

About my parents

On the eve of their 60th marriage anniversary

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Parents are some of the most unappreciated living things in the world. Our relationship with our parents is largely a one-way street in which we take-take-take and give very little back. We even hate our parents at times and blame them for all our problems. We are right, of course, aren't we! Because all our genes come from them and so the poor parents have very little to say in defense!

But suddenly one day our parents perish and all that pent-up love which we did not know existed deep inside our hearts comes out pouring with full force.

Isn't that a bit late? Wouldn't it be nice if we expressed some of that love to our parents while they could still hear, read, feel, and enjoy it?

This is my attempt to appreciate my parents while they are both very much alive, receptive, and celebrating their 60th marriage anniversary on 23rd February 2021.

The funny thing is when you start thinking about it, very little comes to mind in terms of what the heck your parents really did for you! And that's because we as children are so caught up in our own miserable little lives, we largely ignore our parents throughout our stay with them: what they said to us, what they did for us! It is like we were living in a hotel all along and the staff was well-paid and so we didn't have to pay any attention to them but just enjoy the services they provided to us. They were just cooks, cleaning staff, and waiters!

But, fortunately, I am myself a parent now, and as the age-old wisdom tells us, we truly realize the magnitude of what our parents might have done for us when we ourselves experience being parents. The whole mess of raising a helpless baby, the patience required to live with a rebellious toddler, the philosophical questions we face when we deal with a teenager, etc. give us some idea of what our own parents did for us.

My mother was born in Vadodara, Gujarat, in a family of limited means, and being the youngest of a fatherless household (he died when she was 3), was largely dependent on the goodness of her much-older siblings. Her mother (my grandma), though helpless financially, was a tireless, strong, and loving woman, who never forgot my mother's birthday even though every day arrived with its cup full of struggles and challenges. She made "sooji halwa" - my mother's favorite - that brightened my mother's birthday like nothing else in the world could.

After matriculation (11th grade in those days) my mother's sponsors informed her that now she must fend for herself. Of course, this was no big shock because my mother knew all along how difficult

it had been even to pay for her secondary school. She took up a job at the post office and started pitching in for the family expenses. Marriage happened when she was 22 and she began her own independent journey out of her parents' home.

Her children - the 3 of us - arrived in quick succession, and soon she had her hands full with the responsibility of wiping our behinds and feeding our insatiable appetites. My father, to his credit and I must say rather unusual for men of his times, was very supportive and he even suggested the adventurous idea to my mother to pursue further education while we - the 3 little suckers - were all under the age of 5. My mother embraced the idea (which I am sure she had in her heart all along but had kept it quiet due to circumstances) and started college. I have no idea how she did it in those times of poor healthcare services, on the income of a junior lecturer, and with very little help since both their families lived far, far away. And consider the surprising fact that she had done all her schooling in Gujarati and was now pursuing a degree in Marathi!

But she did it, and by the time I turned 9 or 10, she had earned her MA (master's) in Marathi. Around this time, we moved to Warananagar - the town that changed all our lives dramatically - where she got a contract position as a lecturer in the local college. She took her job seriously and there are several interesting stories of her interaction with the local student population, which I will not get into here for lack of space. Suffice to say, she became known as a passionate teacher who did her job sincerely and with full heart. Her 3 children - now all on the cusp of teen-age - were surely no less demanding and once again the show had to be run without any family help, although I must mention that my noble-hearted grandmother (mother's mother) often came and stayed with us for brief stints both during my mom's college education and later in Warananagar.

The lecturer's position lasted 3 years and the most beautiful outcome of those years was the discovery for my mother of her life's true calling. In order to teach the various courses, she had to undertake her own study of various books, including the Dnyaneshwari - the Marathi translation of Lord Krishna's "Bhagwad Geeta". She fell in love with Dnyaneshwari - as almost everyone does who ventures anywhere near that tome. Even while being a college lecturer, she was invited to deliver a public lecture (termed "Pravachan") on Dnyaneshwari at the local temple. It was a turning point in her life. My father tells us now - because we children were too immature and stupid to understand what was going on, and we probably did not even have the courtesy to attend the lecture - that on that day my mother conquered the hearts of the audience with her earnest and passionate rendition of Krishna's philosophy. Her loud and clear voice, her fluid Marathi, and her melodious cadence made the Pravachan a beautiful experience not only for the audience but for my mother too, and I think, on that day she knew what she was going to do for the rest of her life. Overnight, she became a regular attraction at all local events that demanded someone to take the stage and deliver a dose of spirituality and philosophy to an audience jaded by excessive mirth or misery.

She never worked for money again but dedicated all her time to helping others in any way she could. For a few years, she ran the local "Education Committee for Preschools" which funded and looked after some 50+ nurseries and preschools in villages around Warananagar. She had a jeep at her disposal and she would pay visits to these villages, meet the women who ran those preschools and try

to understand and solve their problems. I remember accompanying her on a couple of those trips, and as you guessed correctly, my only interest was hitching a ride in the jeep!

To this day, my mother has dedicated all her time to the study and teaching of Dnyaneshwari and Geeta. Everywhere she went after leaving Warananagar - a few years in Shirala and then Pune - she encouraged the local population (mostly women, although men eventually joined grudgingly but surely) to pursue the study of the Geeta. She ran weekly gatherings where she taught them these difficult books - many of the women did not even know how to read Sanskrit - and demonstrated the joy of applying the beautiful philosophy of the different Yogas to practical life. I fortunately eventually had the good sense to at least partly appreciate her work and so I ended up attending some of her sessions. I experienced with my own eyes and ears her earnestness, her deep love for the ideas and philosophy in those books, and her genuine love for everyone around her.

I don't want to get into what I learned from my mother, partly because I believe all mothers teach similar things to their children, and partly because it would be a long list. I will just say that I feel fortunate to be her son and to have received all that she has given to me.

In contrast to my mother my father was born in a somewhat well-to-do family in Shirala, Maharashtra. His father was a schoolteacher, but also owned a farm which met all the needs of the large family of 7 children of which my father was somewhere near the bottom. From what he tells us, he grew up as a happy-go-lucky child roaming around the village bare feet eating raw mangoes, swimming in the river, and playing various mischiefs that the open and clean spaces of a village typically offer. In those days, parents - especially dads - rarely spoke with their children, and only communicated through actions such as beating with a stick or footwear (whichever was more easily accessible). And so, the children were pretty much left to their own virtues and vices. But having a schoolteacher as father surely was a mitigating factor and my father and all his siblings went to school, studied sincerely, and became successful in later lives. My father was in fact known as a bright boy who always got excellent grades.

Although his family was well-fed, there was very little cash lying around. And so, like my mother, post-secondary education was beyond the pockets of my grandparents. Luckily, my father also had caring older siblings who were by then living independently in Pune and invited him to come to Pune and pursue his studies. He joined a renowned school in Pune for his matriculation and was quickly recognized as a topper even while pitted against the brightest and the nastiest in Pune.

In those days, practically all popular professional programs entailed eventually working with the government and so, involved passing competitive entrance exams. My father was extremely good at cracking those exams and would pass any of them easily even coming at the top of the list of candidates. But, for some reason or the other, he could not actually enroll in any of those programs. Sometimes it was for not having the cash to pay for the registration fee, or due to my grandmother's refusal to allow him to pursue that "risky" career path (for example, for the pilot's course), or for something silly like missing a deadline.

My father was also fond of traveling which sometimes made him drop things half-cooked and begin afresh at a new place. As a result, he ended up having a rather haphazard academic experience after matriculation. He joined the Railway Mail Service to pay for his bills and as a result got to travel to several interesting cities along the west coast of India. He pursued college part-time and finished his BA (Bachelor's) and MA (Master's) in English quite effortlessly. He discovered that he had a particular affinity for languages and achieved mastery not just in English but also in Marathi and Sanskrit. His handwriting was known to be one of the most beautiful and even today we all go to him if a card needs to be annotated or an envelope needs to be addressed.

After marriage, he started his college teaching career and very soon became a beloved teacher for his energy and passion for English, and also due to his knack for simplifying difficult ideas and language constructs. As a child, I remember the private classes he used to run for students who wanted extra coaching, some of whom used to bring goodies for me.

As mentioned above, the move to Warananagar, like for all of us, gave a turning point to my father's career also. He became the head of the English department - a position that he maintained until retirement resisting the occasional temptation to pursue a higher position such as the college principal. He also got the stability and peace of mind to pursue another of his goals - a Ph.D. in English literature. He did his research in the field of Indian Historical Fiction focusing particularly on the writings of Manohar Malgonkar. I was already past secondary school then and clearly remember my father typing out his thesis on a small "Brother" typewriter.

My father was a ravenous collector of books and so our house was always full of bookshelves loaded with English, Marathi, and even Hindi books. Our birthday gifts most often included books. I developed the happy habit of reading books and remember browsing through many of the novels of Malgonkar and several other English classics. My own deep love for languages is certainly in no small part due to the learning environment created by my parents.

To this day, my father continues to pursue his passion for languages - through reading and writing. Just a couple of years ago, he published a collection of 25 Marathi stories - each a shortened translation of an English classic, such as a Shakespeare or a Dickens. He pursued his passion for traveling as well - in which my mother joined him happily and enthusiastically - and they have together traveled all over India, and to several destinations abroad. Unlike many older people, I never saw them "missing" home or complaining about "foreign" food or culture. The aphorism "The world is my home" has very much been evident through their approach to traveling and living in new places. My father has written about his travels too - enough to make up another interesting book.

When I look back at my own life, I am astonished at the freedom I got to pursue any adventure I wanted. How many parents today would allow a 16-year-old to catch a bus and travel all alone to a distant city and explore a place with an unfamiliar language, culture, and food? That's exactly what my parents did when they gave me some cash and let me travel to Hyderabad all by myself after my 10th grade exam. This was in the days before mobile phones and Internet!

My parents also never dictated any career objectives or impose their own career ambitions on us. When it came to teaching us "discipline" or "good habits", they probably got lucky because most parents in Warananagar could never match the standards of Sam Mahableshwerwalla - the dreaded (but also most beloved) school principal. I think my parents were inevitably forced into a more lenient posture to mitigate the trauma we faced at school.

They say that "parenting never stops, period"! My parents have been a loving and active presence in my life all throughout. All this may sound very commonplace - indeed because I think most parents are similar in these respects - but my parents have offered support through all my ventures and adventures, they have extended a helping hand in every circumstance, they have given me the space and freedom to pursue my life unencumbered, they have taught me ageless values through their own actions and behavior, and they have demonstrated to me how to age gracefully. And all this while they have never stopped pursuing their own interests and passions with full energy and enthusiasm.

I feel fortunate to have experienced their beautiful presence in my life.

