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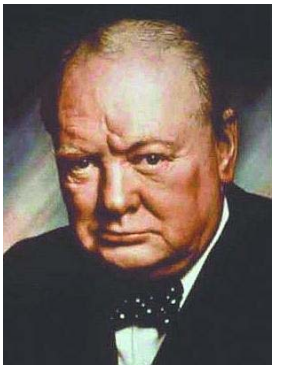
Paul Johnson on the Life Lessons of Winston Churchill

British historian Paul Johnson reflects on Churchill's leadership

By Austin Knuppe



The British historian Paul Johnson begins his biography of Winston Churchill in the following manner:

> "Of all the towering figures of the twentieth century, both good and evil, Winston Churchill was the most valuable to humanity, and also the most likable… None hold more lessons, especially for youth: How to use a difficult childhood. How to seize eagerly on all opportunities, physical, moral, and intellectual. How to dare greatly, to reinforce success, and to put the inevitable failures behind you. And how, while pursuing vaulting ambition with energy and relish, to cultivate friendship, generosity, compassion, and decency." [1]

In the course of a short 166 pages, Johnson paints a vibrant portrait of one of England's finest statesmen – Winston Churchill. Unlike other biographies of Sir Winston, Johnson does a masterful job of providing his readers with valuable lessons in the art of leadership. These lessons are unraveled throughout the text, but are most concentrated in the Epilogue. Listed below are Johnson's five lessons with a short excerpt explaining how Churchill exemplified true leadership:

Lesson One: Always aim high.

> "As a child, Churchill received no positive encouragement for his father and little from his mother. He was aware of failure at school. But he still aimed high. He conquered his aversion to math, at least enough to pass. He reinforced success in what he could do: write a good English sentence. Conscious of his ignorance, he set himself to master English history and familiarize himself with great chunks of literature… He sought to be prime minister feeling only he could achieve certain things. In 1940 he aimed not only high but at the highest – to rescue a stricken country in danger of being demoralized, to put it firmly on its feet again, and to carry it to salvation and victory. **He did not always meet his elevated targets, but by aiming high he always achieved something worthwhile** [emphasis mine]." [2]

Lesson Two: There is no substitute for hard work.

> "Churchill obscured this moral by his (for him] efficient habit of spending a working morning in bed, telephoning, dictating, and consulting. He also manifestly enjoyed his leisure activities, for him, another form of hard work, to keep himself fit and rested and to enable himself to do his job at the top of his form… **But he never evaded hard work itself** [emphasis mine]: taking important and dangerous decisions, the hardest form of work there is, in the course of a sixteen-hour day." [3]

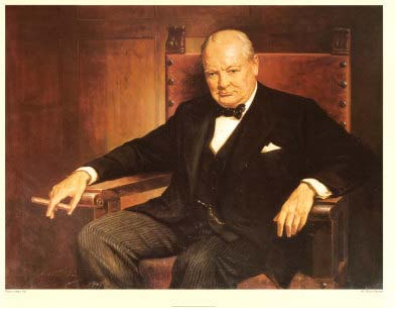
Lesson Three: Never let mistakes, disasters (personal or national), accidents, illness, unpopularity, and criticism, get you down.

> "[Churchill's] power recuperation, both in physical illness and in psychological responses to abject failure, were astounding… He scrambled to his feet and worked his way back. **He had courage, the most important of all virtues, and its companion, fortitude** [emphasis mine]. These strengths are inborn but they can also be cultivated, and Churchill worked on them all his life. In a sense his whole career was an exercise in how courage can be displayed, reinforced, guarded and doled out carefully, heightened and concentrated, conveyed to others." [4]

Lesson Four: Don't waste time or emotional energy on the meanness of life.

> "…Churchill wasted an extraordinarily small amount of his time and emotional energy on the meanness of life: recrimination, shifting blame to others, malice, revenge seeking, dirty tricks, spreading rumors, harboring grudges, waging vendettas. Having fought hard, he washed his hands and went on to the next contest. It is one reason for his success. **There is nothing more draining and exhausting than hatred** [emphasis mine]… Nothing gave him more pleasure than to replace enmity with friendship, not least with the Germans." [5]

Lesson Five: The absence of hatred will leave plenty of joy in a leader's life.



> "[Churchill's] face could light up in the most extraordinarily attractive way as it became suffused with pleasure at an unexpected and welcome event… **Joy was a frequent visitor to Churchill's psyche, banishing boredom, despair, discomfort, and pain** [emphasis mine]. He liked to share his joy, and give joy. It be never be forgotten that Churchill was happy with people." [6]

Aspiring leaderships, regardless of their interest in history of biography, will benefit greatly from a weekend spent reading Paul Johnson's *Churchill*.

For an article on Churchill's leadership, it seems fitting to end with a quotation from one of Sir Winston's most famous speeches. After the British evacuation from Dunkirk in June 1940, Churchill strengthened the resolve of the British nation by declaring:

> "We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this Island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old." [7]

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[1] Paul Johnson, *Churchill* (New York: Viking, 2009), 3.
[2] *Ibid*, 162-163.
[3] *Ibid*, 163.

[4] *Ibid*, 164.
[5] *Ibid*, 164-165.
[6] *Ibid*,165.
[7] Winston Churchill, "We Shall Fight on the Beaches," House of Commons, 4 June 1940.