

The Giver and the Given

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October 21, 2019

There's this one saying that my dad has said throughout my life that pops into my head once in a while. He says "If you don't take action now, change will never happen". When I was younger, I was confused about why he said it and constantly thought "Okay Baba (dad), that's great but this doesn't apply to me". He was right though. It just takes a few seconds for something to happen and everything to change.

It was a rainy day in the summer of 2011 when we got the phone call from my aunt in Bangladesh that had left us shocked and dismantled. My Didu (my father's mother) had just had a stroke. It felt like everything in that very moment came to a halt. No one was speaking for a good five minutes. My first thought was "is baba okay?". I remember looking at my dad's face and seeing his expression go from solemn to stoic in a matter of seconds. Nobody knew what to say. I saw my mom taking her Quran out of the shelf immediately afterward. "You shall certainly be tried and tested in your possessions and in your lives, and you shall certainly hear much that will grieve you...But if you patiently persevere and be pious, then surely this will be of great resolution." (Quran 3:186). My mother had always said and believed that prayer was the stepping stone for getting you through life's toughest moments.

A few days later, it was decided that my family and I would be going to Bangladesh to visit my didu but I was unaware of just how big of an impact the journey would have on me. When I got off the plane, I was hit with thick humidity and numerous smells in the air ranging from cigarettes to spices. But what caught my eye was the number of children, most with tattered clothes, some with limbs missing, all begging for money to support themselves and their families. Growing up in a home, where I never had to worry about the clothes on my back or the food that was always at the table, this sight of these children engulfed me in waves of emotions that I had

never felt before. I suddenly had a huge sense of guilt and the strong urge to run up to each child and give them whatever I had in my pockets.

After leaving the airport, we went directly to the apartment building where my dad's siblings and mother lived in. The minute we entered the home, the air was thick with sorrow and grief. As we entered my didu's room, I felt a bittersweet sensation brewing in my mind. On one hand, I was so happy to see my didu but on the other, I was so upset to see her in the state that she was in. While I knew that she had a stroke, I never knew truly how bad it had been. Didu's eyes that once had a brilliant spark to them, were now staring at us wide with no luster. Didu could no longer talk, walk or even move by herself. All she did was stare at us with an unreadable expression on her face. My dad went up to her excitedly, despite the situation and happily announced: "Ammu (mom), I'm here, your grandchildren are here, your daughter-in-law is here, we're all here to see you". And sometimes I think that I was going crazy at that very moment because I saw my didu's eyes look straight at my mom and start to tear up. Like those tears that you get when seeing your loved one after a really long time. And for a moment, the spark came back. Everyone in the room noticed, and suddenly the atmosphere took a change for the better.

The next day, after saying goodbye to didu, my dad told us that he was taking us to the village where he and his siblings had a plot of land. My first thought of leaving and going to an unknown place was the lyrics: "On the road again, Goin' places that I've never been, Seein' things that I may never see again" (Nelson). The ride there was everything that I thought it was going to be. Now, I expected that the road was going to be a little out of ordinary, but even then, I was feeling a hint of anxiety seeing our driver going 142 km (70 miles per hour) on a curvy broken road with both sides surrounded by water. All in all, I was thrilled that we made it to the village in one piece. Getting out of the car, I had noticed that my feet stepped into something warm and soft,

little did I know that I had just stepped in fresh cow manure. I was very mortified and wanted to go back in the van, but my dad told me to suck it up and tread on like a soldier.

Our main purpose for going to the village, besides fishing and experiencing true rural life, was to visit the families and the children who knew my dad. Some of the people grew up with him, by him, or never saw him but heard great things about him. Seeing him interacting so lovingly with people he hasn't seen in years, like he never left, warmed my heart. My dad then called my name and told me to get the sweets and trinkets we had bought for the children out of the van. When I had returned with the items in my hands, I immediately saw a ton of little children running towards me. I'm not going to lie, at first I was a little overwhelmed because I had never experienced this in my life. But then I saw my parent's faces and knew that I had to make this moment count. So I went to work, with the help of some family members, to distribute everything evenly. After we had finished, I saw the looks of happiness in the children's faces as well as in their parent's faces. "The unselfish effort to bring cheer to others will be the beginning of a happier life for ourselves." (Keller). I never knew that simple stuff like sweets or toy cars would make them so happy. It then hit me that I was so lucky to have the things that I grew up with and that I took advantage of them because I knew they were always accessible to me.

After lots of hugs and a few tears, we headed back to see my didu one last time. When I saw her again, I asked my parents if I could have a moment alone to talk to her. They left the room and suddenly time had stopped. Living in New York, people are always in a rush to get things done and never really sit still and enjoy the little things. So at that very moment with her, I had felt a massive amount of gratitude. I held didu's hand and said "I love you, I'm so happy that I got to see you. You mean a lot to me, thank you for showing me to be thankful for every moment in my life, and most importantly thank you for giving me, my dad."

What my parents had taught me growing up is that it's not about what you give back, but rather your intentions when you do. "I have found that among its other benefits, giving liberates the soul of the giver." (Angelou). Charity to me is an important virtue to practice in my life because if someone has the ability to give, why not do it? One of the obstacles that I faced was staying strong and keeping it together while seeing my grandma in the state that she was in. I overcame this obstacle when I saw how happy the children were and felt like I was channeling my didu because everyone who knew her, knew how much she loved helping people.

Though in the beginning, the path to helping them was a little anxiety-filled and bumpy (pun intended), their joy made my trip to Bangladesh worthwhile. It showed me that I should value my whatever time I have on this earth and use it to impact people's lives in a positive way. The greatest thing about giving back is that there's this secret light that shines in a world that seemingly faces darkness most of the time. In a way, I didn't give those children anything, rather their joy reflected in my soul. "Great opportunities to help others seldom come, but small ones surround us every day (Kotch)". When you have an opportunity to make a difference in someone's life, whether that be carrying groceries for an elderly person, or even talking to someone who seems down, chase it and take it.

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