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January 06, 2004 Volume 40 Issue 01

SPIRIT OF MEDICINE

Picturing Asha

Orangeville, Ont. obstetrician Dr. Asha Goel was murdered in Mumbai, India last August. Seema Goel, her daughter, reflects on the two versions of Asha—the doctor and the person

By Seema Goel

As the deadline for this article drew near, I found myself increasingly reluctant to begin. My mother died not so long ago, 112 days. It was the end of summer, and the world was walking through a liquid heat. She died in a moment of violence which I have not yet accepted, or been able to comprehend.

As my sister and I sift through Mom's belongings, I am forced into a renegotiation of what I know about her, who I think she was. I have to resist the temptation to mythologize her, to make her into a person bigger or different than she was. I rely on pictures to pull her into focus, on small anecdotes and memories to hear her voice.

My parents came from another time and place. They were introduced 40 years ago in Bombay (now Mumbai). They met just twice before their wedding. Like a fairy tale, my mother based her decision to marry my father—a surgeon—on his response to only one question. When they moved abroad would he let her practise? When he said yes, she accepted his proposal, and they came to Canada. In their wedding photo they are young and hopeful, they are about to leave for a country and culture they do not know, and where they hope to be welcomed, to raise a family and to succeed.

There are two versions of Asha Goel, the doctor and the person, and each was equally informed by the other. Not content to simply be a competent physician, she was a humane and caring one, endeavouring to make medicine a better place for both the patients and doctors. Her commitment to medicine gave her a purpose into which she funnelled the strengths of her personality: thoughtfulness, compassion, intelligence and honesty. She loved her profession and there isn't anything else she would have rather been doing.

She had a way of knowing what people needed. She practised obstetrics and gynecology in Saskatchewan and Ontario for 32 years. Between her skill as a surgeon and clinician, her sound advice and her ability to listen, she gained the affection and respect of her patients and colleagues. She wanted to make every woman who came to see her feel they mattered. They would enter and sit, and before the clinical discussion took over, Mom would comment on their new haircut, ask after their husband or children—"Is he enjoying the new job? Has

Jenna recovered from the flu?" Every time I met one of Mom's patients they praised her kindness and attentiveness. I asked her once about this, how she managed it, and she confessed her secret. In the margins of the history sheet she scribbled notes in Hindi about the personal details of the woman's life, sometimes just a comment to jog her memory and sometimes something more specific.

"An important part of medicine is knowing the person, and they should feel it. They all think they're my favourite patient." And she smiled to herself. And though she said it as if conspiring, in fact the patients were correct. Each was her favourite in the moment she was with them. They had her full attention and could tell she genuinely cared.

She was the sole ob/gyn in Orangeville, Ont., for several years, and it seemed she was always on call. Rarely was there a night uninterrupted by the telephone ringing to summon her back to the hospital. I once found her at 3 a.m. jumping up and down in her bedroom and lightly slapping her face before going out on one of these calls. When I asked what she was doing she said, "No one wants to be treated by a sleepy doctor." And then continued her hopping and quickly applied some lipstick. "I can't just be awake, I have to look awake. Otherwise, the patient worries."

The sight of my mother hopping around slapping herself awake stays with me. This is how much she loved what she did.

She was considerate of the values and perspectives of her patients. When a Sikh woman was anxious about keeping her kirpan with her during a procedure, Mom bandaged the small dagger against the woman's arm with sterile gauze and explained its significance to the nurses; as the due date of a Muslim patient approached, Mom made a special effort to stay close to town because she knew the woman would not allow herself to be examined by a male physician.

Over the last four years she developed a second practise in Brampton, Ont., where she served a community of South Asian women who would otherwise have not received adequate medical care due to cultural and language barriers. When she returned from her Wednesdays in Brampton she was always beaming. "I really help them over there. I really make a difference."

Most fulfilled when doing many things at once, she found no idle moments. She flooded her free time with activity—time at the temple, theatre, dinner parties, holidays, planning things for her three children. She was full of energy, both rational and emotional, scientific and spiritual, someone who tried to make the world a better place. She might question this description of herself, but I believe she affected change wherever she went—her triumphs were small individually, but taken together they are substantial.

She questioned hospital practices and policies that treated male and female physicians differently or that placed unnecessary burdens upon them and, with research and perseverance she changed things. Though she shared the fears all of us have—of inadequacy, loss of identity, fears for her children and their futures—she overcame them with hope, the very meaning of her name, and she brought that

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hope to the many people whose lives she touched.

My mother's death came, of course, as a shock—not only because of the extreme circumstances but also because I believed she was invincible. She was so alive, so ferocious of heart and spirit, so ready for any challenge, that it seemed nothing would ever defeat her.

I return to photographs of her. She loved to have her picture taken. There isn't a monument she saw or significant event that took place without the presence of a camera. I never considered that I would be grateful for this habit of hers—for her insistence Dad haul out the camera equipment and someone relight the birthday cake.

There is an avalanche of pictures of her. The usual ones where she is embraced by one of her kids or standing beside my father at a natural wonder, the studio portraits and family gatherings at Diwali, the Hindu New Year. But then there are the sombre ones, the unexpected photograph where she perhaps didn't know the camera was there, where she is looking away, or glancing at the camera but clearly thinking about something else. It is those ones that I return to. She is so clearly inaccessible, so much in a place inside herself, in a place that is not about doing but about repose.

In the last few weeks I've spent a lot of time looking through the family photo albums, looking at her, but also looking for her—in all the ways I did and didn't know her. I don't really know what to say about her or how to elude the clichés.

It is the kind of thing I would have wanted her help with, where she would have spoken softly and even and reminded us to be careful about how we treat each other and ourselves.

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