

Raising a Father

Copyright © 2009 by Arjun Sen
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission of the author.

To Maiji (my paternal grandmother)—

I was not there when you passed away. God spared me that moment. Hence to me you are still alive. When I look at the rearview mirror of my life, I can still see your smile. I see your nod of approval when my actions make you proud. I see your disappointment when I am not living up to your standards. But more than anything, I always feel your comforting hand on my back as I move forward in life.

It is scary to think what my life would have been without you, Maiji. Today, as I finish this book, I realize your true power. You were there for me every minute when I needed you. After that, when I was ready to fly on my own, you sat back and believed in me.

Wherever you are, Maiji, I love you.

Arjun Sen

PREFACE

During my days in the corporate world, some wise, rapid-corporate-stair-climbing friend once told me, “Arjun, in order to achieve bigger glories, one must make smaller sacrifices in life.” I know he was referring to spending less time with family, not being there for one’s children’s special moments, and similar “small” sacrifices in one’s personal life. Learning from him, I always thought that I needed to make personal sacrifices to make it big in the corporate world. I really wish now that I could reach out and find that corporate-stair-climbing friend. I want to tell him three things.

First, my friend, you can have both. You do not have to sacrifice personal life to reach professional success. It is true that I do not have the corner office in the Taj Mahal of corporate buildings. Building and maintaining my consulting business by working from home is not easy. Things like getting health insurance as an individual are especially tough. On the other hand, I have a one-minute commute to work, my work life automatically pauses when I get a call from my daughter, and my team and I work on some fun projects. Not bad to have the best of both worlds.

Second, I measure success differently today. Even as our small consulting company is being shaken to the core because of the financial turmoil in the world, I know I somehow have to survive the next two years. Raka will leave for college in two years, and I believe my success will be determined by the time I can spend with her.

Third, you were right. Yes, at times, in order to achieve bigger glories, one must make smaller sacrifices in life. But you got the glories reversed. The smaller sacrifice is the professional sacrifice. If you lose a job you will find another one, but if you lose your connection with your family, will you ever find it again? I have learned to take this job seriously. It is a job from which I cannot take even a day off. I have learned not to close doors for my daughter but instead to inspire her to dream big and act on achieving her dreams. I have learned to be there to experience every moment. I have learned to listen to her.

This is a story of my daughter, Raka, evolving in life. It is important to know that I have an important role in this story. As Bill Cosby would say, yes, “I was instrumental in bringing her to the world.” And yet it will not take a rocket scientist to figure out that I have had more than my fair share of failures in life. But all through every failure in my life, there has been one thread of saving grace: every day I have tried to be a good dad to my daughter as I have watched her blossom into a wonderful young woman. *Tried* is the key word here.

Fortunately, this is not a story about me trying to be a good dad. Instead, it is a story about how a little girl used all her charm, her patience, her love, and her caring nature to train her dad. She trained me to be a better dad and, more importantly, a better person.

The story of my daughter is based on real events in our lives. But reality is relative. During my divorce I learned a hard truth from Raka: for her there was *her dad’s reality*, *her mother’s reality*, and then *her own reality*. The only thing that mattered to her was her own reality, but it also confused her that all three realities did not always sync with each other.

In this story, I try to stay as close as I can to Raka’s reality and my reality. If you were a witness to our lives, you may see some of the events a little differently. It could be that in my attempt to glorify the story I have painted the events with a few magic colors from a proud dad. I feel that doing so is not harmful. After all, it is not every day I get a chance to costar in a story with the most wonderful person on this planet.

WAKE UP! WAKE UP! THE DAY AFTER 9/11

Louisville, Kentucky, 2001

My life thus far has been full of wake-up calls. Some of the wake-up calls have been figurative, some have been literal. Some have been loud, some have been prolonged. There have been times I have woken up after a wake-up call, and there have been times I have snoozed. Every wake-up call in my life, figurative or literal, has had a purpose, and it has always been up to me to figure that purpose out. This is the story of the biggest wake-up call in my life, which happened the day after 9/11.

All of us remember where we were during the horrors of 9/11. Even today I cannot comprehend the full magnitude of the horror. It was like watching the scariest movie on this planet and then being told that it was real; it shocked the entire existence out of most of us. I was in Louisville, Kentucky. Some of my coworkers were coming back from a trip to Toronto. The cell phones were down, and none of us knew how our coworkers were going to make it back home. The same day, at the same time in the morning, my brother was flying on an American Airlines flight from London to Chicago. At the time of the horrifying events, his plane must have been just a few hundred miles east of New York City. Fortunately his flight got rerouted to Goose Bay, Canada.

The world was in shock; my life was filled with uncertainty. But even with all this turmoil, I was still not ready for what happened the next morning.

The day after 9/11, everyone at my company took a forced vacation day. With travel restricted, there were no meetings. I was at home, alternating between watching the news on TV and the news on the Internet.

In the middle of this anxious time, Raka came and sat next to me. She rested her head on my shoulder and asked, “What are you doing, Dad?” It was one of those casual discussions where she would ask me something and I would answer her without looking up from my laptop. Usually we would have a conversation while I checked my e-mail—I was a master at multitasking. But that day’s conversation was very different, and I was not ready for what was going to hit me. The random questions and talking continued, and then there was silence. I turned and stared at my eight-year-old daughter and realized that she was staring back at me.

I was uncomfortable with the silence. I had to ask something. Just as I would with any of my employees, I asked Raka, “How are we doing?” It is such a strange question. It is a setup. Employees always answered the question with, “Good,” and that would lift the burden off me. If we were doing well, then there was nothing to worry about. With employees, I would follow up and have a meaningless, superficial conversation, then look at my assistant outside to indicate that time was up.

But with Raka, I was in for a big surprise. She looked at me and said, “Not good at all.” I thought I had heard something wrong. I asked her again, but the answer was the same, only this time it was more determined.

I was in unfamiliar territory. I was not prepared at all. I asked her immediately, “Are you not feeling well? What is wrong?”

She looked at me again and said, “Nothing, Dad.” She gently cuddled up next to me. I closed my laptop and put the TV on mute and then pulled Raka close to me. She looked up and smiled.

I asked her again, “What is wrong, baby?”

She sighed, looked at me, and said, “You don’t know me, Dad.”

I failed to understand the pain she felt as she made this statement. I felt challenged. Instead of trying to understand why she felt this way, I got defensive. “Of course I know you,” I replied. I wished she would believe me just because I *felt* I knew her.

Raka thought for a while and then got out a piece of paper. She scribbled something on it and gave it to me. She had written three questions. The questions were simple, and I was sure I could handle them. But I still could not believe what was happening: I was getting a surprise quiz. The three questions were:

1. Who is my best friend?
2. What is my favorite restaurant?
3. What is the best thing you and I have ever done?

As I tackled the first question, I made a mental list of all her friends. Through a methodical process of elimination I came up with two names, and bingo! The answer flashed in front of my eyes. I had done this so many times in the business world—eliminated low-probability options to come up with the answer that had the highest probability of success. This was a fun game. I thought we should play it more often. I could get good at this.

I disclosed my answer with a chuckle, but my smile died instantly when Raka immediately said, “nope!” What came after that was even worse. “Look, I told you, you don’t know me.”

Unwilling to admit defeat, I realized I could still get two out of three answers right. The other two questions were easier. I decided to keep the restaurant question for last, since my career was in restaurant marketing. There was no way I would get that one wrong. So I focused on our favorite things we’d done. There were so many to choose from. Was it the time I took her to Churchill Downs for the races? Was it the time I took her ice skating? Was it our Hawaii trip? Was it the time she came to work with me? Or was it the time when I bought her that new dress from Macy’s New York City? So many special moments; of course I knew her.

Finally I settled with the ice-skating trip. She loves to skate. It had to be one of the best. Raka listened but did not comment. Then she asked me, “And what is my favorite restaurant?” Of course it was Papa John’s pizza. I worked there, and Raka had even met the founder, John. That was easy. I delivered my answer and awaited the hug from her to confirm that I knew her. Nailing the final two answers would give me a face-saving win.

Raka looked very puzzled. What followed was the worst performance appraisal I have ever received. It was brutal. And I cannot argue that I did not deserve it.

“Dad, do you remember what we did when we went ice skating? You took me there after canceling twice. I was all dressed and ready to go both the times you canceled. The one time we were actually there, you took a table close to the rink to see me. Every time I came around you waved at me, but you were on your cell phone the entire time. Then you came up and told me it was time to leave. We had some popcorn and left. It was fun, Dad, but you were not there.”

I was confused. What was Raka talking about? I had been there. I had canceled a meeting with my boss to be there.

Raka went on. “My favorite time with you is when you pick me up from school, we hold hands, we stop at an ice cream place, we talk, and then we go home and I sit on the couch next to you and we watch the *Bill Cosby Show*.”

Now I was really confused. What was she talking about? She did not like the big, grand things we did? She liked the day-to-day activities more? Very strange, yet very interesting. I have to admit that I had had no clue.

“Now, about my favorite restaurant. It’s Applebee’s. Every time I go there they give me a

free balloon, and I love their mac-n-cheese the best.” She paused. “Look, Dad, you do not know me.” That was followed with a long, deep sigh.

I was disheartened. If this had been a performance appraisal at a job, the next thing I heard would have been, “You’re fired.” I realized I needed to use my best skills to get out of this jam. At work, I had two strategies that would get me out of any crisis: either I deferred the problem so I had more time to solve it or I switched the subject to a different topic in which I had a better chance of succeeding. I wanted to make a comeback with my daughter, so I was ready to use both my tactics. I told her, “Raka, I know you do not like Louisville, Kentucky. I know you want to go back to Denver. I am trying to get us back there. I promise it will happen soon. Give me a little time, baby, okay?”

Raka had a determined look on her face. She was not going to let me sway her. She told me, “Dad, I love you, so you do not have to lie to me. I want to go to Denver—you know that—but if you really wanted to go to Denver, by now we would have gone back.”

It felt like my little girl had taken a dagger and punched it into my heart. I was shattered. There are no other words to describe that experience. I tried to explain the lack of career opportunities in Denver for professionals at my level and other market factors, but honestly, I did not know what I was saying. As I spoke, Raka’s words echoed in my mind over and over: “Dad, you do not have to lie to me.” I was nearly in tears.

Raka would not let me off easily. She persisted, “If you are trying, how many interviews have you had in Denver? Why did you go to Detroit to interview the other day?”

The message had been delivered. It had been delivered loud and clear. I could see my future life. I would be sixty-five, have tons of money in the bank, and be retired from a very celebrated career. I would have made it onto numerous who’s-who lists, but my life would be about counting days. I would count the days until two annual phone calls from my daughter. One would come on Father’s Day, and one would come on my birthday. They would be brief calls in which she wished me happy birthday, I asked her how she was, and she said “Good,” and then there would be a pause. She would say, “Dad, please take care of yourself,” and hang up. I could hear the sound of the disconnected phone call. It echoed in my ears.

I wanted to ask her questions, but what would I ask her? I did not know her. I sat and cried. *How did I get here?* I wondered. *Why did I not see this coming?*

As I thought more that evening, I realized this was the biggest and loudest wake-up call in my life. The reality made me want to pull the sheets over my head and go back to sleep, but a small part of me wanted to wake up and change my life.

~ Some wake-up calls we really wish we had not heard. Waking up forces us to accept reality. ~