



DREAMING

TEENS

Dr. Anant Raman

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I hereby assert that this is my own work of fiction.
The names and incidents used in this work are fictional.

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DEDICATION

To my loving mother who taught me to walk, speak, write, laugh, cry, smile and feel good to be alive.

To my dear father who showed me the direction in life and helped me stand on my own legs.

To all my teachers who taught me the art of learning and the way to approach the unlimited and eternal source.

To my guru Sri Ramana Maharshi who has showered his blessings and guidance towards an inward journey that surpasses every other quest in life.

To my wife and friends who have stood by me all along in my journey of life and challenges.

To our two affectionate sons and two smart grand children who have taught me a lot of things which I couldn't have learned any other way.

To all those people who make life worth living on this planet by working together for the common good of all living beings.

and

To the billion girl children on this planet earth,

some of whom share their experiences with me in this book.

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I thank them all with folded hands and a heart full of gratitude.

Preface:

I love children.

And I find they have a lot of wisdom and perspective on things that affect or enrich their lives.

When I talk to them, I often come out much enriched myself, by way of a different perspective or a shared thought that provides insight in to how they perceive their society.

Children have their own fresh perspectives on what is happening around them and what they would like to see to make this world a better place for all.

Looking at situations in various parts of the world through the eyes of the children in each country or location can have a tremendous effect on the way we see things that matter in life.

Nineteen children from different parts of the world tell me what they see and feel, what affects them, what touches them and how they touch others.

1 CRYSTAL CLEAR WATERS AND CARING TRIBES

KRIKI:

As a tribal girl in the rainforests of Amazon, I grew up care free, enjoying the amazing variety of jungle life that is always fascinating to every kid like me.

I am Kriki, and I belong to the Ashuar tribe living in the deep jungles enriched by the Amazon River.

If you happen to be in the deep jungles and care to look up, you will only see thick tree tops that form a canopy of green cover in any direction you look. At some times you may be lucky to witness streaks of sunlight making their way through these canopies to bring some light to the small plants and creatures on the forest floor.

Walking through these forests you will come across animals, birds and tiny insects which keep themselves busy with their own work.

Some of them don't like to be disturbed and will protest if I go too near them, but there are others who like me, and I can go near them and touch them.

Most of them come to the river to drink the cool water early in the morning, when I go there. I know each one of them and most of them know me too. They don't bother me when I jump in to the water for swimming and I see a lot of fish there. If I stay long enough I will be greeted by a family of dolphins too but they vanish if they hear the sound of canoes.

I collect some flowers and large leaves on my way back home. There are snakes too but I am not afraid of them because even if I get bitten by one I can crush some leaves of a plant and apply the juice at the bite marks on my legs where they might have struck me and the snake poison would be gone.

All of us in our village are taught to respect the animals, birds, trees, plants and even insects. We know that they cause no harm if we treat them with respect and be kind to them as we are to each other.

There are large butterflies that come and sit on my head or shoulders and tickle me with their feet. They have bright colors and designs. Some of them even glow in the dark, just like the fire flies. They are special to these forests and are called *Urania* butterflies.

Even the large birds won't eat them as they are not nice to eat.

The parrots that live on these tall trees have so many colors on their feathers. It is nice to watch them fly together making calls to each other, and land near the river and sometimes eat the sand and mud but mostly they stay high up and eat the fruits and nuts from the trees.

Many of these parrots live very long, may be thirty or forty years, or even fifty years like my grandfather who tells me that the red parrots are called Macaws by the people in towns and he had seen them as small babies near our village on the Kapok tree which he used to climb

as a child to look at the eggs in the parrot nests to find them turn to baby birds all of a sudden one day. They look ugly as babies with a gray hair-like coat all over their body, but soon they grow feathers that turn beautiful blue, green or red. Even their beaks grow strong and large so they can crack nuts.

Once my grandfather took me to a far off place by his canoe in which only two people can sit or it will sink in water. He tells me that he made the canoe by himself and also taught many in our village about how to make canoes from some special trees which turn dry at some point of time and die. We don't cut trees unless they have already dried up and all leaves have fallen to indicate that they are not alive any more.

They go in several canoes in to unknown parts of the jungle to bring honey and edible roots, fruits and even large flowers. Most important of all, they collect roots and leaves of herbal plants to prepare special medicines for our tribal village people.

It took almost the whole day with my grandfather on his canoe to reach that far off place. He showed me how people from the towns came to these forests and started to cut the trees to make large houses where others can come and stay. These are called lodges and sometimes people looking very different from us come here from faraway places to see the forests and even see us.

My grandfather and his grandfather and father have all come across such people and did not like them coming here to cut our trees. They don't respect the trees. No one should be allowed to cut these trees which are hundreds of years old and they are living things, just like us.

He also said that some tourists are friendly people coming to visit these forests just to appreciate their beauty and feel the energy. They usually spend only a few days and go back without causing any damage. We are not against them. They are good people and friends.

They mostly stay at a place called Kapawi Eco Lodge, which was built without damage to the rainforest and in an eco-friendly manner.

It is entirely owned and managed by the Ashuar people to provide a place to stay for such friendly visitors.

My grandfather said, that was where he was taking me to show me the place. We reached the Kapawi Eco Lodge after another hour. I always liked going with my grandfather on the canoe or even on foot as he tells me a lot of stories and facts about Ashuar people and about the rainforest trees, animals, birds and other life.

He showed me some rare birds like the yellow fly catchers, and the red macaws flying above our canoe, and the howler monkeys on the trees lining the sides of the river.

All this time I noticed that we were not bitten by any mosquitoes and when I asked him where all the mosquitoes have gone, he laughed and said that in these areas they had planted some special type of Amazon grass which repelled mosquitoes.

We had reached the destination and he tied the canoe to a tree and we started walking towards the Kapawi lodge. Some people from the lodge came running to receive my grandfather and from the warm way they greeted each other I could see that they were good friends, mostly from our Ashuar tribe. They greeted me and invited us inside.

They took us to meet Pepoka, the chief of the lodge, who was already known to my grandfather. Pepoka was a young man whom I had seen before in our village but now he was at this lodge to look after the place with a team of people to assist him in his work.

He was one of the persons from Ashuar tribe who had joined the protest against encroachment and destruction of their rainforest resources by oil exploration companies. They strongly condemned the decimation of the age old trees for lumber, much against their interests, by international corporations.

Thanks to their untiring efforts and bold expression of their concerns as a united Ashuar community numbering more than eighteen thousand

people living in the Amazon regions with ancestral land of nearly two million acres along the Amazon river, their lands have been protected by law from encroachment, through caring support organizations such as Pachamama Alliance.

He developed enough skills in that process, to organize and lead our community into realization of their potential power in working together, keeping their differences aside.

He impressed me as a genuine person who cared about Ashuar community, and my grandfather had a great respect and admiration for him although he was much younger.

Together with my parents, and my grandparents, some of these people came together and organized a number of initiatives to help our community in establishing learning centers, where for the first time ever, our community kids could attend a class room on a regular basis and learn to read and write our Shuar language.

They also introduced many modern methods of doing work in the forest like collecting honey without damaging the beehives.

I am one of the lucky children in our village to go to school for the first time in our history. For my father, mother and grandparents the forest was their school and learning happened when they worked in the jungle.

Our school has only a single-room class for all of us, and we all learn together. Our teacher comes from Quito and he knows many things. He can speak in English and he explains to us that many people outside our Ashuar community learn to speak English as it is easy to talk to people who come from faraway places and don't know our language.

Now even I know a little English, thanks to our teacher.

When we were shown around the Kapawi lodge, there were some people who had come as tourists staying there and I met a girl who smiled at me and said 'Hello, I am Jessica'. I knew this word and to tell my name in English. I replied 'Hello, my name is Kriki'.

She started talking to me very fast, but I could understand only a little of what she said. Then she slowed down, seeing my wide eyed expression. She told me that she had come with her parents from London, England to see Amazon River and the Rain forests.

She added that in the place where she lived, in London, there was a river too, but no forest like in Amazon.

Jessica asked me whether I went to school. I said yes.

She said, in her school in London, they had a group called DreamingTeam who were volunteers to help children wherever they came across children in need of help.

I was interested in volunteering as I have seen many volunteers who have come to help our village, but what help they can do to children?

Jessica said she and her friends helped children in different countries through the internet.

I asked her what was internet.

She said something about computer and how children from any country in the world can talk to other children in even faraway places like here.

I was surprised. I asked her how. She took out a thin flat box she was carrying in her bag on her back, opened its lid and did something like 'tik tik tok tok' and suddenly I saw some children in there, inside that box, laughing and talking in English.

I could not believe that children could live inside a small box. I asked her to let those children come out from the box.

Jessica laughed and said they were far away in London and not inside that box.

Then who are these small children inside that box in her hand? Why are they kept in the box? I was still confused and unable to understand what was happening.

She told me it was not real. They were images and that is how she could talk to her friends in London, even when she was so far away in Kapawi, in our Amazon forest area.

Then she slowly moved the box toward me, did some more 'tik tik tak tak' and there was a girl like me inside her box. I was surprised again and that girl in the box was also surprised. I said 'Hello, my name is Kriki' and she also said 'Hello, my name is Kriki'

I have seen many girls like me in places around the vast areas in our Amazon communities where other tribal people like us lived. So I thought Jessica had one of such girls in her box, but that girl said her name was Kriki too!

Jessica told me that she was not another girl but it was me. Then I moved my hand and found she also did the same. I laughed and she laughed too.

For the first time in my life I was helped by a girl from London to see myself inside her box. I told her I was very happy to see myself in her box and said 'Thank you'

She said 'You are welcome'

My grandfather had finished his work there by that time and came to fetch me. I said bye to Jessica and she became a close friend to me by being so kind in showing so many things with her box. She told me it was a computer and it can do a lot of things. She will show me more when we met again. I invited her along with her parents to our village and my grandfather told me that he has already invited her parents to

come and visit us so he could show them around the rain forests and things they cannot find anywhere else in the world.

We returned to our village and on the way my grandfather said Jessica's parents were good people who want to help us by providing material for the school in our village. They were planning to visit our village after two or three days and in the mean time they were going to visit other places nearby.

Jessica came with her parents as promised, after a few days, in a large boat in which more people could sit and view all the trees and plants on either side of the Amazon River.

She and her parents were happy to meet my mother and the children who were studying with me in our village school, which was a large hut with palm tree leaves on top of wooden beams tied together with strong vines of the jungle. All the sides of this hut school were open and we could see who was coming even when we sat in the class, listening to our teacher.

Our teacher said hello to Jessica and her parents and invited them in to the class and introduced all the children who studied there. When Jessica requested him to let me go with them to see the village, our teacher agreed to let me go with them. He is always very nice to everyone, even to people who come from so far away.

I took Jessica and her parents to meet my mother and others in our village. The men had gone to the forests early in the morning to bring food and honey. Only women and small kids were around and they were tending the gardens. Some of the elders were preparing food for all.

I took Jessica and her family to the large Kapok tree in the jungle not far from our home. I told them to move carefully without stepping on the forest creatures. Just across the roots of this Kapok tree I pointed to them the leaf-carrying ants moving busily in long lines, each ant carrying

a piece of green leaf, taking it to their hidden home around the corner deep below the roots of another large tree.

They were fascinated with the disciplined and well regulated movement of these small creatures one behind the other carrying a piece of leaf even larger than their body.

They were lucky to witness a flock of Amazon parrots in beautiful colors, which came flying just at that time. They majestically landed on the banks of the river and started eating the clay there.

Jessica was surprised that these parrots would eat clay.

She told me that, from what she knew, parrots ate fruits on trees and even nuts which they could crack with their strong beaks but she had never seen parrots eating sand and clay.

My grandfather had joined us by that time to make sure we didn't get lost in the deep jungles. He heard what she said and added that parrots liked to eat the clay and sand on the river banks, as it contained the essence of some of the forest plants and the mountains. They knew it was good for them.

He explained to them about the spirit in the Kapok tree which we worshipped whenever we happened to see them in the forests. To all the people in the Ashuar tribes it was well known that every tree, animal, bird and insect had living spirits in them and it was necessary to respect these spirits to become friendly with them. They help us in many ways.

When I told my grandfather about Jessica's DreamingTeam who help children everywhere he told Jessica it was a nice thing to do. He then explained that Ashuar people believed in dreams and whenever they had to do something very important, they would first go through a process called 'Dream Vision'.

It was a method to go into a dream-like state of inner vision where they would be guided about the right thing to do concerning the important matter in their mind.

For example they usually go for such dream vision guidance to know which plants to use to cure someone who is very ill. They will see the plants in their vision and also be guided to the spots in the rainforest where they could obtain them. One such plant used for healing was Ayahuasca, very special to these tribal people and found in Amazon rainforests.

Jessica and her parents listened to him with full attention without saying a word. They respected my grandfather for his vast knowledge about these special powers known to Ashuar people.

On our way back, he showed them some special butterflies which had bright glowing colors, the monkeys which could talk to each other called 'howler monkeys' and many beautiful birds like the yellow fly-catchers, macaws and even tiny birds that ate honey from flowers.

Before we reached our village after this expedition, Jessica thanked my grandfather and me for showing them all these amazing wonders of the Amazon forests and told us that we were very lucky to live in such a great place on earth.

Her mother had some questions to ask my grandfather.

She said she had heard about the spiritual specialists in their tribe and that some of them had the power to shrink the heads of enemies if they tried to enter their forest areas for exploiting them for commercial gains. She wanted to know whether it was actually a fact.

My grandfather listened to the question and told her that people with such powers were still there in deep and remote jungles, known only to those who have been living there for generations. He had heard about them and had even seen such shrunken heads called 'Tsantsa', when he was young.

Jessica and her parents thanked us and all the people in the village who had gathered to bid them farewell. She said the unforgettable memories of this place in the rainforests will remain with them for a long time and they cherished these memories.

I felt sad that they were leaving. It was as if one of my close friends was going away. We had just formed a bond and liking for each other and had many things to share. She promised to come back to our Ashuar village again to find me grown up and taking charge of the school from the teacher. I liked the idea and told her that I will do my best.

Sometimes help comes from so far away.

This casual remark of my faraway friend Jessica was a great help to me and it motivated me to pay serious attention to what ever my teacher had to offer and with his help I was sure to become fully prepared to take over as a teacher of my single-room school, to be of help to all our community children.

When I asked Jessica to include me in her DreamingTeam, she said she would and also would remember to tell her friends in London who were her team mates. She told me to start my own Dreaming Team in Ashuar community.

That will be my next dream.

2 PIZZA, SPAGHETTI, MACARONI AND MAFIA

ANITA:

When one utters the word Italy, what come to our mind immediately are pizza, spaghetti, macaroni, Venice, gondolas, the leaning tower of Pisa, the Roman coliseums, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Mafia.

I am Anita, a student in Florence, studying the art of film making at Florence Film School, specializing in digital film techniques.

Being an Italian I love to express myself with a bit of exaggeration and a lot of enthusiasm.

When I started using my mini video camera for picking up lively scenes around me in day to day Italy, it became a passion for me and I knew film making was my calling.

Initially I was flabbergasted by the multi-national composition of my class and the potpourri of words getting spoken in different languages at breaks, but the classes were thankfully in English which I could manage to understand and speak, albeit in my Italian accent that I am

comfortable with and even proud of, as it is more dynamic and expressive.

Even ordinary things become interesting when expressed in Italian. You should see when my parents talk to each other, to understand what I am saying.

When I finished school and was still undecided about what to do for a career, I came in to contact with Sophia, through a mutual friend Angelina. We met each other at the central market where I was trying to capture the Italian ingenuity in conning tourists into buying things they really don't need. My interest in documentaries with digital imaging technology had the seeds sown there in the open market.

Sophia and Angelina were uttering some exotic bits about some DreamingTeam and finally I gathered that they were volunteers with DreamingTeam which helps children in need.

"So why not help me?" I said to them and explained my unresolved uncertainties of choosing a path for my career.

They were ready to help me then and there. They decided to postpone their shopping plans for the next hour, so they could devote the time for this noble cause of guiding me in finding my feet on the road ahead. We unanimously agreed that the most suitable venue for this life changing moment would be the famous Café Bruno, just around the corner.

We ordered three cups of cappuccino and while it was getting ready, started our conversation on this specific topic. They asked me questions about what I liked in life, what threatened me most, and things I was uncomfortable with in dealing with strangers, friends, boyfriends and parents, in that order.

By then I came to know that Sophia was a psychology major and she took the initiative of fishing in my troubled waters.

I could at once see her clever *modus operandi*.

Expressing reservations and reactions about comfort levels is relatively easy when we start with strangers and friends and when we move on to boyfriends and our own family members after that, it did not seem impossible.

My phobias and pleasures, irritants and irresistible passions were brought to the open by the skillful navigation and casual style of Sophia's questioning, aided by the soothing and warm cappuccino. The appreciative smiles and the sympathetic silence of my close friend Angelina made it even easier to share what was in my mind.

After screening all my options, such as becoming a doctor, engineer, gourmet queen, fashion designer and tourist guide, they finally narrowed my options to three – becoming an actor on stage, pursuing teaching or exploring the world of film making.

Becoming an actor – because I had good talent to express myself verbally and convincingly, with storytelling skills;

Pursuing teaching – because I liked children and had the patience to go over things without becoming irritated or disheartened;

And exploring the world of film-making – because I was already an accomplished story teller and loved my video camera which accompanied me everywhere, sometimes even to my class room, hidden in a secret compartment of my backpack to escape detection.

By this time they had already put me at ease and my mind became clearer as I had to deal with only three options instead of infinite possibilities.

I was pleased with their generosity in immediately coming forward to help me. They said that was the way DreamingTeam operated ... just-in-time saviors.

I asked them to include me too as a volunteer in DreamingTeam, and teach me the ropes, so I could put in some meaningful help to children in need.

When we walked out of the café, back in to the central market, they took leave of me promising to meet again in another location or at least on Facebook, to keep abreast of each other's status.

I kept shooting on my mini video camera to the delight of the street vendors and shop keepers who were only too glad with the attention they were getting through my lens. The shopping tourists didn't mind it either, as most of them carried their own cameras, still and video, large and small, made proudly in Japan or clandestinely in China, with similar popular brand names that were almost status symbols for tourists worth their salt.

It took me only a couple of days more to decide to spare the Italian children from the unnecessary torture of listening to my lectures; and to save the movie lovers and the Hollywood studios from becoming victims of my acting adventures or misadventures leading to flops and financial loss.

I firmly fixed my mind on film making and told my parents about my decision. Surprisingly, they both welcomed my bold decision. They said, I have become more mature in facing my life, instead of remaining undecided and aimlessly wasting my father's money and my mother's precious time.

So the first hurdle was crossed with some ease.

The next step was to get admitted in to film school of my choice. I didn't waste time. I considered the pros and cons of the film institutes accessible to me and chose one nearby that was fairly popular and opted for a short term course of three months duration which suited me well, since I was not keen to spend years and work for a degree there. My intention was to learn the tricks of the trade so I could use them straight away. Little did I know at that time about how I would sell my work or

make it commercially viable in order to make a living through film-making. However much my parents may love me and like me to be with them I will have to stand on my own legs soon enough and not be a burden to them.

I am now half way through, into the film making course and already I have learned quite a few techniques from the seasoned film makers in our faculty about the nuances of visual storytelling, the importance of editing in keeping the attention of the viewer and also towards ensuring a seamless flow of events that are woven together by the director and the crew.

The importance of light in making impressive visuals and the ubiquitous technique of framing as a means to visualization were already known to me as a freelance photographer and amateur video enthusiast but what I saw through the eyes of the cameramen and women of repute at the professional school gave me an amazing insight into perspective.

It is in the hands of the camera crew that the visual impact is matched to the needs of the scene as envisaged by the director and could make or break a scene. And in capturing events for a documentary there is absolutely no retake and therefore the ability to think on the feet is essential for a good visual portrayal.

Documentary film making is my preferred objective at the moment since there are a lot of dreams in my mind which are waiting for expression. Also, I prefer to work independently at least for some time before I make up my mind to go for commercial ventures and working with large media houses as a nobody, just for the money.

Even before joining this course for enabling me to bring structure and discipline to my work, I have been filming bits on specific themes and one of them is about contemporary Italy through the eyes of children.

Not many film makers see through children's perspective even when they make films or documentaries for children. It is, by and large, the adult's perspective that gets projected.

When I see some parents interacting with their children there are rare moments when I see them patiently listening to them about their views and going the extra mile to avoid sermonizing, and just being there for them so they could feel at ease and relate to them. I capture these without letting them see me, lest the spontaneity is lost.

Sometimes we don't want to think like adults and do things the same way as they do, just because they say that is the right way. Living in the same groove may be comfortable and conflict-free, but sometimes it kills new ways of thinking that could rejuvenate the relationships and reinforce the sense of belonging.

Another stream in my dream is to document the ingenious ways tourists and common people of our own country get conned by numerous conmen, including our politicians, multinational corporations and petty street vendors. The Italian mafia is too large for me to handle at present and I will keep it in the back burner for the time being.

Conning or cheating people in any which way seems to be the pastime of people at all levels of our society. The degree and the magnitude may differ but cheating is ubiquitous as I see it through the lens of my mini video camera.

It makes me more comfortable to have the lens between me and the scene.

I suppose these two themes will provide enough material for a at least a couple of months and in the mean while I will let my dreams run wild to cover extra ground in my new voluntary work with the DreamingTeam.

Perhaps the media of digital imaging may help a lot of children who are caught between parental conflicts and inability to perform in their academic pursuits due to a number of reasons. I would like to add this to my portfolio, not as a subject to show my talent at film making but as a process that will benefit children by way of better treatment to them by the adults who see it in perspective.

On the positive side, Italy is indeed a nice place on earth with two thousand five hundred years of heritage, where great works of art and architecture originated. Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci and Raphael have left their indelible mark as a legacy for all to enjoy and be proud of.

Narrow Mediterranean style streets in Florence with energetic and enthusiastic people sharing their thoughts and opinions so loudly so everyone can hear and be a part of it, the lively gondolas in the waters of Venice which carry tourists so elegantly crossing innumerable bridges and walkways, the millennium-old churches in Rome, the Coliseum, the leaning tower of Pisa and the famous statues of David and Venus de Milo are sure to leave all tourists in awe, providing them with enough memories to take back home in the form of pictures and video.

So here I am so excited to face what life has to offer to me and all the challenges that come with it.

I will surely be in touch with you all, through my documentaries and the untold stories that will come out in them.

3 UNIFIED FIELDS AND WATER TIGHT COMPARTMENTS

MONICA:

For most part, my home town Fairfield in IOWA, USA, is a simple neighborhood with almost everyone knowing everyone else. But suddenly it became active and filled with excitement when a unique university came up in its suburbs to make a difference in the lives of the people of Fairfield.

I am Monica, studying Unified Field Theory and its relevance in our life, as part of my under-graduate studies in Neurophysiology of Enlightenment and Science of Creative Intelligence at Maharishi University of Management.

This university has a beautiful campus with large spaces specifically designed to be environmentally friendly and conducive to scientific studies.

Both my parents teach courses in different faculties at this university and are longtime associates with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi who introduced Transcendental Meditation techniques in our country.

My parents are regular meditators and when I used to see them in meditation every morning I could relate to the calmness and peace experienced by them which made them easy to interact with. I was naturally interested to learn meditation myself to experience it personally and see for myself what it could do to my mind and body.

My dad suggested that I could learn Transcendental Meditation directly from one of the instructors at MUM and if I found it beneficial I could go ahead and enroll for an undergraduate program there, as I had already completed my high school graduation and was still considering various options before me, trying to make up my mind.

One thing led to another and I was accepted in to the undergraduate program in to the relatively unknown but extremely relevant subject.

I had been to India as a young kid accompanying my parents who were doctors, studying the neurophysiology of enlightenment at Maharishi's centre at Rishikesh, in the foot hills of Himalayas.

Maharishi himself was easily accessible to one and all, and was teaching the program directly to a large group of teacher-trainees, while scientific measurements and objective evaluations were being conducted simultaneously by a divergent group of experts including my parents.

In those days if any one of my friends had told me that I may become a student of this science one day, I would have treated it in utter disbelief and brushed it aside, as I had no idea what enlightenment was. Furthermore, science was not one of my favorite subjects.

Perhaps it was one of the ways that I was to learn about the unpredictability of matters relating to our future.

Although much of what I learned was not easy to understand, much less appreciate, due to the abstract nature of the subject matter, it didn't take too long for me to grasp that they all had to do with my own mind as much as with anybody else's.

Mindboggling, mindless and mindful are words that we use fluently and take our mind for granted but when we look at its amazing fields and intricate activities we soon realize that we hardly know anything at all, about this wonderful and subtle source of thoughts located in the gray matter inside our impenetrable skull.

Enlightenment may not appear to be everyone's cup of tea, if only because most of us have allowed ourselves to be unaware of it.

You will not miss what you are unaware of.

Like, a lot of people in our country knew nothing about the Chinese system of Acupuncture until it was studied by some professionals from our country and introduced as a viable and alternative system of healthcare.

Even the ancient science of Ayurveda or the Science of health, so predominantly practiced in India was not known to most Americans until Maharishi's Ayurveda was popularized by medical scientists like Deepak Chopra and now it is well known here as an alternative and non-intrusive therapy, with scientific validation in clinical trials.

You may wonder how I have become so engrossed in to such unlikely pursuits for an easy going teenager. The key is awareness. Once I became aware of the vastness of the Unified field theory and the magnificence of our mind's capacity to study itself, there was no doubt in my mind that I had embarked on the most exciting journey of my life. The university degree I would acquire in this process is merely a procedural exercise to record it for posterity.

So far I have not touched upon the other areas of my student life, some enjoyable and some painful. I prefer to go in to it only at this stage, after presenting the most significant developments as they happened to me showing me the direction for my life ahead.

The classes in MUM are essentially small, intentionally designed that way, so the interaction with the teachers and among students could be

more vivid and rewarding. I have a handful of close friends in my class and we always stick together, putting our differences aside, and remain a close knit team. One of our team members, Vanessa, is also an active member of DreamingTeam, a volunteer group which helps children facing problems in their situations.

The other day she shared with me about Jenny, a bright kid in her neighborhood, whose parents were in to drugs and their home life had deteriorated so drastically that she was desperately clueless about how she was going to face each day. Vanessa said she was moved to tears to see how such careless addictions could lead to broken relationships and emotional imbalance to the children who get caught for no fault of theirs and get a raw deal. Jenny's parents were sufficiently well to do but that didn't justify their irresponsible life styles leading to incompatibility and indifference to their own loving children.

The only advice Vanessa could give Jenny was that she should focus her mind more on things that made her feel good and relegate the unpleasant things to a lower level where they wouldn't disturb her attention while she is engaged in activities that impact her positively.

She said she illustrated it with an experience in her own life which pushed her to a point where she even contemplated suicide but it was her father who saved her just in time.

She was in New Orleans at that time, staying with her parents and studying at the twelfth grade.

She had a spat with her boyfriend who, after going steady in their relationship for more than a year suddenly turned cold and started avoiding her. All her attempts to find out why he was doing this didn't give her any clue and it affected her so much that her grades were down, she was missing classes frequently and was spending sleepless nights crying. When she came to know finally that her boyfriend was doing the same with other girls too, cleverly concealing it from being found out, she was totally devastated and furious. Her parents tried to

console her, telling her to forget him and move on with her life but she was in no mood to listen to all these sermons in her state of mind.

Her father didn't want to let her continue in such depression and took her with him one day for a drive which led them to the sea port. He asked her to get down and accompany him to one of the ships anchored there, in which he was the first engineer, assisting the captain in keeping the engines in perfect running condition. They had just been back from a trip on the ship carrying commercial cargo for delivery to different ports and the ship was undergoing maintenance work, to service the systems and get them ready for the next trip in a couple of days on another assignment.

Vanessa continued:

He was greeted by the staff of the ship as we entered and he introduced me to his mates.

He then took me to the captain's cabin and introduced me to the captain before asking him permission to let me accompany him around the ship, which he gladly agreed to.

Even though all these did not make sense to me and I was wondering why my dad was taking me in to the ship, when I was not in a mood to enjoy such excursions, he told me that I was going to learn a life-changing experience just in a few moments and requested me to accompany him.

We went to the engine room which was located several floors down and on the way he showed me areas in the ship that led us in to a sort of a maze. Each floor had several compartments and on the floor where the engine room was situated, the area was divided into several sections like maintenance workshop, spare parts stores, assembly sections, fuel tanks, and electrical equipment like huge generators supplying electric power to the entire ship, desalination plants that converted sea water in to drinking water for the use of the crew, and majestic control panels

with instruments and control systems at the center of it all, facing the main engines of gigantic proportions that propelled the ship.

The ship's engine operators and the maintenance teams were busy checking various systems and parameters with a tight schedule marked on the wall-chart to enable everyone do their part and get the whole thing ready for the next take off in a few days.

Vanessa continued with her narration:

My mind was completely absorbed into this new environment which I had never experienced before. Suddenly I realized that when my attention was shifted to something new I was no longer plagued by my depressive thoughts.

'Is this what my dad was trying to teach me?' I asked myself.

Before I could think any further, my father seemed to sense my line of thinking and guided me to move further to the extreme end of the floor.

There were huge hinged doors in this floor that separated the sections from one another and each door had a circular locking wheel, with six spokes on each wheel that made it easy to grab them by hand and rotate them clock wise to lock and counter clockwise to unlock. The locks could be operated from either side of the door.

My father asked me to step aside, took one of the doors by his strong hands and slowly moved the heavy steel structure to closing position. The door fitted exactly in to the door frame and there was no sound of sudden contact as when we slam the door at home.

He pointed to the rubber lining on the frame, all around, where the door closed in.

He now rotated the giant sized wheel-locking-system by pushing the spokes downward on the right side and upward on the left side.

This wheel operated the levers that projected on to the sides of the door and locked in to their respective slots on the ship walls to make a perfect seal.

I told him it was very clever and he nodded his head in agreement.

He then opened the door again and moved it to its original position.

I went with him to the deck on the top floor of the ship and on the way he pointed to the doors, so many of them on each floor, dividing each section from the next, fitted with similar locking wheels, some of which I saw some people cleaning and lubricating with grease or oil to make them operate smoothly, as part of the maintenance procedures.

Once we were on the top and in the open, he guided me to a corner and we stood there watching the clouds and the seagulls that dotted the sky.

He gave me enough time to breathe easy after climbing all the floors by foot as this ship didn't have any lifts and everyone had to walk their way.

He asked me what impressed me most on the ship's systems.

Vanessa continued:

I told him that the control panels and the various meters on them were very impressive as they showed the parameters such as the temperatures, pressures, levels and the state of each engine in operation as well as the auxiliary systems such as the lubrication and cooling systems. The operating team could see and judge the performance of every equipment just by looking at the panel, much like the cockpit in aircrafts which I had seen during our travels by flight.

He was very pleased with my observation to details, and my keen sense of focus, and he told me so.

That made me feel good and proud. It is nice to hear your father say something in genuine appreciation about you, when you don't expect it.

It was indeed a heartwarming moment for me and I showed it in my eyes as I acknowledged what he said.

My father then told me that there was a unique safety feature in the ship which we saw in each section and it was essential to every ship. No ship will be built without it. He brought me to the ship only to show me this feature.

I looked at him questioningly.

He continued:

I am talking about the gigantic doors and the locking wheels on each one of the doors which could be operated from both sides of the door.

Every member of the crew is trained to operate these locking systems on these doors. It is an integral part of ship procedures.

Normally these doors remain in open position but if something happens to the ship such as a sudden fire in the engine or in any of the sections, or if there was flooding of water due to some leak, the first thing that the crew is trained to do is to isolate the section so affected, by moving the relevant doors to closed position and lock them water-tight.

This will prevent the flooding or fire from spreading to other neighboring sections and enable the crew to contain the emergency situation as quickly as possible.

These water-tight compartments were an essential feature of every ship.

I told him that it was indeed unique and appropriate for saving lives and even saving the ship at the time of distress which could happen in spite of all safety precautions and checks.

But I did not see why it was so important for me to learn this at this time, until he explained it to me further.

He said, just as these water-tight compartments help in saving the ship by isolating the problem section, so too we could apply the same principle in our own life and learn to keep each area separate and prevent it from affecting other areas when some problems occur.

He told me in a soft voice that, much as he was pained by the betrayal of my boyfriend whom I loved so much, it was a matter that had to be contained and I should learn to deal with it as a separate issue and not allow it to encroach upon my relationship at home or studies at school, just as I would not bother anyone or stop studying, if my mobile phone went dead or got stolen.

He allowed this to soak in and remained silent, looking at me with love and compassion.

Suddenly it all made sense to me.

What a great way to teach me a stunning lesson!

If he had not actually taken me to the ship and shown me everything in detail, it might not have had such an impact and lasting impression in my mind.

I loved my dad for this unforgettable lesson and his patience with me in leading me step by step.

When we drove back home, I told my dad that I was completely back to normal and will always remember this unique lesson throughout my life, and will not allow any matter including a lousy boyfriend to depress me or incapacitate me from living my life normally.

How nice it is to have parents like him, who care for their children and take the time to handle sensitive issues with such compassion and love. I felt really blessed. I thank God for this grace.

Vanessa continued:

As I was saying, I narrated this personal experience of mine to Jenny. I noticed that it moved her. She got the point. I felt satisfied for being of a little help to her, when she needed it.”

I heard this life changing personal account from my friend Vanessa without interrupting her, as I was myself deeply moved and empathetic to the message conveyed.

It is indeed a gift of God to have friends like Vanessa, who take the time to share their experiences that made a difference in their life.

Two significant things happened to me after this interaction.

I joined the DreamingTeam as a volunteer to be of assistance to children looking for help.

And I learned to apply this principle of compartmentalizing my life’s situations, which enriched my life to a large extent.

If I had an argument with my mom or felt angered by an impolite or abrasive behavior of a close friend, I could immediately remind myself that it was something I could handle as a specific issue and isolate it from affecting me in my other relationships.

There are a lot of things to share about my adventures with my mind that came about by my deep studies at the Maharishi University and I will share them at another time.

Bye for now.

4 VENEERED CANDLES AND ORPHANED CHILDREN

DIANA

Swaziland, a small landlocked country with rolling hills, breathtaking and diverse landscapes which attract tourists from far and near is not easy to spot on the world map, as it is not rich in oil reserves like the Middle East or overflowing with abundant supply of other people's money as in Switzerland.

On the contrary it is a dependent country, not much publicized and left alone to suffer the desperation of poor people uncared for by a government which is not answerable to anyone, under the last and longest serving monarch of Africa who lives lavishly.

I am Diana, in Swaziland and I live in Manzini, the hub and heart of our country not far from the capital, Mbabane.

We are a Zulu nation with a rich cultural heritage of living together as large families taking care of each other.

Natural beauty, stunningly attractive landscape, hills, waterfalls, unique handicrafts and friendly hospitality of our people have all contributed in making Swaziland a tourist attraction.

The Hlane National Park and Mlilwane Wild Life Sanctuary for animal viewing, Malkerns Valley to taste some of the delicious pineapples grown there, and the Ezulwini Valley renowned for its arts and crafts centers are enough to keep visitors fascinated for several days or even months if they so like.

The most famous of Swazi crafts, unique and original, are Swazi Candles made of wax with a kaleidoscope of magnificent designs decorating their varied shapes by a special process called veneering, the likes of which cannot be found anywhere else.

Ngwenya Mountain is also an important destination with the glass village at the base of it providing a glimpse into the old art of glass blowing where visitors can watch master glass blowers creating amazing products right in front of their eyes, using only recycled glass.

Tourism brings people from many distant places and generates revenue for our nation, but we are still poor, since the wealth so generated is unavailable to the citizens. Only the king and the governing few live in luxury, unmindful of the pain and suffering that the average Swazis live with.

A tiny nation of just around a million in population surrounded by South Africa on three sides and by Mozambique on the east, we are landlocked and dependent on these neighbors for much of our needs.

Richness of culture and tradition is not enough if we have to live in poverty, deprived of even the basic needs. Malnutrition and AIDS are the major problems that we are facing, with very little help from a monarchy which is answerable to none and accountable only to God-knows-who.

Half the population of our country is below the age of fifteen, which is unique to Swaziland, and half of them are sadly AIDS positive, for no fault of theirs.

I go to school mainly to forget the pains of seeing my parents struggling to feed us and manage by doing odd jobs with no assured income. Of late they managed to get employment with a new company called Techno Serve, which provides some service to the people by teaching them better methods of farming and land usage.

Agriculture is the main source of income for the majority of us, who are Bantu speaking Swazi tribe and Techno Serve has been a boon to many farmers.

When I found that so many of the kids coming to my school had lost one or both of their parents due to HIV, I felt so sad and wanted to find out why there was no cure for this disease. Fifty years back, they say, this HIV did not exist. And now it has become the biggest killer, without remedy.

Ironically, many of my class mates are looking after their parents, rather than the parents caring for these kids.

But there are thousands of kids who can't even go to school and have nobody to lean on, having lost their parents at their young age.

World vision, a relief organization caring for the children and helping Swazi people to cope with calamities and disasters is another boon to our nation.

"S.O.S. Children's Village" is another child care organization that provides help to children.

As a member of the young generation I salute these organizations that are doing good work to save Swaziland.

Sometime back my mother took me with her to her work spot, to show me what is happening there, when I asked her how we can make people help themselves and become free of poverty when the government is ignoring its own people.

I spent the whole day with my mother, which was by itself a rare joy for me.

And what I saw there has given me the hope that all is not bad and it is possible to help people who are very poor to learn and make their lives better.

Many marginalized farmers who had suffered crop loss due to drought or other reasons became so broke that neither they were able to raise another crop nor buy food for their own families.

With a little bit of luck and wisdom, they got trained by Techno Serve to follow right procedures and also to go for crop insurance which was essential to survive the unpredictable environmental factors that cause havoc in their lives.

Soon they became successful in growing vegetables like baby corn, beans etc and other seasonal rotation crops that gave them enough profits to go on. They also learned marketing and storage skills and were introduced to super market outlets who could guarantee procurement of quality products from them, including organic food.

Another venture which helped many, including young students to earn enough to cover their tuition for higher studies in college, was honey farming.

Just a few cautious youngsters took up beekeeping after learning the basics and getting support to build beehives and cultivate them with care, collect and pack the honey for sale.

It was so rewarding that they were able to plough back part of their earnings to add more capacity and also inspire other farmers and friends to join this industry.

As a DreamingTeam member I was fascinated and impressed with what my mom and others were doing there and I started collecting information about such success stories and with help from my friends I

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shared these with people at different forums and community meets to help others help themselves.

I do dream of completing my schooling and becoming a catalyst for change in our country by raising awareness and spreading optimism.

And I also hope that the cure for HIV is found by our own scientists in Swaziland for making this country healthy again and saving the new generation.

5 LIVE FLOWER CARPETS AND LOVELESS KIDS

LIZZY:

It is so nice to live in Holland, although the extreme cold weather in winter makes one wish for the bright sun.

I am Lizzy and I belong to a family of flower growers in Keukenhof Gardens, near Amsterdam in Netherlands.

It is an understatement to say that we grow flowers.

Come and see it in the months of April and May and you will be stunned by the magic of tulips in endless stretches of red, yellow, pink, orange and so many other combinations of colors, which captivate the tourists and have earned a unique place for us in the flower map of the world.

Millions of tulip bulbs blooming in synchrony, swaying so gracefully in gentle winds and sometimes dancing to the tunes of movie makers who throng here to shoot their most popular heroes and heroines in love scenes that demand them dancing in the fields in abandon.

But tulips are not the only flowers that we grow, although they have made us world famous just in a short span of fifty years. You will find

daffodils, hyacinths, azaleas, hydrangeas and even orchids which are tropical plants but grown here in green houses under special environments.

Millions of flowers are exported from the flower markets here, to satisfy the florists and their customers all over the world.

Back to me ...

I have finished school just last year and I am excited about studying microbiology at the University of Amsterdam which is not far away from here.

Once in a way I manage to sneak off from our flower paradise with my friends and we go around on our bicycles to see what is happening elsewhere.

Sometimes I go with my family to drive down to the cheese markets in Alkmaar where we buy choice varieties of tasty cheese which are a regular part of our daily diet. Gouda, Edam, and Leiden cheeses have specific tastes acquired through the regional variants like the minerals in the water, temperature and atmosphere of curing and time allowed to mature in the underground cellars where they are preserved until they are ready for sale.

When we choose to go to Amsterdam we pass through Zaanse Schans, an old village which attracts tourists with its majestic windmills unique to this place. There were more than eight hundred wind mills in their days of glory but now only a few remain on this peaceful landscape.

All this talk may sound like I am promoting tourism but they are the heart and soul of Holland, just as Pizza and Spaghetti are to Italy. We are proud of our heritage and do whatever we can to keep them undisturbed and passed on to the future generations.

Most people may think that we are a rich country and have no problems of scarcity and therefore live happily forever. This is pure illusion.

Some of my friends at school have to deal with problem parents who are alcoholics or into drugs.

The more affluent they are, the higher the chances of disharmony due to addictions and abuses. Their children often come to school depressed, sometimes even bruised and treated badly by discordant parents.

There are many single parent families too and those children long for attention and help to overcome their loneliness at home.

We DreamingTeam volunteers make ourselves available to any of these children and we provide a helping hand, a patient hearing, a hug and much needed assurance that it will all change and they will be alright.

Richness is not in the monetary wealth or possessions. Families where the elders live in harmony and help their kids with love and friendship are richer than financially wealthy families who lack cordial and warm relationships.

Sometimes we even report abuses if the children are suffering too long to find solutions. In some cases they do find solutions and compromises that enable them to protect themselves from getting emotional or psychological scars.

All this is not easy but even if we manage to help a couple of kids it makes us satisfied that we have been useful in some way. We feel good and spread the word so more of us could form their own local volunteer groups.

6 MAGNIFICENT FLAMINGOS AND ELEGANT PELICANS

MIRIAM NJOVU:

Every time I see a bus load of tourists coming to our Masai Mara village I know that my country benefits by their presence by way of tourism revenue that helps in preserving the fantastic Wild life sanctuaries which are unique to Africa.

People come from so many different countries and are fascinated by the migration of animals that keeps Masai Mara always on the Wild life map of the world.

I am Miriam Njovu, and as a girl growing up in protected Masai Mara, I am bound by the traditions of our tribal culture handed down over generations. But I am also enjoying the modern benefits of going to secondary school and preparing myself to become a student of medical science.

We Masais count our wealth by the heads of cattle in our village. The families in each region live in hutments built entirely with natural materials like wood, mud and stones.

I used to wonder how they will know their cattle when they all graze together and wander into the vast grass lands where other tribes bring their cattle too. But the herdsmen know how to identify their cattle, even if they are stolen by others in the night, which happens sometimes, when people lose their cattle due to attack by wild animals in the sanctuary or due to disease, and become desperate to own some, even by stealing.

When I go with my father to see the wild animals that come in the months of August and September from across the Tanzanian plains bordering our country, to feed on the tall grass grown here, I am amazed to find thousands of Zebras, hundreds of Giraffes, Elephants in herds with even baby elephants tucked between the legs of their mothers, Gazelles, Wildebeests, Rhinos and even Buffalos in good numbers.

No wonder so many people come to see them in their abundance, grazing in abandon, unrestricted by and unmindful of our presence as spectators.

I asked my father how they baby zebras know their mothers when all of them look the same in almost identical black and white stripes.

He laughed and asked me to show my fingers of both hands to him. When I raised my hands he took my thumb in his fingers, matched his thumb with mine and told me to look carefully at the patterns on my thumb and his thumb. I wondered why.

He then told me that each one of us had a unique pattern on our thumbs and fingers which differed in minute detail. No two persons among all the millions and billions of people in the world have identical finger patterns. That is the reason they use finger prints to identify people.

So also, the patterns on Zebras, Tigers and Leopards and Cheetahs were different from each other in minute detail. Their babies can know their

mothers and so also the parents can know their babies by their patterns and also by their unique smell.

I still could not believe my dad but he had studied at the Nairobi University and knew a lot more about Zoology and wild life than most people in our community. So I thought what he said may be true.

We girls are allowed to study at school but not permitted to go hunting animals. Also people in our community don't eat meat of other animals except beef or cattle meat, and their blood. Most of our elders don't even grow vegetables or fruits for food. They don't eat any vegetables or fruits; only cow's milk, meat and blood. This may sound weird to visitors who come to Kenya from faraway places but it is true. However we, the younger generation who go to school are allowed to eat vegetables like potatoes, onions and tomatoes, fruits like apples and oranges, eggs of chicken etc. when they provide these in lunch at school, since they want us to eat balanced food, to be healthy and strong.

Our science teacher tells us that for the body to be free of disease we need vitamins and minerals like calcium, potassium, magnesium, iron, iodine, etc and these are obtained from vegetables fruits and eggs.

Our biology teacher, Mr. Sharma is from India. He and his entire family are vegetarians.

He told us that their food consists mainly of rice, wheat, vegetables, legumes and fruits. They never ever ate meat or eggs or chicken or fish, not even snakes or frogs.

Until then I used to think that Masai peoples' food was the best – only milk, beef and cow's blood which are all available from our cattle which are plenty and we don't have to go searching for food.

Now I know that there are a lot of things I didn't know; and it was wrong to assume that only what I know is right because there is a lot more that I don't know.

We don't have TV or phone in our village and therefore our people know very little about the things happening in the outside world.

In our school we have computers and all children are allowed to use them to learn our lessons. Sometimes our teacher will show us documentaries of people in India, South Africa, Britain, America China or Japan. It is so interesting sometimes even funny to see the people from these countries doing things which are very different.

One day when I was browsing the net I came across an interesting bit of news about DreamingTeam , consisting of volunteers who help children everywhere. It is purely voluntary service which helps children to volunteer in their own neighborhoods to help other children in need. I asked to be included and they accepted me too.

Soon we were a dozen volunteers in Masai Mara. We help our teachers to cope with slow learners in elementary classes, show them ways to pick up concepts in science or math. We also share our free time to read the lessons to visually challenged kids who could copy what we read in to their note books in Braille language, for studying later.

I teach some younger kids about the computer and how to browse for any subject to know what they want to know.

Last month we did a project about Flamingos. When we went on line to find out more about their migration and nesting, we were amazed to know that more than two million Flamingos made Lake Bogoria their home and raised their young in the swamps on the shores of this lake. Being a native of Kenya I should have known more about the animals and birds of our country but sometimes we miss out on what is happening in our own neighborhood.

So we requested our teacher to take us to Lake Bogoria which was only about three hours journey from our school, by school bus. He arranged to take us next day and we started early in the morning so we could have plenty of time to watch the birds and also visit Naivasha on the way back.

Our school arranged to get a concessional entry for us as we were on a learning program.

At the Lake Bogoria sanctuary they assigned a guide who took us to the lake. As soon as we got down from the bus we witnessed an amazing sight which thrilled us all. Millions of flamingos were marching in slow motion on all sides of the lake and it looked like a magnificent pink carpet floating on the still waters of the blue lake surrounded by tall mountains. It was a treat to our eyes and we kept moving from side to side to have a clear view of the nearer birds which were preening their feathers. Some were busy dipping their curved beaks in the blue waters to catch their food. Our guide told us that the flamingos ate mostly algae in the lake which gave them the bright pink color so unique to these species. They love the geysers on the lake which provide minerals and the warmth. He said Lake Bogoria had the largest population of flamingos in the world.

Our guide informed us that sometimes these birds migrated to other lakes in Kenya, Tanzania and even other neighboring countries but always came back to Bogoria to nest and raise their offspring.

How nice it is that they don't need any visas to go to any country they choose to! Are they not more advanced than us in this respect and also in living in harmony in such large numbers without fighting for space to own the lake or land for their exclusive use as we humans do?

We learned an important lesson there.

It was almost past noon and we decided to manage some quick lunch at a restaurant and proceed to Naivasha.

Naivasha is another important place in Kenya where they grew roses in green houses.

We had taken permission to visit one of the rose farms through our school office, thanks to our teacher's efforts. Normally they don't allow visitors as they are private farms run on commercial basis and would

not like their work to be disrupted by visitors. However since we were school children learning about our country and its facilities they were glad to show us around.

The green houses where the roses are grown are so long and wide, they accommodate thirty thousand plants in each. There were rows and rows of yellow roses in one green house and lovely red blooms in another. This farm had close to three million rose plants and was exporting twenty thousand flower stems a day to Holland flower market by air. The roses are picked before they bloom and packed in bunches by grades and sizes as per the market needs. A full-fledged cold storage room holds them at specific temperatures to keep them fresh until they are transferred for export each day.

This was all like a dream to us. How many children get the chance to see roses in millions and such varieties? We were fortunate. We thanked our teacher and all the people in the rose farm before we left.

Such field trips make us learn a lot and also share our knowledge with other children. I tell other kids in our village about this lovely experience of seeing a million flamingos and also another million roses all on the same day and they say 'wow'.

We DreamingTeam volunteers dream about the children from all villages getting to know about lovely Kenya, getting to work in these farms and sanctuaries to keep them going strong for future generations of children. We hope to do our part in making these dreams in to realities.

7 MISTY MOUNTAINS AND LAUGHING FLOWERS

POORNIMA :

Driving up in the lush green mountain paths that wind their way up and up with breathtaking views from points on the way you can reach my home at the top of the hills called Darjeeling.

I am Poornima and I belong to the Gorka community who call this their home. Along the way as you came, you would have seen the name Gorkaland written at many places and junctions. We are proud about our identity as very disciplined people who respect traditions.

I am studying in the ninth grade at Vivekananda Vidyalaya School, where we always start the day with the assembly of all students and teachers including the head of our school and even the office staff and gardeners, cleaning team members and watchmen too.

Each day we recite a prayer to thank God and Nature, for blessing us with enough food, water, sunshine and the mountain air to breath.

Our school head mistress Miss Anupama will usually tell us a joke and a thought for the day before letting one of the teachers make the announcements if any, and ask one of the students to come forward and give a brief talk for one minute about something positive that she or he has experienced or read recently.

We have to register our name ahead and when there are many, then only one or two students will get a chance to speak on that day. The others have to re-register again the next day or the day after, until they get to speak.

I like to talk on the mike and hear my voice echoing loud in the entire open ground in front of our school buildings for all to hear. Sometimes if the winds are strong, it may even be carried to the mountains and be heard by the birds and trees.

So I select some good deeds to talk about, like what our medicine man told, the other day.

He said that we should not cause any harm to the trees in the mountains as they provide us vital oxygen to breathe and also keep the eco system in good balance to bring us rain water. They also provide shelter for thousands of birds living on their branches.

Our classes start after we sing the national anthem at the conclusion of the assembly.

All this takes only fifteen minutes, first thing in the morning. I don't like to be late to assembly as I find it a good way to start before we listen to our class lessons that are sometimes hard to understand.

Most of us are from the mountain regions and we need to protect ourselves from the cold winter mornings that fill the air in the entire mountain with fog and mist that doesn't clear until later when the sun makes the appearance.

Frequently it rains too and so we don't forget to carry our umbrellas apart from our sweaters and jackets, warm caps and even ear muffs on occasion.

Some of us speak Gorka language and some speak Nepali as these are the common languages of our community. But at school we learn English and Hindi too.

There are some friends of mine who speak Bengali and I understand many words in Bengali though I can't speak in their language so well.

My mother works in the Ghoom Buddhist monastery as kitchen in-charge and her job is to prepare food for all the monks and visitors who come to the Buddha Temple to pray and meditate in front of the Golden Buddha who sits with half-closed eyes which signify that we need to be involved in the world affairs, only to a limited extent, and turn our minds towards our inner being to experience peace and freedom from unnecessary wants and needs.

I don't understand most of these concepts but listen to the monks anyway, as they are senior people and know more about life and spirit than I do.

I usually go straight to the monastery after school, to be with my mother, as she works late and takes me home after cooking supper for all, which is not much, just some soup and vegetable stew but very nice in taste with salt and spices prepared expertly by my mother. It is soothing to take the hot soup in cold winter and she gives me a bowl-full as soon I reach there but not before I wash up and comb my hair very neat.

My father owns a vegetable shop in the main market and goes away early in the morning to fetch fresh vegetables from nearby farms to sell them in his shop.

I get to enjoy his company mostly on Sundays and special holidays.

On other days he comes home tired and my mother gives him hot soup. As soon as he finishes the soup he sits with me and sings a song for me and sometimes I sing with him if the song is known to me. He even tells me the story behind the song, if it is from our mythology.

He knows hundreds of nice songs and he has a good voice.

Even his friends like his singing.

One of the songs he sang for me goes like this:

“Oh, Tenzing Norgay,

Our beloved Sherpa

I salute you

You went all the way up the Himalayas

You wore thick clothes, woolen caps, mufflers and warmers,

Oh Tenzing Norgay,

Our brave Sherpa,

I wonder how you walked with such heavy shoes made of animal skin

You drank liquor made from rye and malt to keep you warm

You slept in bags and walked with back bags

Oh Tenzing Norgay,

Our friend Sherpa,

I ask you

What did you do after you reached the top?

Oh Tenzing Norgay, did you stay there?

He replied 'My dear mate, I saw God there,

When I reached the top I saw God there,

I saw the whole world below my feet,

And the whole world and me below God,

And God told me 'My child, Sherpa Norgay,

I am above all and to reach me

Just like you reached the top of the Himalayas

At mount Everest,

You don't need to climb so hard

With all these heavy clothes and boots and caps

You only have to close your eyes, take a deep breath

And you can find me inside you.

Oh! My child Norgay, I am inside you and inside all.'

I asked my father what happened after that.

He said, "The song ends there. But Norgay came down all the way back to our land. There was no way to stay at the top of Mount Everest."

I asked him, "Then why did he go all the way up there wearing such heavy clothes and boots and caps?"

He laughed and replied, "Sometimes people do such things and then realize that there was no benefit except the feeling that they have done something which no one else had done before."

He continued, "Norgay established a school of mountaineering for people to learn to climb mountains without falling and breaking their legs. That was a nice thing he did and from that time people didn't break their legs."

My father was laughing when he said this and made me laugh too.

I was thinking whether what he said was really true. But it did not matter to me. I like my father's stories and songs because he makes me sit close to him and hugs me when he tells me stories or sings for me.

Even my mother likes his stories and laughs too. We all sit together near the fire in our house, made with firewood collected from the hills, and sip hot soup made by my mother, while listening to his songs.

I feel good to be with them. They are nice to me and I love them.

There is another song which he sang many times for me, because I like it and ask him to sing again, even though I know it by heart and sing every word with him.

The song sounds very melodious in our language but when I translate it in English it will be only like a story without the melody.

It goes something like this:

“ Darjeeling, my lovely mountain abode

I love to live with you

I love the houses on the slopes

I admire the fog and mist on hill tops

And I wait to enjoy the bright sun

That appears to melt the mist

By setting it on fire

Dear Darjeeling, I like many things about you

But there is one thing I don't like

Oh Darjeeling, there is a huge palace with big gates

On your shoulder full of trees

This palace gates are always closed

And they call it Governor's Bungalow

If the governor is supposed to look after

The poor Sherpas of this Gorkaland

Why is he having such a huge palace

Just for himself?

And why is he not even living in that palace,

Keeping it locked all the time?

Darjeeling, my lovely mountain abode

Why do we need a Governor?"

My father has sung this song many times and I have a feeling that he made it up himself, when he was taking part in the Gorkaland freedom movement along with many other people. I have heard him sing this for all people and they used to clap for his song and sing with him.

I want to sing this song when the Governor comes to visit our school but I doubt whether he will come at all. He doesn't even come to his palace which is always locked but there are people who look after the palace and water the garden plants so they are always in good shape waiting for his arrival.

There are many temples in our hills and we attend many festivals and celebrations in the temples wearing colorful clothes and singing devotional songs.

People come in large numbers during the festivals to the temple offering flowers and garlands for decorating the deities.

I like festivals because I get to meet many of my uncles and aunts at that time and they bring sweets for us.

The Buddhist monasteries celebrate Buddha Poornima when all monks from different monasteries come up the hills in a procession, carrying flags of their respective monasteries. They also bring their copies of the sacred book to be blessed by the chief monks or Lamas, who accept them and bless them. They wait for their turn in long queues.

Even other people who follow the Buddhist tradition come there on this important occasion and receive the Lama's blessings.

At the end of the ceremonies every guest is offered a delicious sweet, prepared and distributed by volunteers. This is a symbolic tradition which means that just as everyone receives the same sweet without distinction or discrimination, so too the blessings of the Buddha are equal to all.

Usually I help the people who distribute the sweet as a volunteer, along with some of my class mates who are also volunteers.

We have been part of a group called DreamingTeam to volunteer to help children who are very poor or having some difficulties.

We spare our time on Sundays and other holidays to offer help in areas where there are no schools for children and they are left at home by their parents, as both have to work in order to buy food and manage the family needs.

In addition we volunteer on occasions like this on festival days, as the crowds of people need to be served and any number of volunteers is welcome to share the work.

Another festival of joy to all of us, young and old, is Deepavali. We get to wear new clothes, eat a lot of sweets and make the mountains reverberate with the loud sound of fire crackers. But this time all students in our school decided to stop buying the fire crackers as they cause a lot of pollution and scare the birds and animals too.

I have seen our neighbor's dog becoming much afraid whenever there was cracker sound and he would run and hide behind their bed. They also decided to avoid crackers from this year. Instead we decided to donate the money to build a park in our neighborhood, with a playground for children and walking path for people so they will make it a habit to go to the park to walk and have a nice chat with their friends who come there.

It is very important to have time for friends as otherwise we will not have anybody to talk to when we need to share anything.

If I don't talk to my friends even for a single day it makes me feel there was something missing in my day. There are things we feel comfortable to share with our close friends that we can't talk about with our parents or others because friends won't scold us and will support us with sympathy or joyous response depending upon what we share.

I once went with some of my friends to the Botanical Garden just for a change from my school-monastery-home-school routine. It is nice to have a break with friends as we can talk, giggle and laugh as much as we like and nobody will scold us because our teachers and parents will be too far away to hear our non-stop laughter.

The Botanical Garden is our favorite place with lots of huge trees having funny and sometimes difficult names on them. We take turns to make up some rhyme or nonsensical slogan to remember these tree names so that we can tell our teacher about the trees we know.

There is one umbrella like tree with large flowers of orange red color in clusters. Its flowers look stunning, covering the entire tree. Sometimes the tree will have no leaves at all but just flowers in all branches making it very attractive. It is called GulMohr.

There are trees with fragrant white flowers, purple-blue flowers and bright yellow flowers and we can't even remember their names. So we name them White Queen, Blue Princess and Yellow Popcorn as the yellow flowers resemble popcorns.

There is a special area where they have kept the orchids and we don't like to miss them.

Orchids are very beautiful flowers, some in deep pink, some scarlet red, some other in bright yellow with brown patches and also in so many other combinations of colors and patterns.

Orchids need special care to grow and bloom. The flowers stay fresh for more than a month in the plant. These plants don't like soil and they are grown in pots filled with chunks of charcoal or fiber without soil. They need good amount of moisture but their roots just hang out from the openings in the pots to breathe the moist air.

Fuchsias are plants that climb on walls or pillars and keep blooming the whole year. Their deep red flowers with blue purple inner petals drooping down in rows make a nice impression on anybody passing by and add beauty to the walls where they are grown.

On the other side of the garden is a large Greenhouse which is another place we wouldn't like to miss.

At the entrance to the Greenhouse are rows and rows of Antirrhinums in majestic vertical blooms of laughing flowers. I have named them laughing flowers and my friends agree unanimously with me. It is hard to move away from this magnificent display of divine laughter.

Inside the Greenhouse are galleries of pots full of cactus flowers, calendulas, asters, chrysanthemums and pericallis blooms, each one trying to outsmart the others in their silent but salient laughter.

As we leave the Greenhouse after partaking in the joy of these laughing flowers and adding our own laughter to them, we notice a large section of lilies, with Amaryllis and Tiger Lilies stealing the show. But among all these there were two strikingly impressive plants with large flowers that caught my eyes.

One was named Torch Ginger Lily. This plant had several large red flowers so lovely among the banana like leaves.

I wished I could buy these plants and take them home so I could see their laughter every day.

The other plant which had similar leaves was sporting yellow-orange flowers with a single bright blue petal at the top like a feather in the cap. They were named Bird of Paradise and the blooms did look like the head of a bird from paradise.

One may wonder how we know all these names of flowers, when we find it so difficult to remember the names of the trees. I like my friends and I remember their names. The flowers are my friends as they always laugh when they see me. Therefore I take the time to find out their names and keep repeating their names as many times as I can so they stay in my memory for ever.

DREAMING TEENS

Flowers make us happy and I feel everyone should give a place for flower plants in their house so they can look at them every day to forget their problems and be happy.

We have many nice flowering plants in our school and our school gardeners are very good at taking care of them. They won't let any of us pluck the flowers. They say that the plants have the right to keep their flowers with them as long as they want and we have no right to pluck or cut the flowers.

I started agreeing with them and even openly expressing my feeling that selling cut flowers should not be allowed as it causes pain to the plants when their flowers are cut. But nobody will listen to me.

Next time you visit Darjeeling don't forget to see the laughing flowers in our Botanical Garden.

Until then I will ask the gardeners there to keep them watered and cared for so they will bloom their best to greet you when you come.

At that time I will also show you our Pashupathinath temple or Dhirdham temple with its beautiful architecture, the Mahakal temple that is on top of the observatory hill with lovely pine woods lining the winding path all the way to the temple.

There are so many nice things to see and you need time to see them.

Bye until then.

8 CURIOUS CAFÉ AND THE SCIENCE OF FORTUNE TELLING

JESSICA:

Here is a daring and outspoken, skinny but smart young girl from London....

And that is me in a nutshell.

I don't hesitate to come out openly in support of any one who is unjustly treated and I raise my voice if it happens to be children like me.

I am Jessica, the same Jessica whom you met in chapter 14, befriending Kriki of the Ashuar tribe in Amazon forests.

My parents own and manage a funny little shop in Croydon in London. They have named it 'Curious Café'. It is a multi-function, multi-ethnic café, where one can browse books and have a cup of freshly ground and freshly brewed coffee which fills the entire area with its unmistakable aroma that even seeps through the door, outside the café, as if to invite the passersby who are too weak to resist its powerful temptation.

On the main area of the shop they have interesting curios collected from exotic places on earth and arranged in a nice display, with brief notes on their pedigree and authenticity, apart from what they mean to

the people who made them and how it will benefit those distant communities, if any one chooses to be kind enough to buy any of them.

This section is intentionally and expressly 'not-for-profit' and the proceeds from the sale of these curios go to fund community welfare programs in far off places as listed in the display, with additional information available for the sake of those who are curious enough to give some of their valuable time to find out what it was all about.

Most people are kind hearted and would gladly buy and take home a piece of art or craft, if it would benefit a tribal community or orphaned children. However, very few go the extra mile to volunteer their time once in a way to help these disadvantaged people and children.

My father travels to places where there are people in need of support. He has set up a charity for the voiceless children and I and my mom lend our support with full enthusiasm in all his activities that have this major goal, of helping those in need, as best as we could.

Our vacation last year to explore the relatively unknown rainforests of Amazon gave us the opportunity to know about the Ashuar tribal people.

I was particularly impressed with a smart Ashuar girl whom I happened to meet when her grandfather visited the Kapawi Eco-lodge where we were staying before embarking on our adventurous trek in to the jungles. Kriki knew a bit of English even more than her grandfather did, and it didn't take too long for me to become friends with her.

In the days that followed we visited their village in the heart of the Amazon rainforests, and it was an amazing experience for all of us, particularly for me, to see these youngsters trying to learn their basic skills in a single-room-school which was really a large hut with palm leaf roof and open all around.

It opened my eyes to the tremendous possibilities of how children in developed countries could come forward to help other children who are less fortunate.

It has indeed given me enough perspective to always remember not to take my numerous blessings for granted.

As a kid studying in the suburbs of London I enjoy clean school surroundings, fully functional teaching aids and well trained and dedicated teachers who try hard to engage us in the art and science of modern education. But for every student like me complaining about silly things like not being allowed to use the mobile phone at school or the math lessons being too hard to understand, there are a hundred who have no proper class rooms or toilet facilities at school and sometimes not even teachers to teach them; and a thousand who have never had a chance to see the insides of a class room or even a school for that matter.

What have these children done to deserve to be so cruelly deprived of even the basic education which is taken for granted by others like me?

I am trying to find answers to these questions but at the same time I am also doing whatever I can, with help from my parents, to reach out to any number of such children and to try and make their lives better.

So when you see a nice basket made of colorful tiny glass beads strung together, woven to shape by hand to such precision, from Kenya's tribal people or a jungle wood elephant carved out from a single log of wood from an old fallen tree of the Amazonian forests, by a skilled artisan of the Ashuar tribe, buy it if you can even if you may not need it, because you will be adding a few pounds to the charity for young children in those communities who need help.

Between the curios stacked nicely on the shelves and the coffee counter which is always busy with people asking for more of the brew, there is this book-corner, where one can find books which can't be easily seen in ordinary book stores

These are books that don't get published by the mainstream publishers who are only interested in big name writers who sell in millions and bring huge profits, who don't even bother to take a cursory look at any other works of faceless writers.

My mom is a great writer, who writes about issues that need to be addressed for the benefit of common people who are sidelined. She started a publishing house on a shoe string budget, to cater to the 'unheard voices' as she calls them.

Ordinary writers who have a passion for writing and think they have something to say and don't know how to make it heard, are welcomed by her.

She particularly goes through their work, suggests improvements to make them more readable and interesting, assigns a volunteer who can help them with the editing and rewriting as many times as needed and brings out their dream book in to printed reality.

She is careful to print only a thousand copies at a time. Such books can be found at the book-corner featuring 'Unheard Voices'.

People who come to have coffee are allowed and even encouraged to browse through these dream works and buy them if they like, without any obligation to do so.

My mom does most of her writing at a make shift desk behind these debut books, while my dad is the coffee maker cum curios seller.

That leaves me little room to maneuver a space for myself, but I don't complain since I come here only in the evenings and weekends to give them a helping hand. I love the shop and I am almost addicted to the espresso coffee that my dad specializes in.

He is a perfectionist and it is worth watching him make elaborate gestures while grinding the coffee beans, filling the freshly ground coffee powder into the espresso machine's filter chamber and pressing

it with a golden compression tool which he got made especially for his use, and waiting for the extraction of the coffee into the cup while frothing a little milk in a mug, to add to it. Once the decoction is ready he carefully adds the hot milk and some of the froth to top it all. The final step is sprinkling a tiny bit of chocolate powder in a trade mark design that imitates a smiling face, to complete the job and hand it over to the waiting customer who is spell bound all the while, fascinated by the one man show.

My dad allows people to decide whether they would prefer to enjoy their coffee as it is or sweetened to their individual taste.

Every cup of coffee he makes gets the same attention and careful treatment and I am yet to see a customer who will not have a word of appreciation for his coffee.

Someday I hope to convince him to allow me to be his assistant and master the intricate steps of coffee making, but I suspect he is too cautious to allow competition, lest he gets shunted away from his esteemed customers and their words of praise.

As I am finishing my A-Levels this year, I am planning to take a sabbatical for a year or two and travel around to these far off destinations once again, but this time all by myself, so I can spend enough time to learn the art of fortune-telling from different tribal people and gypsies.

My dream is to set shop as a fortune-teller.

You may laugh at such a decision by a modern kid in London, but that doesn't prove anything against the merits of this decision, based on my impulsive dream.

Wait until you hear me out before you make any hasty judgment.

I have met some amazingly talented tribal people who had dedicated their entire life to the art of fortune telling, and soul to soul

communication. Some of them had received their instructions and guidance from their own tribal elders who had been fortunate enough to have come in the long line of such masters from ancient times.

I have listened to many of them with the help of interpreters who knew enough English to communicate the message but not enough to qualify for A-Levels.

The amazing thing is they do possess skills of soul-to-soul communication, and psychic abilities which our science is yet to understand, much less study objectively, if only because they have still not devised tools to match.

I have seen women psychics who impressed me even more than the men, by their intuitive powers and their ability to become receptive to such extra sensory perception which seemed to come more naturally and effortlessly to them.

One of them I came across some time back, belonged to the Bemba tribe of the forest region of Zambia. Maria Mwale was a gigantic woman with pleated hair partially covered by a bright purple scarf with nice intricate patterns specific to these regions in Africa. She had expressive eyes, friendly smile and a gregarious persona.

We met her while my parents were looking for handicrafts and Zambian artifacts, made by genuine tribal people. The Friday market is usually where they sell their unique work including exquisite carvings on aged dark wood collected from the interiors of the forest, which lends itself well for such carving, without cracking or chipping.

One can get handmade necklace, ear rings and even nose rings, all made of indigenous materials. My parents selected some of these and bought them to add to their curios collection.

Maria had a stall too, but she was not selling any of these materials. She had a simple table with a red and yellow piece of cloth spread over it.

There were some cards, a black stick with copper ferrules decorating it on either end, some shiny pebbles and some smooth balls of ivory.

There was a hand-written display which said she was a world famous fortune teller and all were welcome to consult her. There was no charge and it was entirely free.

She was from a well-known lineage of Bemba fortune tellers, and the grand master from whom she took the initiation was willing to teach her everything he knew, on one condition: that she would make it free to everybody. She was however permitted to receive any gift given by satisfied people who consult her, but not as a pre-requisite for the services.

As usual my father went for it, as he is hooked on to these traditional tribal arts and my mom documents these episodes without any reservations or judgment, with an open mind so they could spot genuine talent and let the world know about it.

I didn't have any problem with it and enjoyed every bit of these interactions as most of the tribal people had some unquantifiable power and spiritual wisdom. They treated me with the same respect as they showed to my parents, at times even more than that, with friendly hugs and broad smiles exhibiting their love for all children, wherever they came from.

She took my father's hands closed her eyes and soon went into deep trance for more than a minute. Then she opened her eyes and told my father that his mission to Amazon to explore and document the rainforest Ashuar tribes was a noble idea and he was being blessed by the ancestral souls of the Amazon region.

My parents were taken aback and were completely surprised.

How could this fortune-teller, who had never met them until just a few minutes ago, know about our visit to the Amazon region that had happened several months back?

Even I was surprised.

The next thing she said was even more surprising.

She told him that he was in possession of a large green stone and it would bring him unnecessary hassles if he carried it with him. He was advised by the souls that visited her in her trance state, to dispose it off, as soon as possible.

My mother was fascinated by a lovely piece of malachite, a gem like stone of green color, which was carved like a flower vase with a spherical body shape. The polished surface of it had the natural grains like the ones we see on the cross-section of a very old tree trunk. Although malachite is expensive they decided to buy it, to help the tribal woman who seemed to be in desperate need of money. She was selling it with authentication papers and it was a genuine deal.

How could this fortune teller know about a stone which was bought from a place which was nowhere near this Friday market? It was from a different town altogether, a suburb of Kafue, and here we were, more than a thousand kilometers away at Livingstone at the southern end of Zambia, bordering Zimbabwe.

We thanked her for her patient readings and my mother gave her a beautiful shawl that she had brought with her, from London.

I tried to give her my watch as a token of my appreciation but she said there was no need, as she could tell the time even without a watch. And she did.

These are amazing people with incredible extra sensory perception and extraordinary powers of their mind that has to be seen to be believed.

It is easy to dismiss them as coincidences or witchcraft, but I have seen more than mere coincidences again and again. I believe I will be richer in many extraordinary ways if I pursued and learned these skills of tribal people.

Our trip to Zambia was one leg of a tour that included Kenya, Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

During this month long tour we also visited the Victoria Falls, after witnessing the tribal dance at Livingstone in Zambia.

Kenya and Tanzania were unforgettable experiences, where we saw millions of wild animals in migration, which we had never seen anywhere before. We also met the local and ancient tribal people at *Masai Mara* but that is a long story which needs to be told on its own.

When we returned to London we were stopped at the London Gatwick airport and although we had declared the various pieces of curios and crafts which were within the allowed limits of customs declaration without any need to pay duty or tax, we were still detained for a long time at the customs office. Later we were asked to wait for the chief of customs to meet us, but nobody told us what was wrong.

My father insisted that they had no right to detain us as we have done nothing illegal and had already declared everything on our baggage to the last bit, except our used clothes and travel gear.

At last one of the officers came out from the main office of the Chief Customs Officer, and called us in. He said our declaration on the customs clearance request form stated that the value of all items carried by us was within the allowed limits and there was no duty payable. However they found several pieces of malachite which were precious stones and they valued the globe shaped vase at over a thousand pounds, which was more than the allowed limit. We were being booked for under-declaration causing loss to the exchequer.

My parents said it was ridiculous and even showed the original certificate of authenticity which we had obtained as per Zambia's legal procedure for carrying precious stones such as malachite, which were being illegally smuggled out of that country and therefore genuine buyers were required to carry proof of purchase and duty payment at source of purchase, along with the authentication certificate.

The customs at London are a world unto themselves and wouldn't listen to any of our explanation.

After spending the best part of our day at their office and escalating our appeal to the Chief Customs officer, he finally agreed to allow us to go leaving the malachite pieces including the large globe shaped vase with the customs and claim them later after presenting our case to the Inland Revenue.

We had to abide by the law if we wanted to go home that night or we would spend our night in custody.

We chose the non-custody option and left their office.

What a messy end to an otherwise perfect holiday!

And suddenly it struck me that we had completely forgotten about what the fortune-teller lady had so accurately predicted. We did not see how that green stone could cause any problem when we had all the documentation with the purchase, including the certificate of authentication.

When I reminded my dad that we were already forewarned about the possible harassment, he looked at me with questioning eyes. I reminded him about the fortune teller and he agreed and also admitted that he didn't give it the consideration it deserved.

How could an ordinary tribal fortune-teller foresee and predict such a situation at London customs?

She was extraordinary. I saluted her in my mind.

That has given me a strong inclination to pursue this extraordinary line of tribal brilliance which our science can't validate yet because of its inability to devise suitable tools required for such scientific validation.

My parents have given me the green signal.

They have even offered me a strategic corner in their Curious Café, if I wished to set up shop and share my learning for the benefit of all.

Already I have a list of ninety nine extraordinary fortune-tellers on my hot pursuit and a handful of them have agreed to give me their valuable time. In the course of the next two years I am planning to complete my dream journey into the unknown and the unexplored and hopefully I will be the youngest fortune-teller you would ever meet.

9 DELICIOUS NUTS AND DISABLED CHILDREN

AMBIKA:

Every morning when I wake up I tell myself that I am in 'God's own country' and all the people whom I meet are God's own people. That makes me feel good all through the day even if things are not the way I want them to be.

I am Ambika, and my parents are cashew farmers. We have our own cashew plantation and a modern processing unit to go with it which was built recently. We were doing the processing of the cashew kernels manually for several years and my dad felt that it was too tiresome and slow to do it the traditional way, and with a bit of help from the Cashew research foundation he selected the latest machinery that were suitable for a small farm like ours, which were not exorbitant in cost but efficient enough for our use.

The fruits of the cashew tree are called cashew apples but they have nothing to do with apples, nor do they taste similar. Actually the nuts are the fruits of cashew tree and the stem that becomes pear shaped when the nuts become mature look like fruits and turn lovely yellow or orange red in color indicating that the nuts are ready for harvesting.

Most fruits like mangoes and pears carry the seed inside but cashew fruits carry the nuts on their head and they look very inviting when the trees are full of fruits. They have a nice mild fragrance that fills the air around the plantation and it is very pleasant to walk around cashew trees when they have abundant fruits ready to harvest.

I join my parents during the harvest season, along with the people who work in our plantation, most of whom are women and I know them all by name. They like me too from my childhood days and they call me cashew baby even now. We are like a family including all the workers who stay in our plantation, in the houses provided for them.

Extracting the cashew fruits from the trees is done by hand as they need to be carefully plucked after making sure that they are ripe enough and collected in baskets to be taken to a sorting area where the pulpy fruits are separated from the grayish, hard nuts.

The nuts are spread to dry in the sun for three days so their moisture is minimized to make the outer shells harden and are filled in bags to store them in a shed where they will be stacked on bamboo or wooden platforms so they won't be in contact with the floor just to prevent ingress of moisture from the floors. These bags are left to breathe the air and become suitable for the shelling (or deshelling to be more accurate) which is done in the processing unit.

The fruits used to be thrown in olden days as they get spoiled very fast and can't be stored for more than three or four days. They are quite tasty to eat but can't be eaten raw as they cause itching in the throat which takes a long time to subside and could be a very uncomfortable price to pay. It is indeed tempting to eat them, when we see the beautiful reddish orange color or vivid yellow color as in some hybrid varieties, but once bitten twice shy, and we know better than to eat them again, in spite of the temptation.

They are grown mainly for the nuts which are very delicious to eat either raw or roasted and many people in southern parts of India use them in

many sweet preparations like payasam or cashew burfi, apart from sweet or salty pongal which taste divine with cashew nuts roasted in pure ghee and sprinkled on them.

The fruits being so full of nutritious juice are processed separately to extract the juicy contents which are filtered and used to make cashew apple syrup, jam, vinegar, wine or even liquor which is popularly known as 'fenny' and many people like it for its sweet aroma and fine flavor although I have never tasted it so far as I am not allowed to.

My parents are particular that our cashew plantation uses organic farming methods. We never use any chemical fertilizers or chemical pesticides. But as traditional varieties do not have good yields several hybrid varieties have been introduced in our plantation thanks to the Cashew Research Centre and other research bodies who have jointly developed them and made them available for all who wanted them, for increased yields and better management of plants as some varieties were more pest resistant than others.

I have myself seen more than ten varieties in our farm, and they have nice names too, mostly popular girls-names like Amrutha, Kanaka, Dhanushri, Poornima, Akshaya, Priyanka, and Sulaba. To be fair, a couple of them have boys-names, like Damodhar which have orange-red fruits and Raghav with yellow fruits.

I know so much about cashew nuts and their cultivation, that you can call me a cashew expert and you won't be very wrong. That is because my parents have allowed me to take part in all the plantation activities apart from my school work.

Working in the cashew plantations is strenuous, especially during harvest time. The processing is dirty work that can affect the health of the people who do the job of handling the broken shells which contain an acidic oily substance which is an irritant to the skin and sticky. They use castor oil or Kerodex cream to protect their hands from the sticky cashew shell oil.

But with the advanced machines in use now the direct handling of the cashew shells is minimized and they are much better off than before.

My parents have arranged for a doctor to visit our processing plant on a regular basis to check our plantation workers and take care of them in case there is any health problem, as they feel that it is essential to ensure their good health as they are dependent on our plantation.

They have even built a school for their children and they study up to primary level completely free. I myself studied in our school before moving on to secondary level elsewhere. I like many of the teachers still, even though I have graduated from the primary level long back.

Not all children are so fortunate.

There are huge plantations owned by the government, which produce much more than all of us put together as private growers. However, these government plantations use pesticide to protect the cashews and this pesticide called Endosulphan has been causing health problems to those working there and also to villagers who live nearby because of the problem of pollution of their drinking water.

After a lot of protests, the government has at last stopped using this pesticide because of court order. But so many workers and their children have already been affected, apart from the villagers living in the neighborhood.

India is the world leader in cashew production and many states in India grow cashews and they don't use Endosulphan as it is a banned pesticide all over the world. How can our government allow it to be used at the risk of causing so much health hazard to its own people? Are people not important? Don't children count?

As a young person on the verge of becoming an adult, I have a lot of issues that need to be addressed and I joined a group called DreamingTeam whose members are children who volunteer for helping other children. We started documenting the extent of damage caused to

children in these areas to help those who have spearheaded the movement to protest about the callous attitude of the government and to initiate action against those who are responsible for such irresponsible and hazardous practices.

I went with my parents when they joined the people's protests to curb such inappropriate and harmful use of chemicals, and to condemn the passive attitude of the enforcement authorities who turn a blind eye since it is done by their own government.

It took several protests over a long period of time, to get a court order for banning Endosulphan and withdrawing it from usage totally and forever.

What about the children who have to live with the brain damage, mental retardation, nervous system damage? Can they set it right and give them their normal life back?

Who is responsible for making thousands of innocent children and ordinary unsuspecting people live their lives with much suffering?

Should they not be made accountable and put in jail much like those who have been arrested for misappropriation of tax-payer's money and facing criminal charges? Is this crime of playing with the lives of people not worse than that?

We the children of Kerala are asking these questions.

My parents have guided me and my friends who care, to take up these valid questions through RTI, the Right To Information act, which can be used to get the answers and enable people to push for legal action and punishment. We are united to take it forward until justice is done and such blatant violations don't happen again.

Any pesticide is bound to be toxic if used inappropriately or improperly.

That is the reason we are applying organic methods in our plantation and I know every bit of it as much as my parents do, because it is a matter of

health and wellbeing and every one should be concerned including children like me as we are going to be the adults of tomorrow.

Most of the people working in our plantation are provided with family accommodation in the plantation and they live in simple homes with tiled roofs, with all basic amenities like running water, electricity and toilet facilities. There is hardly anything left for them to worry about and naturally they work very hard and are loyal, putting their best efforts and team work.

I should tell you more about the harvesting and processing of these delicious nuts in a nutshell, before I share other interesting things in my life, in God's Own Country.

The cashew nuts are picked only when ripe as I have already mentioned and the nuts in shell are stored in bags before they are taken for processing to remove the shell.

The nuts are steam treated to moisten and expand the shells, and air cured to make them hard and easy to crack.

Shelling is done in machines by passing the nuts in conveyors to the large rollers in bins that guide the nuts to specific slots, which cut and splice the outer shell to reveal the inner kernel. The shells are collected separately and the cashew kernels get cleaned and processed further to ensure that their moisture is just three percent so they can be preserved, to retain their fresh taste when packed in airtight nitrogen flushed packs or containers, after they are graded.

That is the story of one of the most liked nuts in the world, in a nutshell.

Because I know the nut so well and am fully acquainted with the processing, it is almost like a part of me and has earned me the name 'NuttyKutty' among my friends. Kutty means child in Malayalam, my mother tongue.

Now about other interesting things in my life:

My plans are to study engineering and specialize in Appropriate Technology for local use. My dream is to become an inventor, and make affordable machines and gadgets useful in farms, to eliminate the difficult jobs that are mostly done by women here, so that their lives will become relatively less painful.

My parents are not against my plans or my dream, but they would like to see me take over the management of the plantation in stages as they are getting older and are not able to work as hard. Moreover I am their only child and therefore I cannot shirk my responsibility of carrying on our family business. Furthermore so many people earn their living here and we need to ensure that it is not adversely affected.

So all the points are covered by their well-thought-out response, which has been in their minds for long.

Most probably I will do what is expected of me and will not disappoint my parents who have so far looked after me so well and given me all the freedom and encouragement in letting me be a part of everything they did.

It is nice to be a part of a healthy family where the elders set an example by simple living and fair dealing with all those who work with them, including their own daughter. They always include me in the decision making process and I feel connected with a profound sense of belonging.

Every year during my school holidays in summer, my parents would somehow make themselves free from plantation work to go on a family vacation, by delegating the important jobs to be followed up during their absence, to those trained as next in command as supervisors, and we pack our bags to explore different destinations in our own sweet Kerala and sometimes even other parts of India.

Each vacation is etched in my memory as a joyful time spent with my parents, seeing exciting places including the temples which make these places popular.

My parents are very religious and we love to go to Guruvayur, a famous destination for most devout Hindus, to visit the beautiful temple of Krishna, who is known by the name Guruvayurappan here.

The devotees who come to this temple take a shower early in the morning and queue up right from four o'clock in the morning for the temple gates to open and move in an orderly manner as guided by the temple volunteers, to get their 'darshan' or face-to-face with Krishna, who is adored by millions.

On festival days it is hard to even get a place in the queue as it extends so long. But to devotees, whatever time it takes is considered worth the effort as they feel fully blessed when once they are inside, in Krishna's divine presence.

People from all over India, and even devotees from across the continents come to this temple as it is one of the ancient temples of Krishna and the only temple in his form as Guruvayurappan. I like the nice smell of sandal paste used in this temple and the fragrance of camphor burnt as an offering to the deity. I am always delighted to see the majestic temple elephant that is so well decorated and brought in to the paved precincts surrounding the main temple, in a procession every day.

Sabarimala is another equally famous and popular temple which attracts millions of devotees every year during the winter months when they observe some austerities to purify themselves before they go in groups with their offerings in a bag called 'irumudi' which contains coconuts filled with pure ghee, kept on one side of the bag and other materials required for the journey on the other side. This bag is carried on the head when they walk their way up, a trek of five kilometers from the base of the hill called Sabarimala or 'Sabari Hill' located in Pathanamthitta, a major pilgrim center for centuries.

The number of devotees coming here keeps growing every year, standing testimony to the faith of the people and the magnetic power of Ayyappan, the deity at the top of this Sabari Hill.

Ayyappan is also known as Sastha, and is a symbol of unity between different groups of Hindus called Shaivaites and Vaishnavites who have their traditions dating back to thousands of years.

Equally this temple is open to people of all faiths and all devotees customarily visit a Muslim place of worship called Vavar Mosque, and a Christian church, St. Sebastians, on the way before they proceed towards Sabarimala, on their annual pilgrimage.

Several thousand devotees come again and again year after year until they complete eighteen consecutive years to match the eighteen top steps leading to the temple. It also signifies their refinement over the years towards freedom from cravings achieved through mastery over the five senses, the eight ragas, the three gunas, and vidya and avidya adding to the eighteen steps symbolized by the eighteen steps. Crossing these through a life of austerity and purification is believed to take the devotee closer to self-realization.

If one is a devotee, everything which has been handed down by tradition makes sense, as it helps one to proceed in the path so chosen and every one is free to choose their own path. It matters very little which path we choose as long as we go steadfast in it, since the destination is same for all.

I have not come across anything which can guide me better, and I am comfortable with this philosophy and insight.

I like *Ayyappan*, who is the only God who rides a tiger as far as I know. Of course the *Kali* or *Durga*, so popular in Bengal, is seen riding a lion or tiger but she is a Goddess.

Here I have to admit that, much as I would like to visit Ayyappan temple, we haven't been to this temple as yet, as they don't allow a teenage girl or a woman in to the temple to worship *Ayyappan*, unless she is too old.

Who made this rule, I don't know. This is a tradition based on the fact that *Shasta* being a *naishtika brahmachari* (celibate for life) prefers to remain so. When all the other temples actually welcome all, whether men or women of any age, and some even have special queues to let women have comfortable darshan without having to stand in cramped space in long queues with hefty men, here is a temple which stops us from entering the precincts and worshipping *Ayyappan*. However, I do respect the tradition knowing fully well that there are thousands of temples where they allow all and also there are many temples where they allow only women and men are not allowed to enter. We have always been visiting the temples together as a family and my father won't go to a temple where he has to go alone, leaving us behind.

We have a nice picture of Ayyappan in our home in the Pooja or Prayer Room, where we do our prayers every morning together as a family, before we go about our work each day.

Goddess *Bagavathi* is worshipped as Mother Goddess, in *Kadammanitta Devi Temple* which attracts a lot of devotees too, apart from visitors who come to see the temple architecture as part of their tour.

There are many other temples like the *Padmanabha Swami Temple* in *Thiruvanantha Puram* which we plan to visit in the years to come.

We have also been to other places of interest like the Munnar with its enchanting hills and tea estates, the *Cheeyappara* water falls and the sandy beaches of Kovalam.

The house boats in the back waters at *Alapuzha* are a lovely sight and staying in one of them for a night and experiencing the slow cruise which takes us along the rows and rows of coconut palms that line the coast, is pure bliss.

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The Snake Boat Festival in Pampa at *Aranmula Uthrittathi* is an unforgettable experience, with so many seasoned Snake-Boat navigators competing to win the race which sometimes results in a photo finish, rowing neck to neck, and singing the famous boat song in Malayalam, the ancient language of Kerala.

It is a joy to be part of such festivals that bring people together.

Especially for children like me, it is an occasion to get quality time with parents.

The Pooram festival at Thrissur was another grand and memorable event where we witnessed the majestic elephants with royal decorations and large umbrellas that provide a unique setting to rich traditions.

We are yet to see the Thekkady Wild Life Sanctuary and many other nice places in our 'God's own country', but there is no hurry, as there is plenty of time in the years to come.

And then, when all these places are exhausted we will extend our reach to other places all over my country and perhaps even beyond.

Dreams are what life is made of.

As a young member of the DreamingTeam, among millions of other dreamers, there is no shortage of exciting possibilities to fill my dreams. And in this process I encourage my friends too, in to the art and science of dreaming.

For those who want to know how, I will share the know-how when we meet again.

10 BUBBLE TEA AND A BREAK IN THE MOUNTAINS

TANG MEI LI:

Have you ever visited the Sun Moon Lake Mountain or taken a walk on the Taroko Mountain Trails?

Have you at least seen the Dragon Boat Festival?

If you haven't, then I invite you to my country Taiwan, with a lot of nice little surprises.

I am Tang Mei Li and already I can greet you in three languages.

My mother tongue is Min Nan Chinese commonly known as Taiwanese, the medium of instruction in my school is Mandarin and I can also speak English as a tenth grader in Hsinchu province in Taiwan.

After graduation from high school I am keen to go and work as a volunteer for UNICEF, which is doing a lot of good work for the children in our country. Eventually I would like to initiate formation of a help and care center for the children, particularly girl children, who live in harsh conditions in the mountains with very little access to mainstream education.

My country as most people know, is one of the world's top producers of computer products and electronic gadgets, and has huge factories and electronic parks that pump billions of dollars' worth of various things, some of which people don't even need but buy anyway since their friends have them and they don't like to be left behind or look bad in the eyes of others.

Even within our country we have a lot of people who buy them and fill their homes and afterwards find that there is not enough room for all the stuff. Their living space gets severely restricted and they have to go for larger apartments.

But our electronic gadgets like personal computers, laptops, tablets, palmtops, finger-tops, cameras, handy cams, DVD players and viewers, a million models and designs of mobile phones and different sizes and shapes of rechargeable batteries to go with them – an endless array of products, the names of some of which I don't even know – are mostly produced for export to different countries to satisfy the ever growing hunger for such products and their upgrades.

But on the other hand, we have people who are not so fortunate to be employed in Hsinchu Science Parks or Hi-Tec companies. They live in poverty and unemployment, uncared for and left to fend for themselves and find some way to manage a meal for their children and themselves.

Thankfully there are some philanthropic organizations and service groups who provide relief but they are few and are able to reach only a small percentage of those in need.

I have read about the good work done by UNICEF volunteers to help children to get the basic education, nutrition and healthcare and that has inspired me to offer myself as a volunteer.

My mother belongs to Mahayana Buddhist tradition and worships Buddha. As a follower of Buddha's teachings of non-violence and the eight fold path to liberation from the miseries in human life, she lives a simple

life, tries to help others and avoids accumulating anything beyond our needs.

We are vegetarians, as we Buddhists don't like to harm any animals. Eating the flesh of animals is not considered proper or necessary for a healthy life. We believe that fruits vegetables, rice etc., can provide all that we need to keep our body in good shape.

My mother is working in the Hi-Tec Park as a supervisor of assembly lines that prepare mother-boards for notebook computers. That is how I knew so much about the hi-tech gadgets I was talking to you about, a while ago.

But even otherwise I would have known quite a bit, as a high school student with a lot of friends and access to latest information through our school computers that have unlimited Wi-Fi to surf the net on line and fill our little brains to the brink.

I don't want to work in an assembly line or keep doing the same job over and over again every day. My mother doesn't mind it as it pays her well to afford a decent apartment for a single parent family and also cover my tuition in a private school that costs a lot.

I understand the hard work she does and so many others do, to keep themselves well off, which is the most important single consideration in everybody's mind and rightly so.

My father was working as a medical representative and had to travel a lot as required by his job. I have barely seen him a couple of times a week or on the weekends, in my childhood.

Suddenly one day he met with an accident while travelling in a bus, which left many people dead and my father was one of them.

The government gave some compensation to the families of people who lost their dear ones in that accident and my mother was shocked for days but she managed to recover from the tragic loss as time passed. She

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worked hard at her job and became a supervisor because of her dedication and ability to take responsibility.

She takes good care of me and we get along very well.

I try to help my mom at home and never pretend to be busy with school work or study. My mother treats me more like a friend, and shares everything with me.

I feel free to talk about my school friends and even boyfriends and she lets me handle them the way I know best. The only instruction she gives me is to be careful and never allow anyone to take advantage or exploit. I am of course mature enough to value her words, as they are meant to protect me and not to admonish me.

When I told her about my intention to take up volunteering work with UNICEF after completing school next year, she told me that she did not know anything about UNICEF and their work. I explained to her about their various programs to benefit children.

I was already in a group called DreamingTeam through which I was volunteering along with my friends and my mother knew what we were doing and had approved it.

She asked me whether UNICEF was similar.

I told her that our volunteering was to help other children, who had learning disabilities or financial constraints, but UNICEF was an international body doing much larger projects and it would give me an opportunity to learn different skills.

She told me that it was ok and she would support me but I should also simultaneously think about what I would do to be financially independent to continue with such work.

I am smart enough to read between the lines.

I understood her concern about how I would earn a living if I do only volunteering. I can't expect her to financially support me forever.

I told her that my dream was to become a writer and work as a journalist with some news or media group. This would enable me to highlight the need for supporting the volunteers working to help children and in turn cover a segment in news reporting that is vital to our country's resource building.

I would volunteer with UNICEF for a year or two and pursue my dream at the same time by enrolling for Journalism Studies after my school graduation.

She was much relieved to hear my explanation of my career intentions and she told me to go ahead.

Over the next few days she collected a lot of information about journalism courses, recommendations from her friends and my uncles and my aunts and virtually I was flooded with more information than I could handle as a school girl. But I felt good that my mother was with me in this, providing all possible support and even so much publicity in her circle of friends and relatives that my journalism dream had no other option than to become a reality.

What a shrewd mother I have!

I am proud of her and thank God for giving me such a wonderful and understanding mother. She could have easily told me that journalism was not a lucrative career and most journalists struggle to stand on their feet even after several years in their field. She could have pushed me to pursue engineering, electronics, computer design or any number of fields well known to her as a direct result of her line of work and her own educational background. She could have vetoed my dream by a flat 'No'.

She didn't.

She knew better than that and won my admiration and my vote for her nomination to 'The BEST MOM in my world' award.

Jokes apart, it was going to be hard work to manage both and I trust my instincts to reassure myself that I had what it takes to do justice to pursue both.

She bought me a compact handy-cam camera for my birthday and said that it would help me to document my volunteer work, show what the children needed and help me prepare photo-essays that would launch me into journalism.

Just a handy-cam and it had so much potential possibilities.

Things were indeed going smooth and in the right direction. I started using my handy cam to record our work as part of DreamingTeam activities and my friends were delighted. Though we didn't want to publicize our volunteering work, it seemed alright to record it as it could come in handy for reviewing and improving our work and to make it reach out better.

As a result of this simple step I became more proficient in presentation skills, editing and use of applications that made my work more appealing, all the time reminding myself that it should only be an aid to better working as a volunteer and should not become an obsession, over riding my basic purpose.

With the end of that semester I graduated from school and had a couple of months on my hands before embarking on the Diploma in Journalism program that I had already enrolled for. I also had the luck in my favor with the acceptance of my application for UNICEF volunteer program, committed to begin in two months' time.

My mom had not taken a vacation for a long time and she suggested that we go to Taroko mountain region for a break, before I started with my new phase of study and work which would keep me busy from then on.

Next week we were off to Taroko.

During the journey by train we enjoyed bubble tea, also called 'Pearl Milk Tea'. It gets its name from the tiny balls of tapioca that are added to the tea along with a little milk. It tastes nice, with some short eats called 'dimsum' to go with it.

We can get vegetarian food in most places in our country as there are many Buddhists who are pure vegetarians. There are quite a few 'serve-yourself' restaurants where we could have quick vegetarian lunch.

The entire journey across the mountain is filled with beautiful scenic views and the Taroko Gorge that divides the mountains lends itself nicely to the majesty of the tall mountains.

My mother told me that there are many tribes living in these Taroko Mountains and they still retain bits of their unique culture and tradition over the years of invasion by the Dutch, Japanese and the Chinese armies in succession before independence in the fifties.

Many tourists come to visit the Taroko National Park or to enjoy treks through the mountain trails called 'shakadang'.

The village resorts on the way gave us an opportunity to meet some of the Taroko tribal people who are among the many tribes living in these mountains. They made very nice trinkets in marble which is abundant in these mountains and my mother bought me one, to remember this visit and to make friends with the tribal people.

On the way up the mountain trail are a couple of shrines.

The eternal spring shrine is a Chinese style temple with a steady stream from the mountain providing a nice back drop to it.

On the top is the 'Mountain Top Shrine' from where we enjoyed a magnificent view which can't be easily captured by a camera.

The 'jiucyodong' trail that we took, passed through a tunnel called 'the nine bend tunnel' and is unique to these Taroko Mountains.

The mountains rejuvenate us and we felt a lot of energy. It is hard to leave such a peaceful setting and go back to city life but everyone is not destined to live like the tribal people.

In the final analysis I tell myself that mountains are needed for a break from our busy life but the cities provide a lot of other benefits which far outweigh it in comparison.

We came across another group of Taroko tribal people, in one of the villages on the way back. They were in their traditional costumes and colorful designs tattooed on their faces. We were told that it was celebration time and they were celebrating their Harvest Festival singing and dancing to their traditional tunes.

They invited us to join in and we didn't want to miss the opportunity to be part of something so unique, which we had only heard of but never had the occasion to witness.

Starting from a slow rhythm they sang a tribal song and even children joined in their chorus. Taroko women dressed in bright colorful robes started to lead the dance and others joined in one by one to form a large circle which could include visitors like us too. We were the only two women wearing different formal city clothing. One of the young girls dashed in to her house and brought a couple of colorful robes and handed them to us. We wore them on top of our dress and as if by magic we became one among them.

The music entered a faster rhythm and some fat men who were hesitant to join the dance were pulled in by their mates and it was a free for all, a merry go round of sorts, everybody giggling, the children clapping their hands to the music of melodious voices and the tribal drum beats.

At the peak of it , the music suddenly stopped and all of them froze in their respective dance postures, some with frozen smiles, raised legs,

hands on top of their heads and other funny positions not easy to describe.

The music resumed again in a few seconds at a slower rhythm. The dancers came down from their frozen positions and resumed their dance, moving in a circle to the rhythm.

After a couple of rounds they all clapped their hands in appreciation for the music makers and assembled for the main event – the thanks giving.

They thanked the Gods for the bountiful harvest. They traditionally raised millet crop which was offered on this occasion.

The feast that followed was a grand all family affair but we excused ourselves from their feast as we were vegetarians. They were kind enough to offer us a millet pudding with bananas and it was quite tasty especially after all that vigorous dancing and singing.

We bought the two robes offered to us during the dance as mementos.

I managed to capture the harvest festival and their dance on my handy cam, which I showed to my mom on our way back to our tourist lodge.

All good things have to come to an end and our nice trip was no exception.

There are many unique festivals in our country.

The Dragon Boat festival is famous for its boat race that attracts many Taiwanese and a lot of tourists too.

The Lantern festival is another lively one, when we light lanterns and hang them in homes, shops and even parks and streets and celebrate the bright moon, with moon cakes.

I am sharing all these because they are the real Taiwan.

We find many Japanese and Indian tourists who come to enjoy our hospitality and culture.

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Our culture still retains its original flavor and rich traditions, even after suffering several onslaughts of foreign invasions, much like India, which has also braved the invasions over hundreds of years and has retained its unique culture and identity.

We, who follow Buddhist tradition, have a lot of respect for India because Buddha was born there, and Buddhism originated there.

We wish to visit Buddha's birth place one day.

When we see the Indian tourists visiting our country, we reinforce our wish and think of our visit to India sometime soon.

It amazes me that people from all over the world come here and we want to go to another country, when we have not even seen it all here.

I hope to find answers to such unanswerable questions as I grow up.

11 HYDRANGEAS, JASMINES AND OPTIMISTIC DREAMS

GOWRI:

Tilakwadi in Belgaum in South India is home to the majestic Mahadev Mandir, a Shiva temple made of marble and granite. This temple is also called Military Mandir, as it was built for the military personnel in the Maratha Light Infantry Regiment which was stationed in Belgaum and is still maintained by them.

I am Gowri and my father is the head priest at this modern place of worship for thousands of people living in this peaceful and pollution-free neighborhood.

This serene temple has a well maintained garden that keeps the premises cool and pleasant. The pink and purple-blue hydrangeas, the fragrant jasmines and deep red hibiscus blooms greet you when you enter the outer yard of the temple and at the rear there is an area where flowers are grown specially for making garlands for the deities in the temple. Many devotees volunteer for this work as a service to the temple. Sometimes when I am free from my schoolwork I also join them in making the garlands with marigolds, roses, jasmines, champak flowers and the fragrant leaves of Tulsi plant which is grown in every temple as it is considered a divine plant. Many families grow *Tulsi* plant at home in

specially designed pots that can offer good space for its roots. The leaves are edible and my mother chews a few each morning after offering them in her prayer in the Pooja room at home.

There are huge trees on all sides of the temple, some of which may be even hundred years old or even older than the temple itself. The *neem* tree, mango, *jamun* and *bel* trees are all so tall that they look like umbrellas to the temple.

All around the compound wall are *ixora* and hibiscus plants along with frangipani trees, also called *plumeria*, which have a profusion of mildly fragrant yellow, orange and red flowers, almost throughout the year. Just on the right side of the spacious entrance to the temple is the *Nagalinga* tree. The flowers from this tall tree are so intricately formed they are considered divine flowers and offered in worship to Shiva, the presiding deity at this temple. Each Nagalinga flower is formed with a circular base with a vertical cylindrical center resembling the Shiva Lingam, and this structure is surrounded by a curved umbrella of a hundred tiny heads that resemble a 'Naga' or cobra, with many heads. This entire marvel is housed in petals which are pink inside and yellow outside, formed like a lotus flower fully opened in the sun. These flowers are so fragrant that just a couple of them can fill an entire home with that divine scent. We can spot a Nagalinga tree from far just by its fragrance.

I love the fragrance of this flower more than jasmines and roses. Our home is adjacent to the temple and there are many families living near the temple who consider it a blessing that they can provide whatever service they are required to offer to this temple for daily upkeep, *pooja*, cleaning and offering special sweet preparations like *Kunda* which is a specialty exclusive to Belgaum. These sweets are distributed to all devotees who come to the temple.

On festival days like *Nav Rathri*, *Deepavali*, *Shankranthi* and *Shiv Rathri* special *poojas* are performed and the entire hall of the temple will be jam packed with people who come with their families and the children enjoy every bit of the fun.

I know so much about this temple because of what I learned from my parents who are very religious and have taught me many prayer songs which we sing at home as well as at the temple in the evenings when they have the arthi.

My school is run by the *Chinmaya* Mission, where we learn *Sanskrit* as part of the curriculum which enables us to understand the meaning of many of our sacred texts called Vedas and Upanishads apart from the famous Bagavad Gita and Ramayana, dating back to thousands of years.

I have many friends at school who speak different languages at home. Some speak Kannada, others speak Marathi and my mother tongue is Konkani. So to make it easy for all of us to learn together and for the teachers to teach different subjects, the medium of instruction is English, right from our Kindergarten stage.

We also learn music and dance at school, and when we finish primary level we get to use the computers. I have learned many things on the computer. Our computer teacher is an expert in animations and graphics too. It is fascinating to watch him create divine pictures of Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth, Saraswathi, the Goddess of knowledge and *Ganesha*, the remover of obstacles. He makes them smile at us and adds animated flowers falling from above on these divine incarnations as offerings. There are even lamps in his animation like in real temples.

He loves to teach us these applications with which we make small projects as teams of four or five students, who are most compatible with each other. At the end of each term we have a competition where our projects are presented by us to judges and the best three get prizes.

One of my classmates, Divya, who is in this project team with me, helps me to grasp the techniques which are too difficult for me. She has a computer at home which her parents allow her to use and so she gets to learn everything faster than most of us. She is very friendly and generous. She never minds if I go with her to her home and do the homework and projectwork together with her, which is more fun than working all alone.

She is the one who told me about DreamingTeam, a volunteers group where children from many parts of the world join in as members and form local teams to help each other in their neighborhood. She is a member too and in her spare time on Sundays and holidays she makes it a point to go with her parents to an orphanage in *Kanapur*, not far from where we live. They help the children there, some of whom are physically challenged, some visually impaired or hard of hearing, some afflicted with autism but almost all of them longing for someone to come and treat them with love and affection.

She and her parents help by reading for those who have lost their sight so they could take down their lessons in Braille which they are taught in the orphanage class rooms.

Children who are hearing impaired can communicate by sign language taught there and some of them enroll for practical courses like operating a computer or designing textile products. They even have weaving and sewing machines.

Divya teaches designing on the computer to some of these children on weekends when she goes there.

This facility is run by Ramakrishna Mission and many orphaned children have their second parents here through the swamis who have taken up this noble service to society.

When Divya asked me whether I was interested in joining DreamingTeam, I gladly said yes even without consulting my parents because I knew they will not object to my doing service to people in need of help. It has been a rewarding experience for me to be a volunteer and learn to care for others, especially children like me but in unfortunate situations.

A few days back I saw two young kids accompanying a fruit vendor selling fruits, flowers and coconuts to passersby in front of a temple near our school.

They were left to look after the shop when their mother went away to collect materials for her shop. They were younger than me and I asked them whether they go to school. They said they stopped going to school because their father left them and their mother could not send them to school any more. So they worked with her selling the fruits and making garlands out of flowers that she brought each day. As I was talking to them their mother came back and I asked her whether she would send the children to school. She said she earned very little even to buy food and pay rent for her hut and there was no way to pay for their schooling. She did not like to send them to the Government school called Corporation school as it was without teachers and even when they managed to have some teachers in the past they were treating children very badly, beating them for small mistakes and making them stand in the hot sun if they were late to class.

This was not good for her children and so she stopped sending them there after her husband deserted them a year back.

I was very moved by their plight. After consulting my classmate who was with me, we decided to go and ask our principal at school, whether they can admit these children free of tuition fee.

Next day we met our Swamiji. He is a very kind person, always willing to listen to any of us studying in the Chinmaya Vidyalaya School, if we wanted to speak to him about anything at all. No restrictions and no barriers was his policy, to be accessible to all. We told him about the two kids of the fruit vendor and he told us to ask the lady to bring the children the next day afternoon to his office and he will see what he can do.

Usually when he says he will see what he can do, it means he will do his best to solve the problem or take appropriate steps as needed. We knew it was going to work out.

The two children are now in our school.

Last month some of us, the DreamingTeam members, wanted to plant a thousand trees in and around our school, as well as in the park, temple

and other public places near our school to make our area green, cool and pleasant.

When we approached him for his support, he liked our idea and spoke to the horticultural department in Belgaum, to get suitable saplings like Mango, Tamarind, Neem and flowering trees like Parijathak, Nagalinga, GulMohr and Champak.

We planted these saplings all on a single day, going to different areas in small groups of three or four members and even some of our teachers came with the Swamiji himself to help us get permission at various places in order to make it smooth without any objections from people who were in charge. The whole project went off well and now it was only a matter of time before these saplings became trees in their own right.

Although people were enthusiastic and agreed to look after the plants until they became strong enough to survive on their own, we did visit each plant every week end, to water them and ensure their survival.

This is something I learned from the DreamingTeam volunteers – that whatever we do, we need to follow up too, until we are satisfied that everything was going to be ok.

Our wish and dream is that every child who can afford to help others as a volunteer should do whatever possible to make things better for at least ten children in their neighborhood and continue with the work even further if possible, as they would have acquired enough skills to do so by that time, to face hurdles in that process and to find ways of overcoming them until they met with success.

Further each child can also plant ten trees before they finish school and even more, if they are so inclined, later.

These are simple things and not difficult to do if we set our mind to do it.

When millions of children join this movement as part of DreamingTeam to help other children in need, to improve the environment and to make their world a better place, it results in wellbeing for all and we feel good that we are part of a positive change.

12 SEVEN THOUSAND ISLANDS AND SEVEN MILLION DREAMS

JENNIFER:

The fun loving and hardworking people of my country, Philippines, have a long history of culture, customs and traditions from the original Polynesian to the three centuries of Spanish Mexican influence and the American influence of the last millennium's closing years before our independence.

I am Jennifer from Bantayan Island, Cebu region and I had to drop out of school finals, since my parents were extremely poor and had exhausted all their resources to educate me even up to that stage. I had to go to work so I could augment the family income and help them cope with the situation.

I was almost at A levels before leaving and therefore had a good command of English and an excellent training from our music and drama teacher. I could sing and speak dialogues from Shakespeare's Othello, As You Like It, Macbeth and Romeo and Juliet, all of which we enacted at our school auditorium as part of school productions in each term.

Thus even though I was not at the top of the class in academic subjects, I excelled in drama and acting, and my teacher told me that I had a natural flair for acting and surely reach Hollywood someday.

She was not joking or pulling my leg. She was a great teacher who was always positive and optimistic. She encouraged all of us to do our best in whatever field we chose.

Her excellent coaching in reeling off dialogues and playing different roles did not land me into acting but I found a job which made me feel good.

I took the job of a freelance tour guide to foreign tourists coming to Philippines and within a short time I became a popular tour guide, and my theater skills and fluent English gave me a big hand.

Philippines is an archipelago of more than seven thousand tropical islands many of them rich in natural beauty, sandy beaches, coral life, palms and towering hills.

Guided tours need a good amount of professional skill to manage groups of people from diverse interests, different age groups and cultural backgrounds. Initially I was nervous as I myself did not know much about my own country and its special features, heritage sites etc. I spent many days in the local library, trying to soak up all I could, so I would have enough authentic information to share with tourists.

I thank all those people who wrote books about Philippines and also the kind hearted on-line sites on the web where I could browse and fill my brain with a cocktail of history, culture, do's and don'ts.

Is it possible to know everything about seven thousand one hundred and seven islands, their varied cultures and traditions?

It is not possible.... not for me.

But it is not necessary to know everything.

If I knew more than what the tourists knew, that was good enough to start with and I could build it up from there. That was exactly what I did.

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By nature we Filipinas and Filipinos (women and men) are extremely hard working, tolerant of hardships and respectful to all. There may be exceptions as with the people of any country and culture but by and large we have it in our blood, handed down from generations of great grandparents.

It is therefore not surprising that tourists feel more comfortable visiting Philippines and also keep coming thereafter, to enjoy our hospitality at affordable cost.

This may sound like bragging but as a young ambassador of my country I have the responsibility to project a true image of what one could expect.

Batangas with the lovely beaches and diving facilities is just a few hours from Manila, the capital of our country.

Each group of islands has unique features that appeal to people.

Taal Lake and the Taal Volcano which is a water-filled crater at the center of the lake and the Taal town with Spanish colonial culture and traditions is a popular destination too.

Baguio islands, with foggy hills and breathtaking views has colorful flowers to attract many visitors.

The island of Cebu stretching to more than two hundred kilometers and a hundred odd small islands surrounding it, has rolling hills, golf courses and casinos.

High class hotels seem to be the preferred choice to some of the visitors who are not so keen to explore the unending list of islands, in this vast country surrounded by oceans.

If the visitors arrive at a time when we have any of our festivals, it provides added fun and excitement.

The grand float parade festival, called 'Basguio Panabenga' features flower covered boats and marching bands and one should be lucky to visit during this festival and partake in the celebrations.

The dragon dance festival in Manila China Town will bring everyone on to the streets and the traffic will come to a standstill to witness this great and unique tradition.

Datolutan Tattoo festival is another popular one, liked by young people who like to sport tattoos on their bodies and show off.

Sagada town celebrates festival of lights on All Saints Day and it is an event worth watching.

I often use humor in my interaction with young groups from different countries and it helps me to strike a chord instantly and make my job easier and enjoyable to me as well as those who get guided by me.

As a student I had the luck to be associated with a lively group of young Filipinas in our music and theatre section. They called themselves DreamingTeam and they had the common goal of volunteering to help children in extremely difficult circumstances apart from helping any one in need. When I heard that so many children in our school and in our neighborhood had to put up with harsh living conditions, unable to make sense of their poverty and cramped living, sometimes even unable to attend school because of parental conflicts or orphaned status, I made up my mind to join this group and offer help as a volunteer.

Working as a tourist guide has given a tremendous boost to my self confidence levels.

I plan to go back to school to do part time study and complete my school finals, so that I would become eligible to enroll for the Travel and Tourism Diploma and move on to professional work. My parents need all the financial support I can provide, so my younger siblings can be taken care of until they can manage on their own.

Although I have a boyfriend who loves me, I don't want to rush in to married relationship as it can affect my support to my parents. I would rather remain single for the sake of supporting my parents who have always been good to me.

There is of course a small hitch in my job. As a tourist guide I am required to be away from home for several days at a stretch, when I accompany a group on a long journey.

However this is not so bad, considering the fact that there are thousands of Filipinos working away from home and all of them have one thing in common – sending money to their parents at home.

And the added advantage to me is that I get to see my own country's paradise locations free of cost, expanding my perspective and improving my skills as a bonus.

Almost every Sunday when I am back home, I devote a major part of my day to meet with the poor children in my town and also visit the orphanage nearby, to offer assistance in teaching them whatever I could.

Sometimes I carry my portable DVD viewer which I bought recently from the tips that I got as a guide, and show these children clips of mountains, beaches, birds and animals in Philippines. They love to watch these and when they smile and laugh I feel joyous too.

How nice it will be if I could take them all on a guided tour with me ! I tell myself that someday I will remember to do that, to add some life to their lives.

My boyfriend Joshua agrees. When I shared this dream of mine with him, he told me that as a young kid he was in a similar situation as these orphaned children, and used to wonder what it would be like to be rich and to travel by his own a car and see places.

He was adopted by a kind lady who had lost her only son during the war and wanted to take care of all the children who were orphaned and compensate for her loss.

She visits the orphanage regularly and provides food and clothes, study materials etc, to all the children there. She sits with them and listens to their dreams, sponsors those who are old enough and ready to enroll for vocational training like Electricians course, TV repair, Plumbing and Tiling which are easy to learn within a year and do not require a high level of academic background. So many from our neighborhood orphanage have secured jobs through her generosity and are so grateful to her and the orphanage, that they donate a part of their earnings to the orphanage in order to sponsor more such children in need.

Joshua was one such kid adopted by her and he adores her.

This is one of the reasons I like Joshua. He is so open and never feels embarrassed to admit that he was an orphan. Of course he longs for the human touch and family relationships that are taken for granted by most children, who have never experienced such hardships in their life. But he is not one who would keep brooding or expect sympathy for his lot in life. He remains cheerful most of the time, especially when I am with him. He will invent some pranks or jokes that will invariably make me chuckle and I feel comfortable and blessed in his company.

He once told me that he has many dreams and one of them is to become a scientist and find a cure for HIV which has been the most prevalent cause of devastation in our community subjecting people to unprecedented levels of pain and misery.

With his strong will and undaunted optimism, nothing can stop him from realizing his dream and whenever possible, as a DreamingTeam volunteer, I will do whatever I can to keep his dream alive until it becomes a reality.

We the young generation of Philippines will find our own ways to make our life and our dreams more meaningful as we face each day, one step at a time and take others along with us on this journey.

13 TENDER COCONUTS with SWEET JAGGERY

SHANTHA:

Neelankarai, in the outskirts of Chennai, in Southern India, is a breezy coastal village on the East Coast Road that leads to Mahabalipuram, the famous heritage site that attracts tens of thousands of tourists from all over the world, every year.

My name is Shantha and I study at Suddhananda Senior Secondary School at Samvit Sagar in Uthandi, which is just a stone's throw from our village.

My school has taught me a lot of things that my parents and even people in my village don't know.

My mother Shakthi is a tender coconut seller and also cooks food for people who work in construction sites around our village. My father Perumal is a coconut farmer and brings several bunches of tender coconuts from the farm which has more than a hundred trees. He looks after all of them every day and loads the green bunches of tender coconuts harvested each day on his bike and unloads them at our shop on the highway, in front of our village.

My mom sets them nicely hanging from bamboo supports so any one passing by will definitely not miss the temptation of stopping there for a

quick drink to quench their thirst. This shop also doubles as her kitchen behind the counter where she cooks lovely white rice, tasty sambar and spicy curry for people who come to work in new constructions along this road.

Many tourists stop by to buy her tender coconuts to drink the sweet coconut water so pure and fresh. There could be nothing better to quench their thirst after driving along the highway in hot summer. She can sell about three hundred to four hundred coconuts every day in season and to make her burden a bit less I help my mother after school and on holidays.

She has a knack of chopping off the top and sides of the coconut with a sickle that is designed especially for coconut cutting. With five or six chops she deftly exposes the inner shell of the coconut and with another sharp cut she makes an opening, inserts a colorful plastic straw and hands it to waiting tourists one after another.

They love the sweet and cool coconut water which is so soothing to their throat turned dry by long the drive in hot sun.

Some of them hand her back the empty coconut after drinking all the juice and wait for her to cut it in two halves. She cuts it so nicely in one sharp move of the sickle and even makes a spoon from the outer layer, which can be used to scoop the tender inner layer of coconut and eat it in chewable bits by slicing it with the same ingeniously designed coconut spoon. The tender kernel is so delicious that sometimes they ask for more from another coconut.

Once they finish eating they throw the shells at the back of the shop, where they will dry in the sun and become fuel for her stove that she uses for cooking food.

I love the taste of my mother's sambar. She makes it with different vegetables each day and serves it with rice.

A plateful of hot rice with sambar poured over it and a generous spread of vegetable curry to go with it, is so delicious, unless you taste it you can't know what I am talking about.

Everyone loves her food and some of them even come from faraway places, just because they like her food better than what they get in other roadside restaurants.

She will always make sure that I get my share, even if it is a busy day with many to serve. I am her only daughter and she loves me more than anybody, just as I love her so.

My father also likes to come and have lunch at home even if he gets late working at the farm.

Some days when it rains, the coconut business is dull and we make up for it by talking. I tell my mother about what I learn at school. She tells me nice stories about her childhood days and how she married my father ... selecting only him, from among so many eligible men in her village who had an eye on her because she was beautiful. She gets shy when she tells me this part and I tease her too to get more fun out of her. My father was the only one who did not smoke or drink at the toddy shop where people went after work to get drunk. That was the clinching point in his favor and to this day he is free of these habits which drain the energy from many young people in our village.

He gives a helping hand to my mother at the shop, organizing things for her, bringing water for cleaning, and repairing the benches when they become shaky.

My school starts early in the morning and I go walking with my friends as it is just a few minutes' walk from our place. We reach just in time for the assembly and common prayers and then move on to our class rooms in different buildings arranged in such a way that there were always some trees around each building to offer shade and nice green view.

My teachers love this set up and they help us when we don't understand things that are complicated like Math and Science topics. Sometimes even my classmates help me with the lessons and homework. I have many friends at school apart from those who come with me from our village. We wait for the lunch break to gather in groups outside the class rooms under the trees and eat our lunch together. We usually share the food we bring from home in our lunch boxes.

Many of my friends bring curd rice with mango pickles or lemon pickles but some bring idlis which get finished in no time as everybody likes idlis.

Once my mother gave me my lunch box filled with tender coconut pieces with sweet jaggery, as there was no rice. It was so delicious that all my friends liked the taste and I was left with only one bit but even that was enough for me as I was already happy that my friends liked what my mother had given me that day.

Tender coconut with sweet Jaggery became the most preferred item in our group lunch and I ended up carrying a larger lunch box several days a week. My mother did not mind it. She said tender coconut was very good for health and so also was the Jaggery which is made from sugarcane juice that is heated in large pans until it became almost solid, at which stage it is transferred to moulds to cool. This Jaggery is stored in jars and a small piece of Jaggery placed on top of bite size fresh tender coconut kernel makes the mouth water, for more and more of it.

My father wants me to do well at school and go to the university college to learn computer engineering. In our village there is no one who has gone to college.

He wants me to be the first girl to bring a computer to our village so other children can learn too.

I am already doing well at the computer classes in our school with a lot of encouragement from my teachers. Even my mother works hard to save money for my higher studies and I feel blessed to have parents like them,

especially when I see families of the children who live in our neighborhood.

It pains me to see people in my village get drunk at the tavern spending their hard earned money on liquor brewed locally which spoils their health. When they return home late at night after their drinking sessions which are usually punctuated with brawls among themselves in their inebriated condition, they invariably pick a quarrel with their family members abusing them and even causing injury to their children who try to intervene and stop their unruly behavior, which is so unbecoming of them.

Why do men fall prey to such unwelcome habits which alienate them from their own close kin, while women stay free from them?

Most of the women in our village work hard and are honest to God in their behavior. They do their chosen jobs all day long and also manage their homes, cooking for their family and looking after their children. They need all the support in these hard times when food, clothing and practically everything costs a lot more than what they used to do in the recent past, and there is not enough money to pay for even the basic needs.

If I become the head of our village someday, I will punish the men who behave so irresponsibly and beat their wife and children in drunken state. I will even take steps to close the liquor shops and prevent bootleggers from selling liquor in our village.

Even the government has done a great injustice to poor people by opening liquor shops themselves, instead of preventing people from falling to such habits and losing their health.

All this makes me feel blessed that my father doesn't drink and both my parents live a simple life, working hard to earn a decent living.

Sometimes during the school holidays I love to go with my father on his noisy bike to the coconut farm.

Many people come to buy coconuts from him, because he sells them at a reasonable price and treats all his customers with respect and pleasant manners.

The coconut trees grow so tall that it requires a good amount of skill to climb up and pick the fruits at the right stage of growth. Some of the workers who do this job have been trained by my father and have stayed to work in his farm for so many years with loyalty mainly because he treats them as his own brothers and helps them when they meet with problems.

The coconuts have to be picked very carefully after tapping each one with the sickle, to find out their stage of maturity or tenderness. They are to be cut at their stem which connects them to the bunch, without causing damage to the flowers just above them, and without damaging the new fruits that are forming. They also place some special mix of chemicals on the crown to protect the flowers and young nuts from insects like rhino-beetles and termites that eat them away causing loss of valuable fruits.

Coconuts are useful at every stage of growth, whether they are tender, half ripe or fully ripe. Tender coconuts provide sweet water to drink; half mature coconuts are liked for their kernel which is used in making a lot of food preparations in homes, restaurants and hotels. Coconut milk extracted from the kernel is also an integral part of delicacies that are in good demand. Fully mature coconuts and even dry coconuts which turn brownish on the tree, if left unplucked, are good for extracting coconut oil after drying them in the sun and processing them in the oil mills.

I know so much about coconuts because it is our family business and I have learned a lot from my parents about the wealth in these coconuts.

Many people buy mature coconuts during festivals and they are in good demand during marriage season, as they are given as a goodwill gesture to all invitees who attend the marriage.

When we have surplus coconuts after sales, they are cut open to remove the white kernel inside which are spread on straw mats to let them dry in the sun.

These dried kernels are called copra and sent to oil mills for extracting virgin coconut oil.

The leaves of the coconut tree are used to build huts or sheds for cattle.

Unlike the other crops such as rice, wheat or vegetables which could be affected by failure of monsoon or floods, coconuts offer a steady income year after year if they are maintained with care and that is the reason my father preferred coconut cultivation, even though he had to struggle in the first few years without any income until the trees started bearing fruits.

There was something interesting I learned at school about coconuts when I asked my teacher one day as to why they offer coconuts at the temple when the people go to pray to God. He was happy that I asked this question when we were discussing our cultural heritage and why we carry out certain rituals without even thinking about their significance.

He said when we offer the coconut at the temple the priest breaks it open to expose the white kernel and the sweet coconut water which are placed by the priest as an offering to the deity worshipped in that temple. This is like thanking God or Goddess for giving us food and water which are essential for sustaining all life.

There is also a deeper meaning as explained by him.

The coconut shell represents our body. When we go beyond our body we see that we are not just the physical body but the divine soul inside, similar to the white kernel inside the coconut shell. Always we have to remember that we are not the body. We are divine souls in friendship with all living beings.

During festivals our village temple is decorated with lights and flowers, colorful hangings and garlands. All people come together to worship the presiding deity of our village and organize dance and music programs that are spread over several days. This helps people to forget their problems and differences and become friendly with each other in the celebrations that are meant to bring prosperity and protection for all.

Just after a few days of celebrations for the festival of *Navarathri*, I met a girl Latha from Chennai who was on an excursion to Mahabalipuram, the famous heritage site ahead of our village and about three to four hours journey from Chennai. Their bus stopped at our village on their way, for the tourists to get tender coconuts and stretch a bit before continuing their journey. As I was helping my mother to chop and give the coconuts to the kids waiting in line, Latha came forward to offer a hand. This was a nice gesture and I liked it and smiled at her for doing so. When everyone was served she started talking to me asking my name and where I studied.

She told me that she was also doing her final year at school and was a member of a volunteer group called DreamingTeam – children who help other children in need of help. Immediately it appealed to me and I asked her whether I could also be a part of it. She gave me all the information and said every community could organize volunteer groups like they did and the DeamingTeams play an important role in developing those who could spare some time for others in voluntary work with skills for life.

That chance meeting with a stranger provided a turning point in my life. In a few days we were nine Dreaming Teamers in Neelankarai and Uthandi, making a beginning in helping children in need.

Sometimes we get shocked at the abuse and emotional disturbance suffered by children who have no way to get out of it by themselves with their limited resources. Often they are not able to even come to school because of abuse at home.

Some of the DreamingTeam volunteers met our teachers and our School Head to request them to help these children by calling their parents,

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explaining the damage they were causing to their kids by such abuse and providing them training about how to treat their children.

Many parents don't even think of the consequences of their action when they are drunk and repeated exposures to such bad behavior leave a scar in the tender minds of their children, which are difficult to erase even when they grow up.

We organize open sessions for affected children with their parents to help the parents become more responsible and friendly with their offspring.

We have a long way to go but the rewards of seeing a smile on the face of even a couple of children so helped, is well worth the effort.

14 ELUSIVE FREEDOM AND LOST CHILDHOOD

KRITHIKA

Kilinochi in the northern SriLanka is home to me, and to a whole lot of orphaned children.

Even as a child I have seen the brutality of conflicts in my war torn homeland.

My father was killed in cross-fire but I didn't even know about it for a long time as my mother was my whole world.

My father had been forcibly drafted into the fight for independent Tamil land tentatively named Tamil Eezham but mostly referred as Tamil Eelam as most couldn't pronounce the difficult word.

I managed to go to a local school, and every day was like the last day for me and my mother, as there was complete uncertainty about whether we would live to see the next day. But when all the neighbors were also in the same boat it ceased to make us worry, as it was beyond our individual capacity to halt the ruthless killings of innocent civilians in the name of freedom fight.

From a cheerful young girl in my formative years, I have matured too quickly into a fast forward adult but my dreams are still alive and give me a reason to hope for better days.

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My mother has stopped scolding me about my poor marks in my O'Level exams and also when I don't do my homework because all these things had lost their significance in the back drop of day to day uncertainties.

She has been working in the tea estates from the time she was herself a teenager like me as it was necessary to go to work to have daily bread.

It was called Ceylon at that time before independence from the British rule and also in the first years of independence. Later it was renamed Sri Lanka, its ancient name.

In my school many of my class mates have no idea where their fathers were, not even sure whether they were alive. But school was a sort of outlet for us to reassure each other about being alive here and now.

Phones and computers were still working. Even internet was functional although erratic, off and on.

My close friends invited me to a volunteer group called DreamingTeam. The name itself appealed to me as I was an avid dreamer and kept telling myself and my mother that this situation could not go on forever and the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel would show up if we persist long enough to reach the end of the ever extending tunnel.

No need to say I became part of DreamingTeam and have been an active volunteer trying to do at least a few good deeds each week, or weekend, to be more precise.

We go door to door in different neighborhoods each weekend, collect information about any help needed for children, if they are affected or depressed, failing to attend school or unable to continue their education.

We try to put them together with others who may be able to offer a helping hand and gear up the morale. Invariably there were dozens of children who were waiting for such help.

The most difficult time was when nobody respected the cease-fire.

Calls for reconciliation talks were falling on deaf ears and street battles turned many of the once beautiful neighborhoods into ghost towns.

As children we were appalled to see adults making no sense to us anymore. How can leaders of our country be so hateful and insensitive to the plight of innocent people, claiming that they were doing it for the peace of the very same people?

How can world organizations be passive spectators doing nothing to end the hostilities raging for decades becoming worse each day thanks to the uncompromising attitude of both sides, the elected and the unelected, decimating whatever was left of an ancient civilization.

We wrote appeals to our leaders on both sides calling them to negotiate a settlement if only to save us, the children of this country, who were brutally affected for no fault of ours, to prevent the fighters from forcibly enrolling even pre-teenage children against their will, both male and female, and causing the exodus of tens of thousands as refugees from our land.

We sent letters to world leaders to help our country and even sent SOS calls to the United Nations but most of the outside world chose to ignore our plight deeming it as the internal affairs of a sovereign state. Can killing of its own people be internal affairs of a country?

The hypocrisy of the UN and the world's developed nations in trying to arm twist oil rich countries like Iraq and Iran but ignoring major violations in other member countries of the UN like SriLanka and Myanmar, Ethiopia and Sudan put us off and our history books singing the glory of the UN and the Major Powers did not impress us in the least.

We feel cheated and robbed by undemocratic democracies, autocracies and dictatorships.

Is it not the fundamental right of each and every child to be treated with care and respect in all nations? World bodies who fail to lead with vision

to recognize this basic requirement and do everything they can to implement it on priority without any compromise are unfit to call themselves world leaders.

For our part we children keep doing our voluntary work in preventing burnouts in children so affected and to encourage others, not so affected, to maintain their sanity and work for unity and empathy.

And when finally the standoff came to an end after much blood shed, it was more like the aftermath of inhuman witch hunt and destruction to wipe out an entire region and crush all dissent.

This was nothing to be proud of.

The days ahead need more work to be done to get us back on our feet as a unified nation. A lot of reconciliation needs to be done with generosity by the ruling class if they hope to win the confidence of the remaining minorities.

We volunteers at DreamingTeam will do our humble part in preparing the next generation to think ahead, heal their wounds and build their partnership in taking the nation forward, without compromising on their self-respect and spirit of revival.

We believe the younger generation can sometimes show the way when the situation demands it.

We call upon all our displaced people to forgive and start a new chapter.

We call all those who left our land to escape the brutality, to do what they can to help our mother land from wherever they are, if they still feel better off or safer in their new locations rather than coming back and be haunted by the bitter memories of the painful past.

We the children of present SriLanka would like the entire world to help us out in all ways so we will not be left out in being part of the world's future.

15 ORANGE FARMS AND DATE PALMS

AMAL:

Libya, affected by the recent fight for freedom from the dictatorship of Muammar Gaddafi, is my home and I have seen much bloodshed as a young teenager than most children anywhere else in the world would have been exposed to.

I am Amal and my father Salah Asker works as production supervisor at the Azzawiya Oil Refinery in Azzawiya, Libya.

I study at the College of US Aggression Martyrs in Tripoli. It was originally called American School and was mostly for children of expatriates who worked with the Oil sector companies and in the hospitals.

It all changed when Libya was bombed by United States in 1986 and the embargo that was imposed on Libya by the western countries and the UN.

Many Libyan children and common people were killed by those bombs and to remember them the American School was renamed as 'College of US Aggression Martyrs' or CUSAM for short.

All education is free for the citizens of Libya, in state schools and universities. Even those who want to study abroad could get state sponsorship or scholarship and that is how we are encouraged to qualify and take up the jobs that are filled by expatriates for want of skilled local manpower.

As a girl student I have no restrictions about what I study or the job to which I qualify myself. I am doing science at CUSAM and hope to complete my engineering in oil exploration. My elder sister Zahira is already working as Planning engineer and I take inspiration from her confidence in working at the Oil Refinery.

In our country girls have the freedom to wear any decent dress they like and burqa or head-scarf is not imposed on us. Some of us even wear jeans and t-shirt to school.

But my mother still wears burqa when she goes out for shopping or visiting friends or relatives.

My father wears traditional dress on festival days like Ramadan or Eid but he wears western dress like trousers, shirt and suit on occasions or in deep winter when it is too cold here.

We enjoy Mediterranean climate in Azzawiya which is a coastal town. On Fridays I go to the beach in Misrata with my mother and father along with my two sisters and younger brother. My elder brother prefers to go with his own friends on noisy motorbikes.

The road to the beach is full of orange farms on one side and olives on the other. During October and November the orange blossoms fill the air with sweet fragrance which I love to enjoy. There are so many fruits grown here and they are very tasty and cheap too as they are not allowed to be exported and should be sold only in the local markets. Mostly the farmers sell their farm produce directly. Some of them bring it by donkey carts and others use vanettes or cars.

Libyan oranges, dates, peaches, plums, figs, water melons, pomegranates and strawberries are all very tasty. We have fig trees even in our house and at our school so we can eat them whenever we feel hungry.

All of a sudden they closed our school because people were fed up with the government of Gaddafi who was killing Libyan people if they said anything that he did not like or against his government. Even when they asked for normal things like freedom to speak, to travel and to start a business, they were harassed by the government and the police who keep a close watch through informers in every town and office. My father used to say that even in his office he would not talk bad about Gaddafi or his government, even among his close friends because it was not easy to know who was an informer among them. When they heard about the Tunisian revolution and the Egyptian uprising even the people of Libya came together to protest for freedom. My dad took me also with him and said even girls should join the protest as it is for all the Libyan people to become a free country.

Some people got killed by the police and Gaddafi's army but they kept protesting on the Green Square in Tripoli, in Azzawiya Town Center and also in every city like Benghazi, Al Khomes, and Zanzur.

They got help from other countries like France, Britain and US. Everyday my father and his friends will go to fight against Gaddafi's army, stopping their work in the oil refinery. Even school teachers went on protest and so they closed the schools as this protest was more important than studying.

Nobody was afraid to go and fight because they believed it was necessary to make Libya free from the brutal regime, which was looting the wealth of our nation and keeping people under strict control.

For several months I did not go to school and could not meet any of my friends except a few who live near my house. Even to walk on the road was difficult since all services like cleaning and maintenance had come

to a standstill. The only activity that was going on was fighting and killing. But when we heard that Benghazi and Azzawiya were taken over by the protesters we felt happy. We knew that it was only a matter of days before Gaddafi's government will collapse and Libya would have peoples' government free of dictatorship and police brutality.

And it finally happened on the 20th of October 2011. They captured the town of Sirte where Gaddafi was hiding and captured him from a roadside tunnel.

All anger of the people accumulated over forty two years of suppression suddenly burst out and there was no way to stop them from kicking him, slapping him, shooting him and dragging him. The result was he died a horrible death as he was captured and taken by the protesters.

Most Libyans including me and my parents feel no sympathy for Gaddafi and his sons killed in the encounters. For thousands of innocent people brutally tortured and killed by his army this was justice in revenge. Nobody wanted to let him be alive as he could escape or comeback to power to haunt them again.

Well, my country is now busy with the reconstruction and I hope my school will reopen soon so I can catch up with my studies. I don't feel bad about it since the best lesson of working together for freedom was learned by all of us including my generation of young Libyans.

I still don't know what is in store for the days ahead but definitely it was going to be only better than the four decades of suffering under a heartless and brutal regime.

As for me I will qualify myself and be a part of the change so Libya could stand free as a democracy among the two hundred nations on earth.

Last year I joined Dreaming Team, when I came across an appeal for volunteers in all countries to help children cope with difficult situations at home and in their neighborhood. It came in handy during these tense days when our people were busy on the streets. As schools did not

function we formed groups in each locality to keep in touch, keep everyone informed of latest happenings as we came to know, help children who lost their parents in the uprising, distribute food and water to those in need and provide first aid to the injured.

With no prior training in such tasks, we were required to improvise and get going, learning the skills just in time of need.

It is amazing what we kids can do, when we do it with freedom as volunteers.

16 BLUE GROTTO AND GLASS BOTTOM BOATS:

ANGELA:-

I am Angela, a simple girl from Sliema, Malta.

My parents Judy and Joe Calleja manage a home-stay for tourists in Sliema.

I am an active member of DreamingTeam and help kids at my school and in my neighborhood in a variety of situations that make them desperate for a helping hand.

As a teenager I look at life with much excitement and my school provides a platform to learn to interact with others and take charge of what lies ahead in my life. As an A-Level student at St. Paul's School, I have already crossed some bridges and have developed the ability to cross more as they appear before me.

My parents love me and have even bought me a computer so I could learn to use software programs and applications, well ahead of what I need for my school curriculum, and qualify as a programmer that will enable me to stand on my own legs.

Our house can accommodate five tourist families at a time and when it is tourist season my parents get so busy they don't get enough time to sleep, much less to talk to me.

Germans, East Europeans, Russians and Japanese tourists come here to enjoy the sea and sun, relax and get rejuvenated with the fresh and unpolluted sea breeze of the Mediterranean Sea surrounding Malta from all sides.

When I look at the map in my class, I can't even find Malta because our country is a tiny island in the middle of a large ocean.

Even though it is so small, Malta has secured a strategic place for itself in the tourist map of Europe, because of its lovely sea views, the Blue Grotto cave that is home to some unique coral life, the Glass Bottom Boats of Captain Morgan's famous cruises that take people around and the street markets of Valetta where people can find almost anything they are looking for, at affordable and sometimes even negotiable prices.

I go to Valetta every now and then, with my dad when he goes to get his supplies, but I am more comfortable at Sliema which is quieter and more homely. One can spend the whole day at the Strand, with its winding roads that lead to the long beachside, eating pizzas, popcorn or ice cream from those caravan shops that buzz with life from early evening until late night, sometimes even spilling over to the early hours of the next morning during weekends.

Sitting on the cast iron benches lining the main beach front, people watch horse carts, cars and speeding bikes, while being engaged in lively and heated discussions about politics and world matters, despite the fact that they make no impact on the goings on around them. Sometimes they get into animated arguments that expose the perennial problems that occupy the best part of their minds but to no avail.

I have great friends at school and together we have formed a band to take Malta's music to the rest of the world. I love this more than the academic learning. Each week end we organize concerts for a cause and that is how I came into DreamingTeam volunteers group.

As part of the DreamingTeam, I recently worked with a few other members to try and collect old computers from offices and homes to start a computer coaching set up for children in our neighborhood who are unable to afford their own. Many of them became enthusiastic to take the time and learn from us.

Malta is a tiny country and you can go from anywhere to anywhere within 3 hours by road on a bike, and it may take a little longer by the public transport bus as it stops and stops all the way.

It is not difficult for kids like me to find activities that interest us and also get help when we need it. Most Maltese are friendly people and treat tourists with much respect. We know that the tourists help us by visiting our country to enjoy their vacation here, bringing foreign exchange and business ideas. But they also make things dearer for local people. Vegetables, fruits and even food at restaurants have become unaffordably expensive. We need to help ordinary people grow whatever they can in their homes, backyards and any available spaces to bring down the prices by way of increased availability of essential commodities.

We need to play our part as children of this nation and can't afford to sit back and think that it was none of our business and let the adults worry about it. We are the adults in the making and soon enough another generation will look up to us in the same way as we do now.

17 RED ORANGE CANOPIES AND PURPLE UMBRELLAS

ANNA:

Mufulira is a copper mining town in Zambia, a lovely African country with a lot of natural resources, a salubrious climate and friendly people, which, incidentally, happens to be home to me as well.

I am Anna Musonda, a joyful member of DreamingTeam, in Africa.

I study at Mufulira Secondary School in Jacaranda Avenue and my father Romano Musonda works as a technician in the Mufulira Mines, of ZCCM.

His yellow hard hat is too big for my head and he looks funny in his white coverall which becomes dirty brown by the time he returns home from work.

He works in shifts and goes deep down the copper mine travelling more than a kilometer by underground elevators.

Once he took me, my brother Alex and my mom Florence to let us get an idea of what was going on so far below the ground.

They have roads inside, deep down, and drive vehicles to take people around for work and also to transport the copper ore excavated there, to the surface for processing at the smelters.

It is almost like a city down below with street lights, blower fans for air circulation, pumps for water movement and even a canteen and coffee shop for the workers to catch a quick bite.

My dad likes his work and tells me to study well so I can graduate and work there as well. Zambia consolidated copper mines, of which Mufulira mines is a part, is the second largest producer of copper in the world and employs more than fifty thousand people and so I feel that his pride in his being a part of this empire is justified.

My school is not far from my home and I go walking with my friends.

My English teacher George is from India and he always appreciates my hairstyle with pleats that my mother does for me every weekend, which I carefully keep from being disturbed while playing with my friends or by getting wet in the rains.

When I come home from school my mom gives me Nshima with a nice relish and I enjoy eating it as I am so hungry. Nshima is made by cooking corn flour with water. It is a sumptuous food and makes us strong.

My brother Alex is very strong. He plays football for his school team. Sometimes he is good to me but mostly he likes to hang out with his friends at school.

My mother works at the Musukolobe Nursery on Kenneth Kaunda road, growing and selling flower plants, trees, and also providing garden supplies. She brings me nice plants like chrysanthemums, daisies, asters, and roses in pots which go in to my collection of window garden. Once she brought me a tiny African violet plant. I talk to it every day before I go to school and again as soon as I come back from school. It likes me and has grown big with a lot of purple flowers that smile at me. I don't like to pluck the flowers from plants and won't allow anyone to do so

either. The flowers remain nice for many days, even weeks, if I talk to them every day.

When I go to school I first go to my friend's house on the next road called Jomo Kenyatta Avenue, which is full of May flower trees and I love to see the red orange blooms in millions and trillions that transform the sky to a red canopy and lay a red carpet for me to walk on.

Ours is a very planned town and each road in my area is planted with different species of flowering trees. The Jacaranda Avenue is a long road lined with Jacaranda trees which turn purple blue in spring time and the entire road is painted purple for me to dance my way to school.

I know many languages. I speak Bemba at home and Swahili at school apart from English taught there as part of the academic curriculum.

I want to go to college in Lusaka to study Agriculture.

Why Agriculture?

Because everybody in my class wants to study medicine or computer science but not many prefer plant science. We are always short of food and our country imports food at high price. I want to specialize in agriculture so I can introduce new advanced methods to grow all we need so everybody can get food grown in our own country, especially fruits and vegetables and also rice.

Once my science teacher, Pathak, who is also from India, took our class for a field trip to a farm in Kitwe, by our school bus. The farm was very large and people used tractors and machines to work in the farm. I was happy to see green plants all around for miles and miles with corn growing so tall, even taller than all of us.

On our way back we stopped to see another farm where they had thousands of cattle grazing in the endless grass field. One of my class

mates, Mutombo, shouted in excitement and joy “ look, plenty meat, plenty beef”

Our teacher Pathak was shocked to hear him shout like that.

He told us that they were cows and the right thing to say was “ plenty of milk”

“This farm is supplying milk to many towns and if they killed all the cows for beef how will you children get milk to drink?” he added.

That day I learned to look at what I see, from a different perspective and I told my teacher what I learned: The same cattle appeared as ‘plenty of meat’ to one of us and as ‘plenty of milk’ to our teacher.

He appreciated me for this simple lesson I learned on this unforgettable field trip.

Later, when I finished school he told me that after graduation from Lusaka college of Agriculture as I planned, I could do my post-graduation in India where he could arrange to get me a scholarship, since I was a bright student and girls need to be encouraged to get fully qualified and take the country to self-sufficiency on equal footing with boys.

I am already excited to think that I can go to another country for advanced studies and return to Zambia with more skills. I am sure I can contribute to my motherland to make it self-sufficient in food production and ‘stand tall and free’ as so nicely put in our national anthem.

Our generation will reap the benefits of working together without divisions of tribal or zonal hostilities that plagued our elders.

Our country is rich in minerals and metals like malachite, copper and zinc apart from the fertile soil which can help us grow all the food and even more than enough for us so we can even share it with our brothers and sisters in our neighboring countries, to overcome their famine and shortage of food.

Our government spends a lot of money to get TV and mobile phones but farming is neglected. Can we eat the phones and TVs?

I recently joined DreamingTeam, an organization of volunteers, which encourages children to help each other and become volunteers for a better society and neighborhood.

We help some of the kids around us with their problems. If they have difficulty understanding concepts in science, math or other subjects we help them by explaining in different terms and with examples so their doubts will be cleared. We even help them with their project work when they are unable to get parental support.

Once a week we take time to clean up some part of our neighborhood which needs attention. When we work together for a common cause like this we become more connected.

More than anything, we feel good to be able to help each other and learn to work as a team.

Whatever little help we provide seems to make a difference to those children who receive help and we see their self-esteem building up.

I will continue to do this service with DreamingTeam where ever I go and whatever job I take up after completion of my studies.

18 SWAPNA THE DREAM MERCHANT

SWAPNA:

I love friends and I love dreaming too.

As a freedom loving person I have chosen to look at life as it presents itself to me each moment and I have enjoyed whatever came in my way, with its own package of assorted pieces of cake, some sweet and some bitter, but the icing was worth the risk.

I have travelled a lot and worked in different countries with amazing people who show tremendous courage in facing their challenges. I learned from each one of them something which enriched my own life bit by bit.

In this process I came across children who often needed help but could not get it in their situations. Where ever possible I lent them a helping hand by taking time to be with them, understand them and offering solace or empathy which could make them feel better. I soon realized that there was a need to make children aware of the possibility of helping each other by volunteering in their own neighborhoods.

With support and help from a few of my friends I started DREAMING TEAM.

Initially we offered counseling to children who were emotionally hurt by their parents or by being victims of bullying and there were positive changes in their capacity to handle their problems.

Some of them became volunteers themselves and it started spreading.

We appealed to friends and even strangers on line in social networks and quite a few came forward to form help-groups wherever they lived and to organize volunteers together, to see how they could be of support to children who needed guidance, protection, educational assistance and emotional uplift.

Since it is purely voluntary and each could do whatever they think fit in their neighborhood we dreamed that it could snowball into a dynamic movement and result in a better society and a better world to live in.

In many cases we realized that providing the basic guidance and encouragement in making them know simple techniques of self-management and self-confidence could get them on their best foot forward. Periodic inputs made them take further steps in the right direction.

It is heartening to see many of the recipients become volunteers themselves to help others in turn.

Every drop makes the ocean.

What you have seen so far are some random drops from different oceans of Dreaming Teams who have spontaneously offered their time and skills to make this world a better place for all, particularly for the children who will be the torch bearers of the new world of harmony and understanding.

They have all faced different challenges in their life and share their views about their priorities, and what matters most in spreading the message of optimism and hope.

DREAMING TEENS

As a part of the grand plan that guides us, I came in contact with Gayathri of another volunteers' group that opened up a vast stage for further consolidation and extended outreach of our service. What followed was grand vision of unparalleled magnitude.

I will let her tell you the rest of the story.

19 HIMALAYAN MYSTERIES and HUMANITARIAN MYSTICS

GAYATHRI:

The rhythmic sound of the Himalayan waters flowing through the gorges and the mountain slopes, trying their way to reach the magnificent Ganga river, as if it was their life's mission, will motivate anyone who passes by, to stop and listen, and I was no exception.

I am Gayathri and I belong to these mountain regions. I can move here blind folded, and tell you which part of which mountain we are in. There are ways to tell the location, from the sounds, the call of the birds, the density of the fog and the sweet smell of a potpourri of herbal plants that grow on these slopes in abundance.

Master *Omkarananda* is a wandering hermit who found me at the *Haridwar Kumbh Mela* long back, when he went there to take part in the *Kumbh Mela*, which is considered very auspicious for anyone who can make it to the event which takes place once in twelve years.

Many hermits and sadhus who are in these divine mountains meditating upon their own inner guru or spiritual guide to attain salvation and freedom from the worldly attachments, pleasures and pains, come to the *Kumbh Mela* which draws millions of pilgrims from all parts of India.

On one such occasion, years ago he said he was among the first of the sadhus to take a dip in the holy Ganga River. These sadhus wore ashes on their body and chanted Shiva's name in a mantra 'Om Nama Shivaya' continuously for the entire period of their journey to Ganga and back. So many devotees, including men, women and children had come for the holy dip, to purify themselves and receive divine blessings.

As the people were moving slowly and following the lines as regulated by the volunteers, unexpectedly there was a rush in one of the sections of pilgrims who were led by a group of people who went into a trance, mesmerized by the chanting, by the fragrance of the incense sticks burning everywhere and by the divinely charged atmosphere. Without realizing what was happening they got impelled towards the river causing a ripple in the otherwise steady and disciplined movement of people.

Swami Omkarananda saw the influx of the people and the consequent rush in to the river waters, which caused some who were already in the waters taking a holy dip, to lose their balance and get carried away by the volume of water in the river.

He tried to grab those who were carried off their feet and guide them to catch hold of the steel chains running across the river ahead of the point so they could slowly move towards the shores and to safety.

He noticed a couple who were clinging to each other and also holding a child up above their heads to prevent her from drowning. They were over powered by the unstoppable flow of the river and all his efforts to hold them and take them towards the chain were in vain. They threw their child at him with all the strength they could muster and shouted their request for him to please save her while they were being pulled by the mighty waters.

He said he couldn't see their heads above water anymore and he carried me inch by inch along the chain towards the shore. I had already swallowed a lot of water but I was not unconscious. He said I was

holding his beard firmly and that made it easier for him to carry me. He was already old but strong enough to manage his way to safety.

A huge crowd was waiting at the shore to help all who managed to survive the mishap and to provide immediate first aid, dry clothes and stretchers, all of which came as if from nowhere.

He said I was one of the lucky ones to survive such a massive flow in Ganga River, and I was in a stunned state and did not realize that I had lost my parents and had to find some of my people to go to. All his questions about where we came from and whether there were relatives for me to go to drew a blank, as I did not know. The only thing I said to him was my name was Gayathri.

He told me that he managed to take me to the Sivananda Ashram, which had an orphanage where I would be looked after. They were kind enough to take me in, although they were already overcrowded with children in need of care.

For the next few years I was in their care and learned to read and write in the school attached to the orphanage, named '*Shiva Kadaksham*' or Shiva's Grace, in Sanskrit.

As I was too young I didn't even cry or feel sorry for being in such a place. Instead I befriended all the children there, mostly girls, except for a handful of boys.

All this I learned from the Swamiji who was running the Ashram and the orphanage that was part of the Ashram. *Swami Satyananda* was a kind person. He always said to me that there was nothing to fear as Shiva was there to look after all his children, including me.

Quickly I learned to adjust to the nice routines there, getting up early in the morning, cleaning up and taking a shower, wearing a clean dress given to me, combing my hair by myself, applying *Vibhuthi* or sacred ash on my forehead in a horizontal line and a dot of *Kumkum* or vermilion powder at the center of my forehead and smiling at myself in the mirror

before I went to the prayer hall where all of us assembled for the morning prayers.

We chanted the prayer together following our teacher, who taught us these easy verses.

By eight we ate breakfast and then proceeded to attend our classes which lasted until noon. Some of our lessons were taught by Swamiji himself and there were two other teachers who helped us to learn Math and Sanskrit language apart from Hindi, which was optional. Those who knew Hindi as mother tongue attended the Hindi lessons while others like me who did not know Hindi were taught English if we liked to learn it or go to the kitchen and help in cutting the vegetables before we could have lunch.

I preferred to learn English, than to go to cut vegetables, not because I did not want to work there but it made me more hungry to be in the kitchen with the nice smell of food being cooked but not being allowed to eat as yet.

English was very easy to learn as it has only twenty six alphabets, but I liked Sanskrit more because our Sanskrit teacher taught us many verses that were easy to memorize and repeat, like songs. I realized that I was good at singing and soon I was selected to sing in the lead, at the prayer hall, as I had a good and bold voice.

As years went by I had no difficulty in passing my twelfth grade exams which opened up new options.

The orphanage and the Sivananda Ashram, to which it belonged, could support my education only up to that level and further education at a higher institution or college was not possible without sponsorship or scholarship, which was hard to come by.

Also I preferred to stay at the Ashram and provide care to the younger children. I offered to serve as a teacher rather than leaving them. The

other alternative was to try to find some job to support myself so I will not be a burden to the Ashram.

Just as I was contemplating what to do I had a surprise visitor for the first time in my twelve years at the orphanage. Swami *Omkarananda* appeared all of a sudden after all these years, but I could immediately recognize him. How can I ever forget the person who saved me from drowning, in my childhood? His image was etched in my mind as clearly as those of my parents.

He was pleased to learn that I had earned a reputation as the best student as well as the most cheerful girl to volunteer for any work at any time without reservations.

Our Swamiji, Satyananda, was all praise for my self-discipline, for my quick grasp of modern equipment like the computer systems in our Ashram and my friendly approach to the other children who were in need of special care and love.

He was telling Master *Omkarananda*, that I was free to decide whatever I wanted to do, as I was possibly near eighteen and was independent enough to choose my options as available to me.

Master *Omkarananda* praised me for earning such a good name and using the opportunity to learn to use the computers which may help me a lot in my future.

He added that he had come to see me after almost twelve years as he was on his way to attend the Kumbh Mela as before, and wanted to see how I was. But there was another more important reason for his visit, he said.

When he was in deep trance he had a vision and Baba Yuktेशwarji, who was his spiritual guru, appeared before him in his vision. He told him to go and meet me during his visit to the Kumbh Mela, and give me the message that I was born for a very important mission. The mission for me was to spearhead a movement to help children who were

abandoned by parents or who had lost their parents and had nowhere to go. This was to reach all those children who were not able to find care givers like the Sivananda Ashram, who were few and far between.

I was completely surprised by this message from the master of a master in front of me, about whom I have read a lot from books at the Ashram library but never ever thought that he would give me a message so profound and yet so unnerving.

How is it possible?

I was myself an orphan with no resources except my education, a little bit of knowledge about the use of computer systems and my discipline instilled into me by the twelve years of Ashram care and love.

Where will I find the resources to embark upon such a mission? Who will come forward to help me, even if I was willing to dedicate my life for such a noble mission with enormous responsibility?

Swami *Omkarananda* could read my mind and all the questions queuing up for his answer.

He told me not to be scared and that we were all part of a much bigger cosmic unfoldment responsible for all life and that divine cosmic power called variously as Shiva, Shakti, Brahma, Vishnu, Krishna, Rama or any other innumerable names knows how to make resources available to each one of us, for carrying out his mission in the universe in the larger context, and on earth in particular.

So there was no need to worry and what was needed was to start. Everything will fall in to place as and when I was ready to take it.

He told me to go with him as he was going to introduce me to a great but simple soul who would help me and guide me further in my cosmic mission.

I looked up to *Swami Satyananda* for his words of advice.

He told me that *Swami Omkarananda* was a revered Himalayan master, who knew many masters. His words of message are a blessing to me as it doesn't happen to everyone.

The fact that I was chosen to handle such a noble mission was by itself a great honor to me and there was no need to hesitate.

His blessings were always with me, as with any every child in the Ashram and beyond the Ashram.

Swamiji added further that our motherland is called *Bharatha Desha* from ancient times and one of the hallmarks of our culture was the respect given to women as incarnations of the Divine Mother herself, as she could not be physically present everywhere and therefore chose all women to be her messengers.

One can observe anywhere in our country that women are treated with respect and reverence. It is customary to address all women as *Amma* or *Ma*, irrespective of their background and age.

But unfortunately the modern times overloaded with the compulsions of the greedy rat race have rendered life difficult for many poor people and as a consequence the girl child is treated as a burden in desperate situations when the distressed mothers overloaded by acute poverty take the extreme step of abandoning their own children. Such things were unthinkable in ancient times.

Swamiji continued:

So there is indeed a need to create awareness through spiritual and cultural movement to motivate every individual to come forward and do whatever they can to provide care for every child so abandoned due to desperation. No mother would willingly abandon her child if she had the resources to support and care for her child. There might be rare exceptions due to other psychological factors but they are mere aberrations.

A society that turns a blind eye to such inhuman treatment to its own children can't prosper. How can we call ourselves human beings when we are in fact so inhuman?"

Swamiji was getting overwhelmed by his emotions when he uttered these words. I could see how deeply he was moved by the plight of children, particularly girl children, who far outnumbered the boys in any orphanage anywhere in our country, as he had stated earlier on another occasion while addressing the public, during the anniversary at our Ashram.

He continued after a short silence:

None of the teaching staff and the children here in this Ashram and the orphanage would use harsh words or abusive language that was derogatory to the girl child. He and his predecessors, starting from the founder *Swami Sivananda*, had always ensured that respectful language was used at the Ashram while addressing girl children and women who visited or worked in the Ashram.

Even in anger one should never utter the words "bitch", "son of a bitch", "whore" etc. which were demeaning motherhood and utterly derogatory.

Think for a moment who is responsible for the unfortunate position of a woman forced in to prostitution. Does she choose it as a profession or as a preferred occupation?

If by a divine intervention all men are rendered devoid of their genitals when they sleep tonight and wake up tomorrow morning to find their genitals missing from their body, would there be any prostitution in this world?

Why blame women and treat them with such disrespect when it is the men who are responsible and should hang their heads in shame for the state to which they had driven the society to deteriorate?

Therefore such a movement is necessary to protect and care for the girl child and of course any child so unfortunate as to be orphaned.

You have all my support and blessings.

Go ahead my child.

Let there be light that takes you forward on this great mission to save these unfortunate and deprived children, marginalized by the society and bring our nation the pride of place in the entire world.”

He blessed me with these powerful words.

I was speechless with tears rolling down from my eyes.

I could see that Master *Omkarananda* was equally moved. Normally he was not a person who would be swayed by emotions or exhibit them but this was an exceptional outpouring that came spontaneously from a noble person who had dedicated his whole life to the service of children and people in pain and suffering, expressing his anguish about the decadence in our society that was damaging the very roots of our culture.

I promised Swamiji that I was ready to offer myself to this task and would do whatever was within my capacity, unmindful of any obstacles that may come my way.

Master *Omkarananda* thanked me and Swamiji, and told me to be ready next morning after the prayers, so we could go together to meet a philanthropist who was quietly doing a lot of good work without publicity.

My baggage was very light as I didn't have much to carry, except for a few clothes and some books that I had received as prize, present or gift, including a copy of the Bagavad Gita that Swami Satyananda had given to me at the time of my graduation, to guide me and inspire me in my life ahead.

It was an emotional moment to bid farewell to all those with whom I grew up all these years and to the teachers and Swamiji himself who had molded me with such loving care. We hugged each other and sang some devotional songs together. I assured everyone that I would keep visiting this institution, wherever I may go.

Master *Omkarananda* came as he had promised, and together we proceeded to a place called Krishna Kunj in the suburbs of Haridwar, nesting in a confluence of breathtaking mountains.

There he introduced me to *Mathaji Maheshwari* living in a hermitage surrounded by a garden full of tall trees and flowering plants that she was tending, as we entered.

It was apparent that Master *Omkarananda* had already told *Mathaji* about me as she seemed to have been expecting our arrival.

She greeted us with her palms together in 'Namasthe', as is customary and we reciprocated. When the Master introduced me, *Mathaji* welcomed me, saying that Master *Omkarananda* had told her about me and also about the message from Master *Yuktेश्वar*. She said it was a great honor to me to have been so blessed and directed by such divine souls and offered all her help to make me proceed in my mission.

Master *Omkarananda* left me with her and told me that I was in able hands and he would meet me again after twelve years when he would come back for the next Kumbh Mela, and asked me to remember the same and come to Haridwar to Sivananda Ashram on that auspicious occasion, wherever I might be.

Mathaji assured Master *Omkarananda* that she would take care of my needs and I would be fully in charge of my life apart from the lives of many children, by the time he would see me next.

Mathaji was a graceful person at peace with herself, with kind eyes and I felt connected with her right from the start.

She took me in to her kitchen adjoining her living room and started preparing tea while telling me a quick synopsis of her story.

She was from Mewar in Rajasthan and her husband had a business involving excavation and processing of marbles. His select range of pink marbles was very popular and he had more demand for them than he could supply. This home where they lived was built with pink marbles and he designed it as a home away from home, as a sort of resort to enjoy peace and tranquility, as a break from his strenuous job of working with marble extraction, cutting and polishing. Over the years of hard work and dedication he had built his business which now employed more than a thousand people and he had personally trained a team of technical people to manage all operations.

She recounted his childhood days when he would visit Haridwar with his parents, who were devoted to the work of Swami Sivananda who was like a spiritual guru to their family. That bond was passed on to him when his parents passed away.

They had earmarked a substantial part of their income from their ancestral property to be used for supporting the Sivananda Ashram and the orphanage that was part of the Ashram. Her husband decided to build a home for their stay in the suburbs of Haridwar as both of them liked the peaceful atmosphere and pleasant surroundings in the divine neighborhood of Ganga River. To live near Ganga would be a great blessing, he said.

Half the time he was away for his business related work and the rest of the time he loved to stay here to rejuvenate himself, as he fondly used to say.

Mathaji said they had no children of their own and they got reconciled to it and started treating the children at the orphanage as their own.

She continued:

“ We felt the need for more such child care homes as there were a lot of children left homeless due to many different reasons and we were pained to see them on the road junctions and market places, railway platforms, bus stands and even at temples.

Just giving them a few coins in alms seemed to satisfy the conscience of most people who apparently are driven by their good intention of charity. However it was not helping these children to come out of their state of poverty and deprivation. Rather it was making them accept it as their only option. Particularly it was doing a lot of harm to the lives of girl children who had nowhere to go and nobody to look after them, making them so vulnerable to anti-social elements.

“We felt that we could do our part by starting a shelter with educational facility as an integral unit so these children could have access to decent education as well as vocational training which will enable them to take care of themselves.

It took only a couple of months to start the first such integral unit and we named it *RakshaRanjani*, in memory of his mother Ranjani. It was built on a piece of land which they had bought earlier for this purpose. It was large enough to accommodate five hundred children.

Many men and women who have settled here after their retirement from active professions were willing to come and teach these children, whatever skills they had picked up in the course of their careers.

Amazingly these children adapted very fast to learn these skills that required them to work with their hands, and apparently this was better than sitting in the class rooms for academic learning that made them restless.

So we found a balance between both as they needed to have academic as well as vocational skills in order to survive on their own.

Our children have already found jobs as computer operators, screen printers, card designers, tailors, wood workers, furniture makers, condiment and bakery product assistants, and as teachers and caregivers as well.

We now have five such *RakshaRanjans* in different locations. It is heartening to see what we can do to empower these children. The gratitude with which they respond and subsequently comeback, again and again, to see us and share their success stories with us and also to offer their contributions to keep this growing, makes us feel so good that our efforts are bearing fruit, much more than what we imagined.

I and my husband have spent a better part of our lives in providing this service to as many children as we could.

We need someone to take over and make it in to a movement and replicate the same in every part of our large country.

Our dream is to see an orphan-free India in our own lifetime.

There should not be even a single child suffering from hunger and loneliness, for want of care and protection.

It is a mammoth task and I hope God gives you all the energy and guidance to carry forward this mission and make it a reality.

My husband will be back by next week and we can work out the details in the days to come.”

She stopped talking and sat with me to relish the ginger tea she had prepared, handing me a cup of it and giving me time to let the message sink in.

Here I am, just a kid with only some basic education and a little bit of experience in the use of computer system, being completely overwhelmed by the turn of events in rapid succession within a couple of days.

How am I going to prepare myself to shoulder such a formidable responsibility without letting them down?

What makes them think that they can rely on a novice like me, rather than employing professionals to do the job?

Mathaji seemed to have abundant intuition.

She told me not to worry and said that when such a revered master like *Omkarananda* received a message of direction in his meditative vision, there was absolutely no need to doubt their wisdom.

She said Master *Omkarananda* was revered by her and her husband, and they had no hesitation to follow his direction.

“ It may not be difficult to get some professionals to manage a project but it was not our intention to run it like a commercial activity which needed more head than heart.

“Such a noble mission needed a large compassionate heart and Master *Omkarananda* and his own master *Yuktेश्वarji* have identified such a heart inside you.

“All the rest can be brought together step by step in proper order. So don’t worry. Take it easy”

I just let it take over me as it was beyond my little brain to comprehend the vastness of the mission and the enormity of the task.

The day I was about to be carried away by the mighty waters of Ganga and the hands of the *Sadhu* that saved me in a miraculous fraction of a second came to my mind as a flashback and I realized that there was a mysterious power in the back of every occurrence.

Did I do anything by myself?

Was such a task of surviving beyond all odds, and taking care of myself in the twelve years that followed, within my powers?

I saw the entire drama unfold in my mind's eye so vividly, and I was not scared any more.

If I were the chosen one, so be it.

Within the next few days Mathaji familiarized me with all activities in her able hands and whenever it appeared to overwhelm me, she assured me that it was all done by divine will, and she and her husband were mere tools through whom they had to happen.

Her husband Prathap Singhji was all smiles to greet her when he arrived, and acknowledged me with a warm welcome.

He was a fatherly figure and full of joy and dynamism in his expressions and words of encouragement. From the way he explained everything, it appeared that nothing was left to chance and I was going to be alright at every stage in getting myself acclimatized to the tasks ahead. He assured me that no special degree was required to do what was the right thing to do, and he himself was only a school leaver without any college degree to decorate his name in his visiting card.

They were so generous to provide me accommodation in their home and treat me as their own daughter.

I learned to immerse myself in to the task and to look at it one day at a time and give my best in working out the priorities and allotting sufficient time to go beyond the mechanics of it all, to reach the core. I never allowed my focus to shift from my mission.

In a couple of years *RakshaRanjani* spread to other areas and from five units it has grown to become a hundred and five, with each unit being cared for by volunteers with kind hearts and insatiable appetite for service.

We kept them all united with a sense of purpose as valuable members of an extended family. I do observe that different people have different ways of approach but such differences are trivial variations in the larger

scheme that propels us in our mission, to see our motherland regain her pride as a nation without orphans.

I visit all the centers at least once a month to provide the necessary fillip to the volunteers and other service givers. We share all our experiences in our interactions in order to make our work more effective and meaningful. Transparency and accountability are given full importance in all the units and they are all governed with the same set of guidelines and framework.

It was during one of my trips that I happened to meet Swapna.

We were travelling in the same compartment in the train and she struck a conversation when she saw me organizing my papers with data collected from those centers that I had been to, earlier in the day.

Swapna was involved in a volunteer network called DreamingTeam, to motivate children to help other children in need, as volunteers. She said she started the same as a small group when she saw the pathetic condition of children in the garbage dumps when she was doing a survey as part of an infrastructure study for a non-governmental organization. There were hundreds of them working as rag pickers and garbage sorters to earn enough to buy food. They had to sleep in tents made with rags and plastic sheets, in the same garbage yards. Often they had to put up with a lot of abuse by those who made money by selling the plastic and metal in garbage, and paid them such meager amounts for their hard day's work and treated them as slaves.

She took the initiative along with her friends and got these children released from such inhuman treatment. They were admitted in child care homes or orphanages.

In that process their work was featured by a citizen journalist in a media show and soon they were flooded with calls from young kids who wanted to participate as volunteers and offer their time to help children in need.

The DreamingTeam took off and it has spread across to many countries thanks to social networks and media reports of positive changes happening in many neighborhoods through these volunteers.

I told her about *RakshaRanjani* and the integrated skills training modules that transformed many lives.

Swapna was interested to know how we managed to keep all our centers up to date on their activities and how we followed up with the children who had already left our centers after receiving vocational skills training and landing suitable employment.

It was apparent that we were doing mutually complementary work and we felt that there would be a significant benefit to a lot of children if we pooled our knowledge and our resources in a harmonious manner.

She was engaged in helping groups mainly in the southern regions, where as we were providing service in the northern states. We could jointly reach the large chunk of central states and also incorporate the elements of mutual strength to make it work even better.

Swapna's Dreaming Teams and our *RakshaRanjani*s seemed destined to work in tandem and achieve a boost in creating awareness and attract kind hearted donors and volunteers on larger scales than what we had done so far.

We agreed that it was a good idea worth pursuing to its natural amalgamation and decided to meet again soon to take it further.

As Master *Omkarananda* had envisioned, there is a mighty power that provides directions, and the best we can do is to keep ourselves open and available to enable those divine directions to take us forward.

It was already ten years since he met me at Sivananda Ashram at Haridwar and in the next two years a lot of things can be done before I meet him again as he had directed me.

I owe it all to him.

If he had not inspired me to take up such a challenging task and if he had not introduced me to *Mathaji*, I would have missed such an important dimension in my life.

The divine Masters still guide us.

Mathaji and *Prathap Singhji* keep funding all our units from their thoughtful planning in earmarking a part of their business profits for such social cause and they also arrange periodic fund raising campaigns which generated enough funds to fill the gaps, if there were any.

As we were transparent and every rupee was accounted for in proper accounting and audit, we have the reputation as the best managed service organization in the country and it is indeed their vision, proactivity and magnanimity that has been responsible for the unprecedented degree of child care and protection.

A sizeable percentage of children from our centers have themselves become part of the process of care giving, as a gratitude for the care received by them.

Our aim of making our motherland completely free of orphans, through empowerment of girl children, is now getting transformed from a dream to a full-fledged reality. Every volunteer has contributed towards this transformation of making this world a better place for all.

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DREAMING TEENS

DREAMING TEENS

I love children

And I find they have a lot of wisdom and perspective on things that affect or enrich their lives.

When I talk to them, I often come out much enriched myself, by way of a different perspective or a shared thought that provides insight in to how they perceive their society.

Children have their own fresh perspectives on what is happening around them and what they would like to see to make this world a better place for all.

Looking at situations in various parts of the world through the eyes of the children in each country or location can have a tremendous effect on the way we see things that matter in life.

Nineteen children from different parts of the world tell me what they see and feel, what affects them, what touches them and how they touch others.

