My Unexpected Inspiration
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IN MY OPINION

My Unexpected Inspiration

How a chance encounter kindled my faith

SUGANDHA JAIN

What started out as a phone conversation with a prospective client about the services we offered at our learning center in Eastern Canada ended up being a wake-up call for me. I was talking to Ally, a parent interested in having her elementary-school daughter receive individualized instruction in math. During the course of our conversation, Ally noticed my accent and asked if I was Indian--and Hindu. When I replied, "yes, " she revealed to me that her husband was also Hindu. She then asked if I might be willing to answer some of her questions about India and Hinduism. I replied that I would be happy to oblige.

Although Ally's husband is of Indian origin, he does not know much about Hinduism, his religion of birth, because he was brought up in Tanzania and Toronto. Ally was new to Ottawa. Her friends are all white Canadians like her. She wanted to know where she could buy Indian jewelry for herself and traditional Indian clothes for her husband and two children. Although Toronto is flooded with Indian shopping arcades, Ottawa is not.

Ally loves Indian food and regularly frequented popular, local Indian restaurants to partake of samosas and shahi paneer. Lately, she had been wheedling her husband for the names of his favorite Indian dishes from childhood. By gaining access to Indian cookery sites on the Web, she had already successfully concocted spicy cholas. Now she wanted to know from me what local grocery stores might supply her with the fresh vegetables most commonly used in Indian cooking.

Finally, Ally's questions veered toward the philosophy and practice of Hinduism with enquiries about its symbols and rituals. Are there any Hindu temples in Ottawa? she wanted to know. Would they find her presence in the temple acceptable? She commented that I was privileged to be born into a religion with such a rich cultural heritage and confessed to me that her father is an atheist.

Ally had read parts of the Bhagvad Gita and was impressed. She was also fascinated by Hinduism's multitude of Gods and asked if there are any classes being offered locally that might help her family gain more insight into this wonderful religion.

Listening to Ally reminded me of a fictional story I had written a long time ago about the Sun God wanting to bless a ten-year-old boy named Rudra. Every day, the Sun God would rise, hoping to catch a glimpse of Rudra. But day after day, Rudra would still be sleeping at dawn. In this way, Rudra consistently managed to evade the Sun God. In the end, the Sun God got tired of waiting for Rudra and decided to stop trying to bless him. Now after meeting Ally, I was realizing that I was a bit like Rudra. Although my birth-religion, Hinduism, had many gifts to give me, I had failed to receive them.

Ally dreamt of taking her husband and children to India where she would happily lie on its ploughed fields of wheat and soak up its spiritual ambiance. Gratitude was part of this inspiration she felt to help orient her husband to his Hindu legacy. She had only recently married him and was grateful to him for providing her children from a previous marriage with a stable home. Now she felt that she might be able to contribute to his life by helping him establish a connection with his Hindu roots.

Recently, a neighbor came knocking at my door to ask for a cup of rice flour. At first, I couldn't even remember if I had any rice flour. I had to search my pantry for it. Surprisingly, I found some and gave it to her. Ally was like that neighbor. She wanted to learn from me all about Hinduism. I was surprised I had so much to offer her. But, more, I was surprised at how much she had to offer me.

Sugandha Jain is the Educational Director of Grade Expectations Learning Center in Ottawa, Canada