

Our Fathers—Teaching Us to Soar

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When I was young, I often felt as if I lived between several worlds—the world of my professional parents (doctors), that of my culture (East Indian/Sikh), and that of my friends growing up in Canada. It was a world full of contradictions. There were clear expectations around the home: Being able to cook, clean, and take care of the house for our Indian guests. Yet no limitations set on what I could achieve academically or otherwise in life. Mine was a childhood of continual opportunity and ambiguity surrounding my possible identities as a woman, an Indian-Canadian woman, and as a potential professional.

To me, living in a woman's nation seems like that experience on steroids. Instead of managing three identities across 18 years, I often feel as if I'm juggling 10 identities on any given day of the week. And everywhere I look, I now see others—my husband, friends, and co-workers—each managing their own increasing “portfolio of identities” that defies a singular description. I'm grateful for the childhood training that prepared me well for this multiple identity syndrome.

Yet digging deeper, it's also clear to me that my father was the even more powerful force in my childhood. It used to be said that behind every successful man there is a powerful woman, but the adage today should be “behind every powerful woman, there is likely a powerful man and role model.”

In my case, I credit both my parents, who shared a medical practice for over 30 years, with inspiring me professionally. It was my father, however, who taught me to soar, and who fostered the belief that truly anything was possible for my life. As early as first grade, I

remember his love for science, helping me put together my first science project—a working model of the human eye. Yet he was also an artist—a lover of both charcoal and watercolors, as well as a businessman who loved running his practice and financial investing.

As importantly, he took the time to answer my questioning on religion and culture with an open-mindedness that led me to believe intellectual pursuit could co-exist with faith.

His overarching message to me was that it was possible for me to control my own destiny and live by my own expectations. He encouraged me to work for myself, which led me to help found a technology company in my twenties. And in my thirties, I married a man of a different race and culture knowing my father would have embraced him wholeheartedly into our family.

In fact my father also married and embraced an unconventional woman of her times. My mother was raised in Punjab in the 1930s by her father and brother (my grandmother died when my mom was 8 years old). My mother was an anomaly, becoming a doctor and waiting until she was 32 to marry when most women in India married young and stayed home.

Today, I look at my husband and my daughter and I have no doubt whatsoever about the incredible role he will play in the woman she becomes. He is already comfortable in a world where we together choose and interchange the roles we play in our children's lives day by day. But I'm newly grateful for the unique ways he shows her what's possible in ways only a father can. If who we are today has been shaped by a generation of men who taught us to soar despite prevailing expectations, I'm awestruck by the opportunity for our husbands and partners to teach the next generation how to fly even further.

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