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Trans-cultural dialogues about mental health, extreme states and alternatives for Recovery
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My Journey from Adversity to Advocacy

As a little girl growing up in India, my life was shaped by the many stories my mother told me from the ancient epics Ramayana and Mahabharatha. While her stories lulled me to sleep, I was awakened by the dreams my father spun for me.

Sitting on my father's lap, gazing at the crystal blue waters of the Pacific Ocean, the expansive palm-lined streets of Los Angeles, and the majestic cliffs of the Grand Canyon photographed in the National Geographic magazines he loved to read, I could almost picture myself in these far-off places.

“Princess, one day, you will send me pictures of you visiting these places,” my father would say, planting a kiss on my head. I believed my father's dream would come true.

But, at 18, when panic pounded my heart, anxiety coursed through my veins, and my soul was darkened by depression, I had no words to describe my horror. And, my parents had no words to comfort me.



Ignorant about mental health issues, my parents and physicians did not understand my pain. Having no words in my culture to even conceptualize my suffering, I became convinced I was going crazy. Terrified, I hid behind a façade of normalcy, while my world began to crumble.

At 22, I married and moved to Portland. Travelling across the beautiful United States of America with my husband Ram, I was overwhelmed with gratitude. Much to my father's delight, I mailed him pictures from all my travels. Mysteriously, my symptoms waned for a while, only to return with a vengeance.

At 23, I gave birth to my first daughter. While my baby grew radiant by the day, I grew despondent by the minute, and struggled to free myself from the death-hold of depression.

At 25, I had a massive breakdown during my trip home to India, and was rushed into shock treatments, antidepressants and psychotherapy.

My deeply religious in-laws requested a priest to come home to exorcise the demons in me, and he molested me. For days, I remained in a catatonic stupor, mute with grief.

Shackled by the insidious chains of stigma, shame and secrecy, I returned to Portland and began living like a prisoner in my home, and, despite access to the best healthcare professionals, I continued to cycle in and out of depression.

At 27, having survived multiple suicide attempts, pregnant with my second child, and in utter despair, I finally chose to get hospitalized despite my fears of getting locked up in a mental hospital. Somewhere deep in my heart, I believed that here in America, the *land of the free*, people would treat me with dignity. But, I was wrong. I was traumatized when I got locked up in an isolation cell twice within ten days and lost the pregnancy in between.

It is here in the dark pit of despair that a stranger came to visit me, and changed my life forever.

Her name was Aida. Aida was my husband's boss Ralph's mother-in-law's friend. She had overheard Ralph tell his wife Karen about my recent suicide attempt, and hospitalization. And, Aida had insisted on visiting me at the hospital. Although we had never met, Aida came to comfort me in my darkest hour of need.

"Look at me" Aida kept saying, sitting next to me on the hospital bed. But, I could not look at her. I was filled with shame.

"Look at me" she kept insisting, prying my chin up with her fingers. When I finally looked into her eyes, I nearly buckled into her arms. Aida was a beautiful Armenian woman in her fifties, with the grace of Jackie Kennedy and the compassion of Mother Teresa. Her very presence was healing.

“I bet people look at you and wonder what in the world you have to be depressed about,” Aida said. “Look at you, you are young, you have a loving husband, a beautiful little girl, and a fabulous future in America. You have everything a woman can dream for. But, I know that every day is a nightmare. I know how worthless you feel when your little girl wants to play and all you want to do is crawl into a closet and cry all day. I know how scary it is to live at the brink of suicide each day. I know that you believe your family will be better off without a despicable woman like you.”

I stared at Aida, wondering how this stranger knew the darkest secrets of my soul.

“You are wrong my darling,” Aida said, pulling me closer into her arms. “I know you think there is no hope or treatment that will ever make you feel better. But, I promise you, you have the power within to overcome this disease and rebuild a beautiful life for yourself and your family. I know it won’t be easy. But, one day, one step at a time, you can do it. I know, because I have struggled with depression ever since I was eighteen years old.”

Over the next fifteen minutes, I listened to Aida with disbelief as she shared her struggles with depression, and her relentless pursuit of recovery.

For years, my family and physicians had insisted that I would get better. But, I had no faith in their words. When the medications, shock treatment and therapy had failed to heal me, I had lost faith in medicine. When all my prayers and that of my family had failed to rescue me from the dark hell of depression, I had lost faith in God. And, when a priest was invited to exorcise the demons in me, and he molested me, I had lost faith in humanity. But, I believed Aida when she said I could recover; because unlike my family and physicians, she had walked through the dark abyss of depression and emerged into the light.

Growing up in India, my only image of a woman with mental illness was that of a half-naked woman in tattered clothes, muttering incoherently, running down the streets of Bangalore, dogs chasing her, people pelting stones, calling her *hucchi* – crazy. I was afraid I would end up like her. Raised in a culture where mental illness was deemed as madness caused by demonic spirits, I had no concept of recovery. But, meeting Aida and hearing her **story** changed my perception and helped me believe for the first time, that I could recover, just like she had.

Although Aida's visit was short, she gave me the gift of HOPE that has sustained me for a lifetime – through despair and darkness, hope and healing.

Days after meeting Aida, I suffered a miscarriage, which only worsened my depression and suicidal ideation. I became paranoid that my husband would divorce me, take custody of our 3-year-old daughter and move back to India because I had disgraced him and our family. Finding no reason to live, I began to scream I want to die, I want to die. And, I was locked up in the isolation cell for the second time in ten days. It was the most traumatic experience of my life, yet, ultimately, life transforming.

Getting locked up set me free!

Getting locked up set me free to ask questions that I had long buried in my heart.

- Am I crazy or is the world around me crazy?
- Is psychiatric care therapeutic or traumatic?
- What is the purpose of my life?

Getting locked up set me free to realize that **while mental illness can break my mind, and the mental health system can confine my body, there are no walls in this world that can contain my spirit.**

Getting locked up set me free to imagine a life beyond the confines of the isolation cell and the limitations of my illness.

Getting locked up set me free to create a life of meaning and purpose.

On April 30, 1989, confined in the seclusion room of a psychiatric ward, stripped of freedom, dignity, hope and humanity, I promised to emerge a messenger of hope and healing. For every indignity that I had suffered in shame and silence, I promised to fight to restore my dignity and the dignity of others like me around the world. And for every moment that my family and I had lived in despair, I promised to bring hope to the lives of others like us. I had no idea how to realize my promise. But, it kept me alive.

Although my stay at the psychiatric hospital was traumatic at times, it was ultimately life-transforming. For the first time in my life, I met others like myself in the hospital, people with mental illness, and I realized that I was not alone. For nearly a decade, I had wandered through the dark alleys of depression alone, ashamed, and afraid. But, here amidst the so called “lunatics of the world” I found love, acceptance and understanding that I had long craved for and denied in the world of “normals.” And, in our shared struggles, I discovered strength and solidarity. The caring staff, and the many educational opportunities and therapeutic interventions they offered, helped me pave my path to recovery.

Unfortunately, as I began to get well, my brother developed depression and my sister developed schizoaffective disorder. Yet again, my family was tested and torn apart by mental illness. Fortunately, with effective treatment, self-determination, and the unconditional love and support of family and friends, each of us have created a healthy, meaningful, productive life.

While my family and I celebrated our successful recoveries, I grew increasingly concerned about the barriers to recovery faced by the 450 million men, women and children suffering from mental illnesses around the world.

So, in April 2006, along with a dedicated group of mental health advocates, I started ASHA International, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting mental health awareness, and bringing hope and healing to people's lives. Seventeen years from the time I had made my promise in the isolation cell, I finally found a way to pay Aida's gift of HOPE forward.

ASHA literally means HOPE both in Sanskrit, one of the world's most ancient languages which originated in India, and in Hindi, India's national language. In English, ASHA is an acronym for A Source of Hope for All touched by mental illness. At ASHA International, we offer people HOPE in all that we do. And, we offer a wide variety of mental health awareness programs, wellness workshops, cultural competence

training, peer mentoring, referrals and resources. To learn more about ASHA International's programs, please visit us at www.myasha.org

When I started ASHA International, all I wanted was to share my story and the lessons I had learned in pain, to bring hope to at least one person struggling with mental illness. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that I would have the opportunity to give hope to thousands of people around the world. This year, as we prepare to celebrate the 10th Anniversary of ASHA International, I am filled with gratitude that my colleagues and I have had the privilege of reaching out and touching the lives of more than 45,000 people nationally and internationally with a resounding message of hope and healing. Together, we are tearing down the insidious walls of shame and stigma, and empowering peers on their road to recovery and wellness, one day, one person at a time.

Over the years, I have witnessed the power of personal stories to save lives and create social change.

At a wellness workshop I was presenting in India a few years ago, I met Altaf, a young Muslim man struggling with depression, and was overwhelmed with gratitude when he said: "It was my dream to be an architect. Due to my illness, this dream had turned to ashes. But, new hope has arisen like a phoenix out of these ashes. Today's program and Gayathri have inspired me to fly again!"

Barb, an inmate at the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville sent me a card one day: “Dear Indian woman, I’m sorry I can’t remember your name. But, I want to thank you for sharing your story with us. For the first time, I feel hopeful, and can imagine a life beyond the confines of my illness and these prison walls.”

Altaf, Barb and Aida taught me the incredible truth – mental illness has no barriers, not of age, gender, race, culture, or socio-economic status. And more importantly, hope and healing have no boundaries. It did not matter that Altaf was a Muslim man and I was a Hindu woman. It did not matter that Barb was incarcerated and I was free. It did not matter that Aida was Armenian, and I was Indian. The gift of HOPE unites and heals us all.

As I reflect on my life, I have been most grateful to Aida’s gift of HOPE. Her story literally saved my life. Because of Aida, I see a life filled with possibilities. Because of Aida, my children have a mother. Because of Aida, I discovered the courage to share my story to give hope to peers on their road to recovery.

I met Aida for the last time on March 12th, 2014. Even though her husband was in the hospital and she was in a wheel chair, she came to celebrate my book launch at the Powell’s City of Books. I will cherish this picture of Aida and me forever. As always, she was whispering

words of encouragement into my ears. Aida died four months later. But, her legacy of hope will live on forever.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is an Aida in all of us. Each of us has the capacity to reach out and embrace a person struggling with mental illness with love and compassion. Each of us has the opportunity to share our story to give HOPE, and help them on their road to recovery. Perhaps we can change a life, even save a life, just as Aida did.