

My Priceless Inheritance

by

Karthik Jediseh



Happy 70th Birthday, Appa!

Ah, Appa. You're 70 now! Congratulations on this momentous milestone!

Seven decades of your life spent as a son, brother, uncle, husband, father, father-in-law, and now grandfather. You have successfully navigated through and adapted to a myriad of ups and downs; seen and experienced living in more places than most people; been a kind and caring figure in the lives of those you dwelled in; maintained your integrity and authenticity in spite of trying circumstances, but above all, you are my Appa. Since becoming a father myself, I see that you have been the sort of father I want to emulate myself.

You have been so many things in your 70 years. A fond and grateful son. A respectful and admiring brother. A devoted and supportive husband. A funny and interested uncle. A loving and kind father. An accepting and encouraging father-in-law. An exceedingly affectionate and happy-go-lucky grandfather.

However, I haven't seen you in terms of these roles alone. As your son, I want to commemorate this occasion by writing a few short pieces for the gifts you have bestowed on me over the years. They are the various aspects of you that have deeply impacted me. I believe this is my inheritance from you.

I hope that these pieces amuse you and give you pause to reflect on your own life at this milestone. My feeble memory has tried to be faithful to most of the stories and events I've recalled and whether my words are truly factual or not have not stopped me from penning them down. This is how I see you.

I look forward to your correcting me if I've been off the mark in any way!

Enjoy!



The Armchair Anthropologist

There was a real ball of joy in my belly. As I held onto the handlebars of the Vespa, my feet perched on the foot well, the breeze hitting my face only enhanced this exuberant feeling. I had, in my possession, a fresh copy of the *Tintin and the Explorers on the Moon*. Appa was navigating the scooter through the mad streets of Pune, a non-descript, dirty, and congested Indian city like any other. I was flush with anticipation to begin reading through my new acquisition, as I glanced back at Appa and gave him a big smile. He smiled back with a look that spoke, "You're welcome, Kannukutty." Of course, as soon as we reached home, I dove right into the adventures of Tintin, Captain Haddock and Snowy as they explored about that big, white satellite of ours. Appa too leafed through the pages after I was done, chuckling to himself whenever his favourite character, Captain Haddock, threw a fit and shouted "Blistering barnacles!" like the pirate he wished he was.

The wonderful thing about Appa was his eagerness to indulge in these tasty morsels for the mind and the heart. Things that yield this unique combination of emotions that are one part amusement and one part fascination. So, as the number of Tintin books that lined the bookshelf increased over the years, so did his interest in showing me the larger world outside of the social experiment in homogeneity that was India. Beyond the borders of that country lay a vast universe of characters, locales, and adventures as depicted in the many books that Appa enthusiastically exposed me to.

Books were always encouraged and preferred over toys and doohickeys. Even I gravitated towards them. I preferred putting my own life on pause and journey elsewhere, never losing the fascination for the novel, the interesting, the amusing, and the unique. Not that I was being raised to be that particular breed of Indian who shuns the local and national in favour of the international and exotic. No, I was equally at ease reading through the pictorials of the *Amar Chitra Katha* series, the sort of local stories that exposed the many diverse worlds that inhabit the Indian subcontinent itself. However, in the media-poor environment of India in the 80's that was starved of things Western, it was stories of other countries and heroes with strange names, which truly lit a spark in my mind's eye. For these brought about a fresh perspective and, on many occasions, revealed a contrary approach to life. Or at least opened a window to glimpse at it. And opening such windows was what I remember Appa doing best.

Windows were opened through other media than books alone. I still marvel at the thought of growing up in a place like India back then, well before the advent of global interconnectedness and social awareness, and yet having jammed to the sounds of *Kraftwerk* and Hugo Montenegro's instrumental rendition of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. Listening to the crooning sounds of Jim Reeves. The happy, love-fueled disco vibes of *Abba* and *BoneyM*. In a land populated heavily with indigenous sounds and ethnic rhythms, these bits of Western energy and vibes were refreshing. And, it

wasn't even that Appa firmly defined himself as a Rock-n-Roll dude or an aficionado of Pop. He didn't care to define himself in any way, actually. Anything that sounded different, but good, warranted a place in the collection. I still remember the *HMV* (His Master's Voice) logo on our record player and voluntarily picking up this LP or that and playing it all on my own. These sounds filled the house after school and welcomed Appa home after a long day of being an engineer in the Iyer brain trust.

We were in Bangalore when I first heard Kraftwerk's "The Robots," a track that still never fails to get me moving, grooving and do the robot dance. That soon became one of my favourite albums, soon to be followed by their "Computer World" album, which made me giddy as a... well, schoolchild when I laid eyes on the tape in an obscure mall in Jayanagar. I still owe it to his early introductions to these pioneers of Electronic Music that would later be rekindled as my own interest in the genre while in Montreal. I can almost imagine Appa, if he were to have been a friend growing up, to be the sort of open-minded hipster who would have visited local used record shops and get some eclectic and exotic LPs to play on his vintage record player.

Now, add in some Jedi to this creative mess that Appa sculpted in my mind and you have the makings of a childhood enshrined in imagination. While the creatives in America were busy conjuring worlds to inspire and fascinate an entire generation, here was this man from India who ate it all up. And made room at the table for his son. It was Appa that made me the ardent fan of science fiction that I am today.

For then, in those formative years, I saw Mel Gibson as *Mad Max* battling the lawless zealots that roamed the hellish outback in post-apocalyptic Australia; saw Sigourney Weaver outwit and defeat the acid-spewing monstrosities in *Aliens* and play with some insane futuristic military hardware that would make any young boy salivate; and finally, the pièce de resistance, *Star Wars*! When Appa took me to go see *The Return of the Jedi*, I came out of that movie theater a changed boy. And not just because I had one too many vegetable puffs. It was this miraculous story that weaved in this thing called the Force, these incredible, martial monks that were the Jedi with their light sabers, and of course, Darth Vader. Yoda. And Jabba the Hutt. Actually, it was Jabba the Hutt that I found most amusing. I'm pretty sure Appa felt the same.

These early influences put me on a path to being a lifelong fan of all things sci-fi. There was something inspirational in beholding future worlds, societies, and technologies that could overcome the ills and evils that plague our reality. It instilled some hope in me for a mankind that rises above its primitive instincts and base natures. It made me mindful of those scientists, designers, and visionaries that make it their life's work to steer the thankless, self-absorbed, cynical sheep that we are towards that better future. Above all, it awakened something inside me - some excitement, passion, and eagerness towards thinking along these lines -

rather than be dead inside, driven purely by gain, influence, and power. It was Appa's interest in such things that helped lift the curtain on the world that met the eyes, gaze beyond and dream.

So, if anyone were to ask, "What do these things - Kraftwerk, Tintin, and the Jedi - have in common?" My reply would be, "Appa!" To me, he was indeed more than just an engineer from the Iyer brain trust. The funny thing is I never admired or applauded him for what he was to the outside world or what he did for a living. Or what degrees he had attained. Or the sort of position he might have held in this company or that, or the sort of influence and power he might wield in his grown-up life. To me, he was just an interesting man who exposed me to interesting things, for I think he saw life as an exercise in exploring and experiencing rather than attaining and accomplishing. I don't recall ever at any point stating to myself that I feel this particular profession calling my name or that particular field is where I want to excel in. I am truly indebted to Appa for making the mold I would occupy a very fluid one and one that welcomed all sorts of material to fill.

It was his role as armchair anthropologist that invited me to appreciate diverse cultures, art forms, ideas, and stories and come out just a little bit more open-minded, eccentric, and imaginative. It's poignant now that things have returned full circle with us - the Ganapathis - soon to become the Jedisehs (a playfully Canadian take on the Jedis), with ample blessings from Mr. Ganapathi himself.





The Atypical Brahmin

*Ya kundendu tushara haara dhavala, ya shubhra vastravrita
Ya veena vara danda mandithakara, ya shwetha padmaasana
Ya brahmachyuthaha shankara prabrithibhi devai, sada poojitha
Samaam paatu saraswathi bhagavathi, nihshesha Jaddyapaha.*

This Vedic incantation is forever etched in my memory banks, able to be recalled at any time, with minimal error and near-to-accurate pronunciation. Add this to the few other hymns that I still remember to this day and you would not be blamed for thinking that I wake up every morning performing salutations to Surya the Sun God, punctuating my day with sessions of Pranayama and recitations of mantras. However, that couldn't be further from the truth. The credit for that goes to the man who taught me these Sanskrit obeisances in the first place.

I still recall the periodic visits to the many temples and shrines that dot the South Indian landscape. Each shrine an abode of a particular deity or representation of the Source. Not that I saw it like that back then. I followed along like an obedient child, putting my hand out to cup some holy energy from the flickering flames brought out by the priest. Blessed by the presence of the divine. Prostrate in front of the deity and rub some sacred ash on the forehead. There. I just connected with God, *Aandavaa*, *Kadavaley*. To observe Appa during these interactions with the Brahminical flavour of South Indian Hinduism was not to see a devout and pious man, but someone who was detached from the fervor and faith in favour of a more spiritual approach.

Appa was a learned man (not that that has ever guaranteed reason in matters of religion) and a questioning man. While he upheld his filial, fraternal, matrimonial and paternal duties without any cause for alarm, he was nonetheless private in his beliefs and pragmatic at the end of the day. Matters of Man were more important and influential than the matters of God. This was evident in his approach to the one item that defines a Brahmin, in fact, makes a Brahmin. The sacred thread - the *Poonal*.

Considered to be a vestment worn by Brahmins with great pride and reverence, the *Poonal* makes for a lineage going back countless generations to this Sage or that one. I think we were the Agastyas or the Vishwamitras. Not sure. Perhaps then, it was just circumstance that when I came of age for the *Upanayanam* ceremony, it never materialized. Appa's own nonchalance towards the whole *Poonal* thing may have been another reason. Not that I was waiting for it with baited breath - actually, I never gave it much thought. Appa might have mentioned doing the *Upanayanam* once or twice, but that was the extent of it. His hand of religiousness never came down hard on me; it was always a gentle nudge of sorts.

So, it was during the trip we made to India as a family in 2005 to attend the wedding of Jayshree - a cousin - that Appa thought it'd be finally opportune to make me a bonafide Brahmin. I believe it was Appa's nonchalance all along - never one to be fanatically for or against much - that was sufficient for me to agree to it.

We boarded the train for Thrissur from Trichy, a lazy backwater in the heart of Kerala - a state known for its natural beauty and nonchalant lifestyle. Nonchalance was seemingly everywhere. That proved to be a good antidote for any potential feelings of Brahminical pride or worse, arrogance that being conferred the sacred thread might bring about. Thrissur was centered around the Guruvayurappan temple, the abode of the *Kutty* (baby) form of Krishna. I had known that this was Appa's favourite temple as Lord Guruvayurappan was his deity of choice. This may seem like a contradiction - how can a not-so-religious man be enamoured by any deity at all. However, I understood the sentiment behind it going into the ceremony. It was one of adoration of an entity that manifested the power and love of the Absolute, the Divine, the Source, but also one that was innocent, playful, and gentle. It made for a pleasant feeling in the centre of your being, as long as reason prevailed beyond that. And Appa was, if nothing else, a reasonable man.

In the midst of this temple to a playful deity in a backwater town in a nonchalant state, the ceremony took place. Hymns were recited. Ghee was poured into the open fire. Camphor was burned. Dhotis were worn. The thread was adorned. All building up to the climax - the recitation of the *Gayatri Mantra* - supposedly the password to opening the secrets of the Universe only hushed in secret from a father's mouth to the son's receptive ear. It was done.

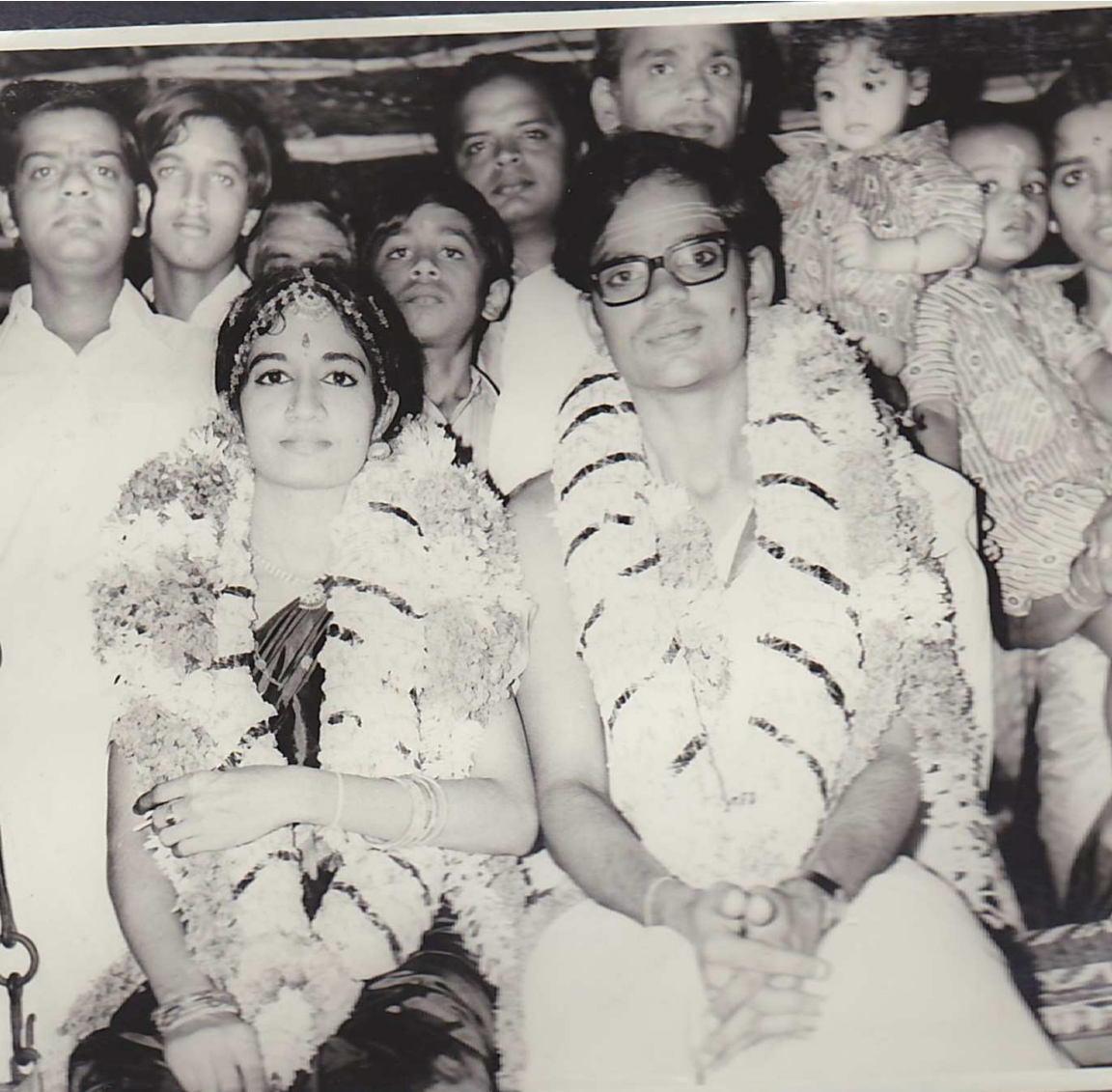
Then came the hug from Appa, accompanied by a couple of tears that shed from his content eyes. I had spiritually felt no different coming out of it, but was content knowing I'd agreed to something that would make Appa happy - the one religious obligation he had of me. He had fulfilled his duty to his lineage and his family, by connecting his only child to the ancestors. For that matter, I never truly gathered that the stock he came from was particularly religious or bent on deity appeasement to get on with life and living.

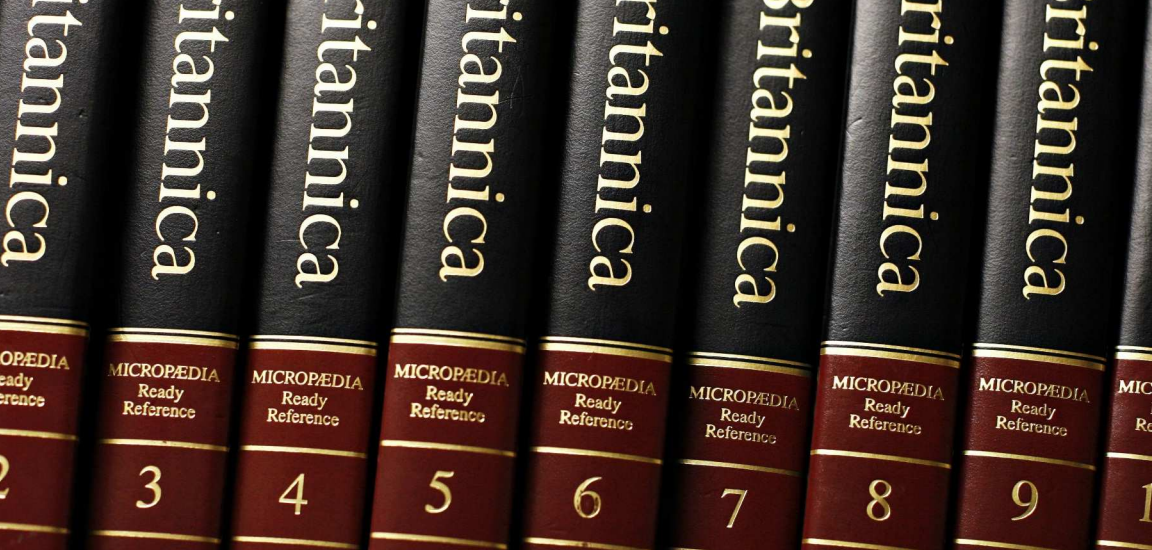
Appa's younger brother, the late Jayaraman, came from that same stock and his life story was even more powerful evidence of bucking the odds. As long as I'd known them, Chitthappa and his wife, Raji Chitthi, had constructed their lives around a mission dedicated to the teachings of Swami Ramakrishna, a 19th century mystic and philosopher. They even went so far as to dispose of all their worldly belongings and move to the vicinity of the Belur Math - an ashram and oasis from the utterly demoralizing dung heap of misery that is Calcutta. All their belongings but for the books. And what books they were!

Visiting Raji Chitthi after Chitthappa had passed away, I had the honour of being witness to one of the most eclectic, thought-provoking, and mind-expanding collection of spiritual and philosophical books. These were the books that Chitthappa had read/collected over the years and I finally caught a glimpse of the sort of man he was. One position lower in the birth order than Appa, he had evidently questioned a lot about his religious

heritage, never truly finding peace till he had encountered the teachings of mystics, holy men, philosophers, and Swami Ramakrishna in his literary pilgrimages.

It was almost as if, with each successive child, the Krishnamurthi offspring had become increasingly disillusioned with the Brahminical traditions their forefathers practiced. Appa, and by extension, Jayaram Chitthappa demonstrated a level of intellectual openness and spiritual flexibility that I never encountered among the many Brahmins I'd come across. Their healthy skepticism and lack of blind conviction sealed my fate as an irreverent disbeliever, in spite of all the merits and benefits of Brahminical Hinduism its many followers espouse. At the same time, however, I shall continue extending feelers out into the Universe to stumble on something that speaks to me on a spiritual level and makes me content, as Appa has with Shri Guruvayurappan. I just haven't found it yet.





The Encyclopedia Salesman

"Appa, when is volume 6 coming out?"

"I don't know, Karthikutty. I'll go to the bookstore and find out."

"Make sure you get it if it's there. I don't want it gone."

"OK, Karthikutty."

Let's go back to a time when Wikipedia was nothing more than a germ of an idea in the mind of Jimmy Wales, its founder, well before any technology that would enable its presence was even remotely dreamt of. This was the time of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, the voluminous tome that catalogued every thing, event, activity, and phenomenon worth noting. To me, it was like a Bible. More than any book, it was this collection of world-spanning facts, figures, definitions, and descriptions that were readily soaked in by the hungry sponge in my skull. For there existed an environment at home that encouraged this narcotic need for knowledge. There existed no purpose to it than for its own sake; there was no prize other than the simple information it conferred; there was just the yearning. A yearning nurtured early on by Appa, the consummate Encyclopedia salesman. He could very well have been one. He would have pushed more copies than the publishers could keep up with, for the simple reason that he would have believed wholeheartedly in the product. He definitely got me sold, buying a whole series of Indian-published encyclopaedias that were dubbed the "Book of Knowledge," published in several volumes. Or, at least that's what I remember them being named.

There was no show such as *Jeopardy!* or *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* back then. I definitely don't remember doing it for any competitions or for impressing any teachers or peers. Nor was it a discipline-specific, selective funneling of knowledge that would prove its value one day, like learning to become an Engineer or getting inspired to become one. I don't remember at any point Appa saying that he'd highly prefer that I follow this vocation or that, or ever mentioning that I'd be much better off if I focused on only learning useful things. I mean, what could I possibly gain from learning about the heroics of Hannibal vs. the Roman Empire; or knowing the types of Birds of Paradise that inhabit New Guinea; or understanding how Man domesticated animals, etc. etc.

Here was a man who simply liked to encourage anything I showed an interest in, not really demonstrating any bias or prejudice towards how he'd rather direct the course of my mind, or for that matter, my life. There was never a pressure put upon me, under threat of the boot or the belt. He was never that type anyway, for even the other aspects of parenting he was responsible for. Yes, I concede there was always the push to do one's best, and seeing as my best was generally above the class mean, it was come to be expected of me. However, it wasn't that I was pulled aside by him and demanded an explanation for why some other equally-skilled kid came first on the class roll and I came in second. In the bigger picture, I think he got the concept of performance, failure, and achievement, and that these need not come to define an individual's net worth. Nor should it take precedence to actually learning and discovering more about our world.

Consequently, learning for its own sake was the mainstay during my childhood. And this addiction of mine was certainly lent a hand by other dealers in the family. Appa's sister, Janaki Athai, had a particular fondness for me which was thoroughly reciprocated. She was the chilliest, most jovial, and smartest woman I ever had the honour of knowing. Her standard gift of fare for any birthday of mine was a new, shiny encyclopedia. Not because this was what she thought would be best for me, but more so because she knew it'd make me happy beyond measure. I came to observe just how much kinship there existed between Appa and Janaki Athai. Hearing from Appa himself - who was possibly Athai's greatest admirer - just how truly smart she was, certainly made me feel more than privileged in having known her and having received her stewardship for so many years.

I'm 37 now and still find myself clicking away randomly through the link maze that is Wikipedia, now that it does exist and proves itself to be a resource beyond comparison to the meager ones that were at my disposal back in the day. I still find it utterly fascinating to know about the history of the Tudors or the many campaigns of Genghis Khan, to the way a fission reactor works or why certain species of dung beetles have evolved such massive horned appendages. It should boggle my mind that I find such things interesting at all, but I believe it was observing Appa's own unprejudiced interest that is the real culprit. My conversations with Appa have always impressed upon me that all these objects, events, people, and places are but components of a bigger picture. It's appreciating just how long and storied a history we - as a species and as a civilization - have, and just how complicated and fascinating the entire world is, from the miracles of nature to the near-miracles of human ingenuity.

Thanks to Appa's advocacy of and interest in knowledge and learning, I have come to understand that this bigger picture gives everyday life some context and puts one's own life in a better perspective, albeit a humbling one. I think being humbled is the point, for each of us is infinitesimally obscure on our own in the grand scheme of things. The more I know about what exists out there, the more I realize that humbling fact about myself. Seeing the bigger picture, being interested in the world and current events, and connecting the patterns of the human condition, is what I've seen Appa encourage, even if indirectly. And what I've seen him practice directly is not be blind to the injustices and travesties that litter the fabric of human reality, and to formulate some reaction to it, driven by some sense of justice or ethics. I can play the conversations in my head about how much he was disgusted by the ravenous excesses of Wall Street, how he finds certain aspects of American politics amusing; how he at the same time, and so on.

Little did Appa, the Encyclopedia salesman, know that his encouragement and open-mindedness would result in something more deep and significant than seeing the bigger picture and being humbled. He has passed on a boon to me. A boon I think Appa has been enjoying, perhaps even without

officially recognizing. A boon that confers a sense of lightness and sympathy in response to the human condition. Upon reaching a certain age where distractions are no longer sufficient, we feel the presence of this general all-pervading suffering. A suffering that weaves in and out of every life as it exists in this fragile, fallible, and flawed incarnation. The sort of suffering that the Buddha perhaps spoke of, however the mere dispassionate detachment he recommended can only alleviate it for so long. In fact, it's knowing the stories, myths, and histories that precede us, and building an accurate image of the present as it exists, that gives that sense of acceptance, sympathy, and perhaps even amusement. The kind only knowledge can buy.





The Unassuming Dravidian

"Do you know who I am?"

"I'll show you what I can do."

"I'm the best there is."

"Look at me and how awesome I am."

I have thankfully been spared these statements of arrogance and conceit on the part of Appa. I've never once looked at him and felt anything remotely close to a sense of superiority, much else any notion of entitlement and vanity. His presence has been mercifully pragmatic and humble. What you see is what you get. If he were pressed, he'll likely admit, "I may not be the biggest, brightest, loudest, richest, or strongest of human specimens, but what I am is authentic and I'm well aware of my flaws and imperfections." I almost wish that an unassuming person like him did live in another land, where such an outlook was indeed embraced and supported, rather than being judged and criticized. A land where he wouldn't have to defend and preserve his outlook against the sort of immediate sizing up done by even the most well-intentioned of us, to determine the value of something or someone.

I don't know what it is about Appa's family, but I never got that they were high-headed about much of anything. Perhaps the only thing they truly knew was their forte was their intellect, not being singers, entertainers, athletes, models, leaders of commerce, politicians, or any of those vocations that might be a direct projection of one's ego and capabilities. They were, to their credit, good engineers and scientists, making use of their analytical abilities to secure stable incomes and do something beneficial while they're at it. It's easy for pride to even creep in here, however, I've always observed a general level of humility about this one aspect that afforded a sense of self-worth for the clan. Any projection of pride was made onto the accomplishments or innate talents of others; never upon themselves. I remember the level of fond admiration he had for his sister, Janaki, who in her own right, had one of the sharpest, most logical minds there was. Had circumstances been different, she very well might have been a professor at MIT or worked on Wall Street as a financial whiz. However, I never felt that she maintained such an image of herself.

Perhaps, it was that the family had fairly humble origins. Appa's appa was a railway man and from the stories I've heard about him, he was all about doing his job, raising no eyebrows, and living a simple, unassuming life. I think the children took to that example and were raised to do their best, keep away from pedestals and anything that would raise their profile, and still live through ethical means. It's these values that bound them together and as such, the Krishnamurthi clan were the epitome of non-competition and inter-reliance. I wonder if there's a physical component to it that gets passed on through heredity for, as long as I remember, I'd cringe at the thought of being #1 at anything. It could simply be that I internalized the sort of behaviours Appa displayed and took after him, for being at the top of any heap is surely a very stress-ridden experience. *How long will it last? What are the threats*

on the horizon? How do I ensure those nipping at the heels be kept at bay? Sure, everyone fantasizes about being the best at something or another, but I observed something else in practice in Appa and his family. If being at the top were a causal by-product of one's innate talents, then so be it. Success in that regard should not be a pursuit for its own sake and so, whatever such fantasies I may have had would never be supplied the fuel. The will to bring it to fruition just wasn't there.

Maybe, it was a cultural and genetic feature. In this dog-eat-dog world of fixed definitions of what is fit and what is not, the Darwinian paradigm has already pegged the South Indian Brahmins in a certain box. They're good at Math and Sciences, and so will make for good analysts, scientists, engineers, and the like. However, they're overall a feeble lot, not particularly endowed with those typical and coveted Caucasoid-Aryan traits that grant an entrance ticket to the game of supremacy. It's almost as if these genetic markers are regarded as outward displays of the sort of fitness that attracts instant universal adulation and admiration. And, in a way, the whole Colonial era was a fitting case in point for the subcontinent to exemplify these racial attitudes and allow the Europeans to walk all over it like lords. So, what do typically dark, non-Caucasian looking people from the Dravidian gene pool do? Do they resign themselves to feel inferior and be subjugated? To be sure, some do and live their lives out by hanging on to whatever shred of these coveted racial features they were blessed with, to feel validated and thus, better than others on the spectrum. Others shrug their shoulders and check out of this game early on, seeing its futility and focus on endeavours and meaning that is created by hand and mind, not shaped by the genetic lottery or societal benchmarks.

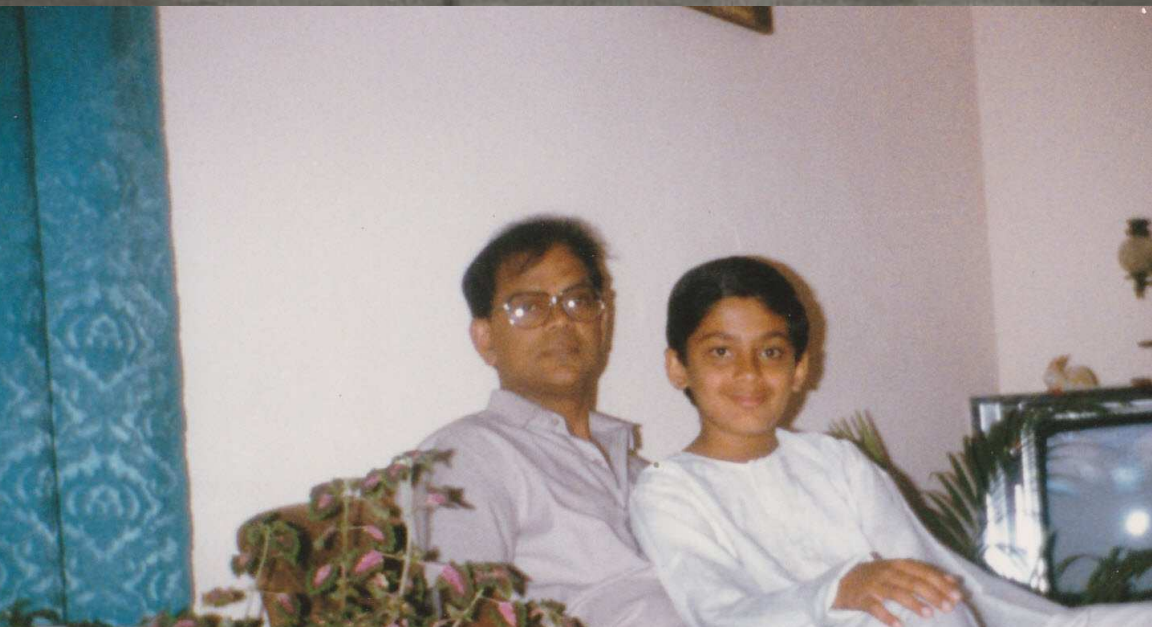
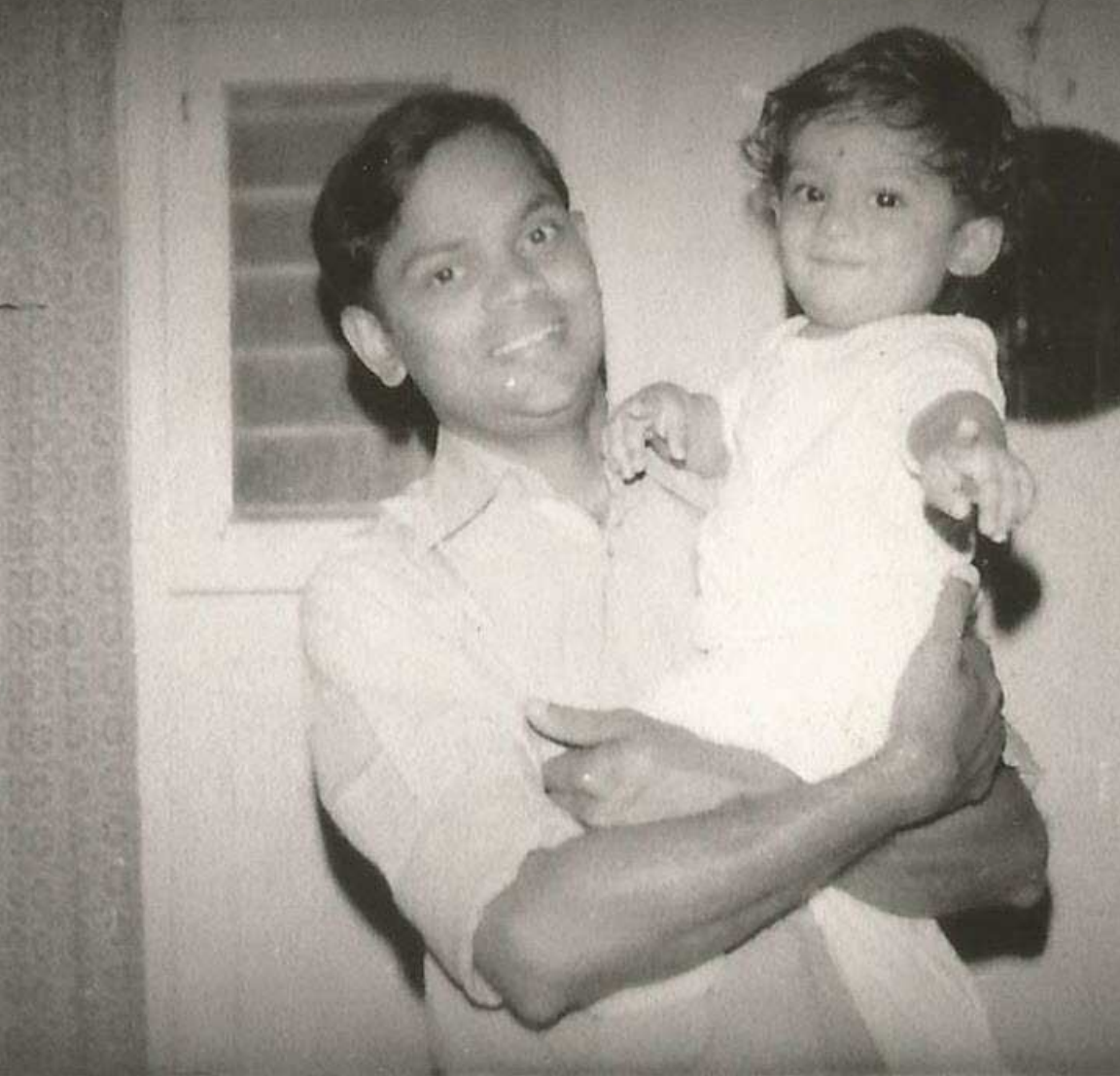
I believe Appa's family, for the most part, and Appa in particular, subscribed to this latter approach. And I've derived a great deal of comfort from it and learnt a few choice lessons. There's a window to life that is opened when one sees the world through such authentic glasses. Outside this window, the world looks like it's made of real people. Beyond the masks that people don to deceive, hide and intimidate, there's real beings with flaws and imperfections and fallibilities and propensities for stupidity. It's not a black and white world. There's shades and degrees of colour that make up stories which provide for sentiments like pity and humour. You can feel sorry for someone. You can laugh along with someone. You can shake your head at someone with amusement. However, you can only do these things when you can turn off their threat displays and see them for what they truly are. These are the powers gained from being unassuming yourself.

Glasgow Airport

Entry is restricted
to those with
an appropriate official
or Air Service Staff

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The Benign Man

We were getting a new sofa. I don't exactly recall the impetus behind this purchase, but suffice it to say, Amma probably wanted it. And that probably meant we were truly in need of a new sofa, for she had an eye for such things - something that Appa totally missed the boat on. In this regard, they were truly polar opposites, Appa with his chill, anything goes approach to the family dwelling and Amma with her particular penchant for maintaining a spic and span home right out of the magazines. But, that's another story for another time. We were getting a new sofa.

The place - the idyllic suburb of Jayanagar in Bangalore, that city pregnant with the vision of booming into a powerful workhorse for the information economy that was yet to be birthed in America. The time - the late 80's when the influence of the West was slowly creeping into Indian homes, in terms of material wants, social mores, and cultural norms. We inhabited a decent, middle-class home on two floors, each room therein a marvelous showpiece any Indian housewife would envy. And so, a new sofa was warranted to maintain its currency and merit. This part is a blur as well, where I don't really remember the details of which sofa first arrived, why it wasn't liked, and when it was returned in place of a new sofa. All I do remember is there was a financial obligation on part of the furniture salesman to return some money owed to Appa. It was these trips to the furniture showroom that belie the point of this particular piece.

So, we meet Mr. Furniturewalla, very likely his real name for I distinctly recollect his mannerisms, his face, his intonation and demeanour that spoke of being Parsi. But, let's just call him that - Mr. Furniturewalla - for that's what he was as well. He seemed quite likeable at first, a potent mixture of smiles and kind words that indicated every intention of being sincere and honest. His initial reactions to owing Appa money were all too reassuring and betrayed any tendencies for deceit and evasion. However, the visits continued to add up, each visit an exercise in patience on part of Appa and having to bear through ever-escalating levels of drama and treacherous displays of pity-inducing pleas.

"No, you don't understand, Mr. Ganapathi... We have no money. I don't even know how I'm going to feed my family. But, I'm a man of my word. You'll get your money. I assure you."

This Mr. Furniturewalla was one of those fine breeds of tricksters, skilled in the art of striking another man's soft spot. Appa's soft spot was of one to sympathize with the less fortunate and be more understanding of their circumstances. Somehow, this guy knew it and he'd only met Appa recently.

"I don't know what to do, Mr. Ganapathi. I'm going bankrupt. How can you ask me money in these conditions? All this is just show. I have nothing to my name."

And so it went. The store remained consistently open, with customers walking in and out. Every new visit revealed some new item had arrived,

some other item had been taken, going so far as to suggest that it was likely sold... for actual money! There was less and less the impression that he was really going to go belly up anytime soon and more and more became an actual comical performance. He probably knew it himself. Yet, his guilt made him continue his act and try to play Appa for as long as he could. Furniture man was probably surprised as well that his pitiable attempts at dignity, while becoming more and more this loathsome rat-like creature, did not elicit a more inflamed response on part of Appa. Heck, I think I was surprised too. I found myself getting feelings of annoyance and then not long after, disgust at this specimen of humanity. Equally striking was the level of restraint that Appa displayed, time and time again. Every venomous thrust on the part of this reptilian furniture salesman was deflected by Appa the mongoose, who was planning and playing the long game. He didn't get bit by this creature and let his blood boil to becoming venomous himself. Details skip my mind, but I know I never got any indication that Appa let this man get the better of him and forced his hand to sink to those reptilian levels.

I don't even know how this situation resolved, for all I know is we suddenly stopped our visits to the temple of lies that was the furniture showroom. We did have new sofas. Appa was not a changed man. I think, if anything, it reinforced his beliefs in navigating his life by a brighter light, than would otherwise be dimmed by the wickedness and malice of men. He didn't become an angrier man for it, nor was he jaded or weakened by any thoughts of failure or insufficiency. I understood what makes him be the man he has always been. It's not defined by the sum of the many episodes in life he may have been perceived to have won, to have dominated or overcome, or come out the bigger man standing over the fallen shell of a weaker one. Such men, to be sure, build empires and are built to build them. Appa, I realized, was not one of these men. I realized he was the sort of man who would ensure that the edifice of ethics, propriety, and general benevolence he'd built all his life wouldn't crumble at the first sight of defeat or being tested. He would see life as the long game. Not the short sprint.

Sure, he was and is every bit capable of anger. And, I've witnessed those outbursts here and there. But, never in the throes of even the most calamitous of emotions, was there any indication of projecting harm to anyone else, least of all overpower or overwhelm one weaker than himself. It's that abject benign nature that I truly admire Appa for. At the end of the day, I don't know what became of Mr. Furniturewalla nor do I really care. Somehow, there's no anger at him for having taken advantage of Appa - which, on paper, might very well seem like what happened and perhaps would be the official court record of events as they played out. But, I'm less concerned for how the books might remember events, for most writers of such books only care about who won and who lost, what money was gained and what was forfeited. I think I was taught to be wary of such books in the first place and then taught a real lesson in human character and its possibilities, for I think the way Appa handled the situation showed that the world was made up of more colours than just black and white.





The Itinerant Householder

"Hey! Did you know Montreal has rollercoasters? It's in an amusement park they call La Ronde. And.. and, they have this really cool-looking stadium with a far-leaning tower! They hosted the Olympics in 1976 and that's when they built it."

Such were the words I'd muttered to Albert at the school library, reading through the section in the Encyclopaedia about the city of Montreal, Canada. It might as well have been a galaxy far, far away, but we were moving there soon. Of course, I had to do my research before arriving in this new land. Appa's postcard arrived a few days ago and I thought it was really amazing that he saw snow! The postcard itself was quite the typical variety that tourists send home, but I still got a kick out of seeing all these 'foreign' sights that were to greet me in person. I was primed and ready. There was little, if any, apprehension at the thought of moving abroad to a far and distant land, and close this 12-year chapter of life on the subcontinent.

Appa had left a few months back to begin his doctorate degree at Concordia University, commencing his studies in the frigidity of Montreal in December. He was sorely missing Amma's food, but he was nonetheless making the most of a new life. He was sharing an apartment with some other students and they were taking turns cooking the daily meals. I truly wondered what it is that Appa could make. Maybe Rasam? Who knows! I knew this much though - I was eager to join him! Perhaps I too was endowed with the "restless" gene, making it seem like a fairly easy chore of beginning a new life in another city, country, continent.

I was no stranger to moving around, having made a home of Hyderabad, then briefly Pune, and now Bangalore. There was nothing wrong with any of these places. We always settled down in short order and made friends, assigned local favourites for restaurants and shops, and did the usual things people fill their lives with to make it attain normalcy. Hence, being itinerant was not an alien experience. And moving around wasn't for a lack of stability, for people often confound instability with this sort of relocating and bunch them in the same basket. Instability is more a symptom of lack of control or choice, where it's life that makes the decisions for you, not the other way around. In every case, Appa was at the helm with hand on wheel when deciding to give another city and another job a shot. It's through these multiple moves that I clued into what drove Appa, the Itinerant Householder.

Appa was not one to care much for climbing up the corporate ladder or establish himself in one firm. Well educated, he certainly had the pick of the litter when it came to highly technical engineering jobs. However the actual work, the nitty-gritty, was what mattered to him. He wasn't one for politics, asserting himself as an Alpha male at the workplace, or cozying up to superiors to ride their coattails to higher salary brackets. Nor was he so engrossed in the job that he sacrificed everything else for it. I never got the impression that Appa chose his next destinations based on higher income, although that certainly may have been a factor. Rather, I think it was the

sort of firm or project he'd be working on that featured prominently in his mind. By the time we were in Bangalore, I might have heard words spoken to the effect by others, about our home and his career being the envy of many. Not that Appa let that get to his head. I probably wouldn't be writing this story sitting where I am if that were the case. For the next chapter that awaited Appa in Canada was a truly humbling one.

Leaving the trappings of middle-class professional life behind in Bangalore, he'd left to backtrack one stage in the story of life from householder to student. Or at least his vedic-influenced mindset might very well have seen it as such, given that one progresses forward from student to householder to contemplative philosopher and finally, a renunciate of life's attachments. It certainly wasn't easy living in a one-bedroom flat with a family of 3, stretch a doctorate stipend to meet daily needs, put off any big purchases or vacations, and still maintain a level of focus on studies. It couldn't have been easy, even though I never directly experienced the stresses of this, or saw Appa falter and stumble at any point under the pressure. This was again a long game - something that was Appa's strong suit - where hardships would and should bear fruit in due course. At least, that was the bargain that was struck with the Universe.

Perhaps, this long game was being played for longer than even I was alive, for I knew that it had been Appa's dream for some time to make a life abroad. In fact, the opportunity even presented itself at some point during his young professional life, however he had to decline following through on account of family obligations. Such was his undeterred commitment to his siblings and family, where personal gain and personal accolade was never something to be sought after at the expense of one's kin. If help was needed, then help would be given. But, that itch to travel and live abroad probably remained there, not finding relief till the acceptance letter from Concordia arrived.

The life that ensued became the norm soon enough, demonstrating just how adaptable we humans are as a species. We made the best of it, even managed to take a trip to Niagara Falls once in those six years in Montreal, and had made a community for ourselves. True, Appa had to contend with being quite senior to most of his colleagues and fellow students and swallow whatever sentiment that reared its head in the presence of peers his age who were tenured professors or students and swallow whatever sentiment that reared its head in the presence of peers his age who were tenured professors or well-established company men. I don't quite know if he regretted his decision, but he certainly stuck to it ever hopeful that it'd pay its dividends. It's not that his immigrant experience was so unique that it warrants special mention for that sake, for so many stories abound with former professors-turned taxi drivers and the like. So, it was welcome news that he landed a job related to his field in Canada upon graduating with a Ph.D. We were moving to this place called Mississauga.

I'm unsure whether this new job was all that it was cut out to be or if it truly satisfied Appa professionally. Industry gurus and pundits have written scads of articles about the many factors that make for employee satisfaction, including growth, respect, autonomy, and so on. It's not for me to say that this job was good or that wasn't. That's for Appa's own ledger of experiences and memories to judge. All I do know is that while I began to get a glimpse of the sedentary life and racked up the years living in the Toronto area, Appa began to once more be loose-footed. From Mississauga to Windsor to Chicago to Missouri to Minnesota to California to Florida and then back to Windsor, and off again to Vancouver, North Carolina, and Houston, occupied the better part of a decade.

These moves, however, were mostly forced and involuntary - certainly a marked difference from the migration patterns he'd known in India. This was real instability - where it's life at the helm and not you, forcing your hand even when you don't want to. I was sad, but mostly helpless in this game, watching on the sidelines as my parents flitted about from place to place like a pair of foster children. In regarding the many circumstances, from a company filing bankruptcy and the aftermath of 9/11 breeding mistrust in brown folk to caustic work environments, one doesn't really derive a pattern all that easily. So, as the meaning-making species that we are, what is one to gather from Appa's gypsy-like sojourn around the continent?

I can only surmise that, in going from someone who preferred choosing his own calling to someone forced to go where the work is, Appa became naturally disillusioned as anyone would. It may have been coupled with the fact that he had to don a completely new hat with the challenges that it brought along - navigating a fairly different workforce and culture from what he was used to in the homeland. It may have been that his temperament and demeanour wouldn't let him fully thrive, given the penchant for Darwinian forces in corporate culture to label someone like him as meek or passive, favouring those dominant personalities and showering them with laurels and riches. It was a different jungle entirely, however Appa wasn't about to be made a beast of.

Through it all, I admire how he maintained his sense of ethics and integrity, kept true to himself without donning fake masks, and above all, never gave up. He's had some interesting experiences and met some unique people along the way, caravanning around from place to place. You can't buy that sort of life even if you wanted to, in spite of the circumstances that made it an inevitability. I will leave the final meaning-making to Appa, but I can offer a subtle hint if it might help. Having his hand forced on so many occasions to pack up and relocate has meaning. A very real and abiding meaning.

The Universe wanted him to fulfill on his inherently loose-footed nature, and see and experience as many places and locales as possible; tackle and adapt to new circumstances and feel all the bolder and capable for it; not get complacent and divert to a life of mindless consumption and distractions; be exposed to interesting facets of engineering and corporate culture and walk

away from it wiser and well-rounded; and as well, be humbled by the simple fact that his dependable wife - my Amma - made a home for him everywhere he went.

More fatefully, the Universe wanted him to express those traits that I have regarded as my inheritance.

Be the **armchair anthropologist** and encounter more cultures and ideas than he could have wanted, discovering a greater appreciation for life.

Be the **atypical Brahmin** and define his own faith and spirituality along his unconventional journey, discovering a greater peace in life.

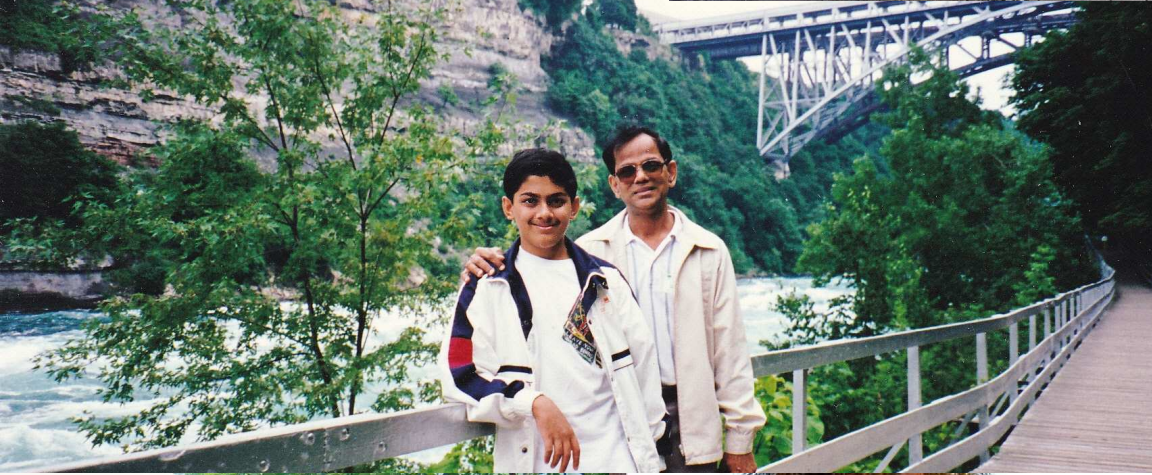
Be the **encyclopedia salesman** and build a bigger picture of the world that he could have imagined possible, discovering a greater acceptance of life.

Be the **unassuming Dravidian** and find a greater strength in his character and integrity without compromising himself, discovering a greater authenticity in life.

Be the **benign man** and connect deeper to his inherently kind and benevolent nature amidst trying circumstances, discovering a greater patience for life.

And, be the **itinerant householder** and move his family onto a life trajectory that I deem far more interesting, challenging, and rewarding, than anything that was in store for them in India.

To me, this is the most **priceless inheritance** my Appa could ever have granted me.



Thank you Appa for being you
and thank you for teaching me so
much. I look forward to future
lessons you will impart, examples
you will set, and stories you
will tell.



