

## Growing to maturity

*It is one thing to know that we are in the right but what do we do when things do not work out the way that we know they ought? This can be a test of character: do we keep going, or do we give up? Influence and power are not the same thing; which is the most productive? Even if we know that we should have power, but we don't, does this stop us having influence? What do we finally do when we have power: how do we react? How hard it can be to break away from the traditions that have always ruled our communities!*

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The great influence in the lives of Hasan and Hussain while growing up was their father, Ali. He was born in the year 601CE. His father was the uncle of Muhammad and when he was five-years-old, he went to live with Muhammad and his wife Khadija. When the revelation of the Qur'an began, he pledged his allegiance to Muhammad as a young boy of nine-years-old. From that time onwards, he was the constant companion of Muhammad learning from him the way of Islam. During the years from 610CE to 622 CE, the infant Muslim community in Mecca was under persecution. This was a testing time. Ali learnt by observing Muhammad how to persevere with patience and courage when things did not go the way that they ought. As a young man, Ali did not lack courage. When Muhammad and the Muslim community migrated from Mecca to Medina in 622CE, Muhammad left Ali behind as his trusted representative. Although they persecuted him, people in Mecca knew that Muhammad was a man of honour, who could be trusted. They would leave their precious belongings in his safekeeping. Muhammad asked Ali to remain in Mecca until all these precious things were returned to their rightful owners; only then was he to make his own migration to Medina. At the time when Muhammad himself left for Medina, Ali slept in the place where Muhammad normally slept because they knew that an assassination attempt was planned. By sleeping in Muhammad's place, he gave him the opportunity of slipping away at night and thus fooling the assassins.

During the years in Medina, Ali was always active serving the community. He was a noted warrior: often, according to the practice of those times, he would be sent out to engage in single-handed combat with the champion of the armies from Mecca, who came to destroy Muhammad and his Muslim community. By engaging in such single-handed combat, the weight of saving the Muslim community from further attack and bloodshed rested upon the young Ali. He placed his trust in God and was always victorious. Ali was given the responsibility of being one of the official scribes to take down in writing the verses of the Qur'an as they were revealed. In this way he had direct access to Muhammad, who would explain to him alone both the outer and the hidden meaning of each verse. This allowed Ali to have a profound knowledge of the way of Islam, which meant that he was respected by the whole community for his wisdom and wise counsel. He often served as the representative of Muhammad, both in formal

matters and in distributing charity. It was reported that he would go at night with a sackful of bread to deliver it unseen to those who were in need.

Although he knew that he had been designated as the divinely-appointed successor to Muhammad, this was not the way that things worked out. Immediately after Muhammad's death, it was Ali's responsibility to prepare his body for burial and arrange the funeral. During this time a group of the traditional tribal elders in the community gathered together and decided that another companion of Muhammad should become the head of the community. Although Ali and his followers pointed out that this was not the way that things should be, Ali did not press his claim. He knew that this would lead to a dispute within the community, which would result in bloodshed and he wanted to avoid this. From 632CE when Muhammad died until 656CE, Ali saw three other men chosen within the community to take on the role of leader or caliph. During this time Ali served as a wise counsellor and a source of spiritual guidance to members of the community. In this way he exercised a profound influence in the lives of many.

During the time of the third of these leaders, Uthman, a degree of corruption set in within the Muslim community. He had chosen to appoint members of his own family to positions of power, thus giving them access to wealth as the Muslim community expanded. Ultimately, this led to the assassination of Uthman by a disgruntled group of the companions of Muhammad, who had come to complain about their grievances under the governor of Egypt. It was at this time that the Muslim community turned to Ali, in 656CE, to become the caliph. One of those family members that Uthman had appointed to be the governor of Syria was a man called Mu'awiya. He was of the opinion that Ali had not sufficiently pursued the assassins to avenge the death of Uthman. He refused to pledge allegiance to Ali on this account.

Now that Ali had political power, he set about removing those people who had been unworthy of the positions that had been given to them. He wanted to root out all forms of financial corruption. His plan was to restore the Muslim community to the original purity of the message contained in the Qur'an as implemented by Muhammad. He wanted to make sure that everyone within the community was treated equally and gave particular attention to relieving the poverty of the poor and orphans. Mu'awiya became the leader of the group who opposed Ali and this almost led to civil war within the community. There were some battles between the forces of Mu'awiya and those of Ali, but he sought to negotiate so as to avoid wholesale bloodshed. This did not please all those who were willing to fight with him and eventually one of these people assassinated Ali in 661CE.

Before his death, Ali nominated his elder son, Hasan, to succeed him as head of the community or, as the Shi'a call him, the Imam. This was not acceptable to Mu'awiya, who retained his power base in Syria and wanted to establish his own dynasty, the Umayyads. Mu'awiya had a strong military force and made an alliance with governors of other provinces. If Imam Hasan had called the community to arms to oppose Mu'awiya, there would have been great loss of life. Hasan decided that the wise course

of action, for the sake of the innocent members of the community, was to agree to give up political power and retain his position as spiritual guide and wise counsellor.