

To my mother: a living tribute

My mother is 93 this month. She normally lives with us in the UK, where she has spent the last couple of decades. But for her next birthday, she will be in India, with my sister, where she often spends a few months in the winter. For me recently, I have become of the opinion that I prefer to unashamedly say all the good things that come to mind to my friends and family, and I believe it's never too early.

Nalini, for that is her name (not changed at her wedding, as often happened in India), has lived a long, rich, truthful and varied life, as a child, a young woman, a wife, a mother, grandmother and now a great grandmother to our grandchildren. She has been a school teacher in her city of Navsari, where she grew up, and elsewhere, in Bhavnagar and Surat. She graduated in Economics and then completed her terms for a Law degree but never did her exams as she got a job as a teacher, in the early fifties, first in Vyara, her mother's hometown, and then in Khadsupa Girls school. It was very forward thinking, and indeed admirable on the part of my grandfather, her father, to allow her to work in those days. He was a prominent lawyer/advocate in the city of Navsari, a tradition still maintained through the generations.

From what I know of my mother, she is the gentlest of creatures! Who else can say that more authentically than me, her son, who has lived with her for so much of his life. She has lived with us over the last 23 years. Almost an encyclopaedia, she is a Google of rich information. This includes music, literature, languages, history, geography! The list just carries on. Her mind is equally full of good and noble thoughts. I would love to learn everything, and much more from her if I can, but I really do not have the ability to grasp it all within the time available to me.

The first thing that amazes me is her knowledge of Indian music, which is very deep. She remembers and knows every musical note on the Indian musical scale, which makes me think she might be pitch perfect. Her ability to recognise each Indian musical Raga is second to none of anyone that I know and her musical ear is such that she can recognise most tunes within seconds. Recently, I attended the Darbar Music Festival at the Barbican in London, and I realised that a little bit of that knowledge has seeped into me!

A mine of literary information, she has read many books, not necessarily religious, as one might expect perhaps of someone her age and upbringing. She has read, as would be expected, the old classics, like Jane Austen's, watched many movies that have been made from them, and remembers the screen idols of old. This morning, she mentioned Maya Angelou's "I know why the caged bird sings" and Harper Lee's "To kill a mocking bird". Having said that she has also kept up to date with more recent books and authors. The other day, she described Alex Haley's "Roots" and the story of Kunta Kinte!

Her knowledge of Marathi literature is equally deep, and she talks about the writers who fashioned Indian society in post-independence India, including PL Deshpande, V S Khandekar and others. These were men and women, all proudly Indian, who wrote about the rich heritage of the country over the last century. She doesn't speak much about British times and

colonialism, which surprises me, though it's probably because she was seventeen when India became independent. In those days, most children had a long childhood.

She has sound knowledge of the basics of the Hindu religion. The secret of this is that she learnt Sanskrit during her younger days, and many of the religious or Indian epics have originated from Sanskrit. I am in awe of her ability to read and understand this great language. A few years ago, she translated the Gita in brief in to English so everyone in the family could have access to it in simple language.

When my father passed in 2008, my mother chose to live with us, that being the norm in many Indian families of my generation. This offered me the opportunity to spend some time with her. It has also brought us immeasurably closer. In her, I know that she will always have our family's interests at heart. I see that in the way she readily adjusts to our family's lifestyle and shows her love for her grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Her desire and curiosity often leave me open-mouthed. Often, when I worked long hours, we would sometimes discuss a topic of mutual interest. Sometimes, our knowledge about it would have many gaps. She used to use her day to Google the missing information, and have it ready to hand when I returned from work in the evening, and our knowledge gap would be constructively filled. Communicating with our extended families in India and around the world is something she regularly does on behalf of our family in Canterbury, which is brilliant in every way, for our whole family. Clever use of the Internet, Facebook and Whatsapp ensures that family knowledge, connections, and warmth are all maintained for the Canterbury Shrotri family. Using these social media activities, she is an absolute rock for her siblings who live in India, and a role model for the next generation on how to move with the times! From bicycles and car, to aeroplanes, the internet and social media. She has seen so much change and managed to keep up with it!

Living in Canterbury with us, she has her own independent life, up to an extent of course. Her daily routine, extremely disciplined, in terms of daily prayer, exercise (yes!) and food intake is impressive, and of course, the daily whatsapp call to my sister in India. She has a very loyal friend, Janet, our neighbour, who spends a few hours with her every week, playing cards and putting the world to right. They also have a set of friends, an inter faith group, who meet regularly, once a month for tea and biscuits, picking up a theme to discuss at the following month's meeting. Deep introspection and respectful conduct and discussion are the hallmark of their meetings.

She has a few faults like anybody else, but the biggest one is in the fact she can see the no wrong in anything I do. I know that's because she loves me to the moon and back, like every mother loves her son, I guess, and each of us will have our own story to tell.

I cannot complete this tribute without paying tribute to another mother, my children's. She has adjusted to having my mother live with us, which is never easy. In true Indian tradition (of my generation), parents have generally been looked after, if possible, by the son, or the eldest son, providing that the whole family adjusts to living in a joint family. There are advantages, and disadvantages, both, like there are of any system. But it does mean, that sometimes things can be difficult. But luckily, these occurrences always blow over. Diplomacy

rules, and that speaks volumes for everyone in the household. My wife also looks after my mother's personal needs in a very kind and caring manner. For that reason, my esteem for her knows no bounds.

I admire my mother's spirit, and her desire to help us by contributing to household activity. She loves to stay active and does a lot of household work. Without her realising, she helps us all round the house, sometimes tidying up after us in the kitchen, emptying and loading the dishwasher, getting her clothes out of the dryer and keeping her own room and her financial affairs tidy. She is extremely independent.

I write this, not just to pay her tribute as she turns 93, but also in the hope that this may shine a light in the lives of others reading this. It also to let others know how each of us can get the most out of our lives, enrich other's and adjust with each other. Living in a joint household can be good in many ways. I am acutely aware, of some who on reading this, will miss their mothers acutely, bringing back a flood of memories. To them, I say, You will never walk alone, for your mother is always by your side! Your loved one's will be doing their best to fill in that void, I know, for sure.

In a few days, I will travel with her to India, and see her off safely, to spend time with my sister and our family. But when I return, I will miss her, and will remember her, especially when I pass by her empty room. No worries, because she will soon be back. It's only a few months!