

## Dear Papa

Trapped in a dark, grimy well, a wretch once saw a dazzling man throw in a rope.

“Climb up!” said the man.

“I can’t.”

“Trust me.”

The wretch clasped the rope and climbed. “Just don’t let go, please!”

The man laughed. “That’s not what Gajendra said.”

Dear Papa,

A summer afternoon drenched Langenthal. Bhai, Ma and I sat on the wooden floor of Jagannath’s temple room. You sat on a swan-white Vyasa-asana and sang in a ragged voice.

An empty floor lapped between you and the congregation who sat at the edges. There was no need to sit so far from you but now I understand. While most of us paddled in the shallows of Krishna consciousness, you drowned in it.

It was evident in your leaking eyes, your raised arms, your choked voice. When you opened your large brown eyes, you announced the appearance day of Narottama Das Thakur. From his birth, you carried the class to his entrance into the eternal pastimes of Radhe Syama.

Following your example, I summarize your life as a means of glorification. Though my words are but a candle beside the sun, I offer them as petals to your feet.

Born and raised on the snowy hills of Jammu, you were a studious but naughty boy. After your father’s passing, the pranks quieted, and the scholar emerged.

Our Gurudev endured the same loss in the paddy fields of Manipur. Under the bonfire that warmed him and his weeping sister, Srila Bhaktisvarupa Damodara Swami studied his chemistry textbook.

“Damodara!” His sister chided. “Our father just passed.”

“Yes,” Gurudev said, “Might as well do something productive.”

Twenty years later, Gurudev was completing a PhD in organic chemistry at the University of California.

The Goddess of Learning similarly sprinkled her foot dust onto your tongue, awakening a hunger that charted your path to the Indian dream: a life in the West.

After marrying a girl who’d once handed roses to Srila Prabhupada, you brought your family to the fresh landscapes of Switzerland, where the Goddess’s foot dust germinated into a wild tree of learning.

At the Swiss airport, waiting for your wife and sons to arrive, one thought rustled the leaves of this tree: “My sons will get the best education in Switzerland.”

Even at the peak of your career, your tending to the tree never wavered. Thick Cisco manuals lined our shelves. After long, grueling workdays, you immersed yourself in the latest networking certifications. Even then, it wasn’t for money. A true Brahmin, you craved the fruits of knowledge, and when they bloomed, you used them to secure the best education for your sons.

While others busily acquired Swiss citizenships and sent their children to public schools to save for a big house, you sent yours to costly private schools, paid for your nephew’s education in India, and gave the rest of your savings to the temple.

When we asked why you didn't work on Swiss citizenship, you laughed: "Because I don't want to stay here."

And you didn't mean just Switzerland—you meant the material world. Like Gurudev, your journey of emptiness in the West led you to your eternal master in Srila Prabhupada's temple.

ISKCON Zurich's courtyard was bloated with socializing devotees as you hurried between them to the ivory entrance doors. A humble grihastha, donning a rumpled dress shirt and a thick moustache, you eagerly imagined grabbing pots of prasadam from the kitchens—how the devotees would smile when you handed them a pakora or poured daal into their bowls!

Clack clack clack went your polished shoes on the steps, just as the ivory door swung open, nearly knocking off your glasses.

A short man walked out with skin the brown of warm earth; pinkish robes swirling around him. Round glasses rested on his slight nose, and his smile held the sweetness of children.

He asked you a question, but you stood dumb, stuck in his honey-brown eyes. Unknown to you then, the turban of your life was thrown at his feet.

After meeting our eternal master, though your worship of education didn't change, its subject did. You'd grace the office on time, solve the companies most complex problems, excel at the networking tests, and when the coast was clear, you'd hungrily slide the latest canto of Srimad Bhagavatam onto your work desk.

"Coming for lunch?" said your manager.

"Maybe tomorrow."

"...are you okay?"

"Gajendra's calling the Lord to save him."

"What?"

"The alligator's got his leg! His family can't even help!"

"...What?"

"You know, Gajendra. The elephant."

Your frequent declining of the manager's lunch and dinner invites must have seemed strange for your co-workers who knew that socializing was the best way to climb the corporate ladder. But the only ladder you cared to climb was the one leading to Gurudev's lotus feet.

And after providing your children the best material education possible, you gifted them "*Vairagya-vidya—the art that can help one develop a distaste for material enjoyment.*" (SB 7.6.9, purport).

"Only Guru and Krishna will be there for you, no one else," you whispered to me in the hospital that night. I sat on a makeshift bed next to yours.

You recounted how, in the surgery room, your heart fell. Where were the friends you had helped with endless finances, council, and love? Where was the mother you sent money to every month? Your wife and children whom you maintained with such fervor? The doctors had said the chance of failure outweighed success. While Death's shadow always followed, you only heard His footsteps at this juncture. Tears welled in your eyes as you scanned the empty surgery room when someone came to you, blurred by tears first, until they stepped closer to the operation table: pink robes, round glasses, a gentle smile radiating such sweetness.

The battle of the operation was won, but the struggle to stay alive persisted. Days passed with you tethered to dialysis. Gone were the hasty mornings of running to the bus stop and leaping off trains with a heavy lap top bag. The Indian father who wore the same daal-stained dress shirt for decades—our superhero—was confined to a bed, a toilet, and two pipes protruding from his body. One from the neck, one from the belly. And still, your worship was relentless.

All hours of the day, we heard Gour Govinda Maharaj blaring from your phone.

“Use headphones Papa!” we groaned.

“I don’t like them,” you said, but secretly, you wanted us to taste the nectar you drank with the cup of your heart.

When you weren’t hearing, you were reading *Chaitanya Bhagavat*, memorizing Krishna’s words from *Bhagavad Gita*, or singing Bhaktivinoda Thakur’s songs. And when you weren’t engaging your mind in Krishna, you were sharing Him with any devotee in the meagre yatra who would listen.

How many times did you give countless *Bhagavatam* classes to Lord Jaganath, Tulsi Maharani, Srila Prabhupada, and an empty temple room? How many times did you walk to the temple in the dark, barely able to tell a tree from a streetlamp? How many times did you explain to your protesting family that you *had to* go to Mangala Aarti because you couldn’t live without seeing Krishna in the morning?

Srila Prabhupada states in the purport of SB 7.6.25: “*a devotee does not desire anything; he is simply satisfied by rendering transcendental loving service at the lotus feet of the Lord and glorifying Him everywhere by preaching, which is his life and soul.*” Which is why, when we moved back to Braja, you slumped into our worn couch, because your cooking, pujari, and preaching services made it hard to finish your sixty-four rounds. It’s why you travelled for four hours in rickety rikshaws to Radha Kund and back for a fifteen-minute service of offering Gurudev aarti in his samadhi. And because Krishna was so dear to your heart, he forever signed your name into his personal diary.

At least, that’s what He promises in Bhagavat Gita 18.68-69: “*For one who explains this supreme secret to devotees...There is no servant in this world more dear to Me than he, nor will there ever be one more dear.*” I’m glad to report, His promise wasn’t the malarky He often offers the gopis.

His signature was seen in the way doctors from Dauji village set up a hospital right in our hall. In the way Radhe Syama sent garlands, Tulsi, and Ganga Jal without our asking. In the way the holy names resounded around you when the time came.

You heard Death’s footsteps once more, and they tinkled as He walked. The *chan chan* of His ankle bells danced to the melody of His flute, and you didn’t cry the way you had in the surgery room. You fearlessly relished your beloved’s Name with your lips.

As we sprinkled Cintamani dust over your body and bathed you in the Yamuna, the sun sank behind the hills across the river.

Next to a tree on that hill, as the flames of your pyre reached for Braja’s sky, a blue cowherd boy the color of a monsoon raincloud raised His arms with glittering eyes. Dust rose as millions of cowherd boys blew their bull horns, and the cows twirled in a frenzy.

With your reunion into Krishna’s butter-soft arms, you handed us the last pieces of fruits from your tree of learning.

*tan-nāma-rūpa-caritādi-sukīrtanānu-smṛtyoḥ krameṇa rasanā-manasī niyojya tiṣṭhan vraje tad-anurāgi-janānugāmī kālām nayed akhilam ity upadeśa-sāram*

*“The essence of all advice is that one should utilize one’s full time—twenty-four hours a day—in nicely chanting and remembering the Lord’s divine name, transcendental form, qualities and eternal pastimes, thereby gradually engaging one’s tongue and mind. In this way one should reside in Braja and serve Kṛṣṇa under the guidance of devotees. One should follow in the footsteps of the Lord’s beloved devotees, who are deeply attached to His devotional service.” (Nectar of Instruction, 8).*

How can one repay a tree who’s already given away all its shade and fruit? Possibly by planting the seeds of that tree across the land. By teaching others to water the trees each day until they blossom too. The shade of such trees would temper the heat of the desert of this world. And perhaps laughing children from different neighbourhoods could one day relish its juicy fruits. *Brahmāṇḍa bhramite kona bhāgyavān jīva guru-kṛṣṇa-prasāde pāya bhakti-latā-bīja. (CC Madhya 19.151).*

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Thank you for everything Papu, and please, don’t ever let go.

With love,

Yours.