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TEMPLES

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How one man renovated a temple by collecting just one rupee, and no more, from each person

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Balasubramaniam's weird habit was incurable. When anyone looked at him for even a moment, he would pull a gleaming brass plate from his briefcase and ask the person to drop a one-rupee coin onto it. This collection went on for years.

In June, 1999, a stroke turned his active 78-year-old mother speechless and paralyzed. Balasubramaniam and his wife Nagalakshmi threw themselves into providing home-based, long-term care for their mother, a job too few children dare undertake these days.

Balasubramaniam's mother had composed bhajanas, or devotional music, ever since she was seven years old and, until her stroke, had sung like a bird. As he watched her now in her silence, he remembered his childhood, when his mother spoke to him with love, sowing seeds of dreams in his mind—dreams of getting a good education, of being useful to

society and his country, of doing good. Balasubramaniam also remembered his struggles as a young adult to understand the meaning of all the ups and downs of life. His mother had told him, "If you can, you should build a temple one day. The idols in the temples are not just stone. If you look at them with the right attitude, you can receive answers to many troubling questions. Also, temples are power places; they prompt people to shed their burdens of worry and anxiety, and charge them up with new energy."

"Now is the time, mother," thought Balasubramaniam, "Now is the time to fulfill the dream you planted in my heart so many years ago." He whispered his resolve into mother's ear. She could not answer, but squeezed his arm with her left hand, the one that was not paralyzed, looked at him, and cried.

A few years back when I had asked Balasubramaniam why he collected coins, he said that he had plans for a temple. He feared that if he used only his own money to build it, some sleeping ego might flare up in him, rendering him overly prideful. He wanted everyone in his community to participate in the temple work. He chose not to accept the coin on his outstretched palm which would be symbolic of accepting it for himself, rather he would receive the coin on a plate, symbolic of accepting it on behalf of

His plans for the temple. He would not ask for, nor accept, anything more than a one-rupee coin, as he did not want big-money interests to monopolize the temple. He wanted to make it everyone's temple. Every time he asked for a coin, he prayed for fulfillment of his temple plans.

Since he moved to Pasumalai, Madurai, in 1987, Balasubramaniam had not spent a day without visiting the forty-year-old Mariamman temple at the entrance to his colony. The presiding Deity, Goddess Mariamman, was made of clay. She had a leaky thatched roof over Her head, perched on four bamboo poles. She should have been painted every year, but wasn't, due to lack of money. She was offered no daily puja, or worship, by a priest. Balasubramaniam vowed to Her that someday he would renew Her shrine.

Over the years Balasubramaniam's collection had grown into 100,000 rupees (^{us}\$2,100). Just imagine meeting 100,000 people, asking each of them for one rupee, and praying that many times. Maybe he could convince others to collect rupees for the temple as well.

One evening, looking down from his terrace, he spotted a bunch of young boys chatting away under a streetlight. "Boys," he called to them, "How would you like to help renovate the Amman temple?" The boys, who moments before had been talking about the latest episode of an MTV program, looked at him as if he had just landed from outer space. No one had ever approached them with such an outlandish idea. But Balasubramaniam had ample patience and a way with youngsters. By the next "under-the-street-light" meeting, these same

boys had been transformed into eager generals, committed to renovating the Amman temple. Their families were surprised to see them stop chasing after pop-culture and work for a temple instead. To these boys Balasubramaniam explained how he collected money over the years and then invited the boys to add to it—but no extortion or demanding, he told them. The boys could approach anyone and everyone and ask for just one rupee. While the boys learned valuable lessons in patience, perseverance and staying focused, they also discovered the simple math that over time, one plus one plus one adds up to a million and more.

In February, 2000, Balasubramaniam and his wife commissioned a sculptor to carve a Mariamman statue in black stone. As the sculptor chiseled away at the stone, carving out a beautiful Goddess, one rupee coins continued to trickle in. Soon the kitty jingled

with the sweet sound of 300,000 coins. Word about the temple renovation began to buzz around the neighborhood. The community flexed its muscles into action and offered to do anything necessary to make "their" project a success.

By May, 2000, the new Mariamman was fully carved. On the auspicious day, a fire ceremony, was performed at the old temple, asking permission from the Deity for installation of a new statue and for the commencement of renovations. The flower-bedecked Goddess was taken in a procession all over the neighborhood and was then installed in a sanctified spot in front of the old Deity.

By now, his mother, who had been bedridden for nearly a year, was declining rapidly. "Hold on, mother, we are just about to fulfill your dream," Balasubramaniam would think

every time he went into the room to check on her or feed her (she was off solids now and living on only water, milk and yogurt).

By September, a concrete shrine and gopuram, or temple tower, had been completed. Ten priests assembled to conduct the kumbhabhishekam, grand opening. This was the most festive and joyous event the entire neighborhood had ever participated in. Balasubramaniam's father, who had lived in northern India since he was three, had never seen a kumbhabhishekam in all his life. The same was true for many people in the neighborhood, both young and old. Beginning on the day of the grand event, Balasubramaniam spooned into his mother's mouth every day a few drops of punyatirtha, sacred water, from the gopura puja, temple tower ceremony. Her physical condition continued to worsen, but she was cheerful, and Balasubramaniam often saw something like a smile on her contorted face. Perhaps

she could taste the difference between this sacred water and her daily regular water. Indeed, the sacred water from the gopura puja is a water like no other—it has in its molecules a power to give peace to the soul. And it did bring the ultimate peace. Within weeks after the ceremonies celebrating the temple renovation, Balasubramaniam's mother left her body. As Balasubramaniam discharged his duty of cremating her, recovering her ashes and dispersing them into the river, it occurred to him that death is simply an event in which elements embrace elements. Flesh, blood and bones (minerals) go to earth; the water content of the body vaporizes and mingles with the clouds; the body's heat merges with the enormous heat of the pyre; and the life force (the divine being within) flies off into the infinite expanse of space. But is mother really dead? Or is she more alive than ever, exalted and present everywhere, embracing everything and everyone?

When Balasubramaniam visited the temple a few days later, he could not really pray. All he could do was see images of his mother merging with the Goddess Amman. Now, having inspired the entire neighborhood to renovate Her shrine, Mariamman has settled into a peaceful and much adored life. A priest comes twice daily to perform pujas to the Goddess. Neighborhood volunteers maintain the shrine, and Balasubramaniam's eleven-year-old daughter Asha sweeps the temple every day. The temple has become an immense source of pride and joy for the community and has also become a center for many social interactions. The residents of Pasumalai would like to improve the temple even further. Their wish list includes a compound wall and courtyard of brick and cement, running water, a good garbage bin, a stand for keeping footwear, and a full-time priest. None of this can be accomplished without adding one rupee to another. If you ever go to Madurai, don't forget to visit the Mariamman temple in Pasumalai to see for yourself what a difference a single coin can

make.

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