

Try not to Forget

By Alok Nath Pandya

Everyone has a story to tell. I know that as an absolute certainty, even though it's a statement which is indistinct at best. Most of them never get published, come hardcover or paperback, or even, if you can believe it, without a book tour to promote them. I think for the most part they are told haltingly, over a long stretch of time. Sometimes you tell them to a group of people, to someone special, to yourself, or to no one in particular. Don't they always seem to change, just slightly, from telling to telling? The lines can blur between what actually happened and what is an embellishment. In the end though, it's still your story, part of it anyways. For what it's worth, this is some of mine.

I had some idea of what was in store for me before I started all of this, but in the end I was still clueless. I did my research, as any dutiful student does, by reading brochures, pamphlets, talked to administration, staff, other students, family, and friends. What ended up happening was that I got filled with other people's preconceived notions of what it would be like for me and, if it were the case, what their experiences were like. In all honesty, there was little else that could have happened; you really can't know what it's like until you've done it yourself.

So what hit me first? It wasn't the workload, oddly enough. The material was and continues to be challenging, with an ever increasing volume. Everyone experiences that shock initially, I think it was one of the ties that bound us; a universal, if individually distinct, event. I don't want to make generalities, but I believe that you'll eventually find that what is given to you, what is expected out of you, to be manageable. It wasn't the workload.

No one did, or could have in retrospect, prepare me for the emotional impact that this would all be. No matter how hard I had worked or the stress I had been put under compared to this because for the first time in many years, this was a singularly unique educational experience. Again, I cannot speak for others, but I can imagine that, eventually, it will hit everyone. Sometimes it won't be all at once, maybe a step at a time, for some even immediately. When it does hit, it'll be a mélange of your own experiences, fears, weaknesses and even the strengths and joys in your life.

I was exhausted by the end of the first semester. I had never

taken anatomy before, the material was very new, but I was eager and put in the hours I needed to. I thought I had accomplished something. The mistake I had made wasn't in thinking whether I had or had not accomplished something, but rather that I could be any more tired than I already was. I began to have less time for my hobbies, communication began to wane with family and friends and the new semester was only a few weeks in starting. Someone more observant might have noticed the signs, but I was lax in being a steward to myself. Without being cognizant of it, I had built something akin to a cocoon around myself made of studying, class activities, and volunteer work. I had deluded myself into believing that all of this was necessary and that I needed to sacrifice more and more to improve myself, giving false support to this vague notion of professionalism. What I ended up doing was insulating myself from the world that I had known and enjoyed being a part of, until all I could hear was a haunting silence. Even with all of the people I would interact with on a day-to-day basis, I was alone. That moment when I realized I was lost was frightening.

That was when it hit me.

In the proper context a new experience can be an exhilarating one. This was not one of those times. I had been turned inward into my own thoughts for a long time. Now my mind was blank. It took everything I had not to start crying. What happens when you feel so weak and brittle? I reached for a source of strength, which has been for a long time the memory of my father and what he had to do to come to this country. 35 dollars, a wife, two young sons, and a few suitcases were all that he had when he came here. He had trained as a physical therapist in India, working in a burn ward at a children's hospital. Coming to the US would mean a huge jump in his salary and with that a better life for his family. He came with a lot of hope, but not a lot of certainty of anything else. My mother recently told me that when we moved into the first apartment, she did not buy a single pot or pan for months. She said the reason was that my father had not taken his licensing examination to be able to practice in the US. If he didn't pass that he couldn't work, this would probably have led to deportation. I know that my father could never have seen that as a possibility. It would mean that he had failed his family, returning to India with his head hung low, and more importantly, he would have let himself down.



My brother and I were young, but we never remember seeing our father worried about this. He had the drive to succeed even with this unimaginable weight he had to bear upon his shoulders. Of course he passed the exam because he wouldn't have accepted any less. We lived all over Illinois, in apartments and rented homes, moving from place to place every few years. We weren't well off, but we were better off than most, and when you're a little kid that's all that you'll probably remember anyways.

He died very young at the age of 39. That whole year was a blur and I can't recall much of anything. My uncle and aunt took us into their house in Maryland, where our grandparents were staying already. It was kind of like starting over. My uncle's business forced us to move to Florida, which is where we've been for more than 14 years. We grew up together, helped each other along the way, and in the process became a new family.

My brother is now in residency on his way to becoming a surgeon, I'm here, and my mom doesn't have to worry about the future. There is still a lot of ground to be covered, years of work yet to be done, but we've made it. We made it where others might have turned back around. Turned back to where it was safe. Not us and not ever. We had sacrificed too much. He had sacrificed everything.

There are things that I forget, which I can blame on being so young. I can't remember his voice. I can't remember how he smelled. I don't know what made him laugh. However, I do know that sometimes my mom runs her fingers through my hair, stares at my face and tells me that I look like him. I know I've worked hard and gotten to where I am through merit alone. I also know that there are going to be hard days, harder than I've ever experienced, but that I will get through them. I know that I truly enjoy what I'm doing now because it's something I've always wanted and I know I can be good at. The opportunity to do what I'm doing came at an incredibly high price and so I don't take that lightly. The most I can do for his memory and for my own sake is to try my hardest, never betray my character, be grateful for what I have, and love what I do.

I love where I am and what I will become. It might be hard for you to understand that now, but I hope that you'll eventually feel the same way. You've had to make your own sacrifices to get where you are right now. Some you might have made and others were made on your behalf. Try and remember them; use them as your strength and a source of comfort.

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