

**The Secret of Overcoming the Obstacles to Success:
Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist***

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Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* has been hailed as a book that has transformed the lives of millions of people. In fact, it is more of a self-help book than a novel. In it, Coelho has focused on the art of living: how to make life interesting by following one's dream. He asserts that one has to discover one's personal legend or the very purpose of being. Coelho claims that actually the greatest secret of success in life is love, for it is at the root of personal transformation and collective evolution. This paper aims to focus on the obstacles faced by human beings and how they manage the obstacles and succeed in life.

The ability to overcome an obstacle or solve a problem is a basic life skill and is essential to our day-to-day lives, at home, at school, and at work. We solve problems every day without really thinking about how we solve them. Problem solving is the process of identifying a problem, developing possible solution paths, and taking the appropriate course of action. Good problem-solving skills empower one to be a great successful person both in life and in the respective profession.

So many have ample abilities to solve their problem very easily in their profession. But they often fail to handle their own personal life problems. This paper attempts to identify the methods which can help overcome the obstacles of life that is found in the novel of *The Alchemist*.

Coelho's *The Alchemist* is a treatise on life management demonstrated through a story of an ordinary, poor boy from Andalusia, who pursues his dream that requires him to seek out the hidden treasures in the pyramids of Egypt. It is an interesting tale of an ordinary individual becoming what he is capable of or realizing his destiny.

Along the way, he runs into many obstacles and the journey quickly turns into an adventure. On his journey he finds love, danger, opportunity, and disaster as treasures. He also learns a lot about himself and the ways of the world. One of the significant characters he meets is an old king named Melchizedek who tells him about discovering his personal legend and what he always wanted to accomplish in his life.

The novel, *The Alchemist* has represented the vision of love, ambition, dream, hope and spiritual journey of man towards his destiny of life. It states "Those who don't understand their personal legends will fail to comprehend its teachings." (3). *The Alchemist* is a novel about the dream of Santiago to find a hidden treasure in the Egyptian pyramid. Major challenges are shown up as obstacles and resistance. Here are some obstacles that Paulo Coelho speaks of in *The Alchemist*:

1. Impossible
2. Personal legend
3. Fear of defeat
4. Dreams
5. Power of love
6. Positive outlook
7. Language barrier.

Impossible

The first obstacle in realizing one's personal legend is negativity, which comes in the form of pressures from parents, teachers, tradition, and expectations from the society. One is told that one's dream is not possible or it can not be done. In Coelho's words, "First, we are told from childhood onwards that everything we want to do is impossible. We grow up with this idea, and as the years accumulate, so too the layers of prejudice, fear and guilt. There comes a time when our personal calling is so deeply buried in our soul as to be invisible. But it's still there".

Believe what you want is possible. It is possible because it is a deep desire that has arisen within you. Know that you deserve to have what you really want. It could be that your heart's desire springs from the deep desire of the Universe. If this is true, then the Universe will conspire to make it happen, though there may be severe tests and challenges along the way. It will ultimately test your strength and resolve.

In *The Alchemist*, the boy Santiago meets in his journey the first and the best man Melchizedek, the king of Salem. Melchizedek brings hope and trust to the boy Santiago. Whenever Santiago had dilemma and felt upset or impossible to achieve his goal; he remembers the King Melchizedek's gift of a white stone and a black stone, "They are called Urim and Thummim. The black signifies 'Yes' and the white 'No'. When you are unable to read omens, they will help you to do so. Always ask an objective question" (31). The King says to Santiago:

Not always in this way but I always appear in one form or another. Sometimes I appear in the form of a solution, or a good idea. At other times, at a crucial moment, I make it easier for things to happen. There are other things I do, too, but most of the time people don't realize I've done them. (24)

Thus, the King gives hope and courage to Santiago to follow his dream.

Personal Legends

Melchizedek's highest goal is to make Santiago discover his "Personal Legend." Melchizedek offers advice and encouragement to the boy so that Santiago will decide to give up everything that is distracting him from obtaining his full potentiality in life. Thus, the old man motivates the boy to achieve his personal legend. And according to *The Alchemist*, Personal Legends serve as the only means by which an individual can live a satisfying life. In fact, the universe can only achieve perfection if all-natural things continuously undergo a cycle of achieving their Personal Legend, evolving into a higher being with a new Personal Legend, and then pursuing that new goal. This concept, that the individualistic pursuit of a Personal Legend exists as life's dominant perhaps only spiritual demand, lies at the centre of the unique theology of *The Alchemist*.

When Santiago must give up his flock and leave Fatima, material success and even love pose obstacles to Santiago achieving his Personal Legend and must be delayed or ignored altogether. Those who put off their Personal Legends, such as the crystal merchant, suffer regret and fail to experience the

wealth and other favours that the universe bestows upon those who follow their Personal Legends. In the novel, even alchemy, the central symbol of the book, entails coaxing metal to achieve its own Personal Legend to turn into gold.

Power of Love

Coelho's novel recognizes the power of love, and is sure to demonstrate that this power can be both destructive and productive. On the one hand, a love that binds people down and limits their abilities to pursue Personal Legends is extremely harmful. In fact, Coelho would argue that this type of love is not actually true love at all. The type of love envisioned in *The Alchemist* is a force of power, strength, motivation, and liberation. This type of true love is the most powerful tool in accomplishing one's Personal Legend.

Fatima and Santiago share this type of love, since Fatima's love not only allows Santiago to pursue his dreams, but also becomes the primary motivation for his efforts. Similarly, it is merely by talking to the universe and the hand that wrote all about love that Santiago is able to fully immerse himself in the Soul of the World and turn himself into the wind. True love is that which compels and enables one to fulfil a Personal Legend. It is the key to achieve greatness.

The Alchemist is a journey symbolizing the route towards self-discovery which strives to show that true love is an act of total surrender. He illustrates that love is not an obstacle in materializing one's dreams, but a force urging the lovers to conquer their dreams and thus find God. In his journey so many persons helped him to reach his goal. Finally the boy fell to kiss knees and wept. He thanked God for making him

believe in his destiny, and for leading him to meet a king, a merchant, an Englishman, and an alchemist. And above all for his having met a woman of the desert who had told him that love would never keep a man from his destiny (168-169).

The Danger of Fear

Fear persistently comes up throughout Santiago's journey as the primary obstacle to Santiago successfully achieves his Personal Legend. Santiago experiences several forms of fear: a childhood fear of having the gypsy woman interpret his dream; a material fear of losing his wealth by departing to Tangier or by joining the desert caravan; the physical fear of dying in the battle at Al-Fayoum; and the spiritual fear that he will fail to turn himself into the wind when the alchemist forces him to try.

Santiago's mentors, from Melchizedek to the alchemist, condemn fear by comparing it to materialism, and they describe it as a product of misunderstanding of how the universe treats those pursuing their Personal Legends. Fear, they suggest, should become irrelevant, even in the face of death, if you faithfully pursue your dreams.

Just as those who disregard fear appear as enlightened figures, fear dominates *The Alchemist's* weakest characters. The crystal merchant in particular represents someone who has allowed fear to rule his life. Although he wants to make the pilgrimage to Mecca required of every Muslim, he fears that once he's made the trip he will have nothing else to live for. As a result, he remains deeply unhappy, reinforcing the notion that fear acts as an obstacle to a happy and fulfilled life.

The alchemist asks the boy to immerse his self in the desert. Santiago does not know how to involve deeply in

desert, so he asks to the Alchemist, who says, "Listen to your heart. It knows all things, because it came from the Soul of the World, and it will one day return there." (134) Alchemist guides him to come out from his emotional feelings such as fear. "Tell your heart that the fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself. And that no heart ever suffered when it goes in search of its dreams, because every second of search is a second's encounter with God and with eternity." (137) Santiago learns to use his heart to overcome fear. He learns to use his soul to never lose hope when faced with adversity. He learns to focus on his own journey, disregarding the influences of society.

Dreams

In *The Alchemist*, dreams represent not only an outlet into one's inner desires, but also a form of communication with the Soul of the World. The Old man says to him "dreams are the language of God" (13). Santiago's dream of a treasure in Egypt, for instance, reveals to him his Personal Legend and sets the entire plot of *The Alchemist* into motion. Whether or not an individual believes in dreams creates a dividing line between the "enlightened" and "unenlightened" characters in the novel.

The tribal chieftain takes Santiago's dream of the hawks very seriously, and he understands the dream as a message from the desert of an impending assault. He also relates a story about Joseph's ability to read dreams, concluding that those who truly believe in dreams also have the ability to read them. The chief's insight, allows him to successfully defend the oasis against attack. Later in the novel, the man who beats Santiago does not believe his own dream, but when he describes his dream to Santiago, Santiago recognizes it as an omen telling

him where to find the treasure. The importance of actual, sleeping dreams parallels the importance of personal, symbolic dreams as embodied by Personal Legends. Joseph states in his article,

Coelho's life is in itself paradigm of "following one's dreams" whatever may happen during the course of it. We have to listen to the child who exists inside us and understand magic moments. Knowing the "self" becomes the first step to self realization, but people tend to kill their own soul, which is in violation of God's love. He points out the relevance of knowing the "Self" in understanding the possibilities of life that are left unnoticed in most cases. He becomes instrument in constructing a bridge which connects the self to the mysteries of life. (, 60)

Positive Outlook

Positive outlook gives self-confidence. Santiago's money is robbed by a robber at Tangier. In the new place he does not know the language so the person who speaks Spanish becomes his friend. He promises to lead him into Pyramid but cheats him. Santiago is "lamenting the fact that his life could have changed so suddenly and so drastically" (41). He is nonplussed and worries of what he is going to do next since he has lost his money. Unable to bear the mental crises and dilemmas and theft is described as Santiago's first and worst obstacles.

Then, Santiago works as a servant for the crystal merchant. Santiago looks at his life in a different way and leads the merchant also to have a positive outlook. While washing the crystal he washed his negative thoughts and feelings. The merchant is depressed and disappointed in his personal life but

his business gains hope. Santiago brings new hope to the merchant. Both grew from the obstacles and started to experience success in their life. The merchant's shop becomes very famous and he earns a lot of money. He is very confident in himself that felt he could conquer the world with the language of faith.

Language barrier

Santiago knows Latin and Spanish he also learns the Arabic language with the help of the crystal merchant, his employer. In the new place of Tanger, Santiago does not know the language so the person who speaks Spanish becomes his friend and cheats him. He had planned to return to his hometown. Santiago learns to communicate with others using the Universal Language. He learns that language from shepherd and how to deal with the sheep. He calls each sheep by name. He always believes that the sheep were able to understand what he said. While standing at the ticket window to buy ticket to Africa,

The boy had remembered his flock, and decided he should go back to being a shepherd. In two years he had learned everything about shepherding: he knew how to shear sheep, how to care for pregnant ewes, and how to protect the sheep from wolves. He knew all the fields and pastures of Andalusia. And he knew what was the fair price for every one of this animal could keep him from his treasure for a ken in this country (27).

Human beings are God's language. God speaks every day, each moment through the people or events. If one can realize that he or she can lead a healthy and happy life. "The ability to

forgive and the ability to love are the weapons God has given us to enable us to live fully, bravely and meaningfully in this less than perfect world" (Sperry 3). Santiago achieves the meaning of life which is the true treasure. He lives a meaningful life and gives life to others.

Finally, Santiago overcomes lot of obstacles such as impossible, personal legend, fear of defeats, Dreams, love and language barrier and attain his goal to find out the treasure. With each passing obstacle and hurdle that the young Santiago encounters that there is a lesson to learn. Each lesson teaches the young boy that he must always follow his heart, as it is the language of God. He realizes that he must go on with his own 'personal legend' no matter how difficult the journey becomes.

Be inspired to be different. Dare to be different. Do not let the fear of others opinions dictate your actions. This life to live is yours. Think for yourself and think big, as thoughts become things. Life comes with its twist and turns. It is never a straight line. Each obstacle is an opportunity to learn from and about yourself.

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