

Growing Up Hindu --- MODERN STORIES FOR HINDU YOUTH: BOOK ONE

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Our parents are our first gurus. They teach by example, explanation, giving advice and direction. Very often parents come to me for advice on the subject of raising their children as good Hindus. In response, I developed a list of ten key character qualities to develop in a child that were published in Hinduism Today magazine, July, 2002.

The nine qualities below are all basic qualities needed by anyone who wants to be happy, religious and successful when they reach adulthood:

1. Positive Self-Concept
2. Perceptive Self-Correction
3. Powerful Self-Control
4. Profound Self-Confidence
5. Playful Self-Contentment
6. Pious Character
7. Proficiency in Conflict Resolution
8. Parental Closeness and
9. Prejudice-Free Consciousness

For this first book of the Hindu Youth Series, I requested our team of editors, writers, artists and reviewers to create a set of ten stories illustrating how these qualities be learned when growing up. They are set in modern US, India, Malaysia and Canada and intended for youth 14 and up, the time when we start to take responsibility for our own actions and when these important qualities should manifest.

Each story illustrates one concept, generally as instilled by the parents when their child is young and then as demonstrated in the youth when faced with a challenging situation. For example, the first quality, positive self-concept, is illustrated through the story of a young boy who successfully deals with a bully at school. Another focuses on two sisters who finally learn to get along by putting into practice “perceptive self-correction” as taught to them when they were children. A third, set in Malaysia, discusses the parallel lives of two sets of cousins, one that was taught “playful self-contentment” as children and the other that was driven only to succeed, at the cost of their own happiness later in life.

In one story, a girl who was raised a pious Hindu and even had a vision of Lord Ganesha when young questions her faith when she tries to get in with her school’s popular crowd. But when Ganesha Himself causes her to avoid a bad accident, her faith is restored and her priorities set straight.

The stories follow the nonviolent child raising principles of Positive Discipline: avoidance of corporal punishment, seeing mistakes as opportunities for teaching and letting children and youth learn by fully facing the consequences of their own actions.

Unfortunately, too many parents of all religions believe that disciplining their children simply means to correct and punish them when they make a mistake. However, a more important aspect of discipline is to develop character. I hope that this small set of stories will provide Hindu and non-Hindu parents alike a means of instilling these all-important key character qualities in their children.

CHAPTER 1: POSITIVE SELF-CONCEPT - The Jealous Older Brother

If you asked Rakesh and Janaka, they would tell you, “Mondays are cool.” That’s the day everyone gathered for family home evening. The rest of the week was packed with individual activities, but on Monday they all shared the good things of their week, played games together and enjoyed each other’s company.

Computers, cell phones and TV were dutifully turned off, and everyone met in the shrine room for puja and bhajans. Problem solving was strictly off limits, and no complaints were allowed. After bhajans, they moved to the living room, where snacks were served. This was a night for fun and good times. The family guru insisted that all his devotees hold this weekly gathering without fail, and the family had the good sense to obey him.

One of Mom’s favorite things was telling stories about the boys when they were little. This was sometimes embarrassing for them, but it was a healthy reminder of how they were raised and what was expected of them. Several times she told the story of the new bike Rakesh got one year at Pancha Ganapati.

“You wanted so badly to ride it that you quietly went downstairs early and rode it all around the living room. But you weren’t very good yet and crashed into the coffee table, breaking an expensive vase.”

“Yes,” admitted Rakesh, “I remember that day. I was afraid I was going to get punished, but you were just worried I might have been hurt.”

“It was a serious moment; you could have been cut or worse. We wanted you to know that you were more important to us than any vase.”

She told other stories, too, of how Janaka always looked out for his little brother. Once he rescued him from an vicious dog, and another time found him when he had gotten lost on a camping trip. Mom never missed a chance to point out when they did well. It was all part of her desire for them to have a positive self-concept, something she found more challenging to do than she ever expected!

When they were younger, both boys were naturally self-confident. Janaka felt himself the stronger, older brother. Rakesh saw himself as the smart and adventurous type. But things changed between the boys when Rakesh entered seventh grade at the same school in which Janaka was in tenth. Rakesh was turning into a very good student, especially in math. Janaka also did well in school, English in particular, but he was weak in math, and that worried him.

In December, at one family home evening, Janaka was in a bad mood and didn’t say anything all night. Dad and Mom let it go, not having a clue as to what the problem was, but thinking he would soon snap out of it. The next afternoon, Rakesh walked into Janaka’s room while he was studying and said, “Come on, you’ve done enough studying for one day. Let’s go and hang out!” Janaka didn’t look up. “You go. I have to finish this math assignment.”

Rakesh strolled up and peered over his brother’s shoulder. “That’s not right! If you do that, you will get the answer wrong.” Suddenly Janaka became angry and raised his voice. “Don’t tell me how to do math! You’re only in seventh grade, I’m in tenth! Get out!”

“Hey, hey, cool it! I was only trying to help.” But Rakesh could not help feeling hurt. As he slunk out of the room, he realized that lately it had become Janaka’s habit to bark at him. In fact, there were many occasions when he was outright nasty to him, such as last week in school.

Rakesh had left his last class of the day and was searching for Janaka when he saw him standing with his friends. Rakesh walked up to him and said, “Janaka, I’m done. Let’s go!” One of Janaka’s

friends shouted, "He can't. He has to stay late to finish a math assignment." Janaka blushed, "Why did you tell him that? He's already stuck up. Now he will think he's smarter than me because he never has to stay late."

Rakesh stared at Janaka. "Of course not. I never think I'm smarter than you!" But his words fell on deaf ears. Janaka barked coldly, "Get lost."

As Rakesh walked off, he heard Janaka's friend asking, "What's up with you, Janaka? The kid didn't do anything." The next evening Janaka made fun of Rakesh. Janaka heard him singing solo in the auditorium earlier that day, as he had been chosen to participate in the school play. At the dinner table, Janaka did an off-key imitation to mock the singing.

Later that evening, Dad asked Mom, "What's going on? Why is Janaka being mean to his little brother? They always get along so well."

Mom stood staring at a picture of the boys when they were much younger. "It may sound strange, but I think Janaka is jealous. You know how sharp Rakesh is in math, even mastering some advanced algebra that Janaka is struggling with. And then there's this singing thing. Rakesh is really quite good; I've heard him practicing. Janaka doesn't have the same talent." "But," Dad responded, "we always taught the boys to have confidence in themselves, that even if someone else was better at one thing, they shouldn't feel inferior or bad because of it."

"I think that all worked fine when the age difference was more important and Janaka could always play the older brother. But Rakesh is not a little boy anymore; he's catching up. Janaka doesn't know how to handle their changing relationship."

The next day Dad suggested, in that fatherly way which gives little room for saying no, "Janaka, let's go for a walk." Janaka knew something was up, but he trusted his father, who was always kindly, even when the boys did something wrong.

This didn't prevent Janaka from being nervous.

As they strolled by the botanical garden near their house, Dad asked casually, "Janaka, is there something wrong between you and Rakesh?" "I don't want to talk about him," Janaka snapped. "Why not?" replied Dad softly, ignoring Janaka's mood.

"I don't like him. He shows off too much! With all his straight A's and never having to stay back to complete his work, he thinks he has a superior brain. He doesn't realize that he is only a seventh grader. Let him reach tenth grade, and then we will see who has a better mind."

Sitting down on a park bench, Dad turned toward Janaka. "I don't get it. Why are you so insecure? You're so good at English and art. What's so upsetting about Rakesh being skilled at math?"

"Insecure? Me??" Then he caught himself, and turned to gaze at a large pine tree across the path. "Maybe. I guess it irritates me that he copes so easily with his studies when I have to struggle to do well."

"Thank you for being honest. You know, son, when I was in eleventh grade I was the all-school champion in long-distance running. The next year a tenth grader came along who not only left me in the dust, he set a school record. I hated him for it. Really, I hated him. Then my father talked to me and explained that however good you are, someone, somewhere, will always be better."

It's just the way the world works. So, instead of being jealous of the boy, I made friends with him. We practiced together, made the school team strong and won regionals."

"You think I'm jealous of Rakesh because he's so good in math?" It was a painful question. "It would be understandable. Every single person created by Lord Siva is blessed with some talent. Rakesh is good at math. But that does not make him the most intelligent person in the world, or even in your school. This year he may do well, next year somebody else could do better in math. You are good in art, but next year another student may come along who is even better. Are you going to feel threatened when that happens?"

Janaka sat quietly, pondering his father's words. He had been behaving badly, and he had to admit it, he was jealous. "I guess have been mean to him. I need help after school, but if I go to a tutor, Rakesh will look down on me."

"Janaka, we've always tried to instill a positive self-concept in you and Rakesh. But you have found security in being the big brother helping out his little brother with everything. But now Rakesh is growing up fast, and look what has happened. So what if you need help? That shouldn't cause you to become mean. I don't think your brother looks down on you."

They left the park in silence. When they got home, Janaka went to the shrine room to meditate while Dad filled Mom in on the conversation. Already the entire home felt more peaceful.

The next day after school, Rakesh was in his room when there was a soft knock on the door. "Can I come in?" asked Janaka. "Of course, no need to even ask. What's up?" I came to apologize for treating you badly these last few months. I was having so much trouble with math, and for you it is so easy. It's really hard for me to admit this, but I got jealous of you."

Rakesh looked at his brother with surprise. "Jealous. Why would you be jealous of me? But I did wonder why you put me down in front of your friends. That was something new, and it did hurt."

"Sorry about that. And sorry about making fun of your singing. You are actually pretty good." "You think? That's nice to hear. I'm so nervous when I sing in front of people." Rakesh smiled. "So, did Dad suggest you come and apologize?"

"He didn't have to. Both he and Mom were really concerned about how I have been treating you, and it took a while for me to see what I was doing. He did explain how everyone has different strengths and weaknesses, and it doesn't mean something is wrong with you when someone else is better at something."

"That's good to know because my math class has a fifth grader on a special program. She's just awesome, best student in the class! Talk about embarrassing for the rest of us!"

Janaka smiled. "So you know what I'm talking about, then."

Family home evening was fun again for everyone. She even overheard Janaka bragging to one of his friends who had come over to visit about how smart his little brother is! Janaka took some remedial math classes after school and discovered that he had misunderstood some important lessons in last year's math course, and that had left him unprepared for the new stuff he faced in tenth grade.

As for Rakesh, he was happy to have his big brother back, the one he still looked up to as his friend and protector.

CHAPTER 2: PERCEPTIVE SELF-CORRECTION - Learning to Get Along

Savitri paused in the middle of shouting, distracted for a moment by the sound of Dad closing the garage door after parking the car. Then she continued. "You're so mean to me, Rekha! All I did was borrow your shoes, and you hit the roof!" Rekha was already angry, but now her face turned bright red.

"You always take my stuff without asking!" This was their third fight of the day, and it wasn't even evening yet. Savitri felt tears in her eyes. "That's not true! It's not like I'm stealing anything, I always put them back. I just thought you wouldn't mind." Then she stopped talking, because she didn't want to start crying.

She and her sister used to be best friends, but starting about six months ago, they were arguing on a daily basis, with a big blow-up at least once a week. Mom and Dad each had long conversations with the girls, together and separately. They explained the different ways the girls could settle their disputes in a peaceful manner, and correct their own faults. It used to work, and everyone got along until recently. Now, despite their parents' best efforts, there was painfully little progress.

Even though she was four years younger, Savitri was almost her sister's height and could wear her clothes and shoes. But dress and shoe size were just one part of the problem. As they were growing up, Savitri adored Rekha. Now their worlds were starting to overlap... and collide. Whenever Rekha's friends came over, Savitri joined in. If Rekha was going to a movie, Savitri begged to tag along. Rekha wanted her independence. She just hated it last week when Dad asked her to babysit Savitri on a Saturday night because he and Mom had to go to an important business dinner. Rekha had to cancel a movie date with her girlfriends. She thought to herself, "Since she's so big, why can't she babysit herself?" and blamed Savitri for missing her movie outing.

Hearing the shouting even before he got out of the car, Dad headed upstairs. Mom was down with the flu since last weekend, and he was worried that the girls' fight would upset her.

"Girls! Enough already! Rekha, Savitri, go to your rooms and come down only for dinner. No television for either of you tonight. You know Mom is sick. How many times have I asked you not to fight like this?"

"A lot?" said Rekha gazing down shyly. "I'm sorry, Dad, but it's all Savitri's fault."

"Is not!"

"Is, too!"

"Please, just go to your rooms." Savitri didn't go to her room, but instead went down to the bench in the garden beside the family's outdoor Ganesha shrine.

It was a beautiful place, fragrant with the scent of Mom's roses, always peaceful. Savitri also liked it because it was right next to the kitchen, and the smell of Mom's good cooking mixed right in with that of the roses. Savitri was trying to understand for herself why she kept fighting with Rekha, but she always ended up just blaming her older sister. Her thoughts were interrupted when she overheard Mom and Dad in the kitchen.

"Will they ever stop?" Mom asked tearfully as Dad gave her a big hug.

Savitri knew it wasn't right to eavesdrop, but moved closer to the window anyway.

"Who knows? I'm told they will outgrow it, but when?" Mom sobbed, "What are we doing wrong?" "There, there, Anjali, it's the flu bug that's got you down. Don't let their fights upset you. I know it's hard. I've spoken to both of them so many times. I told Savitri not to borrow her sister's things without asking her permission—that's what started the latest fight—but she just won't listen. I told them how they will be each other's best friend for the rest of their lives, especially after they start their own families. But they just don't get it." Savitri was shocked at how upset Mom was. She ran quickly upstairs to her sister's room and barged in. "Mom's crying because of us!" Rekha, sitting on her bed, was still mad. "Because of you maybe! You start everything."

“No, no, you’re not hearing me! Mom’s really upset, and Dad was telling her how he has talked to us so many times, but we don’t listen. Do you think it’s true?”

“Maybe... Maybe we really are doing something wrong. Mom’s crying because of us?” “I feel really bad about that. It’s true that they talk to us about getting along and all that stuff about being BFFs. There could be something to it—you know how close Mom is with Aunt Tara.”

“How do we stop?” questioned Savitri. “When I do something you don’t like, you yell at me, I yell back, and the fight is on.” Smiling in spite of herself, Rekha said, “You know how Dad taught us to find and fix our own faults? ‘Self-correction,’ he calls it. The first step is admitting that we are doing something wrong.

That’s always the hardest part. I think we can agree we are doing something wrong! Let’s make a list of the things we fight about.”

Savitri responded with enthusiasm. “We always fight because I borrow your shoes.”

Rekha rolled her eyes. “That’s because you don’t bother to clean and polish them before giving them back. Otherwise, I wouldn’t mind so much.”

“Really!? You really don’t mind my borrowing your shoes?” “I guess not, if you don’t wreck them and if you clean them properly.”

“Of course I will. You should have told me earlier.” Rekha sighed. “I did tell you earlier, but you didn’t listen. Just like when you grab the front seat in the car all the time. Can’t we take turns?”

“I suppose so, I didn’t realize you wanted to sit up front so bad.”

“Well, I do.”

“And then your having to watch after me when Mom and Dad go out—I know that ruins your day!”

Rekha grinned. “Well, it is my duty as the older sister, so I probably shouldn’t complain. But you can’t expect me to also hang with you all day when I want to talk to my friends on the phone or check email and Facebook.

“OK, maybe I should have my friends over more often that way I wouldn’t be pestering you all the time.”

“And when I have my friends over, you can’t always keep trying to join us. Sometimes we’ve got big girl stuff to talk about.” Both sat silent for a few minutes. They realized they had given their parents a lot of grief over the last few months. Neither was quite sure what started the fighting. It was never like this before.

The sisters talked for another hour and completed their list of things they fought about—a method Dad had explained to them several times, but they never actually tried. The list wasn’t that long—clothes, friends, snacks, TV, who sits where in the car, and a few more. Nothing looked all that important in writing. They agreed on a formula to avoid fights about each item on the list: have alternate favorite TV shows, take turns with the best seat in the car, ask before borrowing, and so forth.

That next Friday, the day had been bright and sunny, and the two girls came home from school in a good mood. The school year was almost over, and summer vacation would start in a week’s time. Rekha flopped down on the sofa and grabbed the TV remote. In a few minutes, her favorite show would come on.

Savitri glared at her. "Don't you dare take over the TV!" Mom heard Savitri's loud voice from the kitchen and sighed, "Not again...."

To her surprise, though, she heard Rekha reply softly, "We decided that I would hand the TV over to you after I watched this show, remember?"

Savitri apologized, "Oh right, I forgot. Sorry." Mom could not believe her ears. Dad had just come into the kitchen. "Some kind of a miracle has taken place. For the first time in months, the girls are not fighting over the TV." Dad laughed softly. "So they made it work after all."

"Made what work?"

Dad smiled and put his arm around Mom's shoulder. "Rekha talked to me the day after they had that big fight. Savitri was outside the kitchen by Ganesha and heard how upset you were, with their fight coming on top of your flu. They felt terrible about it.

Rekha told me they would make things better. She said we had taught them to correct their own mistakes, and now they were going to start doing that. She made me promise to not say anything to you until they were sure they could actually stop fighting." Choking back tears, Mom uttered, "I'm so proud of my daughters!"

Just then the girls came in for a snack. Mom grabbed them both in a big hug and tried to hide her tears. Bewildered, Savitri asked, "Are you crying? What have we done now? We haven't been fighting!"

"No, no," replied Mom, "everything its fine, just fine." And things did go well, until the next year when Rekha got her driver's license and Savitri wanted to go along every time she took the car out....

CHAPTER 3: POWERFUL SELF-CONTROL - Learning from a Bully

That bully Rohit makes my life miserable,” Easan thought as he packed up his bag for another challenging day at school. The days were getting worse, and he was not looking forward to another one. After saying bye to Mom, he and younger brother Jothi walked to the bus stop. Seeing the bus draw near, Easan felt his heart beat faster. He could see a few heads poking out of the bus windows. Rohit’s voice, that dreaded voice, shouted, “Hey! Sissy!” The bus slowed to a stop. Rohit grinned at him. The other boys were laughing. This was their morning fun.

Easan stepped into the bus and glared at Rohit, who then turned toward his friends and laughed, “Oh, now he thinks he’s tough!” Easan’s stop was just one before the final stop, and most of the seats were already taken. As usual, the girls sat in the front, the younger kids next and Rohit and his friends at the back, as far away as possible from the driver, the only adult on board. Jothi sat with one of his friends in the middle of the bus, and Easan took a seat two rows in front of Rohit’s gang.

As soon as the bus started off, something whizzed by his head. Startled, he turned around to see Rohit and his friends smirking.

“What’s the matter, Easan, scared of a paper ball?” Easan stood up and clenched his fist. But then Rohit stood up, and Michael, Arjun and Jose. Easan, in 10th grade and just 15, was no match for these older boys. By this time, the rest of the children had turned around to see what was going on. Jothi came back to where Easan was standing. “Don’t do anything. There are too many of them!”

His little brother’s attempt to help just embarrassed him further. Then the bus driver ordered over the PA system, “Sit down in the back, right now!”

Reluctantly, Easan sat down, but his heart beat fast and he felt a choking anger rising up. He could not understand why Rohit kept picking on him. Even worse than being picked on was the fact that Jothi was seeing all this. “Maybe the day will come when even Jothi mocks me,” he thought, “All because of Rohit!”

The rest of the day at school was uneventful. Easan stayed in his homeroom, skipping lunch to avoid running into Rohit. As the bus loaded, the driver warned Rohit and his friends. “Behave yourselves, boys, I’m watching you! Cause trouble and you will be walking home!” The ride was reasonably peaceful.

The brothers’ stop came soon enough, and they ran home, straight to the kitchen where Mom had already set out a snack for them. As he bit into his sandwich, Easan relived the morning’s experience. Remembering Jothi’s frightened face, he became upset all over again. “Why was he so frightened? Did he think I wasn’t strong enough to fight those jerks? He just made it worse!” Suddenly he turned to Jothi. “Look, you’re making a mess! Dropping food all over the place! You don’t even know how to eat properly!”

Startled, Jothi looked up. Mom, too, was surprised and thought, “What is this?” Normally the boys got along very well, and had been taught to have self-control and be polite to everyone. But she had noticed in the past few months Easan snapping at Jothi over nothing.

“Now, now, boys, everything is alright.” Later that evening, after the boys had gone to bed, Mom brought the subject up with Dad. “I don’t know what’s wrong, but there is a problem!” Dad agreed, “I noticed also. The boys are not at all friendly with each other.”

“The whole reason for our having two children was to ensure that they would share a good comradeship and be there for each other.” Dad frowned. “I know, but now they are like sworn enemies.” “Not ‘enemies,’ just ‘enemy.’ It’s one-sided. It is Easan who attacks Jothi.” “Maybe I should talk to Easan,” Dad replied. “I will remind him to show more self-control. I will explain again that he should think before he speaks and be considerate of others.”

The opportunity presented itself the next morning. As the two boys were getting ready for school, Easan bluntly told Jothi, “Don’t sit near me on the bus today. Sit up front with the girls!” Stepping back, Jothi looked fearfully at his brother. Dad had heard the remark from the kitchen and said quietly, “Easan, can I see you for a minute?” Easan responded defensively, “OK, but I am getting late for school.”

They sat down in the living room, while Jothi joined Mom in the kitchen. Dad asked softly, “Son, what’s wrong? What’s upsetting you?” “Jothi bugs me, following me around all the time, even at school.”

Dad was silent for a moment. “I don’t think that’s the problem. You boys have always gotten along well. There has to be something else.”

“No, it’s not...” Then he blurted out, “There’s a bully at school Rohit, who has been making my life miserable.” Dad said, “The way you’ve started to make Jothi’s life miserable?”

Easan blushed, “I guess, sort of, maybe...”

“What do you feel like doing to Rohit?”

“I want to punch him!”

“Do you think it will solve the problem?”

“I don’t know. At least it will wipe that silly smirk off his face!”

“I would not do that if I were you.”

“Why not?”

“This boy is older and bigger than you, and so are his friends. You don’t think a bully like that picks on someone his own size, do you? And if you start a fight, do you think he is going to fight fair? Even if you somehow got the advantage on him, his friends would come to his defense.”

“But what can I do? I’m starting to hate going to school, and I’m ashamed that Jothi is seeing me get bullied.”

“Remember our earlier talks about self-control, son, about considering your words carefully and not letting your emotions take over?”

“Yes, like when I learned to stop playing video games so much. But how does that apply here?”

“The best method of dealing with a bully is to ignore him, and that takes real self-control.”

“Ignore him?”

“Yes, just plain ignore him.”

“How?”

“Behave as though he does not exist. However, to do that, you have to keep your emotions under control. You can also just avoid running in to him.”

“You really think that will work?”

“Yes, I do. But if it doesn’t, I will go to the school and talk to the

principal, and to Rohit's parents if I have to. But I think you can solve this on your own."

Easan acknowledged, "You're right, Dad, I am letting him get to me. That's the problem."

As Easan walked back into the kitchen, the determined tilt of his head made Jothi understand that things were back to normal between them. Together they raced for the bus.

The bus journey was the same in many ways and yet so completely different. Rohit taunted, yelled and threw spitballs. But what had changed was Easan's response. Once he decided to not let Rohit upset him, he found it possible to ignore the bully. He did what he loved best—watch life outside the bus. He did that happily for several days, till one morning when they nearly reached school, he realized that the entire journey had been quiet.

No bullying. Dad's advice had worked.

But an odd thing happened that same day, something very revealing about Rohit.

Easan was walking into the boy's locker room when he saw that a group of seniors had Rohit cornered. They were snapping wet towels at his legs, which could really hurt, and laughing at him. Rohit looked at Easan helplessly. Easan shouted, "Hey, here comes the coach!"

The boys scattered. Looking down the hallway, Rohit quickly realized the coach was nowhere around. "Why did you do that? I thought you would enjoy seeing me getting picked on."

"Maybe I should have just watched," Easan replied, "but I couldn't. They bully you, you bully me, I started to bully my little brother. Where's it supposed to stop?"

Rohit didn't know how to answer that question, and he certainly wasn't used to people coming to his aid, especially someone he hadn't been very nice to. Still, he was grateful for being rescued.

The next morning a new boy was at the bus stop with Easan and Jothi. His family had just moved into the neighborhood. As soon as the bus arrived, one of Rohit's friends pointed him out and whispered, "Hey, let's bug the new kid!"

"Nah," said Rohit, glancing toward Easan, "Why bother? He's not hurting us."

That evening, Easan recounted the day's events to the family. "You advised me, Dad, to control my emotions and not react to Rohit's taunting. It worked. But even more so, when I saw him getting bullied, I suddenly understood. Those older students took it out on him, he took it out on me, and I started taking it out on Jothi—like a cough going around in flu season! Once I controlled myself, and had enough compassion to help Rohit, he gained some self-control and compassion and became less of a bully." "That's the son I raised," Dad thought proudly.

CHAPTER 4: PROFOUND SELF-CONFIDENCE - The Professor's Challenge

Ever since he was a toddler, Anand had been making things in his father's woodshop and over the years had developed some impressive skills with hand tools. Now that he was 12, Dad was introducing him to power tools and letting him complete small projects on his own, such as wooden toys for his little sister Meenakshi.

Dad was a computer engineer at a big corporation, but had learned carpentry as a boy from his father. He was a natural craftsman. By the time he entered college, he had helped Anand's grandfather build an entire addition to their house over two summers. Having gained a lot of confidence by mastering this skill, he wanted to pass on that skill and confidence to his son. "This will help him, whatever profession he follows," Dad thought, "just as it helped me."

"Anand, let's build a rocking horse for Meenakshi. This is a more advanced project that will give you experience with some new tools."

"Like the wood train you made for me when I was her age? That was so much fun! So, what do we cut first? Here's a nice board!" "Not so fast. Every project starts with a plan, right?" "Yes, Dad, like you always say, 'First we build it in our head, then we build it for real.' I'll google 'rocking horse plans.'" Within minutes they had found several free plans on the Web for rocking horses and printed one out. After making a few adjustments to the design, they created a list of the needed pieces and started selecting materials.

Meenakshi got wind of their project, which was a secret, and burst into the workshop when the rocking horse was half finished. "Where is it? Where is it?" "Meenakshi, this was supposed to be a surprise for your birthday!" Anand groaned.

"That's OK, I won't tell anyone, so it can still be a surprise. I want the legs to be brown, the saddle pink and sequins everywhere!"

Anand was silenced—both by her five-year-old logic on secrets and her request to put sequins on the horse. He looked at her and surrendered, "Sure, can do, whatever my little sis wants."

Dad showed her a rocking horse in a picture book he had on Indus Valley, the ancient civilization in northwest India. "You see this? Some child 5,000 years ago played with this little rocking horse that looks a lot like yours." Meenakshi loved the birthday present her father and brother made.

"See, Anand, how much joy and happiness can come from a simple project?"
"Yes, Dad, I've never seen Meenakshi so pleased with anything."

From then on, the projects got more complicated, and Anand became more skilled. Father and son rebuilt the shrine room, made cabinets for Meenakshi's bedroom and a new dining table for Mom. By the time Anand turned 18, Dad confided in Mom, "You know, he's a better carpenter than I am in many respects. He has learned the right way and has no bad work habits."

Having done well in high school, Anand gained admittance to UCLA, which had one of the best architecture departments in the country.

That was his chosen major. The family's budget was tight, so Anand moved into cheap housing near the campus with several other architectural students. The house was in disrepair.

One of Anand's housemates, Jack, complained that the door to his room didn't close properly. "Will the landlord fix that?" he wondered aloud to no one in particular.

"Why don't you fix it yourself?" asked Anand, "It's just loose hinge screws."

"How?" "Don't you know basic carpentry? You just take the screw out, pound in some thin slivers of wood, add some glue and put the screw back. Presto, the hinge is tight and the door closes again! What kind of architect are you going to be?"

"Hey, I'm good with computers, and someone else is going to build what I design. It's not like I'm going to be swinging a hammer!"

"It might be good if you knew how. In this economy better to be a carpenter with a job than an unemployed architect!" Both laughed.

Soon he and Jack got to be good friends. Jack would visit the temple in Malibu with him on weekends and sit in meditation after the puja. The temple's peaceful atmosphere calmed them down after a demanding week at school.

As freshmen, they enrolled in Architecture 101. The professor had a down-to-earth approach. Indeed, he expected his students to know how things are made and what they are made of! In the second class, he set out samples of eight kinds of wood and asked if anyone wanted to try to identify all eight. Anand alone raised his hand. He walked up to the table, glanced at the pieces, smelled a few and rattled off the names: "Oak, pine, douglas fir, walnut, balsa, cedar, ebony (expensive), and Hawaiian koa (equally pricey)."

The professor smiled, "Impressive! Only once before has someone gotten all eight, especially the koa, which is rare."

"Now," the professor continued, "pay attention, all of you! The best form of learning is based on practical lessons. Your assignment for this week is to make a one-foot cube using balsa wood sticks glued together. It may not use any metal braces. You will be graded on how much weight the cube can hold before collapsing. Pair up with another student and use your creative skills to design the strongest cube you can. The record in my courses is 225 pounds. Break it and you get extra credit for the project. You have one week. Anand and Jack discussed the project during break time. Jack was puzzled. "Whoa, what is this? We're making something physical? I thought we would doing exercises on the computer!"

"I'm glad it's something real," Anand answered confidently.

"You think the buildings you are going to design aren't going to be real in the end? Sure, they need to look pretty, but even more so they need to be strong and withstand things like earthquakes.

This is California, after all! I like the assignment. We're going to beat that record and get ourselves extra credit."

"You're pretty cocky. What makes you think it's so simple?"

"It isn't simple, but it also isn't the hardest thing I've ever had to build. My Dad taught me carpentry, so I've had a lot of experience in this area. Before we touch a stick, let's make a plan."

"I already googled 'balsa wood cube plans' and got nothing." "You what? Why would you think anyone would have made a plan for a balsa wood cube?"

"Joke, dude; it's a joke. I didn't google anything. I know we pretty much have to start from scratch on this."

“Not exactly. The problem to me seems closest to a bridge design, where relatively light steel girders are combined in a way that creates a very strong structure. We can apply those concepts to our cube.”

Meanwhile, the other students had been quickly building flimsy cubes. Some did not even support the course textbook.

It was midnight before the deadline day when Anand and Jack finished their cube, a forest of posts with cross bracing every which way. Once it was completed, they decided to test it. Anand pressed down on it with his hand to start with. “Seems pretty solid.”

Jack got a big stack of books and piled it on. “So far, so good.”

Anand suggested, “Put it on the floor.” Jack set it down, and before he could object, Anand stood on the cube. It supported his entire weight!

“Wow!” exclaimed Jack, “But you don’t weigh 240 pounds. Let’s take it to the engineering department, where they have those machines that measure the strength of concrete.” Excited at their success so far, they convinced a graduate engineering student to test the cube in the middle of the night! 250, 370, 400. The cube finally broke under the weight of 450 pounds, double the previous record!

Anand and Jack reported back to the class with a video of their cube in the compression testing machine. The professor was impressed. “You two didn’t take the easy way out and just make a simple cube. No, you did your research and used your brains to make the strongest cube you could. The extra credit I promised is yours, and I’ve got a feeling you will both do well.”

“Well,” replied Anand, “I have my Dad to thank, who taught me to plan carefully, to work precisely and to love a challenge.”

CHAPTER 5: PLAYFUL SELF-CONTENTMENT - Living a Fulfilling Life

It was barely six. Dad had finished his short morning puja and I was helping setting out the family breakfast. As he arranged the plates, his mind drifted back 40 years to the day he and his parents arrived in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, from India. When his father opened their Indian grocery store, he was there to stock the shelves and run kid-sized errands. It wasn't work in those days; it was an adventure of the entrepreneurial kind. That reverie was interrupted by the clamber of his daughters bounding enthusiastically down the wooden staircase. Arpita, 12, and Ananya, 14, were dressed in their uniforms, ready for school.

"Dad, why do we always eat such a big breakfast?" Arpita asked. Dad smiled. "I need energy to do my work at the store, just as you need energy to study. And what's the point of owning a grocery if you can't eat well?" His eyes twinkled as he said those words.

Mom looked at the girls, "Quick, now. Enjoy your breakfast. The bus will be here soon." Twenty minutes later, Dad watched through the kitchen window as they headed for school. That evening, as the family sat in the living room, the doorbell rang. Ananya opened the door to find Uncle Kumar standing outside. "Hello Uncle! Please come in," she said with a warm smile. Kumar was Mom's younger brother. Their family had been in Malaysia for several generations. Their parents and grandparents had been low-paid workers on the rubber plantations and had never gone to school. With great effort, Mom's parents had sent her and Kumar to college, and now Uncle had an important government job.

Dad's parents, on the other hand, were business people who came to Kuala Lumpur in the 1970s. They passed on the grocery store they started to their son. It remained successful and provided a steady income. Uncle slouched down on the sofa, exhausted and stressed out from his day at the office. Without so much as a pleasant remark to begin, he launched into his favorite topic: complaints about his own family.

"I am so angry with my children. No matter what I tell them, they don't spend enough time studying. I hope you two girls study hard! Education is so important these days." Mom chided, "Enough, brother. Don't start that again. In this home we do not force the children to study night and day. We give them time for other things—to learn religion, dance and art, and to just have fun." "Sister, that's so wrong! Those things are useless for making money in the future! They must study and earn degrees! Then they can get a big townhouse, like mine, and a Mercedes.

Running a grocery store is fine for new immigrants, but the children should do better!" Mom was painfully aware that Kumar looked down on their grocery business, but chose to ignore his jab. "But what is the point if by pushing we make them continually worried and upset in the present moment? Our guru told us to teach our children 'playful self-contentment' and we are doing so. They are better people when they are content and happy. Remember, in our Hindu religion there are four goals in life: to live according to dharma, to seek happiness, to earn money and to seek liberation from rebirth. Yes, the girls need an education. That's part of their dharma. But they are still children and children need to be happy, religious and content right now—not sacrifice their youth for a yet-to-happen future."

Dad looked up from his crossword puzzle. "In this house we only force the girls to do one thing!" He peered at his daughters, with narrowed eyes, in a mock seriousness.

When the girls answered in chorus, "Eat well!" the family burst out laughing. Sullen, Uncle Kumar wondered when was the last time he and his family had laughed like that together. Evenings at his home were serious, even somber. There was no time for jokes and games.

The children had to study. His daughter Shaila was going to be a lawyer, and his son Satish, an engineer. That was his plan. He could hardly wait for the day when they became rich and important. They would be the envy of his friends, for sure. And they would be able to support him in later life.

After dinner, as Uncle got up to leave, he whispered to the girls, "I don't want to catch you idling away your time the way your Dad does. Work hard at your studies and you will be like me!" Ananya and Arpita looked at each other, then at their father, who had not heard Uncle's mean remark. Uncle had never helped at the grocery store, he considered it beneath him, what with his university degree and all that or he would know that Dad worked very hard indeed. Dad also knew the value of relaxing at home with his children.

After Kumar left, Ananya sighed, "What's the point of Uncle's hard work? He always seems unhappy. Does he ever stop to just enjoy life?"
"Most people don't," Dad mumbled to himself.

The next day was Sunday, family day. The store was closed. By mid-morning they would all be dressed and leave for the temple for worship. Afterwards they would go for a picnic in the park, if the weather was good, or to an inexpensive restaurant. Then the botanical garden, the amusement park or, on rainy days, back home to watch a rented movie together. Sundays together were always a lot of fun.

As the years went by, the girls did well in school, despite their uncle's predictions, and were in some of the same classes as Satish and Shaila. Ananya intended to get a degree in accounting, and Arpita had her eye on a career in marketing. Shaila's pre-law classes were brutal, as were Satish's engineering courses.

One day Ananya met her cousins for lunch at school. Both were so exhausted and unhappy that she asked why they never took some time out to relax a little. "Because Dad will kill us if we don't study all the time," Satish blurted out. Ananya wasn't sure if he was exaggerating.

After Ananya's junior year in college, Dad suffered serious health problems. The store was becoming too much for him. The girls talked about the situation together, and then with Mom. She said, "You can continue your education if you like; that's our first priority."

"But what will happen to the store?" asked Ananya. "We'll sell it," Mom replied with obvious sadness. "The money will pay for the rest of your college, and what is left will be barely enough for Dad and me to live on."

Arpita frowned. "I don't like the sound of that. Our grandparents started this store, and it has taken good care of our family for the last 50 years. Ananya and I could finish our degrees, but then what? What's the guarantee that we will earn more money than we can with the store? It would be different if Dad worked for someone else, but we have a family business. I like the grocery store, it's challenging, and I like living upstairs from it. We've had such a happy life here." Ananya nodded in agreement.

After further discussions with Dad and Mom, the girls quit their schooling to take over the store. Dad passed away the following year. The girls were fully responsible for the business, and it boomed under their management. After a few years, they bought the store next door to expand the space. Soon both had married. Their husbands joined the family's grocery business. Two years later Arpita's first baby arrived. Then Ananya had twins. Their homes were bursting with the sound of happy children.

It was Diwali, and cousins Shaila and Satish came to visit them for the first time in two years.

“How’s it going?” asked Arpita.

Satish replied, “My life is nothing but work, work, work. Shaila’s the same. If I really keep at it, I can get a high management job in the firm. And don’t ever ask me about marriage! Who has time to marry these days? I might lose out on the next promotion if I take my attention off the job.”

“But are you happy?” Ananya inquired.

“Not really. I want these promotions, but frankly most of the senior members of the firm are stressed out and miserable.” Shaila, who was playing with one of the babies, chimed in. “I would really like to find a husband and start a family, but if I took off for maternity leave, I would never advance in the law firm.” It pained Arpita to see how unhappy they were. They had been unhappy children, they were unhappy college students and now they were unhappy adults. Their father had meant well, but this was clearly the result of his constant pushing and complaining.

It was during the monsoon season, when the downpour was especially heavy, that they heard Uncle Kumar was deathly ill.

The family closed the shop for a few days and Mom, Arpita and Ananya drove to Uncle’s house. Satish and Shaila were there. Their distant expressions revealed they hadn’t visited their father for a while. Each had moved to the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur to be near their jobs. Bedridden, he was a mere shadow of his former self. Only now, as the end was near, had they come to check on him in person.

Kumar looked up from his bed. His illness had caught him unprepared. The doctor had been telling him for years that he needed to relax and spend time with his children, not to mention cut out all the palm oil and white sugar from his diet. Even if he had followed the doctor’s counsel, the children had new jobs and new lives far away. They had all become accustomed to the physical and emotional estrangement.

Kumar struggled to sit up. “I have realized something,” he confessed. “All my life I thought I had to work, work, work and never let up. I pushed myself. I pushed you, Shaila and Satish. I even tried to push you, Arpita and Ananya. But, fortunately for you, your father would have nothing of it. ‘Let them have some time for fun, let them be content with the way things are,’ he would say. I scoffed at him. Now I see the two of you are happy parents.

I would love to have grandchildren, but I raised my own children to be so stressed out, they don’t even want children! They think a family would just mean more stress!”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Dad,” Satish offered. “It’s not a matter of being hard on myself anymore. Soon I will greet Lord Yama, the God of Death. I clearly see things the way they are, and the way they should have been. Feeling we did not have enough, my father pushed me. Even though I was successful and well off, I also pushed my children. With all this wanting and pushing, no one thought to just be happy.”

He paused for a few moments to catch his breath. “I shall not make this same mistake in my next life.” “Don’t talk like that,” sobbed Shaila.

Suddenly Uncle shouted, “Get the car! Get the car!” Startled and confused, Satish looked at Kumar. “Where do you want to go?”

“It’s time to leave, give me the keys!”

Satish looked over at his aunt, then back at his father, who had stopped breathing. “He has gone to Siva’s feet,” grieved Ananya, who then chanted the Mrityunjaya Mantra with her sister. Their soft intonations comforted everyone.

In tears, Satish and his sister listened, but did not understand the meaning or chant along. No time was given for such religious

studies when they were growing up. A year later they all gathered to remember Uncle's passing. The family lit a lamp and did a simple puja in the shrine room before his picture.

Breaking the silence, Shaila spoke, "Father's death was an extraordinary moment, to hear him talk like that with such wisdom about being content in life. But what did he mean, 'Get the car'?" Ananya explained, "I found out a few months ago that when people are about to leave their body, they often have thoughts of travel. In the old scriptures, it says they may see chariots, horses or elephants in their dreams, or talk about them. But today, we travel in cars, so he asked for a car. It was all part of the journey he was about to take."

There was silence until Shaila spoke. "This last year I gave a lot of thought to Father's final words: 'I shall not make this same mistake in my next life.' Father was raised, and he raised us to never be content, to never feel what we had was enough. Even when we had enough, we never took time to enjoy life."

Shaila then made a vow: "I have decided to change, so that I won't have to apologize to my children on my deathbed." Then she grinned. "I guess I shouldn't talk about children when I'm not even married yet!"

Arpita saw her chance. "You know, my husband has a smart and good looking brother who is not married. Why don't you join us on our next Sunday family outing? We won't tell him anything, so you can check him out for yourself first!"

Satish looked up. "Can I come along? Do you have any available sisters-in-law? This is all a lesson for me, too, that there's a lot more to life than making money."

CHAPTER 6: PIOUS CHARACTER - How Ganesha Saved Usha

Usha and Anjana's parents, Umesh and Swati, loved the Hindu way of life, and they promised one another they would instill that same pious character in their daughters. As each girl was old enough, she was given something to do at the family's daily morning puja, starting with fetching the tray of flowers or filling the water bowl. From an early age the sisters loved the worship, the chanting, singing and incense, not to mention the scrumptious prasadam!

They first went to India when Usha was just six and Anjana was nine. The girls were excited to arrive in Mumbai right on time for the annual Ganesha festival. As the family drove to the ceremonies from the airport, Usha and Anjana lit up at the sight of the huge pandals, temporary temples, set up in the busy streets.

Each featured a large and magnificent Ganesha created just for the eleven day festival. Even more exciting was their experience at the famous Siddhi Vinayaka temple. When they arrived, it was completely packed with people. After standing in the long line for over an hour, they moved near the inner sanctum, where they could finally see Ganesha, except Usha, who was too short. "Lift me up, Daddy, lift me up," she pleaded, tugging on his pant leg. Dad lifted her up high so she could see Ganesha.

Suddenly Usha yelled, "He's dancing!" "Who's dancing?" "He's dancing," Usha replied, pointing at Ganesha. "What do you mean? That's a stone statue—how can it move?" "No, He's dancing!" she insisted. "I can see Him moving His arms and trunk and rocking back and forth!" Usha was nearly shouting in her excitement, and nearby devotees took notice.

An elderly lady next to Dad asked, "What is she saying?" "She's seeing the God dance," replied a man to the lady's right. "Is it so?! Jai Ganapati!"

By now the priest had come over. Offering namaskara to Usha, he announced, "We have all been blessed today by this little girl's vision."

The family was still chattering about it when they arrived at the home of Umesh's parents. After greeting their son and his family with arati at the door, Umesh's parents took the family to the shrine room. At that point the day's second unusual event took place. Usha walked over to a shelf near the altar and picked up a strand of prayer beads. "These are mine!" Her dad told her softly, "I don't think so. You have never even been here before. So, how could they be yours?" "They are mine! I use them every day."

Umesh's mother looked at her husband, "Those beads belonged to my mother, the very person Usha was named after." "Do you suppose Usha is your mom reborn?" Suddenly, Usha put the beads back and ran into the next room.

Bewildered, the adults followed her. "This has been a strange day!" exclaimed Swati. "Where did the kitchen go?" Usha called out from the end of one hallway. "Now what?" asked Dad.

Umesh's father offered an explanation. "This was Grandma Usha's home, but it has since been remodeled. Your daughter is standing right where the kitchen used to be! How could she know? Even you didn't know that."

The next day, Dilip came for a visit. He was a close friend of the family and a talented astrologer. They explained Usha's behavior.

The following day, he returned. Excitedly, he announced, "I have studied their charts, and I believe they are indeed the same soul. This is wonderful! But I also have to caution you about something." "What's that?" asked Mom.

"Usha will be naturally religious, but she will become rebellious as a teen. You should watch for that and be ready to guide her wisely."
After a week in Mumbai, the family headed back to America.

Usha's memory of her great-grandmother's house and the prayer beads faded quickly, and she forgot all about it by the time she was eight.

As they grew up, Usha and her sister loved the temple, the festivals, the singing and their twice-weekly bharata natyam classes. They were two of the best students in their weekly Hinduism class. But, just as the astrologer had predicted, all this changed for Usha when she began high school, the same year Anjana left home for college.

The young Usha was both pretty and talented. She started to spend more time with a new circle of friends, the school's "popular" girls. None of them was particularly religious, and Usha kept quiet as they entertained each other by mocking the beliefs of Christian students and gossiping about the school's two Muslims

It was perhaps natural that she began doubting her own beliefs. Around her friends Usha never uttered a word about her faith. She was afraid they might not like her if they knew she was a practicing Hindu. Maybe Hinduism was just another religion that should be left in the past, she pondered, just as her friends frequently said about the other faiths.
Usha walked a fine line to be accepted by this clique of girls.

She never mentioned how conservative her parents were; they expected her to not date until she was 21! Usha went to a few parties with her friends, but avoided showing interest in any of the boys.

One spring, Usha and her friends made plans for a three day holiday weekend at Yosemite Park, one of the most beautiful places in California. Nervously, Usha told Mom and Dad about the trip, asking if she could go. Fortunately for Usha, it was a chaperoned event, with Susan's parents going as well as several other adults. Otherwise, Dad would have had none of it! As it was, he was not objecting, but Mom was visibly uncomfortable about it.

She knew the other girls could be sneaky and manage to get into mischief despite the chaperones. "We should ask Lord Ganesha about this."

"How are we going to do that?" Usha challenged, worried they would not let her go. "How can you, of all people, ask that?" said Mom. "It was you who saw Him dancing in the temple!" "That was a long time ago, Mom, and maybe it didn't really happen."

"Oh, it happened alright," said Mom. "The entire temple practically came to a stop as a result. I know He will give us a sign. Just you wait.

They sent a written prayer to Ganesha through the temple's sacred fire and agreed to allow Him a week for a response. After all, He might be busy with other concerns.

All that week the girls talked and giggled about the trip. Susan's parents would take their SUV, and Susan, Usha and Melissa would follow in their sedan.

On Friday morning, Susan caught Usha in the hall before their first class. "Hey, Usha, we decided to leave this evening instead of tomorrow. I hope you are ready."

Usha froze. There had been no sign from Ganesha, so she had not received permission. Still, she reasoned, no sign didn't necessarily mean "no," so Mom will probably agree. "I'm ready," she told Susan.

"By the way, I invited Nicole to join us. She's been wanting to get in with our group, and this is a chance to get to know her." This was a bombshell for Usha. Nicole had been trying to join with the girls all year, but Usha didn't like her and had managed to keep her out. Back in eighth grade, they had gotten into quite a fight when Nicole started some gossip about her that was completely untrue. Nicole was also a bit of a sneak, and Usha was sure she had cheated on at least one important test this year. As far as Usha knew, Susan didn't like Nicole either, but obviously something had changed.

Usha replied angrily, "But you know how I feel about her! Why did you call her?" "Look, I didn't really have a choice. She would think I was mean if I left her out once she found out about it. She's definitely coming."

"In that case, count me out." Usha abruptly walked away. When Usha walked in the front door of her home, Mom took one look at her face and asked, "Usha, what happened?" "Susan invited Nicole on the camping trip. Now I'm not going!"

Mom knew how much Usha had wanted to go and how excited she had been. "Maybe this is the sign from Ganesha." Usha looked at Mom. "What are you talking about? What has Ganesha got to do with this? Susan's just mean." She ran to her room and slammed the door.

At 3:00 in the morning, Usha woke up to the shrill ring of the phone. Rubbing her eyes, she heard Mom answering the call. She felt a chill run down her spine as her mother asked, "Which hospital?" She rushed down the stairs, now feeling quite afraid. Mom put down the phone and said, "Usha, Susan's car crashed." "Oh, no!" "The girls are safe. They are at a hospital near Yosemite getting treated for minor cuts. Susan's parents are with them, and they're driving back this morning. They're all too shaken up to continue the camping trip."

Dad, Mom and Usha met the group at Susan's house. Mom brought some idlis she had cooked early that morning. The families were good friends, and she knew they would love some home cooked Indian food after their ordeal.

Still upset, Susan explained what happened. "We were driving slowly because it was already dark, but Nicole kept goading me to drive faster. It was an uphill drive, you know, and when I rounded a curve, I lost control and we went off the shoulder. Fortunately, the car slid into two trees—otherwise we would have gone off a cliff! I'll tell you, there's nothing like the feeling of that seat belt tightening around you when your car is flying off the road, and 'boom,' the airbag blowing up in your face. We are lucky to be alive."

"Wow, that must have been scary!" "It was, Usha. But at least no one was seriously hurt. When I looked around the car, I saw that a tree branch had come through the rear window and punctured the back seat. If you had come on the trip, too, then two of us would have been in the back instead of all in the front. Someone could have died!"

When Usha reached home, she went to the shrine room and put a flower before Ganesha. "Thank you for getting in the way of my going on that trip. I'm sorry I forgot that you look after me."

Suddenly she vividly remembered Ganesha dancing for her years ago. It was as if she was seeing it all for the first time. Returning to the living room, Usha sat with her parents. "You were right to question this trip. You knew I might follow the lead of the other girls. By leaving the matter up to Ganesha, you helped me reconnect with Him. I also realized that Susan and her friends are not right for me. They invited Nicole, I found out, because she promised to get them wine and beer for the weekend. I need to associate with a group that shares our values."

Three years later Usha left home for university. Arriving at her new dorm, the first thing she did was hang up the big poster of Ganesha from her room at home. She never failed to pray to Him each day. She knew He was watching over her.

CHAPTER 7: PROFICIENCY IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION - Little Miss Gandhi

Dad bought it for me!” “No, he didn’t! It’s for both of us,” cried Nandi as he grabbed the Pictionary game from his sister’s hands.

“Mom!” yelled Amala, “Nandi’s trying to take my games again!” Hearing the fight from the kitchen, Mom sighed, knowing it heralded the next phase in her children’s relationship. Nandi had just turned six. Until recently, he had adored his older sister, now ten, and did anything she asked. Everything had been so peaceful.

But now Nandi wanted to have his own way. Mom walked over to their room and asked calmly, “OK, what’s going on?”

Nandi complained, “Amala is so selfish and mean. She won’t let me play with the game Dad just bought.”

“You are too young to play this game,” Amala argued. “And you already have lots of games. Every time I get something new, you want to play with it first. Well, not this time! My friend Shama is coming in an hour and we’re going to play Pictionary, which requires at least two players, by the way.” Amala planted her feet, crossed her arms and scowled at her little brother.

Nandi scowled right back, and Mom almost laughed at the two of them facing off like miniature warriors. But she knew this was serious business in their world.

She and Dad had read up on sibling fights. They learned that it isn’t a good idea to settle the children’s fights for them. The better approach is to teach them how to resolve their conflicts themselves. Of course, this would be no easy task. In fact, they could expect to spend the next 10 to 15 years working at it, one fight at a time.

Amala glared defiantly at Mom, “Why does he always want to take my best games and toys? Anyway, it says on the box ‘eight year-olds and above.’ He’s too young for this game.” “Am not! I can play your stupid game! You’re just selfish and mean!”

Mom stepped in. “Nandi, what did Amala say?”

“She never lets me play with any of her toys!”

“OK, but I asked you what exactly Amala said.” Nandi thought for a minute and then remembered, “She said that the game was not for someone my age.”

“What else?”

“That I take her toys a lot and that she wants to play this game with Shama in an hour.”

“OK, and what did we say last week about name-calling?” Nandi thought for a minute, then handed the game back to his sister.

“Alright, I take back calling her selfish and mean.” “OK,” offered Amala as she took the game back, “I’ll share it with you, after I play with Shama. But if it’s too hard for you, then don’t keep taking it.”

That evening after dinner, Mom sat down with Nandi and Amala, hoping they had calmed down. "I want to talk about the fight you had this morning."

"Why, am I getting a time-out for it?" asked Nandi nervously.

"No, you are not. I want to help you understand how to settle your own fights, without me or Dad stepping in. It's called conflict resolution."

"What does that mean?" Nandi wanted to know.

"Conflict means fighting, and conflict resolution means to stop fighting by solving the problem. The best way to settle a fight is by negotiation, not by force and certainly not by arguing."

"What's negotiation?"

"Nuh-go-she-ay-shun. It means talking calmly about the problem until you find a solution both can agree on. The first step is to understand what the other person is saying."

"That's why you made me repeat what Amala said about the Pictionary?"

"Exactly. You're getting the idea. During a fight, people don't listen to each other. If they did, they would find solutions more quickly.

Amala wanted to play the game first with her friend.

That was important to her. So, you could have said, 'Amala I know you want to play the game with Shama, but can I play it after you are done?' And that did turn out to be the solution."

"It worked this time, but what happens if we can't agree?" challenged Amala. "Then you can seek mediation. That is having someone else, like me, step in to help find a solution that you both agree on."

"What if we don't like your solution?"

Mom smiled. "That's why you should learn to settle your own problems! Now both of you wash your plates; and, Amala, go do your homework." Later that night, Mom was telling Dad about that discussion.

From the adjacent room, the children could hear bits of the conversation. The subject soon turned to purchasing a second car, something Mom had been wanting for a whole year.

"Why do you want a second car? What's wrong with sharing the one we have?" Dad sounded a little upset. "Because most of the time, you are using it. And I have so many errands to do and places to take the kids, especially as Nandi gets older. I need a car for myself!"

Suddenly there was a pause, and Dad repeated Mom's reasons for wanting a car. Then Mom repeated what Dad said about not needing one.

Nandi whispered to Amala, "Sounds like they are doing negotiation."

Amala corrected him, "Silly, no one says 'doing negotiation.'"

The verb form of negotiation is negotiating. They are negotiating."

Nandi looked at her admiringly. "Gosh, you sure know a lot." Amala frowned. "They have been talking for a long time. Maybe we should mediate." Nandi said solemnly, "I don't think so. Grown-ups can be

strange. They may not like us kids saying anything, even if we

could solve their problem." Amala realized that there was some logic to that. "You're right, Nandi. Let's stay out of it."

Just as they decided not to try to help, they realized that Mom and Dad had arrived at a solution. Dad summarized, "So, we both

agree that we will buy a second car after we finish paying the installments for the Dodge. Right?" Mom answered, "Right, Dear."

Over the years many opportunities arose for negotiation between Amala and Nandi, and they got surprisingly good at it. In fact, they helped settle disputes between their friends so often that Mom joked that they were running a peer counseling service.

Amala and Nandi also discovered as they grew older that the stakes got higher in the disputes. What was once an argument over a toy was now one over hurt feelings or unfounded rumors.

The biggest test for Amala came in 11th grade. One day at school, Grace, a friendly, outgoing girl she didn't know well, joined her for lunch. They discovered they would be together in two classes next semester, and they soon became good friends. Then one day in the spring, the subject of religion came up. Grace asked Amala if she was going to heaven.

"We Hindus believe in reincarnation, so our idea of heaven is a bit different than what Christians are used to. It's not a place where you live forever. It's a place we stay until we're reborn.

Eventually we do reach a permanent heaven, when we're not going to be reborn any more."

"That's not true," shot back Grace. "Only if you believe in Jesus Christ can you be saved and go to heaven." "Who says so?" "Jesus said so, in the Bible, that's who. The whole Bible is the word of God."

"How do you know that?" "The Bible says so."

Amala pondered this circular reasoning for a minute. "Oh that's fine. We probably shouldn't talk about religion anymore." "Well, if you want to keep being my friend, we should. You need to come to Jesus."

"What do you mean by that? You knew I was a Hindu when we first met."

The conversation ended awkwardly as the girls each headed for their next class.

That evening Amala told the family about what Grace had said.

"It sounds to me like you are experiencing friendship evangelism," explained Dad. "There are certain Christians who make friends with people in the hopes of converting them to their faith.

They pursue not only non-Christians, but even Christians of other denominations, such as Catholics."

"That doesn't seem right," Amala said, "You mean she just pretended to be my friend?" "Perhaps, perhaps not," Dad replied. "A fellow college student of mine tried this with me. He sincerely cared about me. He believed that if I didn't join his religion, I would burn in hell forever after I died. He didn't want that to happen to me. Google it, you will find instructions on the Web on how to do friendship evangelism."

The next day at lunch, Grace ignored Amala and sat with Sundari, a shy Tamil girl who had come to America only the year before. She spoke excellent English, but with an Indian accent, and she was self-conscious about her dark skin, even though the school was multiracial.

At the end of lunch, Amala caught up with Grace. "Are you trying that friendship evangelism thing on Sundari, too?" Grace blushed. "We don't use that term. We are just trying to spread the truth about Jesus."

"I think you are taking advantage of a shy girl. That's not right. She's going to get hurt." "No, she won't, we are trying to save her soul. Anyway, there's nothing you can do about it. We have freedom of religion in this country!"

"You think 'freedom of religion' means you can coerce anyone you want to be a part of your religion?" Barked Amala. Grace said nothing, for once.

That evening Amala spent a couple of hours with Dad researching "friendship evangelism" on the Web. They found out that it is controversial among the Christians themselves, some of whom regard it as insincere and dishonest. The next day Amala asked Grace if she could join the after-school Bible meeting at her church.

"I'm not coming to get converted. I want to talk to all of you about friendship evangelism." Not knowing quite how it would go, but impressed with how politely Amala was asking, Grace agreed. She had to admit to Herself that she wasn't entirely comfortable with friendship evangelism, and her Bible group, all Southern Baptists, had debated whether or not to do it.

Amala, Nandi, Dad and Mom all discussed how Amala should handle the meeting. This was to be her toughest negotiation yet.

It was far more serious than any fight with her little brother, and the stakes were much higher. Grace had explained to her Bible group why Amala was coming to the meeting. Some thought this might be a good opportunity to convert her, but Grace disagreed. "She's a pretty staunch Hindu. I think we should just hear what she has to say about friendship evangelism."

A few minutes later, Amala walked cautiously into the chapel. Grace introduced her to the group and invited her to speak. "I came from India," she began, "where evangelism is a controversial subject. Most of the Christians there don't try to convert others, but the ones that do use any and every method in the book. Did you know that preachers often give food or jobs to poor villagers if they agree to convert? Such converts are called Rice Christians."

"Wow," said Grace, "They actually bribe them to convert? I didn't know that."
"Grace," thought Amala, "also has some experience in negotiating. Clearly, she is trying to show that she understands what I am saying."

"I never lived among many Christians before I got to America, and now I'm really impressed with them. They're a wonderful, kind, devoted and charitable people, and that includes the people right here in this group. You changed my opinion of Christianity, that is, until you tried friendship evangelism on me."

"But I truly wanted to be your friend," offered Grace defensively.
"Perhaps, but you dropped me as soon as you found out I wouldn't convert. Why didn't you tell me in the first place what you wanted? Or better yet, why didn't you just be a good example of a Christian? Maybe then I would have been interested in what made you a good person."

Grace sank down in her seat. "So, you really felt deceived?" "Yes, and I don't want to see it happen to others. You can talk all you like about freedom of religion, but when people get hurt, there's no religion in that!"

The other Bible class students looked at Grace, their leader, waiting to hear what she would say. "To be honest, we debated this when someone first brought us pamphlets on friendship evangelism. But to us, the stakes are really high. Our faith says that the only way to heaven is

through Jesus. Otherwise you go to hell. Why should we let such a terrible thing happen to anyone?"

"I understand you think you are doing people a great service by trying to convert them," Amala echoed. "Yes, and I can see your point also," offered Grace. "Maybe we should focus on being better Christians, as you suggest."

Word got around school that Amala had talked the group out of their friendship evangelism methodology. Her fellow students were relieved, grateful and impressed that she had done it without making any enemies. "Little Miss Gandhi," they named her, and Amala became the go-to girl for all sorts of problems, from fights between friends to misunderstandings with teachers.

CHAPTER 8: PARENTAL CLOSENESS - The Value of a Hug

"Mom, I'm home!" shouted Raj as he pushed open the front door and he and two friends shook the Chicago snowstorm off their jackets.

"Boots off in the hallway!" "Yes, Mom, we know!" Within minutes, Raj, Peter and Simon were in the kitchen where Mom had, as always, something hot for them to eat. She asked each how things went at school. After ten minutes, as soon as the snacks were finished, they headed for the front door.

"We're out of here!" yelled Raj. "Isn't there a blizzard out there?" "No, Mom, it's just snowing hard." To Mom, any snow falling from the sky was a blizzard, just like the day she had arrived in Chicago from Chennai 15 years ago, the first time she had ever seen snow. She much preferred the year-round hot weather of tropical Tamil Nadu, but she had learned to cope with Chicago winters and the indoor lifestyle they dictated.

Raj, on the other hand, didn't just cope with winter, he loved it. Blizzard conditions were an opportunity for skating, snowball fights and the possibility that school might be canceled. "Where's Raj?" asked Dad as he came shivering through the front door.

"Out with friends." "In this storm? Amazing. How many came with him today?" "Just two, Peter and Simon. Nice boys, but like all of Raj's friends, both parents work full time and there's no one home to greet them, much less give them snacks." "They don't come just for snacks, they need a bit of mothering, too. I know Peter's parents. They often don't get home until 8 or 9 at night. Do they think their children are supposed to raise themselves? I think we're the after school parents for more than a dozen children in this neighborhood!"

Raj's mother did not hold an outside job, even though she had a master's degree in biology. She and Dad had decided it was more important to create a home for their four children, and that they could live just fine on Dad's income. Dad arranged his work to spend as much time as possible with the family. He was home almost every evening and on weekends. The family ate dinner together every night and watched shows together on their single television set. They went to the temple on weekends. All six of them attended the morning worship and then had lunch in the temple cafeteria. True, Raj wasn't always happy when this caused him to miss special events with his friends, but he did enjoy the temple.

They took vacations together, traveling to Canada in the summers and to India every two years. Raj's friend Peter, on the other hand, was dropped off with relatives when his parents vacationed in Las Vegas, gambling in casinos where children are not allowed. A whole week might go by when Peter did not see them.

Once, he was left with his Dad's secretary! On the other hand, by the time Raj was 16, he could hardly remember a day when his mother wasn't home. The rare times she was gone, Grandma or one of his aunties had come to stay with the children.

Right at 6:30, Raj flew in through the door from the garage after stowing his sled. "Just in time for dinner," laughed Dad, giving Raj a big hug, even though he still had his snowy parka on. Dad hugged each of the children every evening, which mildly annoyed Raj and his brother. They were in their teens and taller than their father. Getting hugged made them feel like children but perhaps that was the idea!

Raj felt close to his father. He appreciated Dad's kindness and fairness. If Raj or his brother did something wrong, he would talk to them sternly, and had grounded them both more than once.

But he never got angry and was always just. Of course, there were disagreements from time to time, typical in families trying to straddle two cultures. But neither he nor their mother had ever hit or spanked the children.

Raj sensed his family's closeness was unusual. Most other families were distant or worse. But that fact never really sunk in until he went to college at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he majored in physics. It was a long way from home, but had one of the best physics departments in the country. Most undergraduates lived in on campus dormitories.

His first roommate, David, was an intelligent, athletic boy from New York. They hit it off immediately, and over the next few weeks got to talking about their families.

"How are your parents?" asked Raj. "Mine are so strict!" "Which parents do you mean?" "Which parents? What do you mean? Last time I checked, everyone had two parents, one mother, one father."

"Well, I had two parents at the beginning, just like everyone else. I just wish it had stayed that way. They got divorced when I was ten."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"The divorce was bad enough, but at least it put an end to three years of arguments. At first they tried to hide the fighting from me and my older sister Sarah. After a while, they didn't bother.

Every night, nothing but yelling and screaming. Sarah would cry herself to sleep. How about you? Didn't your parents fight?"

"Maybe, but never around us." "Unbelievable. You have no idea how lucky you are. After the divorce, both my parents got remarried. Sarah and I went to live with our mother Jessica and her boyfriend Roger, who also had a daughter my age. Then Jessica and Roger got married and had two children of their own. Roger tried to be a dad to me, but his idea of setting me straight was to whack me on the side of the head whenever I did something he didn't like, which was pretty much every day."

"I can't imagine what that was like. My parents never hit me."

"Wow, you had a charmed childhood."

"You know, I didn't really realize it until now."

"Soon Mom and Roger were fighting about the same things that she and Mark fought about."

"Who's Mark?"

"My dad, or rather, my biological father."

Raj was stunned. "You call your parents by their first names?"

“How else am I supposed to keep them straight? Hear me out, dude, I ended up with another step-dad and two more step-moms before I split for college.

If I had called them all ‘Dad’ or ‘Mom,’ no one would know who I was talking about. Plus, my real mom, Jessica, would feel hurt if she heard me call someone else ‘Mom.’ ” “Wasn’t there some advantage in having a lot of relatives? We Hindus have big extended families that stay really close. If I travel, I can stay with my parents’ relatives anywhere in India, and they treat me as their own son, even if we are only related by marriage.

Shouldn’t you have, ummm, seven sets of grandparents? Doesn’t that pay off on your birthday?”

“Except everyone takes sides in a divorce. Everybody ends up hating somebody else. It gets really ugly. I am only close with my biological grandparents. But tell me about your family. Where does your mom work?”

“She has a degree, but she’s a stay-at-home mom, taking care of the four of us.”

“Huh. You know, it used to be that way in this country. My grandmothers and great-grandmothers were all stay-at-home moms. But for a lot of reasons that changed, including a bad economy. Now I don’t know anyone whose mom stays home, and most of my friends’ parents are divorced. You have no idea how lucky you are.”

“Actually, I do kind of know. Back in Chicago, all my friends would come over to my house after school. They said it was for the snacks my mom prepared, but I just realized it was actually to have someone to go home to. All their parents worked and came home late. But none of their lives was as messed up as yours, no offense.”

“None taken. Your life sounds ideal. Must be some Hindu thing. I suppose your mom and dad had an arranged marriage, too!”

Raj wasn’t sure if David was making fun of his parents, but he answered honestly. “Yes, in fact, they did.” “Maybe that’s the secret! Think you could fix me up with one of your sisters?”

“Hmm, it doesn’t quite work like that. You will need to graduate first and get a good job. Then we’ll think about whether to even consider you or not!”

They laughed and headed downstairs for dinner. Throughout the semester, Raj heard stories similar to David’s from more than a few other students.

When winter vacation came, Raj couldn’t wait to get home.

His parents met him at Chicago’s O’Hare Airport. Raj ran and gave each one a big hug. “What’s this?” joked Dad. “They taught you hugging at MIT?”

They’re supposed to teach you to be a scientist!” “They are, Dad, but I also learned what a special family I have! Now, let’s go home. I’m hungry!”

CHAPTER 9: PREJUDICE-FREE CONSCIOUSNESS - Ravi Meets Jasmine

From kindergarten Ravi, Kennard and Jin had been best friends. They lived in an upscale suburb of Richmond, Virginia, where different ethnic groups were the norm and many cultures coexisted. There was nothing unusual about a boy whose parents came from South India palling around with an African American and a Chinese American. The children didn't give their racial differences much thought. About the most pressing issue confronting them was how Kennard got such a funny name.

It turns out he was named after two respected uncles, Kenneth and Bernard. His mother put the two names together to honor her brothers.

One day, Ravi's Uncle Shankar was visiting from India. He was noticeably alarmed when he saw the trio playing in the back yard. "Is that a black boy?" he whispered to Ravi's dad, his younger brother.

"Yes, and he comes from a good family."

"And the other is Chinese? I don't trust those Chinese; they're sneaky!"

"Oh, what are you talking about? The boys are just ten years old. Don't be such a bigot. We're raising our children to not have prejudices toward others."

Uncle frowned. "Maybe so, but you watch out or Ravi will end up marrying one of their kind." "I don't think so. We've already talked to Ravi and explained how our tradition calls for an arranged marriage with a Hindu girl. We will find him a good wife from our village in India once he is established in a career."

"Let's hope so. This is America, and you never know how kids are going to turn out." Uncle visited at least once every few months. He rarely had anything nice to say about anyone. Latinos, blacks, Vietnamese, whatever, he always had a criticism, even if he had never known a single person from the ethnic group. He didn't even like Tamil people if they were not Brahmins. Like many in India, he still considered caste important.

Ravi shook his head whenever he heard this kind of talk, and he worried what would happen if he decided against an arranged marriage. Uncle was unlikely to approve. Ravi was a devout Hindu and knew his parents' expectations, that he marry a Hindu girl they would find in Tamil Nadu, one who had a compatible astrological chart, spoke good Tamil, cooked South Indian food and knew "how to behave" in a Tamil home. But he believed them when they said that Uncle's opinions were his own and they had come to accept all races of people.

In a few more years Ravi was off to college for pre-law studies. He made many friends, joined a Hindu students group and managed to make it to a local temple on weekends at least once a month. When a club on campus offered free yoga classes, he decided to enroll, hoping it would help him deal with college stresses.

Jasmine, the class instructor, was also a pre-law student at the university. She ran an intense yoga class, and Ravi had to work to get up to speed with the postures. He also took a liking to Jasmine, who was an African American. She knew yoga was part of Hinduism, and she wanted to learn more about it.

"What's this temple worship really about?" she asked Ravi after class.

"The best way to find out is to go."

"I would love to. Is there anything I should know or do?"

"You'll want to dress right. Do you have any Indian clothes?"

"I've got a beautiful salwar kameez that should do. Anything else?"

"Aside from the obvious, don't eat non-vegetarian food that day and come with a prayer in mind."

"I'm already a vegetarian. Are you?" "Oh yes; have been all my life."

"I went veggie on my own at age 11. It gave my parents fits."

But vegetarianism is catching on in America in general, and they finally adjusted." Jasmine loved the temple, and she fit in easily. As the two spent more and more time together, she realized she was beginning to love Ravi.

Months passed. One evening as they walked across campus, Ravi inquired, "What do you think about marriage?"

"What do you mean, 'What do I think about it?' I think it's a pretty serious undertaking for the rest of one's life. I'm not one of those liberated women who think marriage is a temporary arrangement. I want someone who is going to be my best friend, someone who will always be there for me, someone who always has my back."

"That's what I think, too. I see so many people here on campus skipping from one relationship to the next, never satisfied with anyone, and getting less and less happy as time goes on. That seems to be the trend in the world these days."

"It's interesting that our beliefs are so alike!" replied Jasmine. Ravi was silent.

"Would you like to meet my parents?" he asked.

Jasmine knew the invitation meant Ravi was serious about her.

"Do you think there's going to be a problem with them, you know, over race?" "Probably. Do you think you can handle it?"

"I don't know," she laughed. "I guess we'll find out." That first meeting went about as well as Ravi had expected. His parents managed to conceal their shock fairly well. Ravi saw Jasmine to her car after dinner.

"How do you think it went?" she asked. "I'll tell you in the morning," Ravi replied with a smile as he walked back in the house. He expected his parents to be upset. He was not mistaken.

"What is this?" Dad demanded, "I thought you had agreed to marry a Hindu girl." "I did, and I will. Jasmine's a yoga teacher, and I've taken her to the temple several times. She's quite serious about adopting induism."

"But we are going to find a Tamil girl for you in India!"

"It's a bit late for that, and it doesn't always work so well for people of such different upbringing to marry." Mom joined in emotionally, "But she won't know how to cook, and she won't speak our

language. How will she talk to grandma and grandpa? And what about your children? They won't be able to speak Tamil. This is terrible!" Mom ran into her room crying.

"See what you've done!" Dad shouted, "You've upset your mother. I tell you, these American girls just don't understand our culture. They are so selfish, and they don't take marriage seriously.

Mark my words, she will be wanting a divorce in a few years!"

Ravi inhaled deeply. He knew this conversation was going to be tough, and he had told himself he would not raise his voice or become angry, no matter what.

"I think you need to get to know Jasmine before jumping to radical conclusions. You always taught me to not judge people by their race.

Maybe we can just give this some time." The softness in Ravi's voice calmed Dad down a bit. "Yes, I did say we can't judge people by their race, and I meant it. And to have friends of other races is good, but to hear you intend to marry one, that is a bit of a shock. I will talk with Mom."

Dad and Mom soon met Jasmine's parents and got along surprisingly well with them. Both were lawyers who had been happily married for almost 30 years. The two couples found they had a lot in common. Things started to look better for Ravi and Jasmine. Then Uncle Shankar came to visit.

"Are you still seeing that black girl?" he demanded of Ravi. "Yes, Uncle. I am," Ravi replied calmly.

Uncle turned to Dad. "What? Haven't you broken them up?"

As the elder brother, he freely talked down to his younger sibling when he wanted to.

"We're giving them time," replied Dad diplomatically.

Uncle glared at Ravi while telling Dad, "Time won't do it, you have to order him. And if this marriage happens, don't bring that girl around the family in India! We won't have her in our home!"

"Why not?" asked Ravi, still remaining calm. "She can't speak our language or cook our food."

Uncle was visibly upset.

"That's it, language and food? Doesn't it matter to you that she is a religious person?" "We have lots of religious girls for you in India."

"But this is the one I found, right here in America. Why can't you accept that? Are these external things more important than her soul?"

Hearing this exchange, Dad realized that Ravi had a good point. "That is what we taught him," he said to Uncle. "The divine soul lives in one body after another, in different races and cultures."

"Nonsense!" shouted Uncle.

After Uncle left, Mom, Dad and Ravi sat around the kitchen table.

"That was really pretty ugly," shared Ravi. "I knew he didn't like black people, but this was over the top."

"Yes, it was startling even to me," Dad confided. "But Ravi, even though I like Jasmine, Uncle had a point about language, culture, way of life. And it's not just that Jasmine is black. He would make the same objection if you wanted to marry a Gujarati girl. It's seen as cutting yourself off from your heritage."

"Didn't you and Mom do that already when you moved to America?" Ravi challenged. "What do you mean?" "Uncle seems to think I should be just like someone who was raised in India. But I wasn't raised in India. I was born and raised here, as a good Hindu but with a different language and some different customs.

Now I want to marry a girl from this culture, one who is a Hindu at heart, but not an Indian. It seems to me that perhaps this karma was set in motion when you and Mom came to this country.”

“Hmmm. There’s some truth there.”

Turning to Mom, Ravi asked, “What am I supposed to do? I love Jasmine. Am I to cut off the relationship and submit to an arranged marriage? How do you think that will make Jasmine feel?”

And how likely am I to ever have the same love for someone I don’t know? Please don’t make me choose between the family and Jasmine.”

In a thoughtful moment of silence, Mom remembered how her mother-in-law had lovingly and patiently taught her as a new bride to cook the family recipes that Ravi’s dad liked. It would soon be her turn to take on the responsibility of passing on that knowledge to her future daughter-in-law.

“Have Jasmine come over tomorrow. If she is willing, I can start teaching her how to cook Indian meals.” Jasmine arrived the next afternoon. Entering the kitchen, she greeted Mom, “Vanakkam, Amma.” Mom was charmed. After that, every time Jasmine visited she had learned a few more words. Mom began calling her “Malli,” which means Jasmine in Tamil. As they worked on dinner, Jasmine observed, “These recipes are not so difficult when one has a good teacher!”

“Yes, and having the kitchen well-organized makes cooking easier. You are doing a great job with mixing the spices.” “I like the soft and soothing Indian music you play while we cook. I think those positive feelings go into the food.” “That’s so insightful of you. Music is one of the secrets we Tamil moms use to keep our families happy. I can teach you other methods that will never fail to cheer Ravi up.” Jasmine smiled, realizing that Mom was beginning to accept her.

After dinner, they all adjourned to the living room to talk. Dad turned to Jasmine, “We love our son, and we love whomever our son loves. I would be misleading you if I claimed there would be no backlash from the family. I’m sure you’ve already heard from Ravi what Uncle Shankar thinks.”

“I did, and it wasn’t unexpected. Inter-racial marriage is new territory for a lot of people. I have to admit that some of my relatives are upset, too, and for many of the same reasons!”

“I suggest taking this slowly,” Dad continued. “I have taken the liberty to ask a family friend to create a marriage compatibility chart for the two of you.” Jasmine looked up. “So, that’s why you asked where and when I was born?”

“Yes. I know that in this day and age in America no one puts much faith in astrology, but we Hindus still do because our system works, especially when it comes to marriages. In the case of you and Ravi, your charts shows a strong mutual attraction from a past life, but many obstacles to a happy marriage in this one.”

“But if we know what the problems will be, can’t we avoid them?” asked Ravi. “Maybe, and we can discuss that more in the future. Even so, considering your mutual commitment and obvious love, Mom and I are happy to give our blessings.”

“That’s so great! But what about Uncle and the rest of the family?”

“Before the marriage we will have Jasmine as our guest in Kanchipuram where she can meet all the relatives. Once they get to know her, they will come around. As you pointed out, Ravi, we ourselves opened this possibility when we came to America and taught you to treat everyone the same, without prejudice. You will see, Jasmine, you’re going to have the finest Tamil wedding any one has ever seen!”

CHAPTER 10: PRESERVING COMMITMENTS - Making Our Marriage Work

Hi, my name is Ravi. We met in the last story. I decided to tell you myself how Jasmine and I fared in the next few years. I know, you are still young, and this is a totally grown-up topic. But the decisions you will make soon in your life can have lasting consequences, as they did in mine. So, better you learn now what can happen, even with a person you love as much as I love Jasmine, and how preserving a commitment once made can take real work.

Jasmine and I were going to the temple every week, and she was studying the book called “How to Become a Hindu”. After a year or so, we held a beautiful name-giving ceremony for her at the temple and she became Malligai, or Malli for short, the name Mom had chosen for her—meaning “jasmine” in Tamil. The ceremony was also her formal entrance into the Hindu faith. That was a big step, and it helped us feel closer to each other. We graduated from college the next year and were married that spring. I enrolled in law school. Malli got a job to support us. Our plan was for her to quit once I graduated, and then we would start a family.

After our wedding in India, things didn't go the way we thought they would. Challenges multiplied, and we found ourselves struggling to make our marriage work. And no, it wasn't family interference. Uncle Shankar did get involved, but not in the way I expected. More on him later. We found out falling in love was the easy part, and being a family is a lot more difficult!

Now, as you know (because you read the last story), my Dad had our astrological charts compared in the Hindu way for compatibility, to tell how well our marriage might work out and what our challenges would be. Our family guru, Swami Nadeeshwar, had our charts analyzed by three astrologers. They all said the compatibility wasn't the best. There were numerous “combustible” combinations, or something like that. They indicated that we might look at important things differently, and conflicts would be common. All this despite our strong love for each other. Not only that, the charts showed that we had been married in a past life.

Malli and I brushed it off, I'm sorry to say. We were confident we could overcome anything because we loved each other so much. Guruji had given some advice on how to deal with any conflict that came up, but the bad prediction had upset me, and I found myself ignoring his advice.

We had worried that the family back in India would not accept Malli because of her race. That turned out to be no problem at all. We spent two months in Tamil Nadu with my relatives, and she charmed everyone. For one thing, she was more religious than most of them, so the “arranged marriage to a Tamil Hindu girl” argument didn’t work any more. With my mom’s help, Malli learned to wear a sari with style. Plus, she was a good cook, and already knew a bit of Tamil. They knew she loved all of them, and that endeared them to her, since not all daughters-in-law adore their new family. Near the end of our visit, even Uncle Shankar came around and declared she was the perfect wife for me (translation: the perfect in-law for him!).

The first year of marriage was great. Every month was just like our honeymoon. Then, sixteen months into our marriage, we got into the first fight—something about my tossing my coat on the chair and expecting Malli to pick it up. She was tired from work, and no doubt, like so many men, I am pretty messy. But still, for a coat to cause a two-hour argument?

The next day’s fight was over texting. I was working with a fellow law student on a report and typing on my iPhone during dinner. Malli blew up: “You already study long hours, and now we can’t even have dinner in peace?”

Two days later I was using her computer, and she accused me of snooping into her emails. I wasn’t, but I had to wonder what would be in her email that I shouldn’t see.

About this time, I started to ask myself, “Did I make a mistake in marrying her?” I even considered moving out like my friend John did on his wife.

But how could I even think such things? We were in love, after all, weren’t we? We made up after each fight, but it was only days until the next, and the next and the next. We got used to it.

It became what we did, an acceptable way to live, I guess. There were minor fights every week and a major blow-up at least once a month.

I graduated from law school around our third anniversary and got a decent job so Malli could quit hers. It was time to start the family we both wanted. It was a difficult pregnancy. Malli suffered morning sickness right from the second month. There was some benefit, I guess. Seeing her so miserable, I went out of my way to avoid fights—mostly.

Uncle Shankar would come to visit whenever he was in the States. He brought her various ayurvedic remedies and in general tried to cheer her up. This was good, but the downside was that he was now taking her side in our conflicts. Not only that, he was getting my mom and dad involved, and Malli’s parents, too, having made friends with them the previous year. Quite a shift from where he started, I must say!

We managed to keep the marriage stable; divorce was never an option for me. It is against the Hindu tradition except in cases of real abuse. I had made a commitment to Malli, and I was going to keep it. Once we walked around the sacred fire together, the marriage was for life. Despite the fighting, Malli felt the same way.

Yamini was born that spring. The baby took our minds off each other, and the arguments subsided some. Then Rajiv was born two years later, and we were a full family. At first we were careful to never fight around the children. But then as they got older, that rule was forgotten, which turned out to be a big mistake. Though we continued to bicker privately, our first blow-up in front of the children happened at dinner, when Yamini was six.

Malli and I were quarreling over something minor, and we didn’t pay any attention to the effect it had on the kids until Yamini started crying hysterically. “Stop it! Stop it! I’ll be good! It’s my fault you fight all the time. Please stop! I’ll be good!” Malli and I looked at each other, stunned.

Malli calmed Yamini down, telling her again and again that Mommy and Daddy were not fighting because of her. Perhaps she believed it, but we both knew we had caused a big problem for our little girl, and Rajiv was surely suffering as well.

“I think we need to talk to Guruji,” I told Malli. “He gave some advice for us before our marriage, but I forgot it. Now I think we had better ask him what to do.”

Malli’s look was serious, “If we go to him, we should do exactly what he says.”
“You’re right.”

I must admit I hadn’t been close to Guruji since leaving home.

If I had let him know how the marriage was going, he could have helped us resolve our problems. As soon as we sat down in front of him, he said, “Marriage isn’t going so well, is it?”

“How did you know?”

“It’s obvious just looking at the two of you. There are streaks of red in your aura, showing anger, and other dark colors built up from your years of fights. I can see these colors in your astral body. You know this was all predicted in your astrological charts, don’t you?”

I was surprised, to say the least, how clearly he remembered everything about our marriage. It was as though not even a day had passed since my dad and I talked to him ten years ago.

“Do you remember what I told you then, the remedy?” I hesitated, “No, I’m sorry to say I don’t.”

“Then we will go over it again.”

Now mind you, he wasn’t looking at any notes, and his assistant hadn’t said a word. Yet, he remembered everything about us.

“First, after you have a fight that you can’t settle the same day, I want you to go to the Murugan Temple in Lanham, Maryland, that’s not too far from here. It has a strong Ganesha Deity. He is an expert in solving marital problems. Go for the puja, but don’t sit together. You can even go at separate times. Talk to Ganesha; tell Him everything that happened. Don’t hold anything back. Plead for His help. After the puja is over, sing bhajans to Him. Stay there until you are calm.”

“Yes, Guruji, we can do that. Is that all?”

“No. There is one more instruction. Do you remember what I said about writing down your problems on a piece of paper and then burning it up?”

“Sort of,” I admitted, wishing I had paid more attention to these valuable tools while growing up, when we used to attend Hinduism classes at the temple.

“It’s a way of clearing your subconscious mind of emotions.

Write down the problem and burn it up. Write it down again, if need be, and burn it up again. There’s a bit of magic behind it, and it works.”

“Ravi, one more thing. In a marriage the husband is responsible for his wife’s security and contentment. It’s your job to keep her happy. Give her everything she needs and everything she wants

.

If you do that, things will change, and you will rediscover the love you had ten years back. And with her support you will be successful in your career.” I must have looked surprised, because his eyes grew wide as if

to get my attention, and he asked, “Do you think you can do that?”

“Anything to keep us together, Guruji,” I replied.

We thanked Guruji and drove home, talking all the way about how we could make things work again, each determined to make our marriage thrive. Not surprisingly, it was difficult at first. For one thing, it took a lot of time to go to the temple, pray, sing, meditate and write down and burn our

problems. But, we figured, we always found time to fight, even for hours on end, so what's to stop us from finding time to follow what Gurujī told us?

It took about a year for us to settle down. So many times I started to cry in the temple, and cry some more when writing down one clash or another on a piece of paper and burning it.

But slowly I could feel the weight of years of fighting lift. I used to think our different backgrounds was a cause of our conflicts.

But then someone told me, "An interracial couple has the same problems as any other couple." I realized that was true. We were not fighting because of our differences. We fought because each of us, in our own way, was not good at handling our emotions. We would get upset inside ourselves, then take it out on each other. Malli was coming to the same realizations. We started to handle disagreements more intelligently, more compassionately.

Now when we were a few harsh words into something that we would normally fight about, suddenly we would look at each other and say, "No fighting today!" We would go to the shrine room, light a lamp and some incense and sit quietly for a few minutes, then talk through the problem as calmly as possible. We were determined to work out a fair solution for each—usually by my agreeing to give Malli what she wanted, as Gurujī had instructed.

Actually, that's not fair to say. We both compromised a lot. We had to, because we decided our family must come first. No matter what, our children had to have a peaceful home. That decision gave us the courage and determination, and a good reason, to solve our problems.

At our wedding, we had walked seven steps around the sacred fire, making prayers to God and promises to each other, including living in harmony and being loyal companions for life. At first we thought love alone would be enough, and we ignored the advice and warnings from the astrologers. We didn't understand, or believe, what they meant by compatibility. I mean, really, astrology, in this day and age?

Well, now I'm a believer.

The charts are among the first things considered in an arranged marriage.

The various traits are compared, the personalities. Even past life karmas figure in. Weaknesses in one person are balanced by strengths in the other. Only matches with a strong chance of success are considered viable.

But in a love marriage, all this is unknown until it is too late.

Pretty soon the love that was so powerful at the beginning doesn't solve the problems that come up. Such a marriage takes a lot of extra effort. It's even harder when you ignore, as I did the guru's directions. That was my biggest mistake.

So, you ask, what's my advice, now that I am older and maybe wiser? Here it is.

Hindu tradition has always accepted love marriages, you can find stories of them from ancient times. But, for the most part, marriages have been arranged by the parents, and happy couples raising happy families have more than often been the result.

So when you're older, give your parents, relatives and even your friends a chance to find your perfect partner for you. If they don't do that, and you find "true love" on your own, pause and give it some deep thought. Marriage is a life-long commitment.

Go through all the steps that would happen in an arranged marriage. The ingredients for success include mental and emotional compatibility, good astrology, approval of both families and not only

blessings, but directions, from the guru. Without all of these, and I say this from experience, proceed at your own risk!