

Me, Myself, and My In-Laws

- Anita

I sat staring at my prescription pad as tears welled up in my eyes. In my nervous anticipation, I felt the familiar wave of nausea passing through me. I grabbed the edge of my desk to steady myself and stuffed my stethoscope into my pocket and headed for the ride home. The time was 6 pm and I tried to forget all of my patients whom I saw in the hours before including the 18-year old student from the nearby University who I hospitalized with a diagnosis of influenza, and the mother of three whose lab work-up resulted in a my suspicion of cancer; I hoped for the best, but feared for the worst. I remembered a time when I treated my patients with extreme empathy and all the kindness I could muster and with an energy and drive that was unstoppable. However, in recent times, my mind was preoccupied - with my silent and persistent suffering.

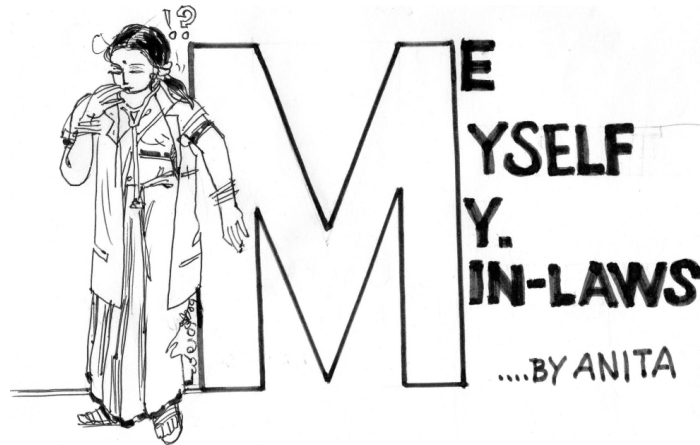
My passion for medicine provided me with a sense of contentment; this and my husband of 8 years, Ashok. I remembered meeting Ashok at a friend's party during medical school. He was a graduate student majoring in electrical engineering and "fresh off of the boat", an "FOB". Growing up in the US, I could never imagine in my wildest dreams that I would be associated with a "FOB", let alone marry one. But, Ashok was an atypical FOB as judged by me and my prejudiced impressions. I loved his English-medium accent, his intelligence, the easy conversations, and his willingness to accept me for whom I was: a girl who grew up in the US with high self-confidence, a passion for my career, with little household experience, and a little bit of an attitude. I reminisced about growing up here - excelling in academics and tennis in high school, being pretty popular with the girls and boys, but always knowing my limits of who I was, and controlled exceedingly by my parents. My parents were strict, like the usual Telugu parents, always wanting to know whom I was with, where I was going, and why I needed to hang out at the mall with my friends. Going to college was as if I had broken out of a jail and I went insane - attending fraternity parties,

hanging out all night, and neglecting my school work. After seeing my grades go from straight A's in high school to a near college disaster in the making, my parents pulled me out of college and made me attend community college until I straightened my act out. Those years of proving myself and regaining trust from my parents were the hardest for me and I punished myself by pushing myself away from friends and fun. I made it to medical school though, a triumph indeed, and was off my parents' blacklist when I introduced Ashok to them - a parents' dream, an engineer, a Telugu, and a straight-shooter. Seven happy years I

had with Ashok and a beautiful baby boy, a now bubbly and energetic 5 year old, Arya. Little did I know how I took my happiness for granted, how many sacrifices I would make, and how I would be forced to change in a single year.

As I drove home, I felt another pang of nausea and fought hard to control my bitterness. I was all

too familiar with what would be waiting for me. Growing up in the US, I valued my privacy and my personal space and had serious issues with those that violated it. But, my life changed and all considerations for my wants and needs were obliterated. The sanctity of my home was invaded by hours of Eenaadu TV watching, the strong pervasive smell of agarbathis, and the messy kitchen with counters sticky from lunch with annam and sambar. My mother-in-law would be in a fervent trance reciting her prayers lighting the deepam and agarbathis oblivious to the tabletop that she had charred despite our constant reminders to her to be careful with the deepam. People on the outside were always impressed with her devoutness and considered her to be a saint for her religious fervor. Nothing could be farther from the truth - to me, religion was a vehicle that some used as means to achieve a spiritual plane, or a sense of comfort during a troubling time or when faced with a loss. I used to see all of my patients' families attend the chapel in the hospital when faced with devastating news that their loved ones had limited time on this earth. I used to wonder why they wasted their time



with the divine when their loved ones suffered a foregone illness, however, as a family member of a patient dying of cervical cancer said me, “We are not a religious family, we don’t go to church, however, we need guidance as to what to do during this difficult time and we need to know that someone is watching over us and will show us the way”.

My mother-in-law, if she were truly devout, would allow her spirituality to guide her, that is, her thoughts, behavior, etc. However, her religion was like the moving wind – it suited her needs when it needed to, such as when others were watching, and other times, it ceased to exist, especially when she dealt with me.

When Ashok’s parents moved in, it was the culmination of endless discussions and arguments that he and I had. I never wanted them to live with us. I was not going to tolerate having strangers (and they were strangers to me) live in my home, when they were perfectly capable of being on their own. Moreover, I argued with Ashok that his parents could fend for themselves and would be entirely dependent on us here for everything. My parents were in their own city, 700 miles away, and were always there for us in times of need, when Arya was born, and when Ashok had a brief stint in the hospital. Mom cooked for us, Dad entertained Arya, and then they went home. We all were very happy being in our own homes. During our discussions, Ashok would remind me that my parents would grow old one day and he determined that is was pure selfishness, on my part, not to take care of them, which had never been my intention. However, what he did not understand was that my parents were different from his parents– my parents were self-sufficient, not a financial or emotional burden, and never interfered with our lives. Even if there had come a time when my mother or father were alone and lived with us or close to us, we could make choices to make everyone comfortable. There would be no imposition, just sincere decisions to ease their life and support them.

I unlocked the front door and Arya ran up to me, wrapping himself tightly around my legs – as I picked him up and gave him a slew of kisses, I confirmed the usual positions of everyone in the house – my father-in-law snoring loudly in front of the TV booming with the ridiculous Telugu movie dances, my mother-in-law lighting yet another agarbathi (I guess her first 10 were not sufficient), and Ashok parked in front of the computer in the study. I walked into the disaster called the kitchen. The table was splattered with chauru drippings, there were steel dishes with half-eaten pappu, a bottle of avakaaya, and lids to the containers

that were half-closed. As I continued my appalling tour of my kitchen with Arya still clinging to me, I struggled to pull the cooker out to start dinner. I yelled for Ashok to help me and after a few more yells, he emerged as if from a cocoon from the study. The best part is he came into the kitchen, as if this was the first time I asked for his help, and he said, “What?” I was livid, “What do you mean, what?” I thought to myself – “I do this every day, I come home, cook, clean, serve your parents, get nothing for it, and go to bed at 11:00 pm every night because your parents won’t eat until the sun goes down, and you say ‘what?’” I used to come home and argue with Ashok citing all of these reasons that he should help take care of Arya, however, I realized very quickly that my life was made a living hell by my mother-in-law anytime I had anything to challenge Ashok on. Ever since his parents arrived, Ashok was a changed man – he actually, literally transformed into a 20-year student dependent on his parents for everything. When we were first married, and even when Arya was born, Ashok was such a help with everything that my parents marveled at my good fortune. Maybe it was their constant praise that “drishti-fied” him or something like that. With his mother around, Ashok turned into a heap of putty. My mother-in-law made the calls on everything – she instructed him to leave the kitchen when he was called in by yours truly for help with the dishes, she ordered him to bed early so that he would get plenty of rest for his “engineering” job (a 9 – 5 pm job with no calls, nothing, unlike what I struggled with – long hours, emergency surgeries, and calls every other weekend), and she made him oil-laden food and sweets which had made him overweight, unhealthy, and just plain lazy.

I never knew how to cook and as I struggled with getting dinner on the table, I was impressed with my ability to make pappu, pacchadi, and chauru. Although I was pleased with my progress in the kitchen, my in-laws always had a lot to say about there not being enough salt, too much pulupu, too little kaaram, etc., and they were right in their assessments. So I worked harder to gain the right blend of tastes, hoping that out of 10 meals I prepared, I could receive one compliment, but that never happened. Criticism was replaced by silence. A silence that I assumed was a good thing, that I was making progress, but later determined through frequent whisperings of criticism by my mother-in-law to Ashok, that silence was not a good thing. The interesting aspect of this was that my in-laws never faced me with their feelings- if they had, we could have it in the open, once and for all.

However, all actions were done through “passive-aggressive” behavior. Their reticence became all too familiar. It took me a while to catch on that by being forthcoming and honest about issues, I was not helping the situation, so I, too assumed that silence is golden. The difference being between me and my mother-in-law that I could not share my feeling with anyone, so I kept them locked inside.

Although I was very apprehensive with Ashok about his parents coming, he eventually convinced me that it was the right thing to do – I saw his side, and I saw that compassion was important and I felt like a spoilt brat and very small for initially putting up a battle. At the end, I caved in; I convinced myself that they were two elderly people that needed companionship and that there would come a time when their children would have to care for them as they had cared for their children, and all I could think of was how they sacrificed their lives so that their children could achieve greater heights. I also thought about how great it would be for Arya to have his grandparents to teach him all the things I never learned from my parents, such as Hindu mythology, Telugu, and slokas. Much to my disappointment, however, my in-laws were very protective of their time. They favored watching Telugu movies over spending time with Arya. After dreaming about Arya being home right after school, he eventually had to be sent to aftercare since my in-laws showed little interest in caring for him.

As I lay in bed that night, I wondered why I was so miserable with my in-laws. Was it their obvious contempt for me, never even asking how my day was or acknowledging my presence? Was it my American-accent laden Telugu which I strived to improve? It is true, I made a lot more money than Ashok – to me, money came and money went. Although my parents were well-off, that was in recent times, following years of struggling and taking care of familial obligations in India. By the time I got to high school, my parents had settled down and were more stable. I remembered the times that we were poor – we had very little money, shopped at bargain stores, but were happy. However, I rationalized in my mind that if I made more money than Ashok, was a professional, and basically a good person with a heart, then why I was allowing myself to be treated in this way? Or was there something lacking in me – was I too impatient (a definite flaw that I was aware of), was I too set in my ways, what was it? I realized through my analysis of myself that I was very

American. I had core Indian values that my parents instilled in me, such as treating guests well, always having good food to entertain, helping others, and creating stability for contentment which is what attracted me to Ashok. I knew he had my parents’ Indian values, yet brought me into the current Indian scene, something my parents were unable to do as their Indian time was frozen in the 1960’s, the time they left India for here. My American side shaped my independence, my strong sense of self, and my desire to give of myself and follow my dreams, courage to look beyond the ordinary, a deep feeling of gratitude for what life had to offer, and, most importantly, a sense of compassion for others. That compassion was not reserved for my immediate family, it extended beyond that, for others whom I did not know anything of, but was willing to extend my heart and helping hand. I lay there thinking of how I opened my hearts to Ashok’s parents, how I tried to learn and change by painstakingly learning Telugu, embracing the opportunity to offer something more to my son, making wholehearted attempts to cook Andhra dishes, and most of all, opening up my home to allow perfect strangers to live with us. I wondered in deep earnest what I received in return – contempt? Lack of understanding of the things important to me? “Passive-aggressive” behavior saved for me? Through this analysis, I finally realized what was lacking in my relationship with my in-laws, I realized that my compassion was one-sided, and it would never change. I realized that I was but a mere annoyance to them – a price they had to pay to be close to their son. Beyond this, it was a lack of empathy for me and my existence. Perhaps, it was not personal, I don’t know. All I knew was that I still felt compassion for them; I knew that even if my in-laws left the very same day, as happy as I would be that I won my life back, that I would still worry about them and would still make sure that they were okay and do whatever was necessary to make them comfortable. I would still visit them and would not harbor negative feelings. However, I was not so sure that this compassion was mutual.

Tomorrow was another day, another feeling of nauseating anticipation, another feeling of defeat, or was it? What could I do to break this cycle? What could I do to lift myself from these doldrums to feel what I felt before – invigorated, excited, and happy? I was not sure what I would do, but I knew I had to take matters into my own hands.
