

Generational Bonds:

A Grandson's Tribute to Late Justice Ranjit Singh Narula

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I STARED OUT OF THE AIRPLANE WINDOW into the hot murky Delhi night as I headed back to the United States. Out there my grandfather (*Nana-ji*) was fighting for his life. He had suffered a stroke as well as a cardiac arrest a few days ago and now was in the intensive care unit of a Delhi hospital with more pipes stuck in him than I could count.

I was warned before I went to see him that he may not recognize me. And he didn't. Not the first time anyway. When I saw him again today, he grinned at me. He was wiggling his right foot and then his left foot, a miracle in its own right since the so-called learned doctors had said that after his stroke he could not move the right side of his body at all. I asked him if he was exercising, and he nodded yes - and grinned again through the pain. He could not talk but he had the all too familiar determined look on his face. He wiggled his feet again. First the right foot and then the left foot.

But, this is not how I remember my grandfather. I was 7 years old and spending another glorious summer vacation at my grandparents home. My mother woke me up at 5 am and yes, today was the big day. I was going to accompany my grandfather on his daily morning walk. Well, actually for only half the walk since it was well understood that nobody in the family could out-walk my grandfather on his daily six kilometers. Sure enough, I was panting quite early in the process. He didn't even slow down, he just kept going. I had to stop. Thankfully, I had enough energy left to trot behind him on the way back. It took me two more years to actually complete a walk with him. Not once did he 'patronize' me by slowing down which therefore made the victory that much sweeter. He set high standards. And if you keep working hard, success will follow, he said.

He has always been mischievous and has a fantastic sense of humour. Living life to the fullest as a young married attorney in Delhi many decades ago, he traded in his bicycle and bought a large European car - simply to take his family and neighbors on many a joy ride. A successful attorney and outstanding judge, he has worked harder and longer than anybody I know and is today well recognized around the world as a leader in his profession. His memory is legendary and he can rattle off details on many cases from decades ago. Make a list of everything and always be better prepared than the other guy, is another one of his teachings.

He cares. Deeply. He calls and talks to all his family and freinds around the globe regularly asking about their well being and then in turn communicating the information throughout the rest of the family. He makes sure everybody knows what everybody else is doing. He is the glue - well actually, super glue, since the bond he has established and nurtured over the years in the family are timeless.

If, by now, it seems I love my grandfather, you are only partly right. I adore him. My children are truly blessed as they learn at the knee of their great-grandfather during their summer vacations. He is as engaging with my three-year old as he is with the Prime Minister of India. He always gives the other person his full attention and communicates with him at his level - be it a favourite flavor of chocolate or a

course-changing legal strategy for the country. In one of my monthly phone calls with him, upon my telling him proudly that I had secured venture capital for my new company, he was quick to ask - but how many customers do you have? Straight to the point. Always pointing out that great things are achieved one step at a time with a complete focus on details and by simply putting one foot in front of the other.

Recently, an acquaintance, upon finding out that I was related to my grandfather, related a thirty year old story of how my grandfather had held the door to his house open with bowed head for a delegation of farmers and educators visiting him for the first time. Well, he was the Governor and Chief Justice of the state and had a staff of dozens, but he recognized and respected basic human dignity. He is a humble man. A simple man. And I am lucky to have him as my grandfather.

A true Sikh of the Guru, he fought all his life against injustice and for human rights. He sat on more non-profit Boards than I can recall, and served on numerous commissions fighting for everyday off-the-street people while never charging them any money. If you are in the right, never give up, said he. He funded and opened schools for children, housing for riot victims, and even regularly spent time in a leper colony doing seva. No words can do justice to a man who has achieved so much, asked for so little and given so freely all his life.

'Are you exercising?' asked the person next to me on the airplane. I jerked my head around and looked at him quite puzzled. He pointed down, and said 'You have been moving your feet for quite a while now.' 'Yes,' said I. 'My grandfather taught me - left foot right foot. One step at a time. Never give up.'

And the lights below were obscured by the clouds as I flew away.

And now he is gone.

I am a bit numb. Although there was a chance that he would recover, the odds were against him. He himself sensed that his end was near. But knowing that he may pass away and actually seeing it happen are two very different situations. Although the mind had prepared for the inevitability, there was always hope. But now there is the sheer finality of his not being there - ever. The protective umbrella over all our heads is gone.

It seems the world turned out for his funeral. Of course, the family came from all over the globe. But even with less than a day's notice in the newspapers, people converged from all over the country. Ministers with wreaths, farmers with gifts, people from neighbouring villages with shawls and schoolchildren lined the streets as his motorcade drove past. The *jaikaras* were continuous and *Japji Sahib* was recited by hundreds in unison. The world was thanking him for all that he had done. They were celebrating his life while mourning his loss.

One said, a man like this comes to us every few centuries. Another said, this loss is irreplaceable for the community. And then my twelve year old said, I am one-eighth of my great-grandfather. Then it struck me. We are all part of him and he is part of us. He made us strong and gave us the courage to weather any storm. We, too, can aspire to extend his legacy by doing good, by being in *Chardi Kalla*, and by simply following the path of the Guru. Whether we have one-eighth of his genes or less.

And then there is his *seva* for humanity. The man just keeps on giving. Sensing that his end was near, he insisted, first with the family and then with the nurses in his hospital room, that his eyes be donated when he dies. He had seen the countless millions without sight in his country and he wanted to do his part. To keep with his wishes, the doctors complied.

And so out there is a person with my grandfather's eyes. I know that if I see him, I will recognize him instantly. Those eyes will look upon me as they have done my whole life, with total love.

