

Extending Your Line

By Sheetal Gandhi

Mid-July is amazing in India; it's when monsoon season greets Mumbai with a beautiful embrace. It was a lazy Saturday afternoon and the grey clouds had engulfed the sun and taken over the entire sky. It looked like evening, but was only 2 p.m. There was thunder and beautiful blue lightening that forced even the darkest of clouds to sparkle. The sky was melting and water poured from it as if to submerge the entire city. Every street was flooded. There was a silent strength and energy in the surrounding with a refreshing smell of damp soil.

It was both peaceful and invigorating and yet I was neither. "Stupid crow! Get out of my balcony!" I shooed away the wet crow perched on the balcony adjacent to my living room. Its call was like nails on a chalkboard. I couldn't stand it. "What does he think of himself?" I mumbled as I walked past my father who was comfortably seated on the sofa and watching the movie *3 Idiots* on T.V. "That's too much anger for a helpless crow don't you think?" my father said to me. I didn't respond and just kept walking. I was only two steps away from my room when my dad called out to me and asked me to join him. I didn't want to, but I turned around and sat next to him with my arms crossed. He turned down the volume. On the screen, there was a slightly overweight grad student who clearly did not speak Hindi giving a speech that the audience found hilarious. "What's wrong?" my dad asked me. "Nothing," I replied. I was still bubbling with anger. Dad just kept looking at me with eyes that seemed to say *do you really expect me to believe that?* I gave up and began to tell him what had happened the day before.

We had received our chemistry exam grades back and for the first time ever I had the highest grade in my class. I was extremely happy, but slightly nervous because there was confusion among my peers regarding the answer to one of the questions on the exam. I realized that if the answer to the question changed, my grade would drop. I started to panic. The class was getting very noisy so, the teacher warned that the next person to talk would get 5 points off of the test. Unluckily for me, panic took over and I started debating with my neighbor that my answer was correct. Rohit being the jerk he was, took advantage of my anxiety and pointed out to the teacher that I was talking. I didn't top the class.

"I was so furious. I asked Rohit why he did that and you know what he said to me?" My dad just listened patiently while I vented out my frustration. "He told me that it was the only way to reduce the point difference the two of us had and beat me." I paused to swallow the anger and utter disgust. "I walked out of the class. I just wish I had punched him before leaving." My dad was trying to suppress a laugh when the T.V screen caught his attention.

He turned the volume back up and asked me to look at the screen. I was now even more irritated. Instead of saying something he wanted me to watch T.V. with him. On the screen, the same grad student was slipping magazines under the doors of the dorm rooms of his peers the day before their final exams.

“That is Chatur. He is trying to distract his peers so that they are unable to study for tomorrow’s exam. Instead of working hard and improving himself, he is pulling other people down”, dad said.

“Just like Rohit. Absolutely disgusting! I have no respect for that guy.”

“Don’t be so judgmental. Chatur is an insecure child. Ever since he was a boy all his parents cared about was whether or not he topped the class. Before going off to college most kids receive an emotional goodbye and wishes for the future, but Chatur received a condition. His father would pay his tuition for college only if he placed first in his class every semester. He didn’t really have a choice.”

“That does not make his deed less wrong. He could have slogged and studied hard.” I argued. I couldn’t understand why Dad was defending Chatur.

“I am not saying what he did was right. All I am saying is that I can understand why he did it. People don’t do bad things because they can. They have their reasons. Rohit probably had one too.”

“So, what am I supposed to do Dad?”

“Do what you already are doing. Extend your line instead of erasing other’s [lines]”

That statement reminded me of a story I had read as a child. King Akbar once called on his wise subjects and issued them a challenge. He ordered for a short chalk line to be drawn on the ground and he dared the men to shorten the line without touching it. The one who succeeded was to receive a 100 gold coins.

The smartest of men tried. They examined the line from every angle but couldn’t figure out a way of shortening it without erasing its ends. When all the men had given up Birbal, Akbar’s most loyal advisor came forward. He then took the chalk and drew a longer line right next to the original line. Akbar was impressed and he rewarded Birbal not only with gold, but also with infinite praise.

What my father said to me that day was the most valuable lesson I learned as a 14 year old. No matter what happens, don’t pull others down. Make yourself better. When you are trying to achieve something that a lot of people desire, there is bound to be competition and in a competition, there can be only one winner. It’s the way of life. You can either sabotage others (erase their lines) or you can work hard and make yourself worthy of the reward (extend your line). Destroying people is easy and it takes great strength of character to not succumb to the easy path. When you resist this temptation, you earn people’s genuine respect.

After that day, Rohit could do whatever he wanted. I wasn’t going to let it bother me. My goal was to study as hard I could. I was ready to achieve great grades and do it the right way.

“Improve yourself”, my dad had told me and that’s what I strived to do every time. Eventually, it paid off.

By the end of that year, the smartest kid of my grade, Aditya, became a very dear friend (not just a competitor). We shared notes and studied together. Both of us had the same resources and hence a fair competition. That year, I had topped my class and it wasn't even the best part. As I was going up to the stage to collect my scholarship I could see Aditya in the audience applauding loudly and cheering for me. We were competitors, but that did not get in the way of our friendship because neither one of us was trying to pull the other down. I got off the stage and my parents rushed towards me to give me a hug. They were proud, especially my dad. Not only because of my academic achievement, but also because I had extended my line.

That evening as we drove home, my mother was constantly on the phone. She called her sisters and some other relatives (whom I had never met) to share the news of my success. She was talking to my aunt when she saw a bakery and signaled my dad to stop the car. She hopped off and returned 10 minutes later with a huge Swiss Chocolate cake (my favorite). Her phone conversation had ended and she announced to us that Aunt Nisha was coming home for dinner to celebrate my success. I knew that she didn't really care about the scholarship and was only coming to poke around, but I was too happy to object to her coming over.

We reached home and mom started preparing the most delicious form of rice, Biryani. By 8 p.m. dinner was ready. I was arranging the plates when the doorbell rang. I opened the door to greet my aunt. She patted my head, congratulated me dryly and went straight to the dinner table. As soon as Grandpa woke up from his evening nap, we sat down to eat. My mother proudly announced my accomplishment to grandpa as she brought out the cake. I had a smile plastered to my face. He congratulated me and helped himself to another slice of cake. Dad nudged him and told him that he couldn't eat another slice as he has diabetes and the doctors had given strict instructions to minimize his sugar intake.

"Doctors! They just scare patients to earn money. Shouldn't a proud grandfather celebrate his granddaughter's achievements? You eat Papa." my aunt intervened. Shocked, my dad said, "What are you saying? Just two weeks ago Papa was in the hospital."

"A little sugar is not going to kill him. What do you have against his happiness? All you ever do is stop him from enjoying. You don't care about him. You only want Papa's property."

My dad didn't say anything, but I clearly noticed the pain in his eyes. I was seeing red and breathing fire. I snapped. "How dare you say that? Dad is only one who is taking care of grandpa. You didn't even come to the hospital to see him. Don't you dare pretend like you care."

That one statement had destroyed everything. My mother stared at me in absolute disbelief. Within a second the disbelief changed into disappointment, then embarrassment and finally anger. She yelled at me and apologized to my aunt who weaved a series of taunts and left. Mom shut herself in her room and she cried. I was confused and furious. I went to Dad and demanded answers. "Auntie was way out of line. Why didn't you say anything? Why did Mom yell at me? I was right, but Mom didn't support me. Why did she have to apologize?" Dad was calm, but stern. He said, "She is older than you. You had no right to be disrespectful to her. She may be wrong and she may have been rude but that doesn't give you or me the permission to act the same way. People may do you wrong but you must never retaliate the same way. Vengeance is

an endless loop. Nothing good ever comes out of it.” I could clearly hear the disappointment in his cold voice. I felt terrible.

I stormed out of the living room and slammed my bedroom door. All the anger transformed into tears that began to stream down my cheeks. The best day of my life had turned into a mess. My parents were hurt and I couldn't (or wasn't supposed to) do anything about it. I was expected to be nice to people even if they were trying to hurt the people I love. I hated this stupid philosophy, but I followed it because I didn't want to hurt my parents. So, at school when some girls were made fun of me, I ignored them but it only made matters worse because they took my silence as a license to keep bothering me. Dad's philosophy was making my life hard. Meanwhile, my aunt created a new drama every other day. I kept quiet, but things still ended with my mother's tears, father's broken heart and my frustration. I couldn't take it anymore. It was too painful so, I emotionally distanced myself from everyone just like Rodriguez distanced himself from his family, but you can never really stop feeling. Some days all the suppressed emotions resurfaced and my feelings got magnified.

One such day, I asked dad, “What is the point of being nice if people keep taking advantage of you?” He put his hand over my head and simply said, “One day you will find out.” I wasn't satisfied by the answer, but I believed him. I knew for sure that I wasn't going to fight fire with fire, but I wasn't going to let myself be burnt either. There was nothing I could do about the drama at home, but I had hope that one day it would all sort out. I never hurt anyone because they hurt me. Three years passed following my dad's philosophy. It had established itself in my sub-conscious and become a part of me. Ignoring those girls wasn't hard anymore. My dad had told me that one day I would find out the point of being nice and in September 2011 I did.

I was in the 12th grade. The last lecture was over and I was waiting at the bus stop for bus no. 123 to take me home. The sun was setting over the sea behind me and the sky was a beautiful red-orange. The sea sparkled and the waves crashed in silent strength when I saw my bus approaching. I boarded the bus and sat next to an old gentleman. He had grey hair and was wearing a white shirt with beige pants. His all-seeing eyes were hiding behind thick glasses. He looked at me and I gave him a polite smile. He asked me which school I went to. I answered and he told me that he was an English professor in the neighboring school. All through the bus ride he talked about today's ungrateful students who had absolutely no respect for the teachers. I listened. My stop was approaching so I told him that I had to go and that it was nice speaking to him. He smiled and before I left he told me “I felt respected when you spoke to me. I wish the kids today were more like you. You are so...nice.” I got off the bus but as I walked home, a strange feeling gripped me. It was happiness, surprise, confusion, pride and satisfaction all at the same time. That gentleman on the bus did not know me and yet he wished that people were like me. I reached home and went to freshen up. I was washing my hands when I looked at my reflection in the mirror. I was still smiling. Right then, I had found my answer.

People may not remember your name or what you did but they will always remember how you made them feel. To be able to look into the mirror, see yourself purely as you are and still like and respect the person you see. That is the point of being nice. All academic education may be rendered useless if you don't understand the fragility of human emotions. Once damaged, broken hearts and hurt feeling can never be mended completely. Realizing this is true education. That is

why my father always said that I should make myself better. Pulling others down is just another way of hurting people. So is retaliation and vengeance. This education that my dad gave me may have made me emotionally distant, but I'm glad to have received it because I can wake up every morning and look myself in the eye. Honestly, I don't know who I'd be if on that one rainy afternoon he hadn't told me *Extend your line instead of erasing other's*.

Work Cited

Richard Rodriguez: *Achievement of Desire*