

Twilight Toast

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Note: The narrative below is about Sam Mahableshwerwalla whom everyone called “Pracharya” or “Sir”. I have used his first name “Sam” throughout my write-up. I apologize to anyone who might be offended by my apparent impertinence. I do not mean any disrespect.

Thursday 20th November 2014

As usual, one of the first things in the morning, I start up my computer to check email. Among the junk messages, there is an email from my friend Satish Patil. I open it leisurely and delicately as if it held something precious. The email is short and it informs me that *"our beloved Sir is no more. He took his last breath today afternoon around 1:00 PM"*.

I look up and think quietly to myself, “So, that is the end.”

Or is it? How can there be an end to Sam's story?

No! It is not possible! I know Sam is still there. There he is! I can see him clearly, walking out of his beautiful quaint cottage in Bangalore. He is walking slowly because his spinal column is bent to his right due to calcium deficiency. He walks to a cane chair and sits in it. His students (I am one of them) join him in a circle. There is tea and biscuits in the tray in the center. It's a lovely afternoon and the air is pleasantly warm. Sam looks happy, amused. Like a child. He looks around – at his students, at his garden, at the people passing by at the gate of his bungalow.

Sam is very old – no question about it. His face is emaciated and his facial bones are prominent. His sharp nose looks even sharper. He looks very small in that chair – short and very thin. He is so small any one of us can carry him easily in his arms. But his presence is larger, more commanding than anyone else's there. He is the center of attention. Our eyes and ears are trained on him. Sam's eyes are bright and playful. He still has a lot of gray hair. He certainly has a handsome face. Most of all, his brain is very sharp. He remembers obscure things. He inquires about the health of someone's father-in-law. He even remembers that the father-in-law had had a hernia operation a

few months ago. Sam's memory is legendary. Back in school days he knew every child's first name!

And Sam is curious. He asks one of the students who is a computer engineer, why there is so much fuss about 3-D printing. Sam says he heard about it on the BBC newscast. And he won't settle for superficial answers such as, "Oh, it's just a new fad." You need to be very careful about making comments like that. Because Sam will immediately ask, "What do you mean fad? It seems quite interesting to me!" He won't stop pestering you until you have satisfied his curiosity.

Sam is not opinionated. He is curious. About the impact of technology on society, about Obama's politics, about the quality of education in engineering colleges, about everything. You just name it. He can engage in a debate with you on any of these topics.

Sam is also concerned. About lots of things. Especially about people. He asks one of the students whose son is dyslexic, "How is your son now? Did you take him to the specialist in Kolhapur?" Once again, he won't settle for superficial answers, glib talk. If you do that, he wrinkles his nose in a famous way in mock disgust and goes on questioning. He goes as deep as he can without being rude or intrusive. He at least ensures the student has understood the gravity of the situation and has promised to do something about it. Every time you meet or call Sam, he will check on the promises you made last time – before you say hello.

Then, one of the students gets up and starts taking photos. Sam hates photos and recordings. He hates all types of social circus such as, photos, felicitations, ribbon-cutting, speeches, awards, etc. He cannot bear being in the spot-light or putting anyone else in that predicament. But now he has relented a bit. With old age, he has mellowed a bit. He allows the cameras to click about him. Photos capture him in various poses. In one Sam is pointing at something. In one he is laughing uncontrollably. In one he is looking in the distance solemnly. In one he is holding someone's hand quietly and is in deep meditation as if he doesn't want to let go of that loving hand.

Sam hates pictures, and yet, he will allow these paparazzi activities. He has given up trying to bend his students to his rules. Or at least he has stopped pushing too hard. There is clearly displeasure on his face about these things, but he doesn't want to hurt anyone's feelings. Some of the students take advantage of this rare opportunity.

And then, suddenly Sam gets up and starts walking towards his garden. He is in a mood to walk among the trees. Among the trees and plants that he and his wife so lovingly planted and cared for. Sam's wife Edna is no more. Edna used to teach us

English. She died of cancer in 1993. Since then Sam has single-handedly cared for his garden. He walks slowly, glancing at this plant and that flower. It reminds us of how he used to walk among rows of students during assembly inspecting each student with utmost interest. He pauses at a plant and says, "That plant was given to me by professor so-and-so. Did you know it blooms only once a year?"

We are amazed, but not surprised, at Sam's knowledge of plants and flowers. He seems to know so much about everything. For us Sam is omniscient. It's no surprise he knows everything!

Sam suddenly turns to one of the students and says, "You must take a branch of this plant and give it to so-and-so. Ask her to keep it in a small pot for a month and then move it to the soil." Apparently, that so-and-so had casually said during her last phone call that she would love to have that plant in her own garden, and Sam has remembered that, although she might have forgotten all about it.

That's how it is with Sam and his students. They just cannot keep up with him. He takes everything seriously. Every comment, every gesture, every mention of a problem or wish. And then he follows it up. Sometimes students pass these comments carelessly and forget about them. But, Sam? Never! You cannot really blame the students. Anyone who comes into Sam's company becomes like him – although for a short while. You start thinking big, different, all inspired. But, once you return to your miserable little life, you cannot sustain that elevated state of mind.

That is not so with Sam. He lives consistently, untiringly, unremittingly in the same universe. His way of thinking, his convictions do not change whether he is in good health or poor, whether he is with you on the phone or in person. Most students cannot keep up with him. Some of them accept defeat and stop trying. Some get frustrated and stop calling him.

And that is most unfortunate. Because that is one thing Sam really, truly does not want to happen. He does not want his students to give up on him, to lose contact with him. He loves his students more than anything else. They are all his children. They are more than his own children. He does not have any of his own. All his life he spent working for his students – as teacher, as principal, and now as their mentor, their father. He is very certainly hurt when his students don't keep in touch with him. But, he never shows it. He might send messages to you through others. But, he will never hold a grudge. His love for his students is unconditional. Yes, if you did something wrong, he will not hide his disapproval. But his arms and the doors of his little cottage in Bangalore are always open for you if you happen to have time for him.

After the garden walk, Sam asks the students to get inside the house because it's evening and the mosquitos start attacking fiercely, stinging at every exposed spot of skin. These mosquitos certainly do not exhibit the friendliness of Sam. Before going inside, Sam asks the chairs to be stored away back to where they were. He is fastidious about order. Even a small piece of cloth lying on the floor would not do. It must go back to where it was. Sam's house is full of things – books, furniture, artwork, little gadgets that came as gifts, gramophone records, stacks of National Geographic magazines. But, everything is in order. Not just physically, but also in Sam's mind. When the discussion turns to poetry, he is able to walk to some corner and pull out a book that is exactly what he wants to read from.

Order and discipline are what a lot of people remember Sam for. He was dreaded for these things when his students were under his thumb in the school. They all have memories of being punished for a variety of acts of disorder or indiscipline. Sometimes for growing hair a bit too long. Or, for not cleaning the nail-paint well enough. Or, for walking in a line that wasn't straight enough. Or, for being late at the hour of sports. There is not a single student who did not suffer at Sam's hands for some act of indiscipline.

That is what most students remember Sam for. Some of them have even developed the *narrow* view that discipline is the gist, the sum total, of Sam's legacy.

Fortunately, many of Sam's students have been able to go past this narrow impression of Sam as a strict disciplinarian. They now see a very different face of Sam. A gentle, friendly, loving, fatherly figure. Back in school days, he was dreaded and feared, and nobody thought he was *loving* and *kind* by any stretch of imagination. But, now, seeing him sitting in that cane chair it is very easy to make that connection. Sam hasn't really changed at all. He must have been as loving back at the school as he is now. It is just that the children did not see it. Besot by our narrow-mindedness and the insecurities of our childhood we only saw a man who cared about order and discipline and who did not waste time to make a show of affection. As children, we didn't appreciate that he spent every moment working for us, looking for ways to make us better and better human beings.

Of course, not everyone was afraid of him; many of us also felt great fascination for Sam. Just think about it. There he was: a handsome urban fellow planted in a village. A fellow whose last name was Mahableshwerwalla – it sounded as if he owned all of

the famous hill station Mahabaleshwar¹. A fellow whose wife was at least a foot taller than him. A fellow who dressed immaculately every day in impressive jackets and tie and dress shoes. A fellow who, along with his wife, looked almost European in skin color and demeanor. A fellow who was spot clean and fresh all the time. A fellow who never looked tired or bored. Nobody ever saw him yawn or stretch his back. Nobody ever saw him eat or drink either. Nobody ever saw him doing anything ordinary like buying grocery, brushing teeth, praying, doing exercise, chatting with a friend, going to the temple, nothing! He looked like a complete misfit, an alien, someone from a different planet, and yet he was as comfortable in this little village as anyone else! He was a wonder of wonders to a hodge-podge population of rural folks and some transplanted urban and semi-urban folks who had migrated to this town for jobs.

We were certainly fascinated by Sam. It was impossible not to be. More than from what he asked us to do or not to do, we tried to learn from just observing him. We observed him picking up litter in his plastic bag while he walked the streets. We saw him stopping bicycle riders riding at night without lights. We observed him inspecting us with hawk's eyes at the morning assembly. We observed his persistence at speaking Marathi – a language he was just learning – even at the risk of making silly mistakes. We observed his stubborn refusal to bend to the interference of parents. We observed him making no exception to his rules – even if the child in question came from the house of a local heavy-weight. We observed that he did not make a big fuss about personal accomplishments of students – whether in sports or academics. We observed him meting out strange punishments to truant students – like making one student eat a potful of grapes when he tried to steal a couple from the school garden.

We tried hard to understand him, to get his essence, to understand what he was made of. But it was difficult then. It was difficult because we had no insight into him as a person, as an ordinary human being. We were allowed occasionally in his house, but we did not know what to look for, we did not understand what we saw.

Today, we *probably* have some understanding of Sam. Some of us who spent some time in the west, some of us who got introduced to the western culture, who took the trouble to follow western values, can see that Sam is essentially a westernized Indian. Of course, that term does not describe him fully, but, essentially it means that Sam is a person who demonstrates western values as well as Indian ones. He was brought up on western classical music, western literature, and certainly western values of equality and equal opportunity, independence and self-reliance, rationality and reason, cleanliness and tidiness, compassion and charity, progress and science. We can

¹ *Mahabaleshwar* is a famous hill-station in the state of Maharashtra.

now, in our minds, connect some of Sam's actions and behavior during school days to these western values. We can now visualize the Sam of school days and notice the western man – not just superficially, but very much at the core.

These students who are sitting right now around Sam at his cottage are very fortunate. Students like them, who take time out of their busy lives and visit Sam regularly, are very fortunate. For them, Sam is now a father, a friend, a mentor. He is everything for them and more. He cannot really be captured in any known relationship. These students sitting there enjoy the glow of his presence, the glow of his intelligence, the light of his spiritual strength, his immense love, his wisdom, his childlike interest in life. Some of them have fully realized what an amazing gift he is and they have lapped him up eagerly and greedily. They visit him often, they call him often. They take leave of absence from their stressful jobs and go to Bangalore and stay with Sam. They care for him and let him care for them. It is a most beautiful thing to watch. They are very fortunate. They see Sam as a mere human. And when they see him as a mere human, their respect for him grows even more. Because his humanity is so rich and beautiful.

Some of these students are even more blessed. Because they not only visit Sam, they also get to live with him and care for him. Bharat Thokale is one of them. Sam calls Bharat when he really needs someone to stay with him. Bharat then spends several days at Sam's house looking after Sam like a devoted son. He sleeps in the guest room or in the room next to Sam's. He gives Sam his medicines and cooks for him. Bharat is most fortunate, because he is one of the very few from whom Sam feels comfortable accepting such personal favors.

Most people who visit Sam are fascinated and then attracted to him. Nowadays, whenever we visit, we see other strange people visiting Sam. They sit around Sam just like we do, sipping tea and eating his biscuits. They are not his students. They met Sam somewhere else in his life's journey. We see Indians as well as foreigners. Some of them were brought along by his students – to see this "exotic animal" as Sam likes to say jokingly. Some are children of his students. Some are wives of his students. But they all seem to enjoy being with Sam just like we do. They appear more relaxed than us because they don't have uncomfortable memories of being punished by Sam as children. The women bring homemade sweets for Sam, which he loves very much. He has a sweet tooth and no diabetes. But, he eats very little – less than a bird, and most of the food goes to his visitors. Sam always has goodies for his visitors. As if he were a mother goose who loves to feed her chicks.

Some people misunderstand Sam. They think he is inflexible and rigid in his views. But that impression is wrong and unfair. Actually his entire philosophical

framework is so rich and enlightened that he doesn't need to mend his ways – at least not too often. That is how it really is. We see it when we speak with him now, when we listen to him, when we follow his logic, when we understand his thought process. He is like the Buddha. He never runs out of ideas. He is never daunted by any problem. He is able to put his arms around any dilemma. His mind is extremely supple and flexible. We surely try his limits by bringing our problems to him. But, he is undaunted. We take to him all kinds of problems – problems of unruly children, of intolerable mothers-in-law, of alcoholic husbands, of difficult bosses, even of secret love affairs. To each of these Sam gives his sincere attention, thoughtful reasoning, and reasonable advice. He does it without a hint of drama or circus, without abusing the questioner.

At his grandfatherly age, Sam is more willing to talk about himself. He is willing to satisfy our curiosity about his mysterious past. He is willing to describe how he was persuaded to take up the job at our school as principal (They had to chase him and court him for 2 long years!). He is willing to tell us about his working relationship with his superiors and juniors. He is willing to confide to us that he carried every day in his coat pocket a resignation letter to be handed over in case he was pressurized in any way. He is also willing to share stories from his youth when he was a budding teacher. He is willing to tell us about him and Edna. It is a beautiful love story of two fellow teachers who paid for their education through their own meager teacher's wages. We listen to the story with fascination as we picture Sam and Edna riding around on a two-wheeler in their hay days. We picture an intelligent and inspired young couple exchanging books and gramophone records as gifts. We picture them stealing away occasionally to enjoy delicious bhel-puri².

These stories give us further glimpse into Sam as a human, as a person, and draw us closer to him. Now, here we are in Bangalore, sitting around Sam and watching him: Sam, who is sitting gloriously in his cane chair. He doesn't try to dominate the conversation. He allows us to chat and he listens with interest. After a while, Sam brings up the news he heard on BBC yesterday about a mud-slide in Seattle. Of course, he brings up this topic because I am visiting from Seattle. Sam has something for everyone. It does not matter who you are, what you do for a living, where you live, how intelligent you are. He has an interesting and enticing conversation for everyone. And it is not contrived. It is not faked. It is genuine. It is effortless. It flows from his heart and being. It flows from him as easily as his love for the cat curled up happily in his lap.

Sam has always had cats in his house. They have names like Tenzing. The cats are Siamese. They keep Sam company. Sam is very much a cat person. The cats follow

² Bhel-puri is a popular Indian snack.

him around the house. He understands what they need, when they want food, when they want a walk. He has books and calendars on cats. He occasionally requests his students living abroad to get things for his cats that are not available in India. I remember once he asked me to bring “hairball remedy” which is needed because cats often swallow a lot of their own hair when they lick themselves clean. That swallowed hair needs to be gotten rid of.

Tenzing is the last remaining cat now. He is also very old. He walks slowly, eats very little. Just like Sam. Aside from Tenzing Sam is all alone now. We use this word "alone" loosely for a person who has no close relatives living with him. Sam actually seems to have no surviving close relatives anywhere (save for a couple of nieces who live in faraway Mumbai). He has no wife, no kids, no siblings. He is as alone in this world as anyone can be. That is another thing about Sam that we find extraordinary. How can anyone be so alone? It seems as if everything in nature conspired to ensure there was nothing ordinary about Sam.

And yet, Sam doesn't appear *lonely* in the literary sense. He carries none of the weirdness or crankiness that one might expect in such a lonely person. He is calm, composed, cheerful, hospitable. He doesn't seem to mind his loneliness, nor has he let it grow upon him by becoming indifferent or disinterested. Anytime we visit him or call him, he welcomes us happily and eagerly. He never asks us for anything. We often offer him to come and live with us. We say, “Why do you live in this house all alone? Come to Pune, we will find a nice flat for you and we will take good care of you”. He refuses politely but firmly. Instead, he inquires about our parents, whether we are taking proper care of them. We wonder how he manages such amazing gracefulness in his loneliness. But, like everything else, we have given up analyzing it! He is superhuman. That is what we conclude.

Sam's polite insistence to be left alone has a deeper – even spiritual – significance, as we surmise now. On one hand, Sam has a strong personal connection with almost everyone that entered his life. Each one of us feels that he or she is special for Sam. Back at school, Sam created this connection with each of his students. He knew not only the student's first name, but also what his parents did for a living, who his siblings were, what his weaknesses were, and so on. Sam never indulged in sermons at assembly and lectures to crowds; he taught through personal examples, individual incidences. So, in that sense, students who made the most mistakes learnt the most from Sam! Students that avoided interaction with him learnt less!

And these personal connections persist today. Each of us still feels that special individual bond with Sam. Every hug is special, every pat on the back is personal, every

hand held is held as if for eternity. And yet, Sam is detached from all of us in a mysterious way. His love is as genuine and sincere as any, and yet, it has not affected his mental poise. His involvement in our affairs is honest, and he truly appreciates our love for him – he even cries a little on rare occasions – and yet, he remains secure and peaceful when it is time for him to be alone, separate.

Sam is content to pass his remaining days alone in his cottage in Bangalore. He has cleaned up his life of all his bonds and possessions one by one. He has sold the house to someone with the condition that he would be allowed to live in it until his death. He has no wealth to worry about – a lifelong career in teaching can hardly help anyone build a fortune. The house is mostly filled with stuff that has no monetary value – books, records, magazines, old furniture. Sam has already started giving things away to whoever might be interested. He has given away his body, too – he plans to donate his eyes to a blind person, and his body to a medical college. Tenzing is his last emotional bond, who himself is weak and sick and clearly ready to retire any moment. After Tenzing is gone, Sam will have no one to worry about, except of course his thousands of students. But, they are all hopefully in good shape, having been conditioned and trained by Sam himself.

Sam is clearly the ultimate *Sadhu*, the sage. Even when he wore fine suits in school, he was as simple as he is today. The suit was only a façade – a means to look neat and tidy. It wasn't a symbol of luxury and riches. Now that we are allowed inside Sam's house, his life, his way of living, we can see first-hand how Sam lives the things he says. His kitchen still has very old equipment – a gas stove that belongs to a museum, cutlery that is fine but ancient, an old refrigerator whose four legs are held in water bowls to keep ants away, a dining set that was probably a wedding present. The house is lit by light bulbs that just barely lift the darkness. He rarely eats more than a slice of bread and soup. (Back in school days, Sam's food intake consisted mostly of boiled vegetables.) Sam doesn't own a vehicle – not even a bicycle. His house is nothing short of an ashram – a place where material goods may be in short supply, but every intellectual and artistic thought flows in abundance. An ashram where Sam lives like a Rishi – old, wise, content, and compassionate.

Now, it is time for us to say goodbye. If Sam is sorry to see us leave, he shows no trace of it. In fact he is the one who starts worrying about us missing our flight. As we all rise, he continues to tell us to do this or that, to tell us to take care of our families. He walks with us all the way to the gate and stands there muttering "God bless you beta"³ until we are properly hoisted into our cars, on our way, and out of sight. We watch him

³ *Beta* is a Hindi word addressing a son or a daughter.

growing smaller in the distance, waving intermittently, the loving smile on his face still vivid in the dust. In a minute, Sam is out of sight and soon out of our minds. We start talking about flight times and where to eat dinner. While we continue our return journey back to our cozy houses and large families, back at his cottage Sam closes the gate and walks slowly to his small empty bungalow dark in the shade of the trees of his garden, the trees fading fast in the fading daylight.

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Footnote 1: During the last few weeks prior to Sam's death, he was very weak and unable to carry out his daily chores by himself. He couldn't even speak more than a few words on the phone. So, several of his students took turns to go to Bangalore and live with him. Dr. Anupama Patil, Sanjeev Deo, Bharat Thokale, Satish Patil, Dr. Priya Kulkarni, Rama Chobhe, Aravind, Ashok, and Dr. Kadam, made the necessary arrangements and took time away from their work and families and performed this divine duty. We are all extremely grateful to them. We are also extremely grateful to Mr. Rudolph Muller of Whitefield, Bangalore who regularly visited Sam, looked after his well-being, and informed his students of his status.

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Footnote 2: The circumstances of Sam's death are extraordinary. Bharat Thokale had planned to go to Bangalore on Saturday the 22nd (of November 2014) and stay with Sam for a week or two. But, on Wednesday the 19th, Milind Khilare suddenly had this impulse to make a quick trip to Bangalore to meet Sam. He also roped Bharat in. So, Milind, Bharat, Dr. Santosh Wale, Prakash Rainak, and Someshwar got into Milind's SUV and drove to Bangalore. They met Sam who was obviously pleased to see them. Later in the evening, Bharat stayed with Sam and the rest of them went over to Mr. Sing's house to spend the night. Bharat cooked a light meal for Sam which he ate happily, took his medicines, and slept. Bharat slept on a sleeping bag on the floor at Sam's bedside.

The next morning, Bharat helped Sam get fresh and made a sweet (Kheer) for him. The rest of the students arrived a little later and they sat around Sam or roamed about in the garden. Sam was too weak to really have a conversation. But he seemed at peace as he lay in bed. When he felt a little hot, he requested Bharat to remove his half sweater. Bharat removed the sweater and proceeded to place it somewhere nearby, and Sam – even in that moment of utmost weakness – groaned and motioned Bharat to put it away properly on a hanger!

A little after 12 noon it was time for the students to start the long drive back. When Bharat went to Sam to inform him that they were leaving, Sam motioned him to call everyone inside. Everyone came inside and stood around Sam. Sam had his eyes closed and tears trickled down his frail cheeks. He held everyone's hands and after a few minutes his tiny body shuddered and became still. He had had a heart attack. Dr. Wale immediately administered CPR but it did not help. Sam had taken his last breath in the company of his beloved students in the very house he held so dear to himself. (Tenzing, his last surviving cat, had died a year before.)

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Footnote 3: Photos!



The Ashram



The Rishi