

A Child Shall Lead:
A Little Knowledge Goes a Long Way

Isaiah 35:1-10

Of all the children of recent years who have done something extraordinary in their short time on earth, Malala Yousafzai may stand alone in terms of international fame and notoriety and perhaps even living with the cost of her remarkable quest. I'll begin with her notable accolades, which include being the youngest laureate to ever receive the Nobel Peace Prize (2014), receiving last year the European Parliament's Andre Sakharov Prize for human rights, being the 2013 recipient of the International Children's Peace Prize, recognized several times among *Time* magazine's "100 Most Influential People in the World," along with over fifty other noteworthy honors for her courageous campaign for women's education—all of this before she turned 18 years old (that should help with college applications)!

Malala, as she is commonly referred to, pays a dear price for her bold witness by being targeted by the Pakistani Taliban (including a failed assassination attempt four years ago), as she has courageously taken them on since she was a child, even while millions of other Pakistanis cower with fear over the Taliban's deadly power. She has embodied the cause of education for women and for the poor around the world, as a remarkable visionary, passionate advocate for justice, and as a resilient and tireless activist.

Malala's story begins on 12 July 1997 in her native village of Mingora in the Swat Valley of northwestern Pakistan. Her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, himself an advocate for public education, founded several schools in the region for the purpose of educating this largely impoverished

population. Despite the religiously and traditionally conservative culture, public schools in this region were open to both girls and boys to study from an early age—meeting resistance only when the Taliban rose to power. Nevertheless, Malala, like many other girls, started school at a young age where she learned her lessons in the three languages of her culture: Pashto, Urdu, and English (a vestige of British colonial rule).

With her parents devoted to universal education, young Malala naturally absorbed what was at stake when Taliban edicts and acts of violence began to close schools and frighten the local population. She was only ten-years-old when Malala insisted on speaking at a public gathering her father organized in the provincial capital, Peshawar. Defiantly, she stood up to the microphone and declared, “How dare the Taliban take away my basic right to education?”—charming the journalists with her youthful zeal, but potentially putting herself in harm’s way with such a public and candid complaint. She proved that these were more than mere words by following through with becoming a trainee and then a peer educator in Pakistan for the Open Minds project, an international program sponsored by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting. After a year or two, with her parents’ blessing, she was invited to become an anonymous blogger for the BBC Urdu website, reporting weekly on what it was like as a schoolgirl to live under the Taliban’s growing influence in the Swat Valley. Even at twelve, Malala was expressing extraordinary courage as an outspoken and articulate critic of the Taliban.

By 2010, the Taliban had taken control of wide swaths of the region, including her home village of Mingora, where they issued an edict banning girls from attending school. Any defiance would be punishable, so the Yousafzais were one of the few families that accepted the risk. Taliban

militants already had destroyed many school buildings and executed defiant administrators and teachers. Though the Pakistani military fought back, the Swat Valley was a war zone. Attending school was a dangerous act of subversion. As Malala wrote in her blog:

I had a terrible dream yesterday with military helicopters and the Taliban. I have had such dreams since the launch of the military operation in Swat. My mother made me breakfast and I went off to school. I was afraid going to school because the Taliban had issued an edict banning all girls from attending schools...My three friends have shifted to Peshawar, Lahore and Rawalpindi with their families after this edict.

I have a new dream...I must be a politician to save this country. There are so many crises in our country. I want to remove these crises.¹

During this time, the Yousafzai family were then approached by the *New York Times* to surreptitiously film a documentary about their resistance to the Taliban. This seemed like a potential way to speak to a global audience, instead of solely within Pakistan.

With a global platform, Malala's young life turned into a whirlwind. The swift rise in this thirteen-year-old's profile brought with it tremendous benefits and opportunities, being recognized by activists around the world for her witness. Desmond Tutu nominated her for the 2011 International Children's Peace Prize. The same year, she was awarded Pakistan's first National Youth Prize in December. At the award ceremony, the Prime Minister instructed authorities to set up a new campus called the Swat Degree College for Women and renamed another school in Malala's honor. A few months later, Malala was inspired to organize her own foundation—the Malala Education Foundation—serving to assist girls from impoverished families to receive education. It was immediately funded generously, from Hollywood celebrities to anonymous donations from

¹ From Malala's blog on the BBC Urdu website, accessed from en.wikipedia.org.

within Pakistan. In a few short months, Malala became an international icon for the right of women to an education.

The darker reality, however, was frightening. The Taliban issued death threats to Malala and her family, even publishing them in local papers. Malala, though, was undeterred and, some would say, naïve. During the summer of 2012, Taliban leaders gathered and unanimously agreed to silence her. On 9 October, a masked Taliban gunman entered the bus she was riding home from school in Mingora and fired three shots—one of the bullets passing through her skull and lodging in her shoulder near her spine.

As the gunman escaped into the streets, those who came to her aid were fearing the worst. Malala was immediately rushed to a military hospital in Peshawar, then for her safety, transported at government expense out of the country to a hospital in the U.K.. Malala would undergo several surgeries and rehabilitation for months, but she was saved from death. And she would not be silenced. Her survival (even with some permanent scarring and paralysis) was considered a miracle, which made this fifteen-year-old girl even more of a hero and more personally convicted about the importance of her mission in life.

The global response was overwhelming, creating a groundswell of support for Malala and her cause. Within Pakistan, over fifty Muslim clerics publicly condemned the attack and issued their own *fatwa* against the Taliban and their acts of violence. The Pakistani government expedited the passage of a “Right to Education” bill which soon became law.

Global leaders spoke out in a similar chorus and invited Malala to the United Nations the following July to speak on women’s right to education. People from all walks of life and dozens of countries took up Malala’s cause

for education in Pakistan and, more importantly, for similar rights and protections in their own lands. In the last three years, under the auspices of “The Malala Fund,” the Yousafzai family has extended their concern to advocate for education everywhere and particularly, for establishing schools for refugee children fleeing the war in Syria. Even though they remain in England for Malala’s safety, the Yousafzai family continues to make a remarkable impact upon the world. Still in her teens, Malala exemplifies the power and purpose of education in changing culture and society. Indeed, a little knowledge goes a long way.

Knowledge in the form of public or private education is one noteworthy way to improve lives. But knowledge of another kind does, as well. This kind of knowledge raises awareness of those who are acutely in need and goes a long way in inspiring charitable intervention that ultimately empower victims and sufferers. One such story arises out of a young nine-year-old’s experience with her family charitable custom which inspired her to find a way to change lives.

Neha Gupta is an American-born girl from a family of Indian descent. Living outside of Philadelphia as a child, she and her parents would annually travel back to India to visit relatives and celebrate birthdays and holidays. During each trip they would maintain her grandparents’ custom of volunteering at a local orphanage as a way to help those who have not been as fortunate. Neha was only nine when she realized she could make a difference in her world. As she later explained:

As I listened to the stories of the children and heard them weep, I was able to feel their pain in my heart. Placing myself in their shoes, I identified with them. I pictured myself living in rural India, being abandoned by the two people I loved most and sleeping on a cold floor. These children of my same age and ethnicity seemed so similar to me, and yet, we were living different lives. It broke my heart to see how, apart from its physical manifestations, poverty had also taken away the very essence of life, stripping my orphaned friends of all hope. These children

would forever struggle with hunger, shiver from the cold, and suffer from diseases associated with malnutrition and poor sanitation. It was shocking to hear that they would likely never escape the clutches of poverty because they lacked access to fundamental education and basic healthcare. I felt great compassion for them and felt as though it was my responsibility to take action and help them lead better lives.²

Neha returned home to suburban Philadelphia and immediately committed to raise money for her orphaned friends. She decided to sell what she could at a tag sale, which was all of her toys—a young girl’s sacrifice that netted over \$700 and, along with other donations, raised enough money to fund a library for the orphanage in India, as well as provide clothes, blankets, sandals, and other things to bring joy to her friends.

And joy it did bring when she returned the following year with additional funds she had raised on their behalf. With her parent’s help, in the following years this personal family mission then turned into a more organized effort, enlisting the support of schoolmates and community partners, eventually leading to the founding of her own charity, “Empower Orphans,” which over the past decade raised well in excess of a million dollars, providing support to over 25,000 children! They have expanded their vision and operations to assist orphans in many countries and, even in their own backyard of Philadelphia, they have donated hundreds of vanloads of home goods to women and children in domestic abuse shelters, over 5000 toys donated to hospitalized children, along with supplies for over 5000 newborns and infants, as well as a computer lab and library to urban children living in poverty. All of this she accomplished from her pre-teen years through high school!

² From Empower Orphans Founder Ignites the Power of the Ripple Effect” <https://rizzar.com>

Neha's passion is summed up in a phrase she often cites: "Convert your empathy into action." Now a first year student at Penn State, Neha summarizes her efforts:

With the problems that exist in the world, it is no longer acceptable to do nothing or to just sympathize. Every youth has the power to enact change—to be able to find a cause that touches their heart to make a difference in someone's life and to convert empathy into action. To be effective, our actions have to be collaborative, treat others with respect and make a measurable impact over the long term.³

Recently, Neha was thrilled to meet someone else who viewed her purpose in a similar way—the young woman was, Malala Yousafzai. These two recipients of the International Children's Peace Prize shared their stories and passions—empowering children to be all they could be, each in their own way. Indeed, a child shall lead.

If we take a moment to examine our lectionary text from Isaiah 35, what it envisions is the promised restoration of Judah following their exile in Babylon, and by extension, the dream of the world as it was meant to be. Isaiah's vision was of joy and delight.

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
The desert shall rejoice and blossom;
Like the crocus, it shall blossom abundantly,
And rejoice with joy and singing...
Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees,
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, and do not fear!
Here is your God...God will come and save you!"
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
And the ears of the deaf unstopped;
The lame shall leap like a deer,
And the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

This is a world made well again by the graces of life and the courage of those who seek to bring suffering to an end, who take on the evils that they see while empowering the meek to inherit the earth.

³ Ibid.

Such a hope comes alive when we listen to the aspirations of our children, who have eyes to see and hearts to embrace those who are suffering. They are the ones—like Malala, like Neha, like Samantha, like Ruby, like Iqbal, and like so many others—who see a wrong and live to make it right.

These are the pure in heart who see God. They are the peacemakers who are children of God. They are God’s youngest messengers, whose the stories we must hear—whose courage and compassion are ours to emulate and follow. For as the prophet proclaimed:

They will not hurt or destroy
On all my holy mountain.
For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord,
as the waters cover the sea.

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