Heaped up hopes

Manasi Dutt MD CCFP

My mother, Manasi Dutt, was a family physician in Burlington, Ont, for 3 decades after immigrating to Canada from India. She had a stroke in 2003 at age 57 that left her paralyzed on her left side and affected her cognition and physical health. She died in 2011. She adored writing and produced several hundred pages of stories and poems based on her own life. The following story contains excerpts from a series of book chapters she wrote. She begins by talking about her own mother. I have edited and occasionally incorporated my own writing, staying true to her original words.

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My Ma wished to be a physician. She told me she had decided that when she was a young girl. She shared her plan with her parents and they agreed to put her through medical school. Everything went according to plan until she reached the final year of secondary school and the time to enter medical school was right at the doorstep. Then the Second World War broke out. The Japanese dropped bombs on Rangoon, and Indian immigrants living in Burma (now known as Myanmar) decided to leave the country en masse for the safer soil of India. Along with many other Indian families, Ma's family set off for India.

By that time commercial flights and ship travel had stopped. Ma's parents had to walk relentlessly for 7 days and 7 nights to reach the city of Dhaka, the main city in East Bengal, which was then still a part of undivided India (now Bangladesh). They only had the shirts on their backs, some jewelry, and some money. On the way they survived by eating nuts and dried fruits. They walked mostly through tangles of wilderness. They didn't dare to boil rice for fear of smoke being detected. After reaching Dhaka, Ma's family rented an apartment and decided to stay there for a little while until they caught their breath. It was clear to Ma that in such uncertain times her plan of going to medical school would be scrapped. Instead it was decided that she should get married and be looked after by her husband.

Laughing and celebrating

At the same time, my Baba's family also arrived in Dhaka from Rangoon as refugees. Dhaka was the hub of Bengali refugees from Burma. That was when Baba and Ma, who were complete strangers to each other, had their marriage arranged. My father's parents, my Dadu and Didu, had recently mourned the death of a daughter and decided that, as their daughter's demise had meant so much tears and despair in the family, a wedding would be a good occasion to laugh and celebrate.

Dadu rented a big house and the extended family from Calcutta took a trip to Dhaka to attend the wedding. There were almost 100 people in the household. Large cooking pots and woks were rented to do the cooking at home. Everybody was weary of the war, so finding a source of joy in the midst of chaos was fabulous for the invitees. The women dedicated themselves to producing exquisite food; every day they cooked one or sometimes several pots full of khichuri and fries to go with it. The men were appreciative of the cooking.

Later in my life I heard from many relatives that they had never enjoyed another wedding as much as they had enjoyed my parents' wedding.

Ma and my father moved in with his parents in Calcutta and then I came along. Yet Ma never forgot about her dream of becoming a doctor. Throughout my childhood, Ma instilled the desire to become a physician in me. I accepted her dream. It seemed quite natural to me, despite knowing few women were accepted to medical school. I just knew that if Ma couldn't make it, then I would make it happen for her. As a result, from an early age I was sure about the fact that I'd be a physician.

The dream of being a physician came not only from Ma, but also from our family physician, Dr Chowdhury. He was a stubby, stout man with vast baldness atop his head. He smiled constantly. He moved at a slow pace. Behind him was always his driver who carried the doctor's bag. Once when I had pneumonia he was called for me. He stood in the door frame.

"I can see that you are waiting eagerly to burst into a smile, but you're trying hard to behave like a sick person," he said to me.

Immediately I broke out in loud laughter. People said Dr Chowdhury cured half of the disease just by being there; the other half he cured by treatment. Later in life I found out how scientific this statement was: by treating patients with dignity, kindness, and humour, a doctor could hasten the healing process. Conversely, a doctor who was disrespectful to his or her patients could delay the healing process.

I wished to be a doctor like Dr Chowdhury.

Gathering advice

Through the younger grades and into secondary school, almost all of my energy went into my studies. As an only child, I had the full attention of both my mother and my Dadu, who were determined to have me succeed. My 5 cousins lived in the apartment attached to ours, and occasionally I envied their lack of focus on school. But mostly I knew my goal was medicine and that I needed to be the best to get there.

When I finally applied to medical school, I received invitations for entrance interviews from 2 institutions. One of them was Calcutta Medical College, the one I so badly wished to get into. I was ready to do anything to do well in the entrance interview, but I didn't have a clue what to do. There was no template or curriculum to study. The questions would be about general knowledge. After learning about my interviews, friends, acquaintances, neighbours, and relatives started giving many pieces of advice.

One neighbour said, "Read a biography about Mahatma Gandhi. Being the father of the nation, there's a good chance that you'll be asked about him."

One relative, who was a university professor, said "Mahatma Gandhi might be the father of the nation, but as far as the Bengalis are concerned, our hearts and minds are tied together with the songs and poems of Rabindranath Tagore. He is the true father of Bengal. You better read up about him. Read how he collected tunes from all over the world and put Bengali words to them."

Each time anybody gave me a suggestion, I'd run to the bookstore at the corner of Gariahat market and buy a book on that subject. Soon the salesperson of that store and I became good buddies. Whenever he saw me coming he'd flash a big smile.

My high-school English teacher Preetidi advised me to read the daily newspaper *The Statesman*. I took her advice to heart and read the paper quite thoroughly every day. As a result, I was well versed in the goings-on locally in Calcutta, in the province of West Bengal, and in India in general. I had great fun connecting the different pieces of news with each other and forming a complete picture. I didn't fully realize that through the preparation process I was turning into a well-informed person. Preetidi advised me to also read *Time* and *Reader's Digest* to strengthen my English. I admired her so much as a teacher that any advice she gave I took seriously. There I was, reading *The Statesman, Reader's Digest,* and *Time,* all because Preetidi advised me to do so. As a result, I knew all about world matters and national politics, as much as my immature brain could absorb.

Telling the truth

The night before my interview at the Calcutta Medical College I didn't get a wink of sleep. In the morning, I had no appetite for breakfast, but I force-fed myself one slice of toast, one egg, and a cup of tea.

Then the interview time came. The interviewers sat around a large conference table; they were people who belonged to different positions in government jobs. Teachers and professors, researchers and medical officials, high-positioned doctors from different hospitals. I knew one of them, a distant relative of mine, but I didn't acknowledge him. I thought that would be inappropriate. Then everybody became serious. All traces of smiles were wiped off of their faces. "Why do you wish to study medicine?" one of them asked in a deep tone.

I knew what the standard answer was: "Because I wish to serve humanity."

I decided not to give the routine answer because, to be honest, in my mind, serving humanity had nothing to do with me studying medicine. I decided to tell the truth.

I told them the long, winding story of how my Ma was an exceptionally brilliant student at school and wished to study medicine. How her parents had agreed to put her through medical school. How just then, when she was about to enter medical school, the Second World War had broken out. How Ma's parents were forced to leave Burma for Dhaka. How Ma wished to fulfil her dream through me, how I had agreed to oblige her, how I found it so very natural to step into Ma's dream because I was the only child she had.

As I finished my long story and took in a deep breath, one of the gentlemen asked the other examiners, "Isn't it refreshing to listen to the truth from time to time?"

Everyone smiled. After that there were no specific questions, just a general discussion about the goings-on in India and abroad. Thanks to the advice of Preetidi, I was knowledgeable in those areas and discussed them confidently and comfortably. I emerged from the interview room more or less satisfied with myself. That was an exceptional feeling, as usually on coming home from tests I would tell Ma, "I have no idea how I've done. Hopefully I'll pass," so uncertain was I in judging my performance. The entrance interview to medical school was the first time some self-confidence seeped into me.

"I think things will turn out just fine," I told Ma on returning home.

The results of the entrance interview were to be announced the next day.

Pushing forward

In the morning I set off early, eager to know whether I'd be able to get into the college of my choice, one of the ancient and most prestigious medical colleges in India.

As I approached the administration building, I saw a throng of mostly boys and some girls gathered on the front porch of the building. They stood facing one wall. The reason was evident. The list of names that had been announced was hanging in a glassed-in notice board on the wall. On reaching the throng, I realized that being of petite stature I could see nothing because of the taller boys in front of me. Ma's face came to mind, her determination coursing through her into me. I pushed my way through the crowd, as one learns to do in the normal density of people in Calcutta. Yet as much as I elbowed forward, I remained petrified of what I might see—or not see—when I arrived.

I reached the front of the group and stared at the starkly typed paper. My last name was Basu so I knew that if it was there, it would be near the top. My eyes flitted quickly past the *A*s to …

Manasi Basu.

My name was there, my name was there, my name was there.

I had never been so happy seeing my name written anywhere on this earth. I had been accepted by the college of my choice. I was in, I was in. I would fulfil my mother's dream; I would enter the career that she had not been able to. Nobody could push us out.

Dr Manasi Dutt (1944-2011) was a family physician who practised in Burlington, Ont. Her daughter, **Dr Monika Dutt,** is a family physician and public health and preventive medicine specialist in Sydney, NS.

Competing interests
None declared