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THE POWER OF PRAYER - A.P.J. Abdul kalam

Introduction to the prose text:

The Power of Prayer' is an extract from 'Wings of Fire', the autobiography of A.P.J. Abdul Kalam. Here he talks about his early life in the island town of Rameswaram. He narrates about his parents and shares his experiences about the persons who have moulded his personality in his early days. He remembers his father's views on prayer and what Jallaluddin said about God.

TEXT

The Power of Prayer - A. P J. Abdul Kalam

(From Wings of Fire)

ORIENTATION [1931 — 1963]

This earth is His, to Him belong those vast and boundless skies; I3oth seas within Him rest, and yet in that small pool He lies.

ATHARVAVEDA

Book 4, Hymn 16.

I was born into a middle-class Tamil family in the island town of Rameswaram in the erstwhile Madras state. My father, .lainulabdeen, had neither much formal education nor much wealth;

Despite these disadvantages, he possessed great innate wisdom and a true generosity of spirit. He had an ideal helpmate III my mother, Ashiamma. I do not recall the exact number of people she fed every day, but I am quite certain that far more outsiders ate with us than all the members of our own family together.

My parents were widely regarded as an ideal couple. mother's lineage was the more distinguished, one of forebears having been bestowed the title of 'Bahadur' by British.

I was one of many children—a short boy with rather undistinguished looks, born to tall and handsome parents. We lived in our ancestral house, which was built in the middle of the 19th century. It was a fairly large pucca house, made of limest and brick, on the Mosque Street in Rameswaram. My aus one tere father used to avoid all inessential comforts and luxuries However, all necessities were provided for, in terms of food, medicine or clothes. In fact, I would say mine was a very secure childhood, both materially and emotionally.

I normally ate with my mother, sitting on the floor of the kitchen. She would place a banana leaf before me, on which she then ladled rice and aromatic sambhar, a variety of sharp, home-made pickles and a dollop of fresh coconut chutney.

The famous Shiva temple, which made Rameswaram so sacred to pilgrims, was about a ten-minute walk from our house. Our locality was predominantly Muslim, but there were quite a Hindu families too, living amicably with their Muslim 111,ighbours. There was a very old mosque, in our locality where father would take me for evening prayers. I had not the faintest lua of the meaning of the Arabic prayers chanted, but I was lotally convinced that they reached God. When my father came Jilt of the mosque after the prayers, people of different religions would be sitting outside, waiting for him. Many of them offered I )wls of water to my father who would dip his fingertips in them and say a prayer. This water was then carried home for invalids. I also remember people visiting our home to offer thanks after being cured. My father always smiled and asked them to thank Allah, the benevolent and merciful.

Start:

The high priest of Rameswaram temple, Pakshi I akshmana Sastry, was a very close friend of my father's. One of the most vivid memories of my early childhood is of the two men, each in his traditional attire, discussing spiritual matters. When I was old enough to ask questions, I asked my father about !he relevance of prayer. My father told me there was nothing mysterious about prayer. Rather, prayer made possible a i.ommunion of the spirit between people. "When you pray," he ..aid, "you transcend your body and become a part of the cosmos, which knows no division of wealth, age, caste, or creed."

My father could convey complex spiritual concepts in very imple, downto-earth Tamil. He once told me, "In his own time, in its own place, in what he really is, and in the stage he has reached—good or bad—every human being is a specific element within the whole of the manifest divine Being. So why be afraid of difficulties, sufferings and problems? When troubles come, try to understand the relevance of your sufferings. Adv always presents opportunities for introspection." "Why don't you say this to the people who come 1 ersity o you for help and advice?" I asked my father. He put his hands on my shoulders and looked straight into my eyes. For quite some time he said nothing, as if he was judging my capacity to comprehend his words. Then he answered in a low, deep voice. His answer filled me with a strange energy and enthusiasm:

Whenever human beings find themselves alone natural reaction, they start looking for company. Whenever they are in trouble, they look for someone to help them. Whenever they reach an impasse, they loo to someone to show them the way out. Every recurrent anguish, longing, and desire finds its own special t"elper. For the people who come to me in distress, I am but go-between in their effort to propitiate demonic forcee with.prayers and offerings. This is not a correct approach at all and should never be followed. One must understand the difference between a fear-ridden vision of destin and the vision that enables us to seek the enemy fulfilment within ourselves.

I remember my father starting his day at 4 a.m. by reading namaz before dawn. After the namaz, he used to walk down ► small coconut grove we owned, about 4 miles from our home. would return, with about a dozen coconuts tied together thrown ,r his shoulder, and only then would he have his breakfast. s remained his routine even when he was in his late sixties.

I have throughout my life tried to emulate my father in my I world of science and. technology. I have endeavdured to lerstand the fundamental truths revealed to me by my father, I feel convinced that there exists a divine power that can lift up from confusion, Misery, melancholy and failure, and guide to one's true place. And once an individual severs his )tional and physical bondage, he is on the road to freedom, piness and peace of mind.

I was about six years old when my father embarked on project of building a wooden sailboat to take pilgrims from neswaram to Dhanuskodi, (also called Sethukkarai), and k. He worked at building the boat on the seashore, with the ► of a relative, Ahmed Jallaluddin, who later married my sister, ara. I watched the boat take shape. The wooden hull and heads were seasoned with the heat from wood fires. My or was doing good business with the boat when, one day, a one bringing winds of over 100 miles per hour carried away our boat, along with some of the landmass of Sethukkaral. Th Pamban Bridge collapsed with a train full of passengers on I Until then, I had only seen the beauty of the sea, now itt uncontrollable energy came as a revelation to me,

By the time the boat met its untimely 'end, ?Mimed Jallaluddin had become a close friend of mine, despit difference in our ages. He was about 15 years older than e.tho I and used to call me Azad. We used to go for long walks together every evening. As we started from Mosque Street and made out way towards the sandy shores of the island, Jallaluddin and I talked mainly of spiritual matters. The atmosphere of Rameswaram, with its flocking pilgrims, was conducive to such discussion. Our first halt would be at the imposing temple of Lord Shiva. Circling around the temple with the same reve as any pilgrim from a distant part of the country, we felt a fl energy pass through us.

Jallaluddin would talk about God as if he had a working partnership with Him. He would present all his doubts to God as if He were standing nearby to dispose of them. I would stare at Jallaluddin and then look towards the large groups of pilgrim!. around the temple, taking holy dips in the sea, performing r and reciting prayers with a sense of respect towards the same Unknown, whom we treat as the formless. Almighty. I never doubted that the prayers in the temple reached the same destination as ones offered in our mosque. I only wondered whether illaluddin had any other special connection to God. Jallaluddin's .liooling had been limited, principally because of his family's iaitened circumstances. This may have been the reason why always encouraged me to excel in my studies and enjoyed y success vicariously. Never did I find the slightest trace of sentment in Jallaluddin for his deprivation. Rather, he was ways full of gratitude for whatever life had chosen to give him.

Incidentally, at the time I speak of, he was the only person ithe entire island who could write English. He wrote letters for most anybody in need, be they letters of application or herwise. Nobody of my acquaintance, either in my family or in e neighbourhood even had Jallaluddin's level of education or ly links of consequence with the outside world. Jallaluddin ways spoke to me about educated people,. of scientific scoveries, of contemporary literature, and of the achievements medical science. It was he who made me aware of a "brave, n c !w world" beyond our narrow confines.

In the humble environs of my boyhood, books were a arce commodity. By local standards, however, the personal rary of STR Manickam, a former 'revolutionary' or militant ld itionalist, was sizeable. He encouraged me to read all I could I Id I often visited his home to borrow books.

Another person who greatly influenced my boyhood was my first cousin, Samsuddin. He was the sole distributor for newspapers in Rameswaram. The newspapers would arrive at Rameswaram station by the morning train from Pamban, Samsuddin's newspaper agency was a one-man organization catering to the reading demands of the 1,000-strong literate population of Rameswara town. These newspapers were mainly bought to keep abreast of current developments in the National Independence Movement, for astrological reference or to check the bullion rates prevailing in Madras. A few readers with a m cosmopolitan outlook would discuss Hitler, Mahatma Gandhi ore and I rent I Jinnah; almost all would finally flow into the mighty political curt of Periyar EV Ramaswamy's movement against high caste Hindus. Dinamani was the most sought after newspaper. Since reading the printed matter was beyond my capability, I had to satisfy myself with glancing at the pictures in the newspaper before Samsuddin delivered them to his customers.

The Second World War broke out in 1939, when I was eight years old. For reasons I have never been able understand, a sudden demand for tamarind seeds erupted to in the market. I used to collect the seeds and sell them to a provision Hope on Mosque Street. A day's collection would fetch me the r incely sum of one anna. Jallaluddin would tell me stories about u war which I would later attempt to trace in the headlines in linamani. Our area, being isolated, was completely unaffected y the war. But soon India was forced to join the Allied Forces rid something like a state of emergency was declared. The first isualty came in the form of the suspension of the train halt at ameswaram station. The newspapers now had to be bundled nd thrown out from the moving train on the Rameswaram Road etween Rameswaram and Dhanuskodi. That forced Samsuddin ) look for a helping hand to catch the bundles and, as if naturally, I filled the slot. Samsuddin helped me earn my first wages. Half a Nitury later, I can still feel the surge of pride in earning my own ioney for the first time.

Every child is born, with some inherited characteristics, to a specific socio-economic and emotional environment, and ained in certain ways by figures of authority. I inherited honesty and self-discipline from my father; from my mother, I inherited faith in goodness and deep kindness and so did my three brothers and sister. But it was the time I spent with Jallaluddin and Samsuddin that perhaps contributed most to the uniqueness of my childhood and made all the difference in my later life. The unschooled wisdom of Jallaluddin and Samsuddin was so intuitive and responsive to non-verbal messages, that I can unhesitatingly attribute my subsequently manifested creativity to their company in my childhood.

I had three close friends in my childhood—Ramana dha Sastry, Aravindan, and Sivaprakasan. All these boys were from orthodox Hindu Brahmin families. As children, none of us ever felt any difference amongst ourselves because of our religi differences and upbringing, In fact, Ramanadha Sastry was son of Pakshi Lakshmaha Sastry, the high priest of Rameswaram temple. Later, he took over the priesthood of Rameswaram temple from his father; Aravindan went into business of arranging transport for visiting pilgrims; ous the the the the and Sivaprakasan became a catering contractor for the South Railways.

During the annual Shri Sita Rama Kalyanam ceremony, our family used to arrange boats with a special platform for carrying idols of the Lord from the temple to the marriage site, situated in the middle.of the pond called Rama Tirtha which was near our house. Events from the Ramayana and from the life of the Prophet were the bedtime stories my mother and grandmother would tell the children in our family.

One day when I was in the fifth standard at the Rameswaram Elementary School, a new teacher came to our Glass. I used to wear a cap which marked me as a Muslim, and I .ilways sat in the front row next to Ramanadha Sastry, who wore sacred thread. The new teacher could not stomach a Hindu priest's son sitting with a Muslim boy. In accordance with our Jcial ranking as the new teacher saw it, I was asked to go and !;i t on the back bench. I felt very sad, and so did Ramanadha Sastry. He looked utterly downcast as I shifted to my seat in the last row. The image of him weeping when I shifted to the last row ft a lasting impression on me.

After school, we went home and told our respective parents about the incident. Lakshmana Sastry summoned the toeacher, and in our presence, told the teacher that he should t spread the poison of social inequality and communal intolerance in the minds of innocent children. He bluntly asked the teacher to either apologize or quit the school and the island. Not only did the teacher regret his behaviour, but the strong sense of conviction Lakshmana Sastry conveyed ultimately formed this young teacher.

On the whole, the small society of Rameswaram was highly stratified and very rigid in terms of the segregation of different social. groups. However, my science teacher Sivasubramania lyer, though an orthodox Brahmin with a ye conservative wife, was something of a rebel. He did his best break social barriers so that people from varying background to could mingle easily. He used to spend hours with me and would say, "Kalam, I want you to develop so that you are on par w the highly educated people of the big cities,"

One day, he invited me to his home for a meal. His wife was horrified at the idea of a Muslim boy being invited to dine in her ritually pure kitchen. She refused to serve me in her kitchen. Sivasubramania lyer was not perturbed, nor did he get angry with his wife, but instead, served me with his own hands and sat down beside me to eat his meal. His wife watched us from behi the kitchen door. I wondered whether she had observed any difference in the way I ate rice, drank water or cleaned the floor after the meal. When I was leaving his house, Sivasubramania lyer invited me to join him for dinner again the next weekend. Observing my hesitation, he told me not to get upset, saying, "Once you decide to change the system, such problems have to be confronted." When I visited his house the next we Sivasubramania lyer's wife took me inside her kitchen and sery me food with her own hands.

Then the Second World War was over and India's freedom was imminent. "Indians will build their own India," declared nandhiji. The whole country was filled with an unprecedented optimism. I asked my father's permission to leave Rameswaram and study at the district headquarters in Ramanathapuram.

He told me as if thinking aloud, "Abul! I know you have to !Jo away to grow. Does the seagull not fly across the Sun, alone and without a nest? You must forego your longing for the land of your memories to move into the dwelling place of your greater desires; our love will not bind you nor will our needs hold you." lie quoted Khalil Gibran to my hesitant mother, "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you. You may give them your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts."

He took me and my three brothers to the mosque and recited the prayer Al Fatiha from the Holy Qur'an. As he put me on the train at Rameswaram station he said, "This island may be housing your body but not your soul. Your soul dwells in the house of tomorrow which none of us at Rameswaram can visit, not even in our dreams. May God bless you, my child!"

Samsuddin and Ahmed Jallaluddin travelled with me to Ramanathapuram to enrol me in Schwartz High School, and to arrange for my boarding there. Somehow, I did not take to the new setting. The town of Ramanathapuram was a thriving, factious town of some fifty thousand people, but the coherence and harmony of Rameswaram was absent. I missed my home and grabbed every opportunity to visit Rameswaram. The pull of educational opportunities at Ramanathapuram was not strong enough to nullify the attraction of poli, a South Indian sweet my mother made. In fact, she used to prepare twelve distinctly different varieties of it, bringing out the flavour of every single ingredient used in the best possible combinations.

Despite my homesickness, I was determined to corn terms with the new environment because I knew my father had invested great hopes in my success. My father visualized me as a Collector in the making and I thought it my duty to realise my father's dream, although I desperately missed the familiarity, security and comforts of Rameswaram,

Jallaluddin used to speak to me about the power of positive thinking and I often recalled his words when I felt homesick or dejected. I tried hard to do as he said, which was to strive to control my thoughts and my mind and, through these, to influence my destiny. Ironically, that destiny did not lead me back to Rameswaram, but rather, swept me farther away from the home of my childhood.

OUTLINE SUMMARY

In this lesson Abdul Kalam gives an account of his family and parents. He describes about his father's routine work and about his friends. He also remembers how his father explained to him coMplex spiritual concepts in simple Tamil and made him understand the power of God. He narrates his experiences wit Jallaluddin who discussed many things including scientifi discoveries, literature, medical science and much abou spiritualism. Kalam remembers STR Manickam, a freedom fights who encouraged him to read books from his library. Another person who greatly influenced his boyhood was his first cousin, Samsuddin, a newspaper agent. It was Samsuddin who helped Kalam to earn his first wages. Kalam remembers with gratitude, Jallaluddin and Samsuddin for it was they who moulded his personality in his early days. Kalam also gives an account o of his school friends and teachers at Rameswaram. With a heavy heart Kalam describes how he missed his family and his home town when he went to Ramanathapuram for his higher studies.

DETAILED SUMMARY

Abdul Kalam was born into a middly class Muslim family in the island town of Rameswaram. His father, Jainulabdeen, and his mother, Ashiamma, were an ideal couple. Kalam was one of their many children. They lived in their ancestral house in the Mosque street in Rameswaram. Kalam enjoyed a secured childhood both materially and emotionally.

They lived in the Muslim locality but there were also a few Hindu families who were friendly with their Muslim neighbours. I he famous Shiva temple in Rameswaram was very near his house. There was an old mosque in their locality to which Kalam would go with his father in the evenings. Though he could not understand the prayers chanted in Arabic there, he staunchly believed that they reached God. When his father came out of the mosque after the prayers, people, belonging to different religions, waiting for him outside would offer him a bowls of water into which his father would dip his hand and say a prayer. Then they would carry the water home for the sick people. Kalam had seen people coming to his home to offer thanks to his father, after being cured, smilingly his father Would ask them to offer their thanks to the benevolent Allah.

Pakshi Laskhmana Sastry, the high priest in tha Rameswaram temple was a very cloSe friend of Kalam's fail,' Kalam had seen then discussing spiritual matters. When Kelm' became old enough to ask questions, he asked his father about the relevance of prayer. His father explained that prayer mad possible a communion of the spirit between people. He added that when one prays, one's body goes beyond and becomes part of the cosmos which knows no differenciation as wealth, age, caste or creed. Kalam admires his father for explaining complex spiritual concepts in very simple Tamil. He told Kalain that every individual is a specific part of the divine Being. So onn should not be afraid of problems. When one faces sufferings, one should understand its relevance. Adversity presents opportunities for introspection.

Kalam asked his father why he did not convey this to the people who come to him for his help and advice. His father replied that it is human nature to seek company when they are in trouble. They want some one to show them a way out. He said that for the people who come to him in their sufferings, he was a go - between to get the favour of God through prayers and offerings. He said that it was not a correct approach. He stated that one should know the difference between a fear - ridden vision of destiny and the vision that helps us to find the enemy of fulfilment within ourselves, Kalam tried to understand the fundamental truths revealed to him by his father and was convinced about the existence of a divine power that could lift from all miseries and guide one to his own true place. When cuts himself from all bondages, one finds freedom, I, viness and peace of mind.

start

Kalam describes how his father first started building a wooden sail boat with the help of his relative, Ahmed Jallaluddin, who later married his sister: Kalam was only six years old then. He watched the boat taking the shape gradually. His father made 1, pod business by using the boat to take the pilgrims from imeswaram to Danuskodi. But the boat was destroyed by the cyclone. Kalam who had so far enjoyed the beauty of the sea, I ion understood its uncontrollable energy.

By that time Kalam and Jallaluddin had become close Inends. Every evening they used to go for long walks and liscussed about spiritual matters. Jallaluddin talked about God 1! if, He was his working partner and made Kalam wonder whether I. illaluddin had any special connection with God. Jallaluddin could liot continue his studies because of his family's poor financial condition. But he never felt for that: He was satisfied with what was given to him. He encouraged Kalam to study well and was happy about his success.

At that time Jallaluddin was the only person in :ameswaram who could write English. He wrote letters for all hose who were in need. No body in that island was as educated is Jallaluddin or had any contact with the outside world. Jallaluddin talked to Kalam about educated people, scientific discoveries, contemporary literature and achievements of medical science. It was he who made Kalam aware of a brave new world beyond their narrow island.

During his boyhood, books were very scarce. In their locality, STR Manickam, a former revolutionary had a personal library. He ecncouraged Kalam to read books and Ka!aril often visited his house to borrow books.

Samsuddin, Kalam's first cousin was another person who influenced Kalam when he was a boy. Samsuddin was the only distributor for newspapers in Rameswaram. He collected the papers at the Rameswaram railway station and supplied to about 1000 customerss and made them know the recent happenings, Dinamani was the most sought after newspaper.

When Kalam was eight years old, the Second World War broke out in 1939. Jallaluddin told him about the war. Rameswaram was unaffected by the war. Soon India was made to join the Allied Forces and a state of emergency was declared The train was suspened from hatting at the Rameswarant station. So the newspaper bundle was thrown from the moving train on the road. Kalam helped Samsuddin in catching th bundles and thus he earned his first wages.

Kalam inherited honesty and self- discipline from h father and from his mother he inherited faith in goodness a deep kindness. But it was Jallaluddin and Samsuddin who influenced him much in his boyhood days and helped him later to develop his personality. Kalam thankfully attributes his leativity to their company in his childhood.

Ramanadha Sastry, Aravindan and SivaprakaSan were the three close boyhood friends of Kalam. Though they were all Imnri orthodox Hindu Brahmin families, the friends felt no ipligious differences between them.

During the annual Shri Sita Rama Kalyanam ceremony, II was Kalam's family that arranged boats to carry idols of the I ()rd to the marriagee site. Stories from the Ramayana' and the lile of the prophet were told to the children of Kalam's family 'hiring the bed time by his mother and grand mother:

One day when Kalam was in the fifth standard, a new Iv.icher came to their class. The new teacher could not digest, i. ilam, a Muslim boy sitting next to Ramanadha Sastry, the son III a Hindu priest, in the first row. At once he asked Kalam to sit (I the back bench. Both the boys felt sad and were upset.

When the boys returned home, they told their parents about the incident. Lakshmana Sastry called the new teacher find told him that it was wrong on his part to spread the poison of 4ocial inequality and communal intolerance in the innocent children's minds. He asked the teacher either to apologize or to quit the school and the island. The teacher realized his mistake felt sorry for his behaviour and was reformed.

The small society of Rameswaram was highly stratified and very strict in terms of the separation of different social groups But his science teacher, Sivasubramania lyer, an orthodox Brahmin was a rebel. He tried his best to break the social barriers so that people belonging to varying backgrounds could mingle easily. He spent much time with Kalam and said that ho wished to develop Kalam so that he would become an equal of the highly educated people of the big cities.

One day he invited Kalam to his home for a meal. His conservative wife could not bear a Muslim boy eating in her pure kitchen. She refused to serve food to Kalam in her kitchen Sivasubramina lyer was not disturbed. He himself served food to Kalam and he sat by his side and ate his meal, His wife watched them from behind the kitchen door. When Kalam left the house, the lyer invited him for dinner again the next week end. Kalam hesitated. His teacher encouraged him saying that one who wanted to change the system should be ready to face such problems. Kalam visited his house the next week. Sivasubramz niya Iyer's wife took him inside her kitchen and she herself served him food.

The Second World War was over and India was going to be free very soon. The wide country was filled with optimism Kalam asked his father's permission to leave Rameswaram and to study in Ramanathapuram, His father readily gave him permission and he also advised his hesitant mother of let him go. His father took him to the mosque with his brothers and after blessing him he saw him off at the Rameswaram station.

Samsuddin and Jallaluddin accompanied Kalam to imanathapuram. Kalam found it difficult to adapt himself to the ,w environment. He missed his home and Rameswaram very iich. But he determined to adjust himself to the new ivironment as he wanted to realise his father's dream. Jallaluddin used to talk about the power of positive liking to Kalam. Whenever Kalam felt home sick or dejected, recalled the words of Jallaluddin and tried to control his )ug.hts and mind and through them to influence his destiny. Kalam says that his destiny did not take him back to RameSwaram t it took him far away from his childhood home.

list of 1 items

Rani is a young bride who is neglected by her indifferent and unfaithful husband, Appanna. Appanna spends most of his time with his concubine and comes

home only for lunch. Rani is a typical wife who wants to win her husband's affection by any means. In an attempt to do so, she decides to drug her husband

with a love root, which she mixes in the milk. That milk is spilled on the nearby anthill and Naga, the cobra drinks it. Naga, who can take the form of

a human, is enchanted with her and begins to visit her every night in the guise of her husband. This changes Rani's life completely as she starts to experience

the good things in life though she never knows that the person with her is not her husband but the Naga. Soon she becomes pregnant and breaks the news

to Appanna. He immediately accuses her of adultery and says that he has not impregnnated her. The issue is referred to the village Panchayat. Rani is then

asked to prove her fidelity by putting her hand in the snake burrow and taking a vow that she has not committed adultery. (It is a popular belief that

if any person lies holding the snake in their hand, they will be instantly killed by the snake God.) Rani places her hand in the snake burrow and vows

that she has never touched any male other than her husband and the Naga in the burrow. She is declared chaste by the village Panchayat. However, her husband

is not ready to accept that she is pregnant with his child and decides to find out the truth by spying on the house at night. Appanna is shocked to see

the Naga visiting Rani in his form, spending time with her and then leaving the house. Appanna gets furious with the Naga and indulges in a fight with

him. Both of them fight vigorously. Eventually, the Naga dies in the fight. After this incident, Appanna realizes his mistake and accepts Rani along with

the child she is carrying.