

*We will read and write about freedom
in the sunlight,
sing and dance about it
in the moonlight,
and whisper about it in the darkness.*

*And tonight we will find
deep inside us
the soulforce
truthforce
that resides in the freedom
of Tibet
Palestine
Kashmir
Myanmar
Manipur, Assam, Nagalim
the Cherokee Nation
the Mapuche Nation
the Yirrkala Nation
Leonard Peltier
Mumia Abu-Jamal
Hector Llaitul
Aung San Suu Kyi
Sharmila Irom*

And tonight, we will...

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in remembrance



Kizhedath Damodaran

25 february 1912 – 3 july 1976

from his granddaughter
for his great-granddaughter
neither of whom got to know him

to mark his birth centenary

25 february 2012

To spend some time remembering the person Acchan was; to mark the centenary of his birth; to celebrate his life and his legacy in even a small way; to make an offering of our deepest respect and abiding love: this is our intention in putting together this small booklet.

Acchan died months after I became his daughter-in-law. But those short months were enough for me to know more of him as a person than what others could tell me or I could tell from his writings — his simplicity and selflessness, his pursuit of knowledge and truth, his absolute focus on what he was doing, his attention to detail (which I haven't heard anyone talk about), the depth of his caring — enough to form the bond of a lifetime.

Acchan wrote volumes, published and unpublished. As it happens, the very last thing he wrote before succumbing to a stroke more than 35 years ago was a letter to me. I got that letter only weeks later (and still treasure it). From then on, letters took on a very special meaning for me. Part of what his granddaughter Malavika has chosen to write in his honour is also a letter, to him; that brings a deep sense of a circle completed.

-Tara

I am older now than my father was when he died. He died more than 35 years ago, more than half my life ago. Yet, on occasions his image pierces into the protective bubble of intellectual life I have successfully built around me, causing tears and choking. It is happening now, as my fingers type.

As a child, I hero-worshipped him. I still do, so chances are that I can never examine him without emotional clouding. He was my role model, and my teacher. (And here is something that I find hardest to say: I loved him, and still do. I didn't say this when he was alive, but I should say it at least before I die.)

I learnt the importance of being truthful from him when I was twelve, when I told a lie and discovered how much it disturbed him. I didn't realize, until I became an academic, that I had also imbibed from him the dedication to the pursuit of truth. And it took me even longer to realize that my pursuit of theory, of philosophy, and of the well-being of humanity, as well as my habit of "discussions" and debates, of being "impractical", and even of being "absent minded" — all stemmed from what I imbibed from him, either biologically or through osmotic role modeling.

When he was alive, I obstinately refused to read *Das Kapital* though he tried his best to entice me to. Now I wish I could discuss Marxism with him. I wish I could see him putting on his shirt buttons the wrong way. I wish I could go to sleep, as I did as a child, with my arm around him. I wish I could say all this to him.

Mohan

Dear Acchacchan,

I wish I'd gotten to know you, even just meet you. I'm certain you would have wanted to know me, perhaps would even be proud of me. And I'm certain we would get along great, even if we might differ on the role of the State, implementation of a people's self-governance, what place humans have in relation to the rest of life on this planet. Or maybe not, maybe we'd agree perfectly, who knows?

I have a daughter now. She's sleeping on my chest as I write. She was born on November 3, just after the time of year that various cultures around the northern half of the planet mark as holy days during which to remember and honor the dead. Some believe that a window opens between the world of the living and the world of the dead. For us here in Patagonia, it was spring, not autumn, when she was born, a time of flowering and re-birth. This little one has roots in both hemispheres; I wonder which seasons and holy days she will relate to more.

I can't help the feeling that you and your great-granddaughter were hanging out together in that window between worlds before she left the womb and entered our crazy world. Am I being wishful, irrational, superstitious?

You rejected religion after the death of your father, Acchan told me. I'm no fan of dogmatic organized religion, even rejected it rebelliously for a spell, but even then for me spirituality and politics were one. What would you say now if I could ask you?

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Amma and Acchan got to meet Anjali when she was just a month old, and for this we are all so grateful. They've rocked her to sleep and cooed at her in Malayalam during diaper changes. She's started babbling her own language now, more every day. Acchan went back to India before she started; I hope they have a chance to talk to each other soon. I wonder what it would be like if you, Amma, Acchan, Anjali, Denali, and I could all be together. What would we chat about? What would we argue passionately and good-naturedly about? What would we agree wholeheartedly about? You've passed on your goofiness to Acchan, and it's definitely got to me too, though neither of us go out to the balcony over a public street to change our clothes so as not to change in front of guests in the house. Will Anjali be goofy too?

It's hard not to have hopes and expectations for this little baby. I want her to speak Malayalam, to eventually have enough Malayalam to read *PaTTabaakki*. Not just enough to read it like I did, slowly, haltingly, getting only half the way through and even that only with the help of my other grandfather (who acted in it when he was young, he told me). No, I want her to be able to really read it by the time she's my age, stage it, take it to villages resisting the feudal mind.

I won't be so foolish as to hope that by the time she's my age there will no longer be a feudal mind, a colonial machine, that humanity will no longer be sick with greed and fear, no longer have the desire to control and possess everything and everyone.

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If you were with us in this world today would you be disheartened by the feudal mind that is seeping into every corner of the globe, or heartened by the silenced battered but untiring resistance that links arms around the earth?

If you were around I would tell you about Larry Gibson and the resistance against mountain top removal in the Appalachias. I would tell you about the Mapuche resistance in Argentina and Chile. Or perhaps you would already know about them, but I would tell you about what I saw and heard in person, and ask you what you thought. You would surely know about Sharmila Irom in Manipur.

In 2010 there was a call for art and action to mark ten years of Sharmila's hunger strike against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. I wrote as an offering the first part of "A Song of Silence, Hunger, and Heroes," the poem that comes after this letter. The second part was an offering I made to the 2006 celebration of the centennial of the birth of 'satyagraha' as a word and concept. Each line describing the future is inspired by a real history, an act of creative resistance by some community or person around the world.

I write that "Seventy-eight percent of countries reporting child malnutrition export food". This is directly from Derrick Jensen's *Endgame, Volume 1, The Problem of Civilization* (Chapter "A Culture of Occupation", p.195, in case you have access to books over there). Jensen is

responsible for seriously reorganizing and redirecting my thoughts and behavior with respect to the coming years. I don't know what those years will look like, but I hope to do everything I can for the world that your great-granddaughter Anjali will inherit. I'm asking you and Anjali, our ancestors and descendants, to guide me through this fog of civilization, out towards the jungle of the new world.

Happy Birthday Acchacchaa.

Love,

Ammu

A Song of Silence, Hunger, and Heroes

Malavika Tara Mohanan

Folks sit down to eat. For a while at the table
there is only the sound of chewing and plates and mms.
Someone says, "Donde hay silencio hay hambre."
Where there is silence, there is hunger.
A conversation starts up, and a lovely meal is had.

Tonight, from Wallmapu to Manipur,
where there is hunger, there is silence.

Ramadan, the holy fast of Islam. For 40 days,
no food nor water from sunrise to sundown.
Nightfall, after the last call to prayer,
folks sit down to break fast with dates and water.

Those who cannot complete the fast
make an offering.
They arrange for food for someone else to break fast,
someone too poor to fast otherwise
for they have no control over when and what they eat.

There is justice in this.
There is spirituality in it.
Justice and spirituality are never far apart.

The power to fast cannot be acquired with
credit cards, PhDs, or AK-47s.
It comes from a deep knowledge of self and of one's place in the universe,
and an undeniable love for life.

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From Ireland to India,
the hunger strike is an ancient form of protest against injustice.
For some it is a tactic.
For others it is part of their spiritual path.
Sharmila Irom calls it her bounden duty.

Sharmila Irom has refused food for 10 years. In November 2000, in Malom, Manipur, the Indian military killed 10 villagers standing at a bus stop. Sharmila stopped eating, and will not voluntarily take food or drink into her body till the repeal of the brutal law of the land, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, under which such killings, and even worse, are commonplace. Within days Sharmila was imprisoned for attempting to commit suicide; ever since, the government has force-fed her through a tube down her nose.

Have you ever felt the clarity that comes with not eating?
The wakefulness that comes when your body is not stuffed to sleep?
The light that appears when you joyfully and easily do your bounden duty?

In 2010, Mapuche political prisoners in Chile carried out a hunger strike for three months. They are being held under an anti-terrorist law that was put in place under the Pinochet regime, the military dictatorship that held Chile prisoner for 16 years.

Maria Tralkal, a representative for the hunger strikers, had a message of solidarity and support for Sharmila Irom. She and her community consider force-feeding to be a form of torture, she said. So did the suffragettes of the United States and Britain almost a century ago. So does the World Medical Association.

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There is another kind of hunger,
a craving for wealth and power
that no amount of credit cards, PhDs, or AK-47s will sate.
One that devours everything including itself.
For what will it eat once it has killed this planet,
species by species, ecosystem by ecosystem, community by community?

Seventy-eight percent of countries reporting child malnutrition export food.
A woman acting in defense of the life of her people
is charged with attempting suicide.
From Chile to Chhattisgarh, those who offer their unarmed bodies
to shield the land that sustains them
are called terrorists.

To know someone, we ask them what they are called.
To really know them, we must ask them what they call themselves.
To ask them anything, we must speak their language.

The language of the Mapuche is called Mapudungun; 'mapu' is earth, 'dungun' is speech or speaking, 'che' is person or people. In the Argentine side of Patagonia, after cultural and physical genocide, few Mapuches speak Mapudungun. In its place there is mostly silence, and poor peasant Spanish. But across the Andes in Chile the force of the tongue still lives strong. Where young Mapuches grow up speaking the language of the earth, there lives a culture of resistance and resilience against the destruction of the land.

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Up north, in West Virginia, USA,
the sing-song drawl of the Appalachians marks one as a hillbilly.
Larry Gibson never got past third grade
but will rattle off facts and figures quicker than you can catch them,
as he tells you story after story about
the mountains that are his home,
the blasting that is systematically leveling these mountains,
the thick black water that pours out of the taps,
the wealth of the earth destroyed for the sake of black gold.
He defends the mountains and lives with regular death threats.
If fighting the coal industry eventually means living without electric lights,
then heck, he says,
he'll live without electric lights.

Have you ever been with someone who sources their energy from life itself?

I've never met Sharmila.
I imagine she speaks slowly, softly,
penetrating politically, technically, and spiritually
to the heart of the matter,
without a hint of aggression,
even while speaking of great injustice,
like Sergio Catriaf does.

I went to speak with Sergio in Temuco, Chile, September 2010.
Despite having been let out on bail,
he was still fasting alongside the other Mapuche political prisoners.

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The next day was the bicentennial of Chile's independence from Spain.
We watched soldiers and schoolchildren in the military parade.
The officials wore capes and hats that were
eerily reminiscent of Nazi Germany.
For a brief moment I wasn't sure when or where I was.

Centuries ago the Spanish invaders met with tremendous resistance when they reached Mapuche territory, known as Wallmapu. The conquest failed in the southern tip of the Americas. The Spanish were unable to colonize the Mapuche people. Later as an "independent" nation, Chile swallowed, or assimilated, one side of Wallmapu. Without a war or a word, the Mapuche people were finally colonized by the simple drawing of borders and the myth of national unity.

A similar story could be told about India,
the nation that some think it is,
and the liberation that others will do their bounden duty to attain.

The story of the Mapuche political prisoners on hunger strike is
as unheard as the years of Sharmila's non-violent resistance,
as silenced as the voices of the Appalachias.

And everywhere we haven't looked
there are unsung heroes about whom children are waiting to hear.

I'd like to meet her some day.
Part of me wants to meet her in a free Manipur,
but another part of me wonders,
if she begins to eat, will she lose her light?
Sharmila Irom. The Iron Lady, they call her. A Gandhi of today, they say.

Fasting and hunger were old friends for Mohandas K. Gandhi.
Silence, too, he knew well,
observing a day without speaking every Monday for years.

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So many of us want to change the world.
Leave a livable planet for the children to come.
But we don't know what to do.
Perhaps, if we know silence well enough,
if we know hunger well enough,
we will know what to do,
what feeds us,
when to be silent,
and when to sing.

*

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*And tonight
we will keep right on singing
for our dead.*

*And we will give our dead
back to the Earth
and the Earth will embrace them
and breathe them into the seeds of new
life.*

*And we will save these seeds
and exchange them
and plant them everywhere, even —
especially —
in our most crowded cities,*

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*and the flowers will come
cracking out of the concrete,
and when the petals fall
we will clap our hands in wonder
at the fruits
and the plenty before us.*

*What we have, we will give,
and what we need, we will create.
We will hang dewdrops
from our ears
and sunshine
from our hips and
leave the diamonds
and the gold
for the earth to wear.*

*When we cut down
the body of a tree
we will first ask its spirit
for its permission,
forgiveness,
and blessing.
When we take
from a body of water
we will remember that every drop is sacred.
We will know what we take
into our own body,
and what we become.*

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*We will measure time
by the skies
and space by our stride.
The planet will be our playground,
the universe our classroom,
and we will see all the world
in the seed of a grape.*

*We will build each other houses
and grow each other food
and bathe each other's children.*

*We will breathe the air of equality.
We will be good neighbours
and bad subjects.
We will have a healthy disrespect for
authority
and question before we believe
but have faith before we dismiss
and understand before we judge.*

*We will write and re-write our own laws,
and the greatest punishment for a crime
will be the very knowledge
that we have committed it.*

*Our minds and hearts
will be weapons of love,
our bodies,
shields.*

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