks. Let me confess however that from then on I kept my respectable distance from him and avoided even the faintest contact with him, including shaking hands or even sharing the same pathway at once. If I saw him coming I would generally find an excuse to stop and divert to someplace else.

Needless to add, he eventually did not graduate; neither could he progress beyond class one even after 4 years of repeating the class. The principal eventually did an analysis following some investigations which he shared with the rest of the school in the assembly. This was after Yogoyogo had left.

The principal's findings were basically that his main undoing was his love for food, especially heavy foods like pounded yam and the like which he often ate with utmost relish. Yogoyogo was famous for his ability to mow down any food mountain, no matter how high. He loved and enjoyed to eat heavily.

According to our principal's analysis, having overloaded himself Yogoyogo was too heavy to do anything else but sleep like an overfed python. Unfortunately, it was not a once-off occurrence but a habit. His inability to curb his appetite caused him to sleep; perhaps, as a way of escaping work. No one could tell.

There is yet another reason to watch your food beyond the Yogoyogo syndrome. It is that as food makes you well, it can also make you sick. Countless are cases when food eaten has been the cause of the failure of many a candidate either at work or in school.

For instance, one of my best friends in school, Abba, had to miss a very important scholarship test because he had eaten something that upset his stomach so much that he excreted and vomited the whole day of the exam.

He lost that chance and the chance to continue in our school because subsequent events rendered his parents incapable of paying his school fees, a weight that could easily have been borne through scholarship which I am sure Abba would have got, being an exceedingly brilliant student.

Student: But the brilliance could not serve him in avoiding food poisoning.

Teacher: Sadly.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE KILLER INSTINCT

Teacher: How do you spend your time now that you are on vacation?

Student: Studying, playing soccer and watching movies.

Teacher: What kind of movies do you watch?

Student: All kinds, sir; but it depends on what is available. Since I cannot yet afford to buy them as I like, I am grateful to watch whichever one is available. The one I watched yesterday was very interesting.

Teacher: What was it about?

Student: Are you that interested in movies, sir?

Teacher: Yes and no. It depends on what is there to learn. I prefer uplifting movies.

Student: *What does that mean, sir?*

Teacher: Let's talk about your interesting movie. Another time, we can discuss my kind of movies.

Student: *Alright, sir.*

Teacher: Go on then. I am listening.

Student: *The movie was about a hardened criminal who broke away from jail and resuscitated his old gang to begin another lease of fatal bank robberies. The law eventually caught up with him, as the police traced him to his hide-out. He fought back, badly injuring some of the officers.*

This aroused the killer instinct in the squad leader who had earlier planned to catch the criminal alive for the law to take its course. His killer instinct led him to gun down the criminal who was attempting to escape. The first shot injured the criminal; but he would not stop shooting. He shot to kill and continued pumping the bullets into the dead body as if to assure himself that the man was really dead.

Teacher: Did you enjoy the movie?

Student: *Very much, sir; especially the action part where the leader of the police squad was provoked into resurrecting his killer instinct.*

Teacher: The killer instinct. You have used that phrase twice in quick succession. Do you know what it means?

Student: *Yes, sir. I believe it is the instinct to attack something until it is truly dead, far beyond any possibilities of redemption. I learnt the phrase from my uncle only last weekend. He used it in describing the team that won the football fixture we were watching. He said the team that won had the killer instinct.*

Teacher: Why did he say that?

Student: Ten minutes to the end of the match it was clear who the winner was, leading 4-0 and superior in every department of the game. Yet they were unrelenting, raiding the goal post of their opponent voraciously, hungry for more. They ended up scoring additional 3 goals; bring the final score to 7-0. Yet, all they needed was just a win to qualify for the next round of the competition.

Teacher: I think your uncle is spot on with his phrase. Surely, that is a team with the killer instinct much like the leader of the police squad in your movie. I must confess I love people who show the killer instinct, not necessary for killing but in executing whatever assignment they have.

Just imagine a student having the killer instinct preparing for his exams. Can you imagine a brilliant student with the killer instinct in the exam hall doing justice to the exam questions? Can you?

Student: Sir, you want me to answer?

Teacher: Yes, answer.

Student: I can, sir.

Teacher: How would such a student be different?

Student: He would take no chances. He would ensure that every question is given its due and that nothing detracts from full marks. He would ensure that his spellings are correct. He would ensure that his preparation is orderly and clean. He would not leave the exam hall early. In fact, I think he would likely be the last to leave.

Teacher: Why?

Student: Because he would want to utilize every available minute to ensure that his work is, as much as possible, error-free enough to guarantee or almost guarantee 100%. For him 99% would not do.

Teacher: Are you that type of student?

Student: No, sir.

Teacher: Would you like to be one with the killer instinct.

Student: Sir, by all means.

Teacher: Good. You must, therefore, learn never to be completely easily satisfied with your performance in anything. Those with the killer instinct continuously push the frontiers of improvement, never resting, no matter what they achieve.

Student: I see.

CHAPTER TWENTY

WORK IS FAITH

Teacher: I called your house yesterday, as promised, sometime around 3pm.

Student: I am sorry, sir. Then we were still at the worship service.

Teacher: You were there until 3pm?

Student: Yes, sir.

Teacher: So when did you close?

Student: We finally closed at 4.30pm.

Teacher: 4.30pm?

Student: Yes, sir. Actually, we closed early. Usually we would dismiss at 5pm or 5.30pm.

Teacher: When do you start the worship?

Student: We usually start at about 10am.

Teacher: You mean you worship for 7 hours?

Student: Yes, sir.

Teacher: And you are all comfortable with that?

Student: Well, to be honest; not really, sir. You know, it is quite a long time to go on empty stomach, praying, singing, and dancing. I usually end up ill after every worship session. I have headaches, my belly churns and I generally feel sick.

Teacher: That is a pity.

Student: These days, I have learnt not to exert myself that much. I try not to shout during prayers and I minimize my dancing. But all that does not stop the biting hunger, the headache or resulting weakness. Nevertheless, it is not as bad as before.

Teacher: Amazing.

Student: You have some suggestions, sir?

Teacher: No. In religious matters there is nothing to be said to another, especially unsolicited.

Student: But I am soliciting for your views, sir.

Teacher: I do not think you should worry about my views on this one. Your relationship with God is your private affair. It could be enjoyable, it could be punishing, it is all a private matter. In fact, speaking of views on religious matters reminds me of two short stories which I would like to share with you.

Student: Thank you, sir. At least now I have some view coming from you.

Teacher: Stories mark you, not views; and they are true stories. Now, the first story. Years ago, I knew a couple that belonged to a religion which did not allow for any form of medication. At one time the wife took ill, some serious stomach problem. She moaned, groaned and cried all day for weeks. Neighbours begged her husband to please take the woman to a doctor. He refused. He would sit beside his beloved wife, moaning in sympathy and crying from the agony of not being able to do something to relieve the pain of his wife, whom he obviously loved very dearly.

Relative, after relative, visited to join the neighbours in begging him to take the poor woman to the hospital. He was adamant. Eventually he also took ill; perhaps from the anguish of watching his wife suffer what was to be a fatal pain, for the woman died. Weeks later he followed, leaving their toddler child, who had suffered so much neglect in the face of the sick parents that it, too, died.

The second story is about Chinwe, one of my initial best friends in school. At least, she was until she joined this religious group. Some would say religious cult, which gave prayers such prominence in the lives of its members that it nearly obscured all other activities, including attending classes and studying. Chinwe and her group believed that prayers with faith - whatever that meant - solved all problems.

Shortly after joining this group Chinwe no longer turned up for prep and shamelessly missed classes. Anytime there was a clash between tutorials and their prayers Chinwe, who now dressed herself in "extra-pious" clothes, was sure to be found in the prayer meeting. She became known in school as the "Prayer General." Chinwe could pray in any language, comprehensible and incomprehensible. More often than not, the latter was the case; for that was more than enough proof that she ate from the same table with God almighty. That was what we were made to believe.

Some of us even envied her. I must confess that I contemplated joining her because she seemed to exude reverence; except that her breath was terrible. It oozed badly. To hold a conversation with her, you had to be extra polite not to shield your nostrils. That was not the news, though.

The news was that Chinwe failed so much and so badly in her exams that she was advised to withdraw. She ended up with no skill and little knowledge except the jumbo she knew as prayers. It was not long after we left school that we heard that she committed suicide, after a night raid at a

dingy hotel revealed that she apparently practiced prostitution, part time, for a living.

It was from the Chinwe experience that I extracted a major guiding principle: "Prayer is Good, But Prayer and Work Sharing Equal Enthusiasm Is Better." Now I work or study as if my life depends on it; likewise, I pray as if my life depends on it.

Student: *Very enlightening stories.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

KEEP IT WARM

Teacher: I enjoyed your birthday party yesterday. Thanks for inviting me.

Student: *I was very glad that you could come.*

Teacher: It was my pleasure to be there. I must say that I thoroughly enjoyed the food. It was warm and nice, although I arrived very late. Usually, when you are that late to a party like that what you get is cold food.

Student: *I am happy you enjoyed the food. Which did you have?*

Teacher: Rice, jollof rice.

Student: *That was my choice too.*

Teacher: How did you keep it warm?

Student: By warming.

Teacher: What kind of warming? Were you taking the food intermittently to the kitchen to warm?

Student: No, sir. We had the whole pot of rice sitting on a gentle warmer, which heat it gently but continuously.

Teacher: Can you please say that again?

Student: I said we had a warmer, which kept the rice pot heated gently, mildly and continuously.

Teacher: Interesting. But I did not see any fire under the pot.

Student: We were using a new electrical devise, which is just like a pan upon which the pot sits but it keeps the food warm perpetually.

Teacher: No wonder. It is amazing how life's lessons pop up from everywhere to help us on the way to stardom and success in any field.

Student: What do you mean, sir?

Teacher: What you have said about the electrical devise is a major lesson that could be useful to you even in your academics.

Student: How sir?

Teacher: Let me illustrate with a story. I was once on a holiday with a friend of mine in a far away country. He was a professional sprinter. It was off season for both of us, so we decided to take a two-week holiday, away from our usual habitat. We had a wonderful line up of things to do: places to visit and amusements to have.

Student: I can imagine.

Teacher: I must say we had quite a good time. But that is not why I recall this story.

Student: I have come to realize that in your every story there is a germane lesson.

Teacher: Nice to note that. Now, what was interesting for me in course of this holiday trip was that this athlete friend of mine kept on a routine of physical exercise morning and evening, with probably the same fidelity with which he said his prayers - Without fail.

Student: Really? Even on holidays?

Teacher: I learnt a lot from him that vacation. It did not matter how the day went - good, not so good, exciting, exhausting or otherwise. It did not matter whether we slept late or woke up early, he was faithful.

Student: Faithful?

Teacher: Yes, stridently faithful to his physical exercises, his prayers and his scriptural studies - over which he would spend quite sometime, meditating or contemplating. The unfailing discipline to keep up this routine, even on holidays, was what thrilled and amazed me.

Student: Why?

Teacher: I used to pride myself then as being disciplined but there was my friend far superior to me in that department; teaching how discipline could be kept. I could not help but ask him why he was so unrelenting in the physical and spiritual exercises.

His explanation was similar to what you told me about keeping the food continuously warm. He said he could not afford to disconnect from his spiritual source even for a day, for that guarantees his all round well-being and flourish.

Student: What wisdom!

Teacher: What wisdom, indeed! I was to find that this wisdom is good no matter the field of endeavour, which for me then was school. From then on, I always kept my brain busy, even though at times, at low intensity but busy all the same. I strongly recommend same to you even as you enjoy this holiday. Stay with your books, keep your brain warm. Keep whatever area in

which you wish to excel warm like the food at the party, and it will never fail to please and impress no matter the test.

Student: *Thank you, sir.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

YOU NEVER WALK ALONE

Teacher: I have a story for you.

Student: *You make my day, sir. You know how much I love your stories.*

Teacher: I know. I would like to tell you a story about a very close friend of mine.

Student: *Is it anyone I know?*

Teacher: Maybe.

Student: *What does that mean, sir?*

Teacher: It is the story of a friend; so close that I could never describe myself outside of him.

Student: *Close in what sense, sir?*

Teacher: Close in every sense.

Student: *Close as a relative? A brother? A sister?*

Teacher: Closer, much closer.

Student: *Close like shadow?*

Teacher: Closer, much closer

Student: *This is getting very intriguing.*

Teacher: Not a surprise. It is intriguing but as real as anything, anyone you really know. He is also a close confidant.

Student: *You mean you could tell him anything?*

Teacher: Yes. It is foolhardy not to tell everything.

Student: *Why?*

Teacher: Because he knows everything.

Student: *He knows everything?*

Teacher: Sure, he knows everything.

Student: *Whao! Is he God?*

Teacher: Yes. He duly represents God.

Student: *Now I see what you mean.*

Teacher: I am glad you do.

Student: *But God is always with us all.*

Teacher: Yes, in theory.

Student: *What do you mean by that, sir?*

Teacher: I mean in the sense of general knowledge. Just like I know that there is a fountain down the road, or a cinema at the street corner, or a restaurant behind your house.

Student: *I do not understand.*

Teacher: I am not surprised. That is why I want to tell you the story of this friend.

Student: *The one we are speaking of?*

Teacher: No. Not really, another one just to illustrate.

Student: *Oh, I see.*

Teacher: This is a story about my friend, Ozinga. Many years ago, his father received a message from a relative who lived in a very big city. He wanted Ozinga, a boy of 8 at the time, to come live with him so he could assist with the boy's education. If Ozinga had stayed in the village, he was certainly not going to have any good education because his parents were very poor.

The message was Ozinga's chance to a better life. His parents recognized the opportunity; but his mother was very reluctant to let Ozinga go. She thought he was too young to leave, that he would be lonesome and grossly unprotected in the big city.

Ozinga's father thought differently. He knew he was going to miss his son but he wanted to do everything to encourage the boy to make the move. Ozinga complained that he was going to be lonely without his beloved parents. He really did not want to go. His father assured him that he would go with him but not physically. He said to Ozinga that he would always be in his presence and that Ozinga could prove that for himself, even though he was not physically within sight.

Student: *How is that?*

Teacher: That is the story. His father assured him that he was always with him and that what he needed to do was listen to the inner voice within him. He said anytime Ozinga needed anything, advice or direction, he should ask

as if he, his father, was actually there and then listen to the voice within for answer. He said Ozinga would actually hear him, his father, speak.

Ozinga did not believe his father but he put it to test and it worked! It worked at play and it worked in school. It worked everywhere. Each time the voice he heard was that of his father and the reasoning of the voice within was clearly the pattern of his father. Then Ozinga started believing. From that point on he knew that he never walked alone. He knew he went everywhere with his father. So in the big city, he was never lonely. He survived and prospered assisted by the enduring presence of his unseen companion, his father.

You know, you chose your own companion. It could be your real father or your Heavenly Father or anyone else. The one you choose will offer help only to the extent that he can help himself. So the more competent your choice of the unseen guide, the better the quality of advice that you get at every turn especially if you ask and really listen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

PRIZE GIVING DAY

Teacher: It was a very colorful ceremony.

Student: *Thanks for inviting me. I thoroughly enjoyed myself. It was very uplifting.*

Teacher: I usually like to witness prize giving day ceremonies in schools, no matter where it is held.

Student: I did not realize that a primary school could make it so interesting.

Teacher: I have been to that school's award ceremony twice. It has always been very rewarding.

Student: I was particularly thrilled by the excitement on the faces of the very young ones as they were called upon to receive their prizes. Young as they were, they seemed to realize the importance of their achievements.

Teacher: Maybe not as much as the parents, many of whom may have failed to enjoy such privileges in their own time. They hoped to recoup the missed experience through their children.

Student: I can imagine, sir, that such parents are usually more demanding of those prizes from their children.

Teacher: Sometimes, it is really those parents who have actually known the thrill of receiving prizes as children that are harder on their children for prizes. Such award ceremonies are often for them very nostalgic. It is like the gush of emotions that fill a veteran champion when the young ones are being crowned. It is like the feeling of the older couples at the wedding of younger relatives. Through the new, the old is renewed, the love and nostalgia rekindled. The experiences relived.

Student: Sir, you speak like the occasion flooded you with images of your own days in school.

Teacher: That is correct. I will not deny it. It took me back to those competitive days when the prize giving day distinguished the excellent from the very good. I loved those days. As a small child in school, I used to long for the prize giving days.

Student: To show off?

Teacher: Yes, to show off. To show the bullies, where it really matters. To show all my vainglorious classmates, that their place was officially behind me.

Student: Sir, wasn't that a mean way to think?

Teacher: I did not think so then and I still do not think so now. For me the prize giving is what, in a manner of speaking, separated the men, from the boys. But there was a far more important reason why I loved the prize giving day.

Student: Why?

Teacher: It was my chance to give back a little bit to my parents who, through their humble jobs, were giving everything so I could be in school. The prize day was my chance to say "Thank You" to them. It was my chance to encourage them. It was my chance to assure them that their labor will not be in vain.

Student: How touching!

Teacher: Oh yes. For me, the prize giving day was more than Christmas. It was my chance to put a big broad smile on the faces of my parents. It was my chance to put pride in their eyes and a chip on their shoulders for once. It was my chance to put them on center stage, so they could feel like stars once in a whole year.

Student: Oh, so touching!

Teacher: Yes, very touching. The prize giving day meant the world to me. It was a day that I knew my parents would be in their best clothes to come to school. Often their best clothes were nowhere near the garments of the rich parents. But I knew that once we came to the high point of the event, my parents' clothes would no longer matter. The back position where they sat or stood would no longer matter.

The importance of other parents' jewelry and splendor would fade, when my name would be called and called repeatedly. For each time my name was called, I never failed to look inside my father's eyes. It said everything, every time.

Student: What?

Teacher: It is difficult to tell without bringing tears into my eyes now. But let me just say that the look in my father's eyes, in those moments,

once a year was and remain for me indescribable. The look was that of a deep inner healing, it was hope, it was pride, and it was a rare glint of glory. It was faith that the future was surely going to be better. His eyes were materialized fulfillment and unrestrained gratitude for blessings he thought undeserved.

Student: You bring me close to tears.

Teacher: I do not blame you. I have to fight back mine. But my heart is filled with the joy of those days.

Student: I can imagine.

Teacher: You needn't imagine much. Did you see the young man who stood out in the arena at the mention of his daughter's name? The man in the resplendent grey suit and orange bow tie.

Student: His pride was palpable. He was there for the prize even before his daughter got to the stage.

Teacher: That is how jubilant many parents feel about star performances of their children. Can you imagine if students all really knew that? Can you imagine the length they could go to make their parents proud on prize giving day?

Student: Frankly sir, I do not know what other students would do. But for me, from today I promise myself that all prize-giving days in school would be dedicated to making my parents proud. I promise to fill their eyes with so much joy that I, too, would have difficulty describing someday.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

SSSH.....SILENCE PLEASE

Student: Sir, why is it that very bright and creative people generally appear to be at their best in quiet environments?

Teacher: I imagine that should be obvious.

Student: I know it is because the quiet enables them to concentrate.

Teacher: Good.

Student: Could that be the only reason?

Teacher: Do you think there is something else?

Student: I do not know. Just asking? Just a hunch.

Teacher: What do you mean by a hunch, here?

Student: I just have this intuition, maybe a deep feeling that there could be more to it than just the need for a quiet environment where concentration could be enhanced.

Teacher: I believe your hunch is right.

Student: Really?

Teacher: Yes.

Student: I'm glad to know that. This had been gnawing on my mind for quite a while now. I mean this question. Almost all the very intelligent and decent people that I admire appear to have great love for the quiet place; either to live, or just to stay, stare and think.

Teacher: People sometimes tend to regard such persons, quite erroneously, as anti-social loners.

Student: That is how even in school we often brand the very brightest amongst us.

Teacher: You remind me of one of my closest friends while I was in the university. Anytime you could not find him either in the room, library or the drama theatre he was almost certainly at a remote section of the sea front. Quiet. Just staring at the sea and listening to the silence.

Today he stands tall as easily one of the most profound of our spiritual philosophers and a truly happy and successful man - very wise and ageless.

Student: That is the kind of person I look forward to becoming sometime in the future. I guess it is because of my love for such people that I have pondered over this question of their attraction to quiet places for a long time. It occurs to me that what they get from the quiet must be more than the quiet. Now you confirm it.

Teacher: Well put, son. What they get is certainly more than the quiet which is their initial desire. They look always for a quiet environment where they could concentrate with the least possible distraction and focus their energies.

Have you ever done the experiment in Physics in which you focus the energy of sun rays through a special lens?

Student: Yes, sir. That experiment is fresh on my mind. We did it a few weeks before this vacation.

Teacher: What did you observe?

Student: We found that by converging sun rays through the convex lens, we could actually burn a paper placed underneath the lens.

Teacher: Exactly. That is evidence of the power of concentration. When people minimize distractions to the barest, through the help of quiet environments, they could focus their energies better to penetrate or absorb the substance of whatever they are studying. This explains the need for

quiet anywhere people are involved in study - class, library or wherever. But as you said, there is more benefit than the mere quiet itself.

Student: I'm all ears, sir!

Teacher: You see, all great thoughts come from silence. Silence is the harbinger, the library, the custodian of all great solutions, ideas, inventions or what have you.

Erroneously people believe that they are the ones who come up with great ideas of any sort. The truth is that those ideas already exist in the universe and silence coupled with personal affinity for that idea, attracts it to our minds.

You must have experienced a situation where pondering a particular question, an active way of setting up affinity, the relevant idea just floats weightless like a feather into your mind. Then suddenly the problem is illuminated with the solution in a split second; and you are filled with joy.

Student: Surely sir. This has happened to me several times, especially in my attempts to solve mathematical problems that have for long proved difficult. Suddenly, while ruminating over the problem, the solution just appears to sneak into my awareness and makes the problem so simple to solve that I marvel.

Teacher: Fantastic. You have the experience. That is what silence or quiet, as you say, does for you. It provides you with an optimum environment for maximum concentration and feeds you with ideas and answers long elusive. It is as if the silence helps open your mind; or your inner eyes and inner ears and subtly directs them to see a solution that may have been lurking around unseen because of the noise in the environment. For, as I said, in silence is the solution to all problems. With good affinity set up through inner questioning, or what some call contemplation, you may be lucky to attract that which you seek.

Student: So silence must contain the world's greatest treasures then?

Teacher: Where do you think all the good things have come from? Where do you think you have manifested from? Where do you think all has come from?

Student: Silence?

Teacher: Silence of course. From silence they come. To silence they return.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

PRACTICE Q & A

Teacher: There is one technique that worked very well for me. I keep forgetting to let you know.

Student: *I am glad you remember it today.*

Teacher: I am glad too. But something prompted the remembrance.

Student: *What did?*

Teacher: I ran into Paulo, an old schoolmate. He was such a bright student especially at the university. He was so bright that he wrote books even before he got to the final year.

Student: *Oh yeah?*

Teacher: Really. He was so bright that he was delegated by lecturers to take tutorial classes involving not only junior students but, in some cases, his own very classmates.

Student: *What do you mean by tutorial, sir?*

Teacher: Sorry, I just assumed you knew. Tutorials are simply study periods for instructions to smaller groups, so students have a chance to look at some more practical application of the issues from a lecture.

Student: *I see.*

Teacher: In our particular case, we had options of which tutorial class to attend. Many elected to attend that under Paulo, although he was a fellow student. I guess people were overly impressed by a student who had written a book which even some lecturers bought.

Let me add however that I was not one of those who attended his tutorial class.

Student: *Why? Were you envious?*

Teacher: No, far from that. He was a very bright student. But as far as I was concerned he was not a great tutorial instructor. I had other ideas of how a tutorial should be conducted to best benefit me.

Student: *What do you mean, sir?*

Teacher: Paulo's tutorial class was more like a direct continuation of lectures; where you were taught theories, philosophies and the like. He was profuse with explanations. I must say this impressed many; but not me.

Student: *That is my point of interest. Why not you, sir?*

Teacher: He just did not conduct the class in a manner which I liked. Well, this is besides the fact that he carried such bushy forest as hair.

Student: *How would you have wanted him to conduct the tutorial class?*

Teacher: Largely in the manner in which both of us have our discussions. More like a dialogue. Especially more like a question and answer session; something I generally like to refer to as Q and A sessions.

Student: *Wasn't his session Q and A?*

Teacher: No. He rather gave additional lectures, additional information and all that.

Student: But that is impressive.

Teacher: Yes, I know. But I am sad to tell you that most of those who attended his class hardly made any grades beyond 'C' in our own set.

Student: Oh? Why?

Teacher: I think precisely because of what I thought was wrong with his tutorial style. I guess students liked him because he did not require them doing any work before attending his class. All he did was feed them with more and more facts. In many cases he overfed them with facts and figures well beyond what the real lecturers gave.

Student: Are you implying, sir, that his method made students lazy?

Teacher: No. What I am saying is that his method was good for lazy students who did not want to work on their own.

Student: I do not understand, sir.

Teacher: To attend a tutorial class based on the Q and A model required the active participation of the audience - the students. This is a model which requires you, the student, to have done your homework properly and then expects you to come with questions which aim to clarify areas that you may not have understood in course of your reading.

Students in a Q and A session are expected to then have their questions or comments based on the work they had already done on the topic. This is what they contribute for responses either from the teacher or from fellow students who might have a better understanding of the particular facet being discussed.

Student: I see. What you are saying is that to get the most out of a tutorial class one must do his homework by reading up the topic to be discussed.

Teacher: Yes. I would say do not just read it. Read it in painstaking detail; then frame questions around the areas where clarification is required

for your better understanding. The questions or comments you come up with are then what you take to the class. If indeed all the students do that, you would have a most enriching and rewarding session. You would receive new information situated in the context of what you already know and that would aid far better and deeper understanding.

Student: I see.

Teacher: I would recommend this Q and A method not only for tutorial classes but for all sorts of classes. I would even recommend it for your regular school, religious or spiritual classes. In fact, classes of any kind! Be proactive.

Student: What do you mean by "Be Proactive", sir?

Teacher: I mean take the initiative. Do not wait for the lecture. Get the lecture from other sources in one form or the other before it is actually delivered. Take your questions to the lecture based on the reading or research you have done around the topic and see what difference it makes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

CHARGE YOUR BATTERIES

Student: Sir, I tried to reach you yesterday through your mobile phone to confirm our meeting today.

Teacher: So sorry, my phone must have been off. I realized this late in the day.

Student: *What happened?*

Teacher: It was the battery. It had run down. I forgot to charge it overnight as usual.

Student: *Oh I see. It happens.*

Teacher: Oh yes, I know it happens. But it can be quite an upset when people cannot reach you, and you are not even conscious of the fact.

Student: *I can understand. It happens to me too.*

Teacher: Sometimes I wonder if it also happens when God is trying to reach us or warn us about something and our spiritual batteries are just dead.

Student: *Does God try to reach us in similar ways?*

Teacher: Maybe not in similar ways but in various ways. I think God is perpetually trying to reach us.

Student: *I have never thought about that.*

Teacher: Well, I think those who expect the guidance of God look out for it; they listen for it. Some do have a knack for finding it in the sights or hearing it in the sounds around. But that is of course if their spiritual batteries are charged enough to pick up the signals.

Student: *You sound mysterious sometimes.*

Teacher: I am sorry if I do.

Student: *Please do not get me wrong, sir. I really appreciate your thoughts no matter the subject and I come away always far better off.*

Teacher: The lessons of life are in everything, if you care to look for them. So as we converse we, of course, stumble on them.

Student: *I understand.*

Teacher: I know you do. But let me illustrate further. Imagine that by trying to call me yesterday you wanted to warn me of an impending danger. Imagine, for instance, that you were to warn me not to take a particular route to town the next morning because you happened to know that a big tree had fallen across that road.

Now because my batteries were not charged I would, of course, not have gotten the message and thus would have proceeded to suffer the inconveniences and losses that you were trying to save me from.

As it is with human communication, so it is with spiritual communication. Often we do not pick up the signals, the same way that a transistor radio with dead batteries would not be able to pick up radio signals.

Student: *Sir, can you use an illustration that relates to school, something I can easily relate to?*

Teacher: Ok. Imagine that you were to have an exam and a cunning teacher had directed you to specific reading materials for the paper, knowing he was going to set the test based on completely different topics.

Imagine that one of the students had his antenna up and received spiritual advice to read those particular topics, in addition to the ones specified and thus performed far better than his mates. Can you relate to that? Is that a practical enough illustration about how keeping your spiritual batteries charged can help you in school?

Student: *Certainly, sir. In fact I think I have had this kind of good fortune before. While reading the topics which this teacher gave us to prepare, I had a strong urge to go beyond them to a particular topic which he did not mention. It happened that nearly half of the questions eventually came from that topic; and of course I shone.*

I did far better than all my classmates who then moaned about how they were deceived; and gossiped about how I could have been favored by the teacher, whom everyone knew was very fond of me. I tried to explain but no one believed me.

Teacher: That is how it works. You were able to pick up the signals through "a strong urge," as you put it. That is just one of the ways the signal comes. There are others.

Student: Which?

Teacher: Too many, more than the human mind can fathom. There are dreams and sudden inner sights or insights, for instance. It could come through the voice of others, or an inner voice. It could come through a scene in front of you. Anyway, anything can be used to pass a message to you.

Student: But how does one get a message meant for him?

Teacher: I am sure you do not really expect me to have the answer for all situations, for it is extremely difficult to predict how the message would come to people. What I believe requires attention is simply taking time to keep your spiritual batteries charged.

Student: How do I do that?

Teacher: There again, I cannot interfere. Each must find his own way, depending on what his religious or spiritual faith is. But this much I think is safe enough to say: Do whatever keeps you in close touch with the Divine within you.

Practice keeping in touch with IT, in whatever way you prefer - prayer, meditation, contemplation, mantras, repeating the holy names of God, ever reminding yourself of the presence of the Most High, reading and chewing over the Holy Scriptures, quiet conversations with God, acts of love, a feeling of true gratitude, etc. It all depends on what the individual prefers or, better still, what really works for him or her.

Let me say this, none has ever achieved anything great without the support of this inner communication. It helps to keep the batteries charged, whatever your goal.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

BLAME NO TEACHER

Teacher: I had a good laugh yesterday in the company of two of my former school mates.

Student: You must have been talking about the good old days?

Teacher: Oh yes, the good old days. I wonder why everyone always thinks the old days were good. I guess the past always appears somewhat more romantic.

Student: What stories did you share?

Teacher: What we laughed about yesterday were not really stories as such, but reminiscences of what happened in school. In fact the discussion centered more on blame.

Student: Blame?

Teacher: Yes, blame. Each was trying to outdo the other in blaming different teachers for not offering one subject or other in the final class and external exam.

Student: How, sir?

Teacher: As you may know, students often complain that because of some behavior or teaching method of a teacher or the other, they took a dislike for a subject. Haven't you heard such complaints?

Student: Very much sir. It is common. We complain about teachers discouraging us, in one form or the other, from doing well in a subject or the other.

Teacher: Exactly. This was generally the thrust of our discussion. And the reasons ranged from the reasonable to the ridiculous.

Student: What were the reasons?

Teacher: One said he had to drop a particular subject because the teacher had a bad eye, so you never quite knew where he was looking at any time. He said once when he thought the teacher was looking at the window, he was actually directly watching him joking with his friend in the far end of the class.

He said this put him off and from then he hardly showed any interest in the subject.

Student: Really?

Teacher: Another said he lost interest in a subject because the teacher had body odor; and that since he sat in front, being one of the smallest or, more precisely, shortest in class, his seat was usually just before the teacher. He said his acute sense of smell forced him to drop the subject because he was tired of the bad smell. That was how he ended up not offering the subject in our final exams.

Student: Amazing.

Teacher: If you saw him complaining you would not help feeling that his reason was genuine. I could not help sympathizing with him. But the one that amused me was the reason that one gave for not offering geography.

He said one day, I believe in their penultimate year in secondary school, the geography teacher, perhaps in an attempt to get the students to be serious, announced that the study of various aspects of the syllabus would take them a year each. He also repeatedly told them that the study of Nigerian geography would take them a whole year and that the study of African geography would take them another whole year.

The teacher also told them that studying the geography of Asia would take them a whole year and those of North and South America would each take them a whole year. He went on and on about how various aspects would each claim a whole year. By the time he had finished this young man, lets call him Tade, had calculated altogether 6 years to cover the syllabus, yet they had less than two years to their final exams. He reached his conclusion and opted out of geography.

Student: But the teacher must have been joking.

Teacher: Tade swore the teacher was not joking; at least not by the looks on his face. He concluded that the teacher was indirectly announcing that passing the course in two years would be impossible, since by his program they could not possibly have covered the syllabus by then.

Student: But did some others take the subject?

Teacher: Sure some did and passed creditably. Some even made distinctions.

Student: *So the geography teacher was not that bad after all.*

Teacher: No he was not. His statement had simply been wrongly interpreted by Tade.

Student: *What a pity!*

Teacher: What a pity indeed because from what I gathered, Tade was one of the best geography students then. Even more lamentable was the story by Kele who always dreamed of being a lawyer. In his final class he dropped history, which was then a requisite for law candidates.

Student: *Why did he do that?*

Teacher: According to Kele, not his real name, the history teacher had a penchant for mixing up his tenses and *verbing* at will.

Student: *What is verbing?*

Teacher: *Verbing* was the slang for speaking wrong English in school then. Another word for it was *kpoi*. Those who mixed up tenses and the like were said to be *verbing* or *kpoing* and were generally ridiculed.

Kele, a very good English language student, was particularly good at picking out the *verbage* in anyone's expression of the language. Then he would laugh at them until tears stood on his eyes. This he did no matter who was involved. You can then guess what happened in the history class with a teacher "madly generous with kpoi?"

Student: *But was the history teacher a good one?*

Teacher: Kele said he was. The only trouble he had with him was what he described as the man's "odious cocktail of misplaced tenses".

Student: *What a shame!*

Teacher: What a shame indeed. I think Kele would have made an excellent lawyer but he just couldn't overlook the faults of the history teacher and take personal responsibility for his subjects and his future.

Student: Sad.

Teacher: Sad indeed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

WATCH THAT TV

Teacher: You do not look happy this morning. What is the matter, my friend?

Student: Sir, I was actually coming to complain to you.

Teacher: What is the matter? You quarreled with a classmate?

Student: No, sir. It is about something that happened at home.

Teacher: Home?

Student: Yes, sir. It is actually between my father and I.

Teacher: This is getting interesting. So what makes you think I can help with that?

Student: Because I think you can approach my dad on this one, on my behalf.

Teacher: Anyway, let's hear the story. What did he do?

Student: *He ordered that the television in my room be taken away to the store. Now my TV which I had enjoyed throughout the vacation has been removed. I do not feel good about it; but my dad insists it is for my own good.*

Teacher: Did he explain why he believes so?

Student: *He said he made a mistake to have bought me the television in the first place.*

Teacher: But why did he do that?

Student: *He promised.*

Teacher: He promised to buy you a TV for your room?

Student: *Yes, sir.*

Teacher: Quite unlike your dad. What warranted the promise?

Student: *I had accused him of being unfair, because he had a television in his room which he rarely watched. So I requested that it be transferred to my room.*

Teacher: And he agreed?

Student: *He paused a while and admitted that I had a point about him hardly using the television, but added that he still used it even if minimally. He then proceeded to use my desire as an incentive for me. He does that very often. I have grown to know that. He said if I desired a television in my room I would have it, provided I came first in class that term. That was last term.*

Teacher: Very interesting.

Student: *So I worked even harder for that reason and I came first.*

Teacher: Then he fulfilled his promise?

Student: *Characteristically.*

Teacher: I like that very much. Your dad is truly a man of his word.

Student: *That is precisely the problem now.*

Teacher: What?

Student: *He promised and delivered the television. Now, after only 6 or 7 weeks he has ordered its removal!*

Teacher: What reasons did he give for the removal?

Student: *The expected reasons of course. He said it would be a distraction as school resumes. He said it would waste my time. He said I would become a TV addict.*

Teacher: Does he have a point?

Student: *Well, maybe he has a point but I am surely not going to be a TV addict.*

Teacher: Would you know when you transform from a regular viewer to an addict?

Student: *I guess so, sir.*

Teacher: How many people have you ever seen owning up as addicts? They have the craving, which they continuously satisfy. As long they can afford the addiction and it has not caused any visible physical or psychological damage, they do not see themselves as addicts. The transition from the regular consumer to the addict is so smooth as to happen unconsciously. Maybe your dad is trying to save you.

Student: *But I do not watch TV for that long.*

Teacher: Or maybe he is trying to motivate you to maintain your current performance.

Student: *How, sir?*

Teacher: By withdrawing the TV. That way you can focus on your studies. TV and study are competitors. Both demand time. It is difficult to satisfy

both. One has to suffer. Your dad may have thought of this and made the decision for you.

Student: But he has TV in his own room.

Teacher: Do you have his level of discipline? Be honest. Can you discipline yourself to have your TV off as much as he does when you know there are interesting programs all the time; with so many choices in the digital channels?

Student: No sir.

Teacher: That is honest. Your dad knows that and that is why he risks your anger for your greater good. Television is an excellent thief of time. It requires you to do nothing except sit back and enjoy. Not many young people can resist that temptation. What your dad has done is to make it easier for you to resist.

If I may add, TV is not really good for the development of your young mind. Books are by far better because they engage and force you to use your mind, either by providing the requisite image to complement what you are reading or by forcing you to reason, to think. TV virtually does everything for you - it gives you the word and also supplies the image. The brain does virtually nothing but enjoy. Now tell me honestly, is there anything to gain from doing virtually nothing?

Student: I daresay, virtually nothing.

Teacher: Again, that is honest. No grind no growth. Need I say more?

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

SURVIVE INDEPENDENCE

Student: Happy Independence Anniversary.

Teacher: Thank you but which independence anniversary are you referring to?

Student: It is my country's independence anniversary or don't you share the joy with us?

Teacher: Of course I share the joy with you. It is just that independence anniversary means so many things or, rather, so many times to me. So when you say "Happy Independence Anniversary", I have to rummage through my mental library of dates to figure out which independence you are talking about.

Student: I do not get it, sir. Are there different independence anniversaries?

Teacher: For me, yes. There are numerous.

Student: What do you mean, sir?

Teacher: I would rather tell you a story.

Student: Characteristic!

Teacher: I beg your pardon.

Student: Nothing, sir. I am waiting to enjoy the story.

Teacher: Ok, listen. This was a story I heard from my favorite teacher which I would modify slightly to convey my intended meaning.

Student: As usual, I cannot wait to hear the story, sir.

Teacher: I know you love stories, but I would keep this brief.

Student: Alright, sir.

Teacher: Once upon a time, there existed a great community with a very unusual custom of discarding kings that ruled over them. Every 15 years

they would pick a new king. No matter how well the incumbent performed or how healthy or young he was, once he had clocked 15 years on the throne he must be replaced with another.

Student: Strange.

Teacher: The stranger part was what happened to the king after completing his tenure.

Student: What, sir?

Teacher: He was led into the wild forest of dangerous animals.

Student: To the wild forest of dangerous animals!?

Teachers: Yes. This forest had the fiercest animals. No king was known to have survived it.

Student: The animals killed him?

Teacher: Of course in a matter of days, in some cases, hours.

Student: What a custom!

Teacher: What a custom indeed. Same fate befell every king. At least this was the case until the reign of Nganga who was determined not to suffer the same fate as the many kings before him. Usually for the 15 years that a king reigned, all his every desire or need was met by the community. There was nothing that the king wanted that he did not have.

The king was dependent on the community for everything, from food to fashion. Nganga decided, to the community's chagrin, to forfeit this privilege as a strategy for surviving the post-kingship days in the wild forest.

Student: How?

Teacher: He decided he was not going to depend on the community but would rather fend for himself all the way, while still governing. He joined the rest of the community in farming, hunting, fishing, building, etc. Initially this behavior was abhorred by the community who insisted the king must sit on the throne and be catered for. But Nganga would not budge. Since he

had a mandatory 15 years to govern the community just allowed him, knowing his reign would come to an end and they could revert to feting their kings as usual.

As Nganga worked with them, he picked up skills for survival. He became very creative in solving problems, strong and rugged. The community grew to love their unusual king, who offered leadership in all spheres of their community life and led by example. But 15 years was soon over and he had to be led to the wild forest.

Nganga had prepared for the day and was glad to go. Months later news filtered back to the community that he was still alive and indeed lived in a wonderful house surrounded by a well cultivated and beautiful garden. His wives, children and servants could neither restrain nor withhold themselves. With the help of an elated community they went in his search, found him and founded another community where Nganga reigned for the rest of his life.

Student: What a story! What a happy ending!

Teacher: I am glad you like it. But notice that King Nganga's story is your story. You are just like him; today a student cared for by your teachers and parents who fend for your every need. They do this faithfully knowing that some day your own kingship would be up and you would have to be led into the wild jungle of society for your own independence. If by then you have not imbibed skills of survival which you are being taught today as character and learning, you would have nobody but yourself to blame. The choice is yours to be like King Nganga or those before him.

CHAPTER THIRTY

DON'T TRY TOO HARD

Student: *Sir, I am sorry I could not keep our last appointment.*

Teacher: That is OK. Why didn't you come? You had another engagement?

Student: *No, sir.*

Teacher: So what happened?

Student: *I was at home but deeply depressed.*

Teacher: What? Deeply depressed? Why?

Student: *I once again failed to qualify as a neophyte golfer (or to make my "handicap" as is technically referred to). I have been trying to earn my basic handicap for a long time now. I really thought I was ready this time.*

But I was nervous. Having the handicap meant so much to me. I guess the nervousness, coupled with my fear of failing again caused me to panic and falter badly. I played worse than I had ever played in all my practice sessions.

Teacher: What do you think was responsible?

Student: *I think I was just too anxious. I wanted the handicap too badly. That made me nervous. I guess I tried too hard.*

Teacher: Why did you try too hard?

Student: *Because I was afraid of failing again.*

Teacher: I am glad we are talking about this. At least this way I can share my own experiences with you so you can see that there is nothing strange about you. Most people go through this phase, sometime or the other. It should not bother you that much.

Student: *What experience are you referring to sir?*

Teacher: Numerous but let me narrate one that occurred when I was a boy scout. 12 of us had been selected for simple tests that would determine who should lead. I wanted the leadership experience badly. One of the tests,

the one that I failed, was crossing a river atop a fairly narrow plank, hanging several meters above the fast moving river.

The challenge was to stay balanced on the narrow plank until you crossed. I remember the test because of how badly I felt after failing it. As it got to my turn, my anxiety had grown beyond my control. I wanted to win too badly. I was ready to try too hard.

Student: Just like me.

Teacher: I tried. I tried too hard and ended up falling into the river and of course failed the test. This was a piece of plank that I could easily have walked on for miles without falling off, if it were lying on the hard ground. But just because this was a bridge over a river, the anxiety of not falling off caused me to concentrate too hard. I tried hard. And in the end I tried too hard.

This is generally the consequence with anything that we try too hard for. The resulting anxiety tends to inhibit our performance and enlarge our fears, driving us to manifest to a self-fulfilling prophecy - the fear of falling, causing us to actually fall.

Student: You say this applies in every endeavor?

Teacher: I would suggest so: trying too hard generally yields the opposite result. Even with studies! I am sure you have many examples of fellow students who tried too hard not to fail, but ended up failing. Maybe not because they ordinarily should not have passed but because they read too much, and possibly, hardly slept the whole night preceding the exam.

Trying too hard is often a manifestation of loss of self-belief, trust and confidence. The resulting nervousness, fear and anxiety often beget failure or performance much below that of an otherwise confident candidate. It is for the same reason that most nervous penalty takers in soccer end up missing target. The loss of confidence is already itself an admission of failure. Little wonder it is failure that results.

I once witnessed the miracle of how a child of about 6 months was saved from falling from the top floor of a 5-storey building. By some negligence the child had crawled to the corridor railing with gaps big enough to take the baby. An additional movement forward and the baby would have come tumbling down to an almost certain death.

Just then the mother instinctively turned, saw her baby, and was thrown into a frenzy of panic. She yelled, but luckily her voice was muffled by the quick hands of her husband which cupped her mouth. He too had just noticed the deadly situation.

But he was a calmer person who realized the consequences of trying too hard at such times. Calmly he called out to the little baby, who in turn responded by stopping to listen to his voice. That was all the split second required for the man to swoop the child away from danger and certain death.

The dad was later to attribute his heroic effort to the cooperation of his wife who understood his action in that trying moment of stopping her from panicking. In her frenzy she would have tried too hard and the baby, almost certainly, would have plunged to death. Although he, himself, was also apprehensive and anxious but not panicky, his natural calmness helped him control his fear and prevented him from trying too hard and acting desperate with possible fatal missteps.

Student: Sir, what is the difference between trying hard and trying too hard.

Teacher: Difficult question. Perhaps the difference lies in anxiety, in acting out of fear as against acting out of love. Trying hard is working for success. Trying too hard is working against success.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

STRENGTH OF CHARACTER

Teacher: Once upon a time there lived a very hardworking prince in some distant land. He and the rest of his community were victims of war, displaced and sentenced to refugee status where they were being maltreated. Many accepted their new condition of misery and became beggars on the street.

The ravages of the war made no discrimination between the common man and royalty. All were equalized by misery so much that those who knew the background of the prince (let's call him Ude) mocked him about his past, calling him prince in jest. The more charitable ones called him pauper.

No dehumanizing abuse was spared to humiliate Prince Ude, for the land where they took refuge was incidentally that of his clan's bitter rivals who had earlier been subjects of their kingdom. The new turn of history was seen as their turn to rubbish the royalty that once ruled over them. Ude, the only surviving member of the family, was therefore the butt of their jokes; singled out for all manner of jeers.

They rained abuses about how he was no good, how he was being punished by the gods, how he was beneath them and not worthy of a place as a servant in their households. Ude's clansmen accepted their new status as beggars. Many even began to believe that they were never-do-wells.

But not Udeh. In spite of the circumstances the prince never, for once, forgot who he was. He reminded himself incessantly that he was prince and that it was forbidden for a true prince to beg. So he never succumbed to begging, no matter how difficult and rough it got. He would rather bear all possible humiliation and spare no ounce of energy in order to earn his own living.

He lent himself as a hand in the farms, in the markets and at homes. The fact that he was mocked as "Prince" did not matter. He was more content to ensure that whatever he got he earned, as is expected of a prince of his kingdom. Nothing could break his spirit or obscure his self-belief. He was convinced of who he was and nothing in the universe was going to take that away from him.

One day the kingdom of their refuge was itself attacked by another clan of adventurers to satisfy an expansionist desire. The erstwhile hosts then also became refugees like Ude and his people. In the course of interacting with their new rulers Ude was identified as an extremely talented, imaginative and thoughtful person, poor as he was. Soon they found him a role in their administration.

Over time the new rulers discovered that he was actually a prince of one of their subject states. As he found favor in their eyes, they deployed him to

rule on their behalf over his own clan. That was how Ude, through a strange turn of history, reclaimed the throne and dignity of his forebears.

All those who saw him as a refugee bore witness to his steadfastness. They testified to the fact that not even in the most difficult of circumstances did Ude for once renounce, by actions, conscious or unconscious, his prince-hood and the dignity of his clan as reposed in his royalty. For this, his people loved him and held him in the highest esteem. Ude ruled over them for many years until his death in old age.

Student: What a story!

Teacher: I hoped you liked it?

Student: I loved it!

Teacher: I am glad.

Student: He must have been a man of very strong character to have survived with his self-belief, all the bruises and damnation imposed by the circumstance of a refugee in a hostile environment.

Teacher: You are so brilliant. You get the import of the story right away: The strength of character. It is in difficult, tough and humiliating circumstances that it is truly tested. That is when you doubt yourself and your abilities. That is when you lose faith in yourself and your identity. That is when the environment begins to dictate who you must be. That is when you are made in the likeness of others so easily. Only strength of character can resist the onslaught that most people would succumb to.

Student: Sir, where can I find this strength of character? Is there something I can read to help me?

Teacher: Surely there are lots you can read to help you develop strength of character. But the greatest help you will need is inside you! That is where your true self resides, not on the outside. That is where you would find the greatness in you. Some would even say that is where you would find God.

You must be familiar with the story of Ezi, your schoolmate.

Student: The one who won the Governor's prize?

Teacher: Exactly.

Student: Ezi joined the school as a class 3 student from another school. We were then in Class 1. His parents had been transferred from the rural area where he had been one of their best students in years. He believed that he was the best until he came to our school. Here he found that standards were far higher than what he knew and that his best could only earn him a humble position in the new school. His pride was hurt. Ezi was mocked by his classmates as a village school champion who could not compete in the city school.

In spite of this, he never lost faith in himself. His strength of character came to the fore. Ezi refused to relinquish his self-conviction as the best. He was therefore ready to put in all the hard work necessary to reclaim this position, even in the new school. He set to work and buried himself in his books. His father believed in him, too, and provided for him a coach at home to help him catch up with the new standard.

Teacher: That is basically the story of Ezi. At first it was difficult. His mates mocked him as a village champion who could not compete in the city. His new grades seemed to buttress that fact. But he would accept none of them. Ezi would only accept himself as the best and nothing could persuade otherwise. No amount of hostility from his environment or even the facts of his grades would shake his faith in himself.

After the initial years of struggle Ezi caught up and manifested his faith in himself as indeed not only the best in his new school but in the entire region, winning therefore the Governor's Prize.

Student: That is strength of character.

Teacher: Now you know.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

LOVING BY STUDYING

Student: Sir, I have been looking forward to this meeting today hoping there would be another story.

Teacher: I am glad you look forward to the stories. I enjoy them myself even as I tell them.

Student: So there is a story for me today?

Teacher: Yes, but a very short one.

Student: It does not matter sir. I am glad to hear it. The stories help me to have a better understanding of the truth you teach.

Teacher: Again I am glad to hear that. You make my day. Now the story which I have today is not fiction. It is true. You must know the Ukalas.

Student: The Ukalas! Yes sir, I know them. The twins! Yes I know them.

Teacher: The non-identical twins as some describe them today.

Student: Oh yes, sir. But are they really twins?

Teacher: They are twins. They used to be more identical when we were growing up. They also did almost everything alike.

Student: How come they seem so different today, in looks and I think in their views of life, even in religion!

Teacher: The difference started to show in the university.

Student: But they are both doctors today.

Teacher: Yes, in name. Only one of them is actually practicing. The other has long been decertified because of incompetence.

Student: Oh, I did not know that.

Teacher: He is not allowed to practice.

Student: How sir? How did he turn out incompetent?

Teacher: That is the story.

Student: I see.

Teacher: They are from a very religious background. Both of their parents were leaders of their sect. So both children were raised in line with the principles of their faith. They both embraced the teachings and became very devout and pious.

In the university, one of them, Kamu, took his religiosity to extremes and paid more attention to evangelism than his medical studies. The repercussions from this behavior split the family into two ideological camps. Kamu's twin, Ewe, on the other hand placed far higher priority on his studies, while still practicing his religion quietly. Ewe had the full support of his father, who was very unhappy with Kamu.

On the contrary their mother understood Kamu and gave him succor, support and even subtle encouragement; believing that the things of heaven should be given more priority over earthly issues including studies. The effort of their father to try to persuade Kamu and his wife otherwise did not yield fruits. Each held fast to his or her position. This disagreement ran so deep and bitter that it actually split the family.

The parents separated and so did the twins. Kamu lived with his mother, while Ewe lived with his father. The position of Ewe and his dad was that medicine, like other professions and occupations, was merely an instrument for loving God through practically caring for his creatures.

It was in line with the primary injunction of their religion: to love God above all else. Father and son believed that a prime way of showing this love for God was to shower love on people whom God created by loving them in tangible, practical ways. One's profession, for them, was one of the major tangible and practical ways. They believed that love must be demonstrated through what one does; and by how well one does it.

For Ewe that translated into becoming the very best doctor that medical school could produce, so he could minister to his patients with masterly expertise, always doing the very best for them. He and his father believed that to do this, was to love God.

Student: Sir, I am a bit confused here.

Teacher: Why?

Student: Did they mean that one's profession is supposed to be a major means for loving God through practically helping other people?

Teacher: Yes and, I am afraid, I agree with them. To say that I am a teacher is simply to say that I have chosen teaching as a prime means of loving God through loving his creatures that I teach. To say that I am a mechanic is to say that I have chosen that vocation as a prime means of loving God through serving those in need of my services. To say I am a lawyer is to say I have chosen law as a prime means of loving God through serving those in need of my services. To serve them best is to serve God best.

Students who love God struggle to become the best in their chosen vocations or professions. They see this as a prime means of returning God's love through serving others.

Student: So to take my studies seriously is to love God?

Teacher: You could not have said better.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

THE HEAVEN DWELLERS

Student: Last night I witnessed quite an unusual event while visiting my uncle. His eight-year old son had a project from school and needed white sand for it. He could not find any in the concrete environment of their house. From the balcony his father, who is also my uncle, watched.

Unsuccessful with his search around the house, the child gave up and was about retiring into the house when his father intervened. He urged the child not to give up and advised that he should step out of the compound and walk a few meters down the street where there was a building site.

The boy agreed but called out to his mother to go with him. Again the father intervened. "Go by yourself", he said. The little lad seemed shocked that his father could say that. He cast a furtive look upstairs just to be sure his father meant what he said. Indeed his father meant it for he repeated the order.

The child seemed perplexed. He thought for a while, and announced that he did not need the sand anymore. He explained that his teacher had given him the option of choosing any other material for his project. It didn't necessarily have to be sand. Again the father intervened: "You must go and get the sand. Get the sand. If after you have gotten it you decide you do not want it anymore, you can discard it; but get it you must."

The child pleaded, "But I do not need the sand anymore, Daddy." His father retorted, "It does not matter. You must go and get the sand." The boy, now standing at the edge of the street, cast a look back at the gate, as if thinking of dashing quickly back inside. His father seemed to have read his thoughts and threatened: "If you do not get the sand, you are going to be locked out and you would possibly have to sleep outside tonight."

It was getting dark. The boy was now visibly afraid. He started crying, shivering. But his father was adamant, unrelenting in his order. By the mound of sand was a shack where two guards watching over the site lived. The guards were in, for the father had sited them. He suggested to his son to go to them, seek their permission and get the cup of sand that he wanted.

The boy became even more petrified and now sobbed loudly, attracting the attention of their domestic servants inside the house two of who rushed out to help. Their emergence miffed the father who immediately ordered them back into the house. The child must be left alone to face his challenge, he insisted.

Painfully realizing he had no options except to face his fear, the child began lifting one heavy leg after the other, timidly moving, sluggishly approaching the shack. You could tell what a monstrous burden this was for the little lad. From a safe distance, he tried to engage the guards, who obviously sensed his predicament and pitied him.

They were outside earshot but he seemed to have got their nod, because he proceeded to scoop what he could into his cup and walked back, all tears, probably wondering how unjust a dad could be! I was myself shocked at my uncle's hardness at his own son, whom I know he loves dearly.

Shortly afterwards, I announced that I was leaving but my uncle insisted that I should have dinner with them. It was unlike him to insist, so I decided to wait for dinner with the family and I am glad that I did. It was over food that my uncle unraveled the mystery behind his action.

He explained to his son that his insistence was to teach a simple lesson of courage. He recounted how the lad was first full of fear, eventually had no choice but to confront his fear and then successfully achieved his mission. He said this was the usual pattern in the achievement of any worthy objective.

My uncle emphasized that his son must learn to be courageous in all he does. I was to then understand that he did all this against the background of a complaint from the child's school that his son was often too shy to ask questions in class and too afraid to take up active roles in joint projects including drama, dance and the like.

He saw the evidence of this penchant for fear in his too-quick readiness to back down from the search for sand once he realized no one would accompany him. I took the lesson home, in every sense, and was particularly struck by the trouble my uncle had taken just to make the point of courage in our lives.

In fact I remember him paraphrasing what must be a favorite quote: "It is true that the meek would inherit earth, but only the bold and courageous would inherit heaven." To inherit the heaven of anything, courage was extremely necessary. He however added that courage must be coupled with caution and common sense.

I went home wondering and pondering over this lesson, and I was full of gratitude for being there when it was enacted. One day, when I too have a family I would borrow from my uncle's ways. That is how much I was touched by his words and I thought I should share them with you, sir. I wonder what you think.

Teacher: I am short of words. Unlike me, you did not declare that you had a story to tell. You just told it - easily and sweetly - better than I could have ever done. You have with great insight underlined the major lessons to be distilled there from. I am grateful. Thank you for being my friend.

Student: Now you are making me shy.

Teacher: Seriously, I have enjoyed your story. Your uncle must be a very wise man. His son is very lucky. I hope he grows to fully understand and appreciate the lesson his father was trying to pass across.

If he learns it, there would be no stopping him from greatness in whichever sphere of endeavor he chooses to serve life. For truly, courage is a major factor that would separate the heaven dwellers from the earth bound even in scholarship which is currently your main preoccupation.

You must have courage to be best in anything you do. To believe that you can, and work to achieve, irrespective of obstacles, is to demonstrate courage. It is an indispensable element in any achievement. Have courage, my son.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

DON'T BANK BITTERNESS

Teacher: You look worried, troubled in fact. You look far different from the handsome amiable friend I am used to. What is the matter?

Student: *I am bitter.*

Teacher: Bitter? Why bitter?

Student: *A friend stabbed me in the back. A friend that I trusted so much betrayed me; and worse, lied against me to our new mathematics teacher. I feel very sad about it.*

Teacher: It is probably better not to ask you about the details.

Student: *I am glad you understand, sir. It is a very private matter.*

Teacher: I am sorry about that. Your friend must have really hurt you badly. Sorry. I am so sorry to see you in such a bad mood.

Student: It is alright sir. I would get over it.

Teacher: That is the spirit. Try to get over it. I would add, as quickly as possible. The quicker, the better.

Student: I know you are trying to teach me something.

Teacher: You sure know me well enough by now. True, I am trying to get you to understand that bitterness is poison.

Student: Poison?

Teacher: Yes, poison. Perhaps even worse than the usual poison, which affects only the physical body.

Student: What do you mean, sir?

Teacher: Bitterness of the heart is like the poison of say a snake, or any such dangerous creature, to the human body. It needs to be flushed out of the body system as quickly as possible before it does damage. But I would go one step further to add that the ravages of a mere physical poison, especially where not immediately lethal, could be less dangerous than a bitter heart.

Student: I still do not understand, sir.

Teacher: Bitterness of the heart actually literally introduces poisonous fluids into the human body. It would not be surprising to find a bitter person develop all manner of illnesses - nausea, ulcer, heart problems, high blood pressure, stroke, name it! The more the poison increases in the human system the more deadly it becomes.

Let me even bring the point nearer home and ask you how you feel now compared to your normal states of happiness or balance?

Student: I feel sick.

Teacher: For how long now?

Student: Since the incident this morning.

Teacher: Does it all make sense now?

Student: I am beginning to understand.

Teacher: So you see, the earlier you get out of your melancholy, the better your chances of fending off illness. Now, while the bitterness debilitates your physical body and depresses your immune system, it obviously also poisons your emotional body, which is why you are moody and sad. All the effervescence of life usually around you is dimmed like a bulb with a dying battery.

Many would describe you as not being yourself for you are diminished, less than who you are; and as an aside, let me add that you become less attractive in every way. Rather than being drawn to you as usual, people would be repelled from you. That is what brooding and moodiness cause. It strips you of charm, of charisma, of beauty in exchange for ugliness.

Student: Oh no, sir, it cannot be that bad!

Teacher: It is even worse. Notice how much the moodiness has affected your appetite for study. Work that you would ordinarily gladly undertake efficiently becomes a cumbersome drag. Your mind slides into slow motion and you find yourself not thinking or acting clearly, negatively affecting your every endeavour. You become in every sense a sub of your usual self. Thanks to bitterness.

As it constraints your mental activity rate, so it affects your intuition and perception. All the attributes and talents that you are otherwise imbued with are completely minimized. That is what bitterness does.

Student: Sir, but it is so difficult not to be bitter when people are so unkind to you.

Teacher: I know. People may be unkind to you, causing you to be bitter. But must you multiply the effect of their act by inflicting further unkindness on yourself? If they actually set out to hurt you, must you become an added weapon against your own self?

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

RESPECT OTHER RELIGIONS

Teacher: Did you read about the bloody clash between two religious groups at the university?

Student: No, sir. What happened? I hope no one was killed?

Teacher: The papers only reported that about 9 students were being treated for serious injuries at the Teaching Hospital. Some of the students are said to be on the critical list.

Student: God, this is strange. I have never heard anything like it before; clashes between two religious groups in the university?

Teacher: Sure.

Student: That sounds really strange to me. The reports that I am more familiar with are reports about cult groups killing one another. That is terrible enough. It really scares me to know that one day I would be a university student myself.

Teacher: Do you fear you might join the cults, too?

Student: Never! No matter the lure or coercion. After all, majority of students graduate from the universities without joining any cult groups. I would safely belong to that majority, and nothing would happen to me.

Teacher: I am glad you have that understanding. So do not be afraid.

Student: But now that the clashes are beginning to involve religious groups and I am religious, how safe can I be?

Teacher: It depends.

Student: It depends on what, sir?

Teacher: It depends on whether your religious group is a cult or a gathering of lovers of God.

Student: I do not understand, sir. Please help me understand.

Teacher: Let's put it another way. What is the difference between a cult group and a religious group?

Student: Very many, sir. They are as distinctly different as night and day.

Teacher: That is how it appears.

Student: Sir, you mean it is not so?

Teacher: At least not as obvious as it appears. There is a very thin line separating both. With just a minor deviation a religious group easily transforms into a cult. A major distinction between both is that the cultist is often under oath to protect fellow members against anybody else.

A cult sees its members as one body, which must be upheld against others, no matter what. The cultist must take sides with his co-members, no matter how wrong his 'brother' may be.

On the other hand, by definition a religious group is united by a common love for God, the creator of all including those who do not belong to the group. The love for God helps the religious group apply universal principles without partiality to anyone including their own members.

This is easy to understand because God, which is every religion's rallying point, is the Father, the Creator, and the Maker of all forms of life. So, for true religions to love God is to love all life; to love all persons irrespective of which end of the universe they may come from. But not so for the cult,

whose band and bond of loyalty is circumscribed within its membership to the detriment of all others.

This is why in the court of a fellow cultist as judge, any member is sure to win a case no matter how guilty. In the cult right or wrong, partiality or discrimination, reward or punishment, is dictated by membership or otherwise of the person involved.

So if a religion sees itself and its members as distinct to the extent as to be automatically favored against all other people irrespective of what the members deserve, that religious group is transformed into a cult. So that by a mere sign or recognition of a fellow member, partiality in his favor is guaranteed.

At that point we are practicing cultism; the point at which one is immediately adjudged better or more entitled to life than others just because of being a member of the group. Amongst cultists loyalty, not love, not universal principles, not fairness or justice, dictate decisions no matter how lofty.

So when religious groups on campuses or anywhere else begin to condemn, mock and demonize other religions, putting themselves on pedestals of arrogance, and self-righteousness against other groups, that body is knowingly or not transforming into a cult. So a cult can be a religion.

It is therefore not surprising that religious groups clash typically like cults these days, because they have unwittingly become cults indeed. The test is in how you regard and treat other children of God who may not be members of your religious group.

Student: I see.

Teacher: I believe that as long as you recognize *getting to know God* as the basis of any religion, understanding that God is the source and maker of all beings whether or not they belong to your religion, you would keep away from transforming into a cultist and reaping its consequences.

