

The Alchemist – Paulo Coelho

One furlough afternoon I was accidentally introduced to a book about which I feel compelled to write, through a podcast from Vinh Giang who is a motivational/ inspirational keynote speaker and also a magician by trade. As I was listening to his podcast, I found myself ordering the book on Amazon! Talk about instant gratification – the book arrived in two days! Leafing through the pages of *The Alchemist*, one comes across soul-stirring wisdom sprinkled beautifully throughout the book like a gentle breeze weaving through the willow trees. The book captures your imagination like no other. And I found I couldn't put the book down as I wanted to know what happens to the central character. The book has been heavily tagged and highlighted never to be given away.

Through the story's central character, a young shepherd boy, one goes along on a journey where he dares to dream, has to quell self-doubt but has the gumption to follow his heart to discover his fate and realize his destiny. This is the central theme of the book. Let's jump right into it then.

On his journey to find a treasure the young shepherd boy finds that the path along the way is bumpy. Challenges arise that test his resilience. Along his travels he encounters various people – some who trick him out of all his riches while others who help him get closer to his goal. But through each negative encounter he decides whether he should become bitter and distrustful of people because one person betrayed him, whether to hate them from stealing his treasure while he was still in search of his own and whether he would feel insignificant to conquer the world because he felt God had been unfair to him. Yet, he finds a way to convince himself that he could be smarter the next time around,

realizing that he had to choose between thinking of himself as the poor victim of a thief or as an adventurer in a quest of his treasure – He choose the later of course because he had faith!

Key characters weave in and out of the story – each having a poignant discourse with the story’s central character. At the very beginning is a philosophical exchange between the King of Salem and the shepherd boy who is introduced to the concept of a person’s “*Personal Legend*”. The King argues that everyone has a “Personal Legend” which is described as *what one has always wanted to accomplish in order to lead a satisfying life*. The King goes on to state that when everyone is young, they know what their Personal Legend is. *Yet people never realize that they are capable, at any time in their lives, of doing what they dream of*. Because as time passes, a mysterious force begins to convince them that it will be impossible for them to realize their Personal Legend. This force that appears to be negative actually *prepares your spirit and your will* because whoever you are, or whatever it is you do, when you really want something it’s because that is your mission on earth. **“And, when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it.”**

Sometimes, the faint of heart find it easier to convince themselves that it’s better to go back to what they are familiar with rather than risk the leap to something new. Only the brave choose between something they have become accustomed to and something they want to have (choosing this instead). *There is nothing to hold you back but yourself*. This ends beautifully with the King telling the boy, *“Follow the omens. God has prepared a path for everyone to follow. You just have to read the omens that he left for you. Don’t forget to follow your Personal Legend through to its conclusion.* The secret to happiness is to see all the marvels of the world (experience it), and never to be distracted from your own personal goals and purpose in life.”

This got me thinking. How many times did I allow distraction to dissuade me from pursuing my Personal Legend? If I were to be perfectly honest, I could count a few!

Finding himself in a new land, not knowing the language and having been robbed of all his money, the boy decides to seek out his own treasure and starts to work for a crystal merchant. He knew he needed to change his life (learn to sell crystal) and make the money he needed for his journey because sometimes, there's just no holding back the river!

After almost a month he realizes that it isn't exactly the kind of job that would make him happy. But he stays with the job because he makes a good commission for each piece he sells and the merchant treats him fairly. As time goes by, the boy introduces ways to improve things at the shop. He realizes that the *language of enthusiasm, of things accomplished with love and purpose is understood by everyone*. Just as he had conquered that crystal shop (left his indelible mark on it), he would conquer the world! (and so have all of us – left an indelible mark somewhere, sometime – but did we pursue to conquer the world?).

The merchant tells the boy how he had dreamt of going to Mecca in accordance with the Muslim Law but had never made it there out of fear, that if reality fell short of his imagination then, he would be disappointed. So he preferred to go through life “wanting” to go, rather than acting on it. He confesses that he *knew the things he should be able to accomplish, yet didn't want to do so*. This made the boy think – he could always go back to being a shepherd. He could always go back to being a crystal salesman again. But he had a dream, and the strength and the will to get there. He couldn't imagine himself becoming the crystal merchant.

The young shepherd boy knew it was time to move on. He decides to join a caravan crossing the desert as he continues on his journey to find his treasure. He realizes one thing: *making a decision is only the beginning of things. When you make a decision, you are diving into a strong current that will carry you to places you have never dreamed of when you first make the decision. The closer one gets to realize their Personal Legend, the more that Personal Legend becomes their true reason for being.*

A fellow traveler in the caravan is an Englishman. He tries to befriend him who seems unfriendly. The Englishman, like the boy is in search of his own Personal Legend and the alchemist (a central character, a teacher, a mentor, a guide).

As the caravan proceeds it has to make a few detours. *No matter how many detours and adjustments it made, the caravan moved towards the same compass point. Once obstacles were overcome, it returned to its course, sighting on a star that indicated the location of the oasis.* The Englishman who was immersed in reading his books is unaware that this is happening. Using the Englishman as its example, the novel suggests that even though knowledge gained from books can be useful, one should not rely on it solely and unconditionally. True wisdom comes from experience, which one must earn through action.

But to the boy it is much more interesting to “observe” the caravan and listen to wind. As the boy becomes friendly with the camel driver who traveled alongside him, the camel driver lets him in on a secret – that *people need not fear the unknown if they are capable of achieving what they need and want.* “Because I don’t live in either my past or my future, I’m interested only in the present. If you can concentrate always on the present, you’ll be a happy man. *Life is the moment we’re living right now.*”

As the caravan reaches an oasis, after many days of crossing the desert, news of war between the tribes reaches them. The boy thought about his treasure – *the closer he got to the realization of his dream, the more difficult things became. In his pursuit of his dream, he was being constantly subjected to tests of his persistence and courage.* So he could not be hasty, nor impatient. If he pushed forward impulsively he would fail to see the signs and omens left by God along his path. Omens were God’s way of indicating to him what he should do. To do that successfully, he had to have no fear of failure.

I’m going to skip forwards to when the central character finally meets the alchemist who tells him that he is not there to instruct him. The boy knows all he needs to know. He, the alchemist was there to point him in the right direction of finding his treasure. He reminds him that wherever his heart is, there he would find his treasure. He had come so far and he couldn’t abandon his Personal Legend so that everything he had learned along the way could make sense.

What follows next in the book is a moving interchange about how to follow your heart to overcome fear. Your heart is like a compass. It knows the direction you should move, so listen to it carefully. Read on to understand this beautiful perspective.

“Don’t think about what you’ve left behind,” says the alchemist. “There is only one way to learn – It’s through action. Immerse yourself in it. *Listen to your heart.*” The boy tries to listen to his heart. It was not easy to do; in earlier times, his heart had always been ready to tell its story, but lately that wasn’t true. There had been times when his heart spent

hours telling of its sadness, and at other times it became so emotional that he had to hide his tears. So he asks the alchemist, “Why do we have to listen to our hearts?” *“Because, wherever your heart is that is where you’ll find your treasure.”* “But my heart is agitated. It has its dreams, it gets emotional, and it’s become passionate over someone I love. It asks things of me, and it keeps me from sleeping many nights, when I’m thinking about her.” “Well that’s good. Your heart is alive. Keep listening to what it has to say. You will never again be able to keep it quiet. *Even if you pretend not to have heard what it tells you, it will always be there inside you repeating to you what you’re thinking about life and about the world.* It’s better to listen to what it has to say. *When the person and their heart become one, neither is capable of betraying the other.*” Does a man’s heart always help him?” the boy asked the alchemist. “Mostly just the hearts of those who are trying to realize their Personal Legends. Trust in your heart – but never forget that you’re in the desert (meaning the real world is harsher and can have a negative impact on your dreams).

The boy continues to listen to his heart as they cross the desert. He realizes that he is not afraid any more. People are afraid to pursue their most important dreams, because they feel that they don’t deserve them, or that they’ll be unable to achieve them. The heart becomes fearful thinking of loved ones that go away forever, or of moments that could have been good, but weren’t, or of treasures that might have been found but were forever hidden. Because, when these things happen, we suffer terribly. The alchemist tells the boy, *“The fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself.* No heart has ever suffered when it goes in search of its dreams, because every second of the search is a second’s encounter with God and with eternity.

The boy realizes in his heart that when he had been truly searching for his treasure, every day had been luminous, because *it was part of the dream that he would find it*. He discovered things along the way that he never would have seen had he not had the courage to try things that seemed impossible for a shepherd to achieve! *Everyone on earth has a treasure that awaits him. But very few follow the path laid out for them – the path to their Personal Legends, and to happiness*. “Why don’t people’s hearts tell them to continue to follow their dreams?” the boy asks the alchemist. “Because that’s what makes a heart suffer most, and hearts don’t like to suffer.” The boy understood his heart and asked it never to stop speaking to him. He asks, when he wanders far from his dreams, that his heart press him and sound the alarm. He swore that, every time he heard the alarm, he would heed its message.

In his parting message to the boy, the alchemist tells him, “Before a dream is realized, the Soul of the World (the spiritual force that unites mankind with nature as equals and governs all things as one) tests everything that was learned along the way. It is so that we master the lessons we’ve learned as we’ve moved towards that dream. That’s the point at which most people give up. The boy remembers a proverb – **The darkest hour of the night comes just before dawn** meaning that things often seem at their worst just before they get better.

One of life’s simple lessons, the alchemist says are, “When you possess great treasures within you, and try to tell others of them, seldom are you believed.”

Towards the end of the journey the boy asks the Alchemist to teach him about alchemy (metaphorically it means transforming from who you are today to who you can become tomorrow as you pursue your Personal Legend). The alchemist replies, “Alchemy is about penetrating

to the Soul of the World (the spiritual force that unites mankind with nature as equals and governs all things as one), and discovering the treasure that has been reserved for you. That is why alchemy exists – *so that everyone will search for his treasure, find it, and then want to be better than he was in his former life*. The alchemist at one point shows the boy how he had achieved his own Personal Legend and how it was possible to achieve it. Anyone who interferes with the Personal Legend of another never will discover his own! Don't give in to your fears. If you do, you won't be able to talk to your heart. There is only one thing that makes a dream impossible to achieve: the fear of failure. When you stumble upon a problem, you just have to learn to overcome it; your life depends on it. If you die, you'll die in the midst of trying to realize your Personal Legend. That's a lot better than dying like millions of other people who never even knew what their Personal Legends were."

At the point the alchemist parts ways with the young boy he tells him "No matter what he does, each person on earth plays a central role in the history of the world. And normally he doesn't know it."

As the boy reflects on all that has happened, he realizes that in his search for treasure, he felt pride. He had left his flock of sheep to follow a dream. His journey, discoveries, books, the people he had met, the conversations he had had, had changed him. He thanked God for making him believe in his Personal Legend and for leading him to meet a king, a merchant, an Englishman, and an alchemist. The boy told himself that, on the way toward realizing his own Personal Legend, he learned all he needed to know and had experienced everything he might have dreamed of. But here he was, at the point of finding his treasure, and he reminded himself that no project is completed until its

objective has been achieved. As he finds the treasure he had dreamed about, he reminisces about how true it is: *life is really generous to those who pursue their Personal Legend.*

Throughout his journey, the boy discovers something about himself. He has been transformed. He has learned to listen, to recognize the omens, to trust his own heart and his instincts, pride in finding his Personal Legend. It's fun to read how he talks himself out of self-doubts at the same time staying in control of his own feelings and emotions.

The lesson then is that *if we fearlessly and resolutely pursue our Personal Legends, the universe will conspire to help us – but test us too!*

At the end of his journey, the central character learns new truths about his Personal Legend, and also develops a new perspective on the world around him.

How can we apply this to our project management lives you ask? As PMs we listen to what our team members, stakeholders are saying. We are led by the groups' needs. We have an internal monologue with that little voice in our brains – good food for thought. We rely not only on our knowledge but our instincts and experiences to do what we do. Focusing on the fundamentals is key to success. We owe it to our Teams! As PMs we make crucial decisions on the spot when the conditions around us are far from perfect. Leadership is an attitude. What we say matters. What we do makes a difference. And how we lead has impact. Our Personal Legend on any given project, is to see the project through successfully (and sometimes we may not get to the summit – but the lessons learned are not lost.). And as we get through the project, we learn a thing or two about ourselves – either confirming what we already knew or realizing a new facet of ourselves we didn't know existed.

How about us – all of us – finding our own Personal Legends? What is your dream? As the book says, you're never too old, or never unable. Set a goal and get started! Thank you Paulo Coelho for taking me on a journey of self-reflection and helping me focus on my own Personal Legend.