

MOTHER'S DAY SPECIAL: An ode to my mother

By Renu Khator

Two years have gone by, but it all seems like a big dream. I was on my way for an interview with the Board of Regents of the University of Houston, one of America's largest research universities. I was excited but nervous. I knew this was no ordinary position, and would be no ordinary interview. I was fully aware that no American university had ever selected an Indian as chancellor, nor had a woman ever been appointed to such a position in Texas. I knew that the odds were against me.

To divert my mind, I glanced outside the airplane window and saw white clouds. Suddenly a rainbow shot up from their midst. My heart swelled up with wonder and delight. I had seen many a rainbow in life on lifting my gaze towards the sky, but never before had I seen one on lowering my eyes. I groped for the camera in my purse and when I glanced up, not just one, but two rainbows had manifested themselves resplendent in the glory of all their vivid colours. They seemed to be racing alongside my airplane.

How could I have ever come this far? How did life bring me to this place where I could dare to dream of becoming a chancellor? Whose shoulders have supported me and whose hands have guided me on this journey? I found myself traveling back to my childhood...

My journey began in the small town of Farrukhabad, about 250 miles from New Delhi. I spent the first 18 years of my life blissfully jumping rope and playing dolls. Never once had the thought of going to America crossed my mind. Walking down memory lane, I found myself surrounded by voices from the past, and loudest of them all was my mother's.

"OK, children, I have a question for you. There once was a fruit-seller selling oranges. The first customer buys a dozen oranges, the second buys two dozen and the third only four oranges. If the fruit-seller is now left with exactly half as many oranges as he had started out with, how many oranges do you think he had in the first place?"

"Mom, we are already done with our homework. We are too tired to think anymore," I mildly protested. My sister and brother nodded their heads in agreement.

"Come on, there is nothing to think about here. You should be able to answer this question in your sleep. Let's give it a try," my mother answered. By now, one of us would figure out the answer and the next 30 minutes would pass in answering questions as if it was a game.

This was our nightly ritual as we would lay down in our open courtyard under a star-studded dark blue sky ready to fall asleep.

Whether we were in the car or in the courtyard, whether lying down in the shade sheltered from the afternoon heat, or huddled under a blanket on a cold winter's night, mother's questions would constantly hover around us. My mother is not a teacher, nor does she hold a high school diploma, but her thirst for knowledge and her impatient passion for inquiry lead her to read four different newspapers every day.

Thank you, mom, for giving me the gift of inquisitiveness.

*Today, people ask me, "What is the secret behind your success?"
I know that my mother's expectations are my secret.*

Being the first born, I was the darling of the house and the centre of my family's attention. This only meant that someone had to assume the responsibility for making sure that I was not spoiled. Needless to say, this task fell solely on mom's shoulders because dad was too busy in being the most prominent lawyer on our side of the state. Mom's philosophy was that excelling in academics was meaningless if one ignored the other facets of life. Hence, in addition to school work, I was sent to learn classical Indian dance, Indian drums, sewing, embroidery painting, and cooking among other things.

I am sure if it were possible to pursue any sport in my little town, she would have sent me to participate in them as well. I published my first poem when I was 15 years old and even though it challenged traditional social norms, she swelled with pride reading it. I never mastered anything, but learned to appreciate everything. Today, when people ask me the secret of my seemingly balanced lifestyle, I just smile and thank my mom for it.

From the day I arrived in America, I found comfort in exploring new ideas, new fields and new discoveries. Even though my mother denies it, I am convinced that she is the one who gave me the confidence to step outside my comfort zone.

Thank you, mom, for giving me the courage to explore and try, try and fail, and fail and try again.

I remember an episode when I was in the sixth grade where all the girls had to take mandatory home economics class. Preparing a dish at school was the final requirement to pass the class. My lottery pick paired me with the dish Sujji Kaa Halw, a dessert made with cream of wheat. The problem was that I had no clue how to light the stove, let alone make a dessert. "Mother's school" began and for four days everyone ate Halwa for breakfast because that is all that was cooked. On the day of the exam, mother measured out all the ingredients, packed them neatly in small packages, and labelled them clearly.

"Is it necessary to do all this? There is no grading in this exam. All I have to do is pass."

"Not only is it necessary, it is required that you always aim for above average."

"What is wrong in being average?"

"Average results come from average efforts. If you dare to immerse your heart and soul in your work, the results are bound to be above average. And all I expect from you is to put your heart and soul in whatever you do."



Dr. Khator at her investiture as president of the University of Houston

Today, people ask me, "What is the secret behind your success?" I know that my mother's expectations are my secret. How can anyone who from childhood was expected to immerse herself completely in the task at hand ever be satisfied with passable results? My mother never expected any less from me because I was a woman. I may have had to cross extra hurdles or jump extra loops, but in my mother's eyes, I was not being defined by my challenges but by the way I faced them. In those days when the social norm dictated that sons be given preferential treatment, my memories are of mom stuffing extra chocolates in my coat pockets as I went off to school and patting me on my back as I returned.

I thrived on my mother's pride. It was a given that on returning from school I would find mother standing behind the partly ajar main gate. I would know that she was there as I crossed the alley and walked up the stairs. She was rarely seen in public without my father as per his wish. It is only natural for someone who is accustomed to seeing her mother's eyes cover the path of her walks to see rainbows even during the most anxious times.

Thank you, mom, for giving me the gift of knowing that I am never without friends.

I was only 18 when my life took a major turn. One night, I went to bed as a carefree teenager only to wake in the morning to the realisation that I was to marry, in 10 days, a man studying in America. I was shattered because I thought it meant the end of my educational journey. On seeing me bawling, my mother said, “That you are going to get married someday is inevitable... today is as good as tomorrow. Your father knows what he is doing. He has made this decision after much consideration.”

“Everyone is concerned only with his own opinions and considerations. No one cares about what I think. I want to complete my master’s programme and then get my doctorate. Whatever happened to father’s big talk of ‘the milk boiling over and the ghee being wasted’? How can he think of marrying me at this stage in my studies?”

“I know you want to continue your education, and I am sure your new family will let you do so.”

“How do you know that? Can you point me to a single woman in our extended family who was allowed to go to college after marriage? Who can guarantee me my education?”

“I give you the guarantee. My mother’s heart is giving you this guarantee. Deep down here,” she said putting her hand on her heart, “I know they will let you continue your education. He will keep you happy.” I was smart enough to know that these were simply words to cajole me. Who would let me study in America when I could not even speak English? I only believed my mom’s words after securing admission at an American university. Mom wrote me regularly, and in each letter she never failed to remind me that, “It is only because of Sureshji that you are able to go to college... to reach such heights.”

That others too have contributed to every success we encounter was a lesson of life that mother has ingrained in me since infancy.

Thank you, mom, for giving me the gift of inquisitiveness.

That is why today when people ask me “what is the secret of your success?” I smile and start enumerating the names of all the mentors I have encountered in the course of my life. I know my fellow travellers are the ones who have filled my life’s rainbow with colours.

“We are starting our descent...” the flight attendant’s voice echoed in the plane and jolted me back from the past into the present. When I peeked out of the window I saw that the rainbows had been left behind and beneath us was America’s fourth largest city, Houston. My mind was as light as the morning dew and my head free of all preoccupations and worries.

Exactly eight hours later, the dual appointment of chancellor and president was in my hands. The very first person I called was my mother back in India. In my impatience I woke her up in the middle of the night.

“Mummy, I got great news for you. I have become the president of the University of Houston.”

“Very good. Can I speak with Sureshji?” She always adds ‘ji’ as sign of respect for her son-in-law.

“Mom, didn’t you hear what I just said? Aren’t you going to say something?”

“I heard everything, my dear. Now, give the phone to Sureshji.” Dejected, I shoved the phone in my husband’s hand.

“Sureshji, heartfelt congratulations to you on Renu’s becoming the president. It is the results of your efforts and you deserve full credit for this day.”

This is my mother, ever encouraging others and always sharing credit with an open heart.

Mom, please forgive me for not listening to you today, but I want the world to know that you are the one who deserves all the credit for my success.

###

Renu Khator is the president of the University of Houston, and chancellor of the UH System.