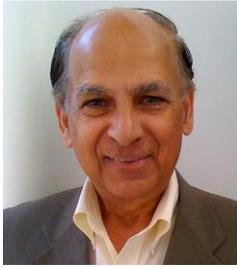


Dreams Don't Die



Juginder Luthra

Dr. Juginder Luthra completed his MBBS from Medical College, Amritsar in 1966, and his MS in Ophthalmology from the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGI), Chandigarh in 1970. He moved to Nottingham, UK along with his wife, Dolly — a dentist from the Amritsar Dental College — and a daughter, Namita. They were blessed with twin daughters, Rohini and Rashmi, in May 1975. The family moved to Weirton, West Virginia in June 1975. Now their three loving daughters are married to wonderful sons-in-law, and Dolly and Juginder are blessed with six grandchildren.

There was a flurry of activities all over the house. “Is the suitcase ready, did you pack enough mango pickle and *praanthe* with cooked dry potatoes placed between them? Are your shoes polished, do you have enough money for the journey? Do you have Dr. Chitkara’s (Pitaji’s cousin) address, at whose house you will be staying for the first 3 or 4 days?”

The last one was planned to avoid the notorious, scary ritual of ragging which every new student received from the seniors.

“Make sure your shoes match; one black and one brown will look really funny. Don’t stick your head out of the moving train, you will get a coal particle fly into your eye. Above all, no more mischief; you are a big boy now.”

Questions and advice was coming from every corner and everybody. Mataji (as my siblings and I called our mother), with her dripping nose, and tears in her eyes, haltingly, with a raspy voice, said, “Make sure you eat properly; I will not be there running after you with butter soaked *praanthe* and your favourite *bhindi* and *karele*.” She kissed my forehead. Our tears mingled.

What was the fuss and occasion for all this hoopla in September, 1961 at house number 2, Model Town, Panipat?

I was on my way out of the home, at the age of 17, alone, plunging into the large, unknown world. I grew up with the luxury of being sheltered, so far, by my mother, brothers, sisters, Dadaji and, mostly physically absent but in spirit always around, my father. We all knew that. Felt that.

After the partition of India and our migration as refugees from what now had become Pakistan, the responsibilities of supporting the large family was on Pitaji’s shoulders. Money earned from the newly learned trade of making bricks was never enough. First, the eldest son, Suraj, followed by the next one, Prem, and later, Virinder, got jobs and supplemented his meagre income. All of this combined money was barely enough to cover the family’s basic needs of shelter and food. Education was considered to be as essential as food by Kundan Lal Luthra, my father, whom we called Pitaji. That was his main goal of life for his children.

The family had distributed 11 *boondi laddoos* as gifts to all the neighbours, and appropriate donations had been made to the needy woman, Brahmni, who visited us weekly to receive

money and food for her recently uprooted family. Ganesh, the obstacle remover god, had been invoked with indecipherable mantras. We had also obtained proper blessings from the family Gurus — Swami Satya Nand Ji and Shakuntla Behan Ji.

Yes, indeed, it was a big occasion for the family, and above all for Pitaji. I was the first child going to medical college, and, hopefully, becoming the first doctor in our family. The older six siblings had become engineers, businessman, and teachers. The one younger to me, the last one of the eight siblings, had declared his intentions of becoming an engineer.

I had also wanted to become an engineer, and not a doctor – because I hated blood! In hindsight, what a foolish reason it was; but at that age, it was a major reason for me to join pre-engineering courses after high school. In the two-year course, I had already attended pre-engineering classes for three months in 1959 at Government College, Rupar, Punjab.

A two-week All-India trip, arranged through the college, gave Pitaji a window of opportunity to change the course of my life. While I was on the trip, he went to the college, cancelled my Physics and Math classes, and enrolled me in Botany and Zoology. He also arranged for evening tuition and extra classes, to make up for the lost time.

He was pleasantly surprised and happy when I did not object, and quietly followed the path he had carved out for me. Since then, I have been forever thankful for his foresight. We learned later that there was a whole different dimension to this action; a moment of fulfilment of a long, hibernating dream of the architect of education of the whole family, our Pitaji.

Before Independence, my father, Kundan Lal was the older of the two sons of Lala Gokul Chand. Lalaji had been gifted 10 acres of land by his British officer. Kundan's younger brother, Karam Chand, was meant to take over the farming. Kundan loved to help people. What better way to serve than to become a doctor — that was his thinking. With this goal in mind, Kundan studied pre-medical courses in Daya Nand College, Lahore. He completed the pre-requisite courses, and earned more marks than required to get admitted to the prestigious Lahore Medical College.

Much to Kundan's disappointment, a Muslim boy, with lesser marks, was given his spot due to the quota system in Muslim-dominated Lahore. Not the one to be defeated and give up, Kundan continued his studies to complete his B.Sc. to definitely ensure admission to the medical college in the following year. His actions and courses were on track.

No one can foresee or predict the hand of destiny. What is not meant to be will not be, despite all the effort. Defeatist, a rational defence mechanism of acceptance, or ingrained deep faith in destiny and will of God; such has been the Hindu philosophy.

At that time, infectious diseases were prevalent and a common cause of death in all age groups. Kundan's brother, Karam, fell victim to one such disease and died. Their mother died shortly thereafter.

Lalaji summoned Kundan back from Lahore to Khanewal, our ancestral village, to look after the land. His pleas to let him continue his education fell on deaf ears. One could cry, make a scene, but the dictates of the elders could not be denied. Such was the culture around 1925. The budding doctor, overnight, became the doctor of crops. And what a farmer he became! Farmers from all around Khanewal would seek his advice on all aspects of farming.

Pitaji's suppressed, dormant, and hibernating seed of becoming a doctor had never died. One day it had to sprout. He must have seen something in me akin to himself, and saw a doctor in me, serving humanity. My pre-engineering course gave way to a pre-medical course. After getting sufficient grades, I got selected into Medical College, Amritsar, only 20 miles away from Lahore, Pakistan.

Now I was finally ready to embark on the daunting, lonely journey to Amritsar on a newly started train, called the Flying Express. After the flurry of activities at home, good byes, tight hugs and tears, Pitaji escorted me to the train station.

The train, as usual, was running late. He would not talk much, but looked at me with his usual style of tilted head with a slanted gaze, a tear building up in the corner of his eyes. He carefully wiped it by the same motion as if he was straightening his hair; hoping the train would be a little more delayed.

A loud whistle, a down green signal, and the plume of smoke far to the left broke his trance. Overhead speakers announced the arrival of the train that would take his son away to finally fulfil his long cherished dream. The held back tears could not be subdued any longer; a mixture of joy and sorrow wet my cheeks and collar as he gave me a tight reassuring hug.

The train rolled out gently. His blessings to serve humanity, and become as good a doctor as he had dreamt to be, kept following me through his loving gaze, gradually fading smile on his face and the waving of his hands.

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