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A Promise Fulfilled

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To the Memory of Syeda Lutfe Shaba, PhD (1959-2008)

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I stand by my unconscious mother holding her hand at the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) as her oxygen saturation (a relative measure of the amount of oxygen that is dissolved or carried in a given medium) goes down. Compared to the regular ranges of 90 to 105, her saturation was hovering around 50, 49, 48, 47…

Syeda Lutfe Shaba, PhD

The doctor puts his hand on my back and asks me whether we would want my mother to be on life support with an almost zero possibility of revival. Looking at my mother's peaceful face, I make the call, “Let her depart peacefully as I hold her hand. Let's not prolong the suffering.” Within a few minutes, her saturation graph becomes a straight line from irregular patterns. I, holding my tears, touch her forehead and slowly close her eyes. She was just 48.

My mother was married at the age of 14 when she was in grade 9. Eight years later after having my sister and myself, she completed her secondary school certificate exam. Her family members were elated. They expected that from that point on, my mother would put an end to her education, dedicating all her time to household tasks - taking care of children; in-laws and husband; cooking and cleaning. My mother was reluctant to accept this cultural norm. She had decided to fight against this stereotype by secretly continuing her studies; and that, she did. She would drop me off to school in the morning, attend her college/university while I was at school and then pick me up in the after-noon. I still remember those days when she would be running late to pick me up and I would cry at the school gate eagerly waiting for her to show up. She would always pick me up using one hand, with her heavy books on the other hand and apologise so many times. Despite knowing that she would run late again the next day, I would forgive and hug her back.

Saturday was a weekly holiday in my school- the only day for me to sleep late and do whatever I wish with my dad being in his office. For a few years, I had to sacrifice my Saturdays as my mother would dress me up pretending to take me to my school and instead go to her own college. This process had continued for years without anybody else in the family knowing. She had feared she would be compelled to give up her education if anyone had found out.

My mother would always wake up at 5:00 am; go to the roof with her books, study and come down-stairs around 7:00 am. It had happened so many times that my father invited a bunch of people just before her exams. My mother would write small notes that would fit her pocket and study them while cooking.

Around the time when she was completing her masters, due to her study load, eventually everyone in the family had found out. At that point, everyone became supportive of her education. This support from her family members was a tremendous source of inspiration. She had secured the second position among all the women in the Islamic Studies department of Dhaka University with a first class.

My mother was ambitious. Even after touching the milestone of a master's degree, she went after the doctoral degree, the highest educational degree in academia. While she was on the verge of finishing her doctoral degree in 1999, she was blessed with her third child. Due to conceiving a baby in her late thirties, Eshteher, my younger brother, was born with Down-syndrome, a permanent mental retardation. This had significantly slowed down the progress of her education. She would have to travel back and forth to the United States to seek treatment and spend a considerable amount of time there. Before she could settle down in one place, she was diagnosed with cancer in 2006. She rigorously fought against the disease with a resilient mind towards the side effects of multiple lines of chemotherapy. Her doctors often commended her ability to be cheerful and optimistic despite knowing that she would not live long. Knowing that she would not have the health condition to accept her doctoral degree, she had requested me to submit her thesis to be published. This was a promise which I was able to fulfill. Her department has given the permission to write Syeda Lutfe Shaba, PhD (Researcher) on her epitaph and also has taken the initiative to publish her thesis from the Islamic Foundation of Bangladesh.

My mother had shown the same level of unparalleled dedication towards her children's education and overall well-being. Along with achieving desired academic results, she was also very keen on having us pursue extra-curricular activities during our formative years. There were days that I can recall, when she would insist on taking me to the Dhaka Shishu Academy. With her interest and support, I had completed 2 year courses in poetry recitation, acting, painting and tabla (an Indian musical instrument). She encouraged me to attend many competitions from where I won numerous awards (http://mehoque.com/Leadership/AssortedWork.pdf).

In spite of achieving the desired milestones in academia, raising kids, taking care of all the mundane issues of the family, my mother would find time to cultivate hundreds of plants and bonsai trees on our roof-top. There was a poem in Bangla my mother would hum, which was her source of inspiration and love for gardening --

“Muthe jodi jote ek ti poisha (If you come across a buck)

Khaddo kinio khudar lagi (Use it to buy food to fulfill your hunger)

Muthe jodi jote dui ti poisha (If you happen to come across another buck or two)

Phool kine nio hei onuragi” (Use it to buy flowers)

My mother would always look out for cooking competitions and send them her own recipes every year. Even a few months before her untimely demise, she had received an award from an achar (pickle) competition.

Her huge aquarium along with its beautiful fish still stands in our living room.

Religion was an important facet in my mother's life and she held an utmost, un-deviated faith in Allah. Since my childhood, I have never seen her miss her prayers. She taught me how to read Arabic and had me memorise five major suras (Yasin, Rahman, Mulk, Waqia, and Muzammil) of the Quran. During the time when she was bed-ridden, she would always request me to recite Sura Yasin. The recitation of Quran would give her the peace of mind, which her medications were unable to provide.

My mother may not be physically present with me today, but her principles; her inspiration; her wisdom; and her beautiful smile still drive me forward to this very day. She inspired us to dream big and told us that good things happen to those who try. If I could be half as productive and successful as my mother was during her 48 years of life time, I will consider myself the luckiest person on earth. Here is a poem dedicated to her memories written by Henry Van Dyke.

“Time is

too slow for those who wait,

too swift for those who fear,

too long for those who grieve,

too short for those who rejoice,

but for those who love, time is eternity.”

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