

LESSON 22: *You are in charge of your own attitude*— whatever others do or circumstances you face. The only person you can control is yourself. "As human beings," Gandhi said, "our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world—that is the myth of the 'Atomic Age'—as in being able to remake ourselves." Worry more about your attitude than your aptitude or lineage. "We who lived in concentration camps," wrote Viktor Frankl, "can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in numbers, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms to [determine one's] attitude in any given set of circumstances—to choose one's own way."

It is not what is done to us that matters, but how we take what is done to us, Archbishop Tutu reminds us. Booker T. Washington did not know his father's name, but it did not keep him from becoming a great man.

You didn't have a choice about the parents you inherited, but you do have a choice about the kind of parent you will be. You may not be able to clean up your neighborhood or street but you can clean up your own house or apartment or room. (Although there are circumstances—trying to parent in rat-infested, peeling, dark, dirty slum apartments—that defy my or anyone else's judgment.) Don't let anything keep you from struggling and seeking to be a decent, striving human being. It is where you are headed not where you are from that will determine where you end up.

After watching the first day of Justice Clarence Thomas's confirmation hearings for the Supreme Court, a friend called me to gripe laughingly about the emotional response of some senators to Thomas's stories of his deprived childhood and how far he had come from the days his family lived in a house with no indoor plumbing. By the senators' standard, my friend observed, half the Black folk of our generation must now be eligible for the Supreme Court, since so many of us who have overcome odds many whites could not imagine grew up, like Thomas, with outhouses!

Don't make excuses. Whether you are poor or rich, don't think that children of privilege don't have to fight for meaning in their lives too. In fact, Booker T. Washington told Tuskegee students that they were blessed compared with some people. "The man or woman who has money, without having had to work for it, who has all the comforts of life, without effort, and who saves his own soul and perhaps the soul of somebody else, such an individual is rare, very rare indeed." Make up your mind that you are not going to allow *anything* to discourage you. Never use physical poverty—or family status and wealth—as an excuse for spiritual poverty. Don't think if you just had money it would solve your problems or empty feelings. Success, Booker T. Washington warned, may injure individuals and institutions (and I'd add countries) more than poverty. Indeed, perhaps America is not hungry enough to listen to and learn from countries with a smaller gross national product whom we perceive as less than peers. The children of the poor have much to teach the children of privilege about the strength that comes from a journey of struggle.

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