

Summary of *Raising a Father*, by Arjun Sen

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 one’s 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 one 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 and others like him. I want to tell him you can have both.

I measure success differently today. My daughter, Raka, will leave for college in two years, and I believe my success will be determined by the time I can spend with her. This is a story of Raka evolving in life and using all her charm, patience, love, and caring nature to teach me how to be a better dad. And a better person. It has been my education of a lifetime.

My intent in writing this book was simple. I wanted to give it to Raka as her Christmas gift. I wanted to tell her about her goodness. But the book turned out to be my own gift. As I wrote, I cried, I smiled, and I lived through many different emotions as I revisited my life experiences from today’s reality. Sometimes reliving the moments taught me things I had missed learning the first time. I really did not want this book to end.

My world changed one day after most everyone else’s. It was the morning after the tragedy of 9/11, and I was in for the biggest shock of my life.

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 a 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 email—I was a master at multi-tasking. 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 then got out a piece of paper. She scribbled something on it, and then she 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 because of my career in restaurant marketing, there was no way I would get that one wrong. So I focused on our favorite things we did. 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 cancelled. 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 cancelled 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 could 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.

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

That day marked the beginning of my new life. I realized that I’d had my priorities upside down, and I began a serious effort to make sure that vision of counting days to my twice-yearly phone calls from my daughter would never become reality. As I learned more about my daughter and developed our relationship, I found that she was much more capable and responsible than I had ever dreamed. She even became an irreplaceable manager at my new home-based consulting company.

THE START OF A PRESIDENCY

Denver, Colorado, 2007

For the summer of 2007, I wanted to do something different. I was tired of Raka waking up and saying she had nothing to do, a typical problem faced by parents of teenagers. I decided to help Raka set up the teen division of our company, Restaurant Marketing Group. My objectives were simple. Raka would stay engaged, she would be home with some of her friends, and I would have solved the “bored with nothing to do” problem.

As the summer progressed, I saw a young professional in action. When Raka assumed her role as the president of the teen division in my company, she was ready to hire her first team members. Initially she picked four of her best friends, and I was relieved, but then Raka the president took over. She had a detailed discussion with me on what skills she needed in her team. The next morning she came to me with a new list. Each of the four members on her list had specific skills that Raka was comfortable with. When I asked her why she did this her answer was simple, “If I do not have the best team, I have to do more work myself.” Hmm, human resources leadership insight.

For the roll-out meeting, Raka and I were supposed to present to the four team members and their parents. That afternoon, I was ready. Clint, as always, was assisting me to make this event a success. A few hours before the meeting, Raka was acting strangely goofy. I tried to calm her down, but it was to no avail. Finally I had to do the unthinkable, I asked her to meet me in my home-office. I told her that this was a very big evening for her and me. She must calm down and seize the opportunity. A speech followed that would make any CEO managing a new president proud, but Raka looked at me and said, “Dad, please do not be mean. This is a big day for me, and I am really nervous, but don’t worry. I will do all right.” Amazing confidence.

When the presentation started, Raka was at her dynamic best. I did the formal introduction on the legalities of this work venture. After that, it was Raka taking over the team and explaining to them what they would do and how much money they would make. Amazing. The team was formed, a leader was born, and I found a new reason to be proud of Raka.

The team worked on four projects, all of which were for national players in the restaurant industry. The first few days the team was naturally a bit overwhelmed. They had many new things to get used to. There was me, Raka’s dad, giving lectures on marketing, marketing research, project management, and other areas, there were guest speakers who are coming in to talk about public relations and media planning, and in between there were free meals at Chipotle and Quiznos. At the end of the summer each of the team members would make \$400 guaranteed. Not a bad proposition.

Since this was the first job for all the teens, they did not know what to expect. There were some distracted moments, and there were moments where each was trying to go her own direction, and we had only eight weeks. In eight weeks the team had to research four brands then do ad concepts and presentations on each of the brands. I was getting worried and started to doubt if this team would ever get serious about reaching its goal.

After the first week, I talked to my president, Raka, about my concern. This was one of the many moments when I started a serious discussion with her and she made it easy by accepting the problem. No effort was spent in arguing if the problem existed. Instead we were working on solutions. Raka was asking for help. She wanted to solve the problem herself. In the past, in my corporate days, I implemented a start-stop-continue process for team members. I felt that was a simple yet effective way of dealing with team members instead of doing a too-detailed performance approval. I explained the process to Raka so that she could implement it with her team. She listened and nodded, and then she was off to bed. The CEO-president relationship changed to father-daughter. A little later I walked into her bedroom to give her a good-night kiss. She was half asleep, staring at an episode of *Friends* on TV. I watched as I pulled the door closed behind me. There was my little president. Was this real or was I dreaming? I get to work with my princess? I am the luckiest person alive.

The next morning, there was a little extra activity before the team work session. Raka and her HR

person had written down a start-stop-continue for each team member. It was done in confidence in a set of one-on-one meetings. I have done these in the past in the corporate world, but this time it was different. There was instant magic in the air. Each team member was energized and completely focused on the tasks at hand. Simply astounding.

LESSON: *If you take people seriously, not only will they be serious, but also they will teach you a thing or two.*

Raka has turned me into a better person. I am more patient with people, and maybe a little bit more caring and compassionate. Unlike my corporate days, when I was ruthless with people, I am kinder and more patient with my team members in my consulting company.

It has been a lot of learning so far, but I am not done yet. I still have two more years of daily classes, and I am looking forward to every lesson.