

A photograph of a bamboo plant in a glass jar on a windowsill. The plant has a thick, dark stem and several long, green leaves. It is positioned in front of a window with horizontal blinds. To the right of the window, there are patterned curtains with a geometric design in shades of blue and green. The text "True and Bright" is overlaid in a white, serif font on the right side of the image.

True and Bright

lakshmi jagad

श्री गुरुभ्यो नमः ॥

Sri Gurubhyo Namah

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INTRODUCTION

Coming home from an early morning walk, I wondered where I was headed. As a writer, I mean.

I had attended a one-day workshop for writers the day before. Had met a spirited bunch of professional and amateur writers, and come away feeling... nothing. I had signed up for the class thinking it would be a logical next step for me. I'd expected that I'd meet people like me, share tips and tricks and techniques, learn from their experiences, and so on.

Ahhh, I realized that my writerly ego wasn't cut out for that kind of feedback. Now, I am not a real writer (what does "real" mean?) neither do I have a well-defined ego. But the truth is that I am not looking for feedback on my writing. It isn't up for discussion. I am a spontaneous writer, to say the least. I don't write as an intellectual exercise or for cathartic purposes; I write wholly for self-expression. I don't much care to defend my writing or explain it to anyone. It was/is meant for me, and yes, some friends seem to enjoy reading it too.

Long story short, I realized that I wasn't necessarily a good fit for the writerly world. Then an idea arose: write a book.

Compile some of the truest and brightest (or "true and bright") blog posts I had written thus far into an ebook. Of course, I'd give it away for free. Then I wondered if I could possibly ask people to donate a dollar or two to a charity of my choice. I thought of Concrete Jungle.

And that is the story of True and Bright.

Thank you for reading! I didn't think I would make it this far, I really didn't.

Lakshmi

W A T E R

I am Water.

In my purest form, I am life-giving, energizing, strengthening.

In Nature, I am ever-moving. At that moment, I am brilliance, joy and grace personified. When stagnant, I am dull, slothful and wasteful. What I aspire to be is calm and still with a surface so clean and sparkling that you can see your truest countenance in it.

I am formless, shapeless, tasteless and colorless. I take the shape of the container that houses me. I am without any rigidity or judgment. I am expansive, generous and forgiving.

On some days, I am so joyful that colored lights dance off my surface and disappear into the horizon while small boats filled with laughing children float lazily over me. On some days, I am so pensive that even the sun bleeds with me, splashing his resplendent form all over the sky. Some cool nights, I sing loud and clear, my voice filled with unusual confidence. At dusk, I retire into gloom until the moon appears, lighting up the rest of my day.

My favorite time of the day is dawn when the cool air gently sweeps my face, making way for the golden sunshine that will always protect me from death, decay, sadness and sloth.

Note: A few years ago, I took an online test to determine which one of the five elements my personality resembled the most. The result ended up being Water. Now I am strictly an Air-Space type of person, but yes, I'll take Water happily! I wrote this essay right after I got the result.

LOCKING EYES

This evening, as I drove home from work, I passed a white van. "State Prisoners" was inscribed prominently on the front and back. I couldn't recall the last time I had seen a vehicle of this kind. I wondered if it was actually transporting any prisoners.

I got a little ahead, and looked again. There were two men inside, dressed in white. One was middle-aged and white, looking out at the traffic. Behind him sat a young, handsome black guy wearing a headset. He had large eyes and thick eyebrows, a prominent nose. And he looked straight at me.

I couldn't look away. I had sunglasses on, so I felt somewhat comfortable looking right back. His gaze didn't waver. Neither did mine.

The van moved ahead, and I kept pace with it.

Again we drew level, and I found him looking at me. I returned the gaze. The traffic moved swiftly, and the van sped forward. I fell back, and lost my place.

I prayed silently, let me catch up with him again. I removed my sunglasses.

The traffic continued to flow forward, and again I caught up with the van. There was a lane separating our two vehicles, but there were few cars, and I was able to look right at him. He looked back at me. He had a direct and open expression. It wasn't unfriendly. There was no question in his eyes, or any curiosity. It was a clear, simple look. And I was able to reciprocate the simplicity.

It felt special, this brief interaction. Later I wondered, should I have smiled? Given a thumbs-up, a tiny wave, perhaps?

In hindsight, I am happy that I did nothing to spoil the moment.

Not for a single instant did I “feel sorry” for the young handsome man. Neither did I feel intimidated locking eyes with him. (I am not always comfortable looking into another’s eyes; it feels too direct for my comfort.)

What did I hope to convey? That I was sympathetic? That I hoped things would improve for him? Or did I mean to send a blessing?

None of the above, actually. I was caught in a brief moment of sharing, and I was able to participate fully. And I came away from that interaction, feeling strangely intimate and connected.

H U S B A N D

He was a tall man, a little portly around the middle.

His eyes were deep blue marbles that shone bright, not cold or hard. He had a nicely shaped head, the hair gathering gray near the temples. His face had the ruddy sheen of a healthy man, warm-blooded and passionate. When he laughed, his eyes crinkled shut, mouth open. His face was transformed, its contained expression morphing into one of simple joy, open and uninhibited.

Then he started, "My husband says..."

And my heart plain burst with the unexpected sweetness of it all.

(How wonderful it is to hear "my husband" and "my wife" in all kinds of hitherto unknown contexts.)

ATTRACTIVE

If I am going to be really truthful, then I'd like to say this: I don't really know if I am an attractive woman. I am an attractive person; I have enough confirmation on that. However, as far as physical attractiveness goes, hmmm... I don't know.

A gawky girl with stick-straight hair and a gummy smile grew up to be an awkward teenager. Something changed around age 16. Maybe the hormones were doing their thing, but I hit the beginning of my "attractive" phase. Male attention found its way to me.

(I wonder if the guys around actually saw me, or they saw themselves reflected in my willing, friendly eyes. Some of us have the rare fortune of functioning as mirrors to others. They see themselves in us, and we get lost in the reflecting images. They don't really see us, but they seem to love us, because they see themselves reflected in our transparent countenances. Perhaps that's why guys paid me attention, compliments and such.)

I was sufficiently young and naive; so I thought of myself as an attractive girl that time. I was slim, and I had this lovely head of hair — silky, bouncy, and most importantly, straight.

Those were heady years, perhaps a tad too much. Heady enough that I lost sight of myself, which is an oft-happening occurrence for folks like me: the mirrors.

As I headed to engineering college, the pattern continued to play itself out. Guys and attention, compliments and positive feedback... it went on. The awkward teenager felt vindicated.

(Despite what you may think, my fundamentals were solid, because I zeroed in on the one guy who stayed outside this shiny universe. And I stuck with him. Turned out to be a good decision.)

The years went on, and so did my attractive streak. Like every young woman, I was probably putting out feelers, scanning the territory for solid, bankable mates. I certainly got my share of matching signals, some terribly messed up.

Then marriage happened. Young, romantic love ripened into a sweet companionship and a rich friendship.

But I was attractive no more. Perhaps the signals had shifted without my knowledge?

As the years rolled on, I started looking younger and older at the same time, if you can imagine that. I didn't have the fresh-faced innocence of youth, but my slim frame made me look much younger than my actual age. I wore no makeup, dressed like I'd just graduated college... And my hair began graying. I think my body and mind were playing games, confusing each other and everyone else! Men could no longer place me, or so it seemed.

But more significantly, I think I had begun signaling a lack of interest.

So, while women talk about having to handle unwelcome attention from males around them, I wonder: Where is this attention? Why isn't it finding me?

I think I am not the mirror any more. My mirror has turned inward. Suddenly (or not so suddenly), my attention to the outside has dwindled. I am not available, I guess.

B O M B A Y M Y L O V E

Many years ago, Pinch and I spent a cold night at Victoria Terminus Station. It had probably been renamed to CST already but we only knew it as VT Station. Janfest was on, and typically the concerts would end just before the last train departed. One night, it looked like the last concert was going to run longer, and Mom-Dad and the others chose to leave. Pinch and I opted to stay back, and what can I say, my awesomely cool parents let us do just that.

The concert ended, and we had a few hours to kill before the local trains began around 5 am. So we walked around South Bombay and finally came to VT. Even now, I can taste the feeling of safety and familiar comfort I experienced that night. Perhaps it had to do with the guy walking with me, someone I knew, even back then, would be more than a good friend. But it also had much to do with the fact that I was in Bombay, a city that has contributed so much to my sense of independence, freedom and generosity.

VT station was bustling even in the middle of the night. Trains were arriving from other parts of the country, goods were being unloaded, tired families waited with luggage for trains departing later in the night. VT was brightly lit, porters were busy, the station had an appearance of continuous activity. Piles and piles of newsprint lay around, busy vendors sorted their stuff, packed and tied them and cycled away.

I wondered, does this city ever sleep? No, she is awake all the time — keeping a benevolent eye over all her children.

Today, a young couple may think twice, then discard the idea of spending a night at VT. Hardly anyone might find the idea of walking around South Bombay at 2am safe, let alone romantic.

So much of what Pinch and I share is tied with Bombay. Shopping at pavement book stalls in the middle of the monsoon, gorging on *bun pav maska* at Bastani, eating lunch at that Irani eatery where we chomped on chicken *dhansak*, walks along Marine Drive...

I hope that generations of young couples will get to experience the beauty and charm that is Bombay. I hope they get to revel in the generosity of the city that allows them to squeeze into a crowded train compartment and grants them the space to live in each other's eyes. I hope they understand that in Bombay, we truly get by with the kindness of strangers and friends we have never met. All the world loves a lover... and Bombay does too! Nooks and crannies designed for hour-long chats, friendly waiters who serve you cappuccino, day after day, never asking you to leave, even long after the coffee grounds have dried... and look away at sound of the rising voices and pretend not to notice the red-rimmed eyes. Transvestites who bless you and curse you alike but hardly ever let you feel like you're alone in a city that seems to never stop, never rest, never sleep.

Yeah, we are in this together, and yet it feels like we are being torn apart and the slender fabric of Bombay is wearing thin.

But Bombay is pure silk with incredible tensile strength and radiant shimmering beauty.

Bombay is my home, she has a huge chunk of my heart captive, and as much as I curse the terrible roads, the awful traffic, the perennial MTNL construction, my heart can only pray that this magnificent city, my home for more than 25 years, continues to remain indomitable, generous and all-embracing... as she has always been.

Note: Dec 26, 2008 was the day terrorists struck Mumbai. They attacked various locations around the city, took hostages, murdered hundreds. It was horrifying. I felt strangely unmoved, as I followed the developments from Atlanta. The shock and anger set in later, and then this post followed.

MORE ON THE SLUMDOG

This morning, NPR had a feature on the release of Slumdog Millionaire in India, and they traced the various reactions stirred among the Indian populace. Many people seem to be affronted by the depiction of poverty, squalor and crime in the film. There is a grouse that most Western films always portray Indian in this typical way. At the same time, NPR interviewed a slum dweller who had been living in Dharavi all his life, and he was of the opinion that people deserve to see the truth behind Dharavi. That's how people live, period.

I have been to Dharavi, although the part I visited was not as bad as the rest of it is. But I know enough about Dharavi to say that the film has not portrayed anything that is untrue or a fabrication. Yes, there are mounds of filth around the little hovels, sanitation is really bad (if it exists), water is contaminated and the living conditions are abysmal. Yet, as one of the residents claimed, there is a thriving leather industry and a textile industry that operates out of Dharavi. People here may be poor but they're not miserable. People may lack good homes and clean running water but that has not prevented anyone from making a life of what they have. Bombay is such a city — she grants you an inch of space to live on, and some of the brightest people take it and run with it. They make a home, bring in a family, raise generations — all in that one inch of space. Trust me, I have seen it happen.

Above all, if you have seen Slumdog Millionaire, you cannot miss the sheer lightness and joyful moments scattered through the film. Yes, it portrays distressing issues as poverty, prostitution, communal disharmony, crime, class conflict and violence. But I feel that the overarching theme in the film is faith, joy and innocence. Slumdog is an ode to innocence, the unbeatable spirit of Jamal Malik and his zest for life and love.

This morning, as I drove into the office parking lot, a car came up on the wrong side and I felt this momentary anger — why was she driving up the wrong way? Then I thought, hey, where did this irritation come from? I have spent 25 years in Bombay, a place where nearly everyone drives the wrong way! A city where you sweat, grin, make yourself as compact as you can, and crowd into train compartments that burst at the seams with commuters, where a 3-seater seats five people with briefcases and bags, where a 2-wheeler transports an entire family with little ones — and I complain about space!

Living in the US, I have gotten so used to spotlessness and order that an errant driver makes me see red, a dirty toilet brings up the bile, and someone crowding into my space makes me insecure! But hey, I am a die-hard Bombayite — put me in Bombay and I'll be back to my squeezing, adjusting, push-pull self.

Note: I wrote this post in early 2009, a time when I was less informed about dominant narratives, framing, Hollywood tropes, etc. Sigh, ignorance is bliss. I included this piece simply because I enjoyed writing it, plus it is really about Bombay.

LOVE AND NEUTRALITY

Love isn't generally associated with neutrality.

Love is associated with all sorts of positive experiences — joy, cheer, generosity, good wishes, hugs, support. Neutrality seems very cold in contrast. Like a noble gas or a non-reactive element. We want the people we love to respond to us. We don't want them to be cold or aloof. Or so we understood what it means to be neutral.

When we love someone, we are pretty much in their business openly. When we cannot stand someone, we are in their business too. In our heads, that is. We cannot stop thinking about them. But when we love someone, it is well understood (and expected) that we are connected to them in many ways. This includes providing them with physical/mental/emotional support, wishing them the best, giving them the gift of time and presence, being available to them. Or so the popular understanding of love goes.

Love isn't meant to be neutral or empty. It is meant to be filled with positive vibes and generosity and blessings.

There is no space in love. We keep wanting to close the space, end the distance. Sometimes, it is impossible to close the distance physically, so we do it mentally. And we project our best hopes and wishes on to the people we love. Isn't that expected? How else do we love the people we do, if not by wishing them the best? "May you live long, prosper, be healthy." And so on.

Of course, we also claim that we want space in our loving relationships. Space is a neutral element. Yes, we appreciate space but we don't much care for its neutral nature.

If we are to stay neutral, what is the differentiation between us and a stranger? None, or so we think.

Imagine a parent remaining neutral towards their offspring. It is impossible! We are so emotionally close to them; there can be no space in question. And if that space exists, it isn't empty. It is filled with hopes, dreams, and expectations.

All these positive vibes begin to exert subtle control on the loved ones in question. It hovers over their lives like a cloud. Not a grey, ominous one necessarily. Maybe a white, fluffy one. But it persists. It follows them around. And of course, we shrug it off, thank it even. We are happy to be the beneficiaries, the receivers of such largesse. We are grateful for the support, the encouragement. We regard these as the hallmarks of true love and support. When we don't see them, we think that love has passed. That it no longer exists.

We could never recognize true neutrality for the immense freedom it provides. Indeed, we are incapable of appreciating the gift of neutrality. We crave connection, and we think neutrality is its opposite.

I remember a talk by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar titled "Guru Shishya Sambandh," translated as "Guru Disciple Relationship." In it, he explains that the relationship between a Guru and disciple is like none other. It cannot even be called a relationship because it lacks all markers of typical relationships. He issues a gentle warning, do not make this into a relationship like the others. Because that is the perfect trap to fall into, leading to unmet expectations and drama.

Of course, we like to put a spin on this relationship as well. We imagine that the Guru wants the best for us, s/he wants us to grow and progress and move forward.

What if we came to realize that the Guru has an attitude of complete neutrality towards us? That s/he wants neither the best nor the worst for us, not happiness or sorrow or health or wealth or sickness, whatever. That s/he simply lets us be. That s/he isn't really looking out for our so-called improvement, progress, whatever.

Our tender hearts would be broken. We'd feel let down, all hopes dashed. "You are the one I trusted completely, I thought you'd take care of me." How can the Master be neutral?

I wonder if we can even begin to comprehend the immense freedom granted to us by neutrality. Freedom to be (or not) whoever or whatever. Freedom from love and projection, support and bonding, ties and expectations.

Really, do we even want such freedom? Ahh, I think not.

We like to be supported. We want blessings from loved ones. We rely on their best wishes and positive projections, laden as they may be with subtle expectations. We cherish those connections. We cannot bear to hurt the ones who love us. We don't want freedom. In fact, I doubt we can handle it.

HOW DOES LOVE TASTE?

Love tastes of home.

Of sweet steel tumblers of filter coffee; of banana chips fried in coconut oil with smoke rising off the surface; of plantain-chickpea fritters, plump and sweet. Of a simple plate of bottle gourd dal and steaming rice with a smidgen of lime pickle and lots of ghee.

Of turmeric milk with ginger, drunk on cold mornings, accompanied with much tears and tantrums; of golden mangoes brought to the perfect stage of ripeness in dark cool store rooms; of piles of sweet, sticky jackfruit, patiently removed from giant gnarly fruit by experienced hands and generous amounts of oil.

Of creamy pink *paayasam*, rich and decadent, fit for a wedding; of tangy green mangoes, eaten with a mix of red chilli powder, salt and oil.

Love is in my mother's hands, my father's eyes and their voices, raised with exasperation, concern, joy. Love spices and flavors everything Mummy makes, rendering it perfect and memorable. Love is what makes her cook for me and all of us, each day, every day. Love is a young father cooking simple dishes for his two daughters, as their mother went to visit *her* mother. Daddy is no expert cook but the simplest dishes took on such outstanding flavor under his loving hands.

Love tastes like the scents of Mom and Dad and G combined into a wholesome burst of sensations, that never leaves me no matter how old I am or where I live. Love is me and everything I hold dear.

MY LOVE IS SHEER IMMENSITY

My love is sheer immensity.

It is empty space, full and limitless and infinite, boundless and endless. It cannot be contained in a single person, one entity. It get stifled, suffocated. It begins to stagnate and stink. And decay, then die.

But the one who chose to accept my love is the most generous of everyone. He took it with both hands and threw it out to the sky, so it had all the space it needed. Without any adjustment, any condition, any compulsion. My love got its opportunity to expand and revel in its own self.

And it came back to me. Gorgeous, generous, magnificent, spectacular. What could I do but throw it back into the sky?

And it embraced every being in this Universe, every breath of air, every second of time that ever existed. It touched the Sun, the Moon, the millions of stars and star fragments. And each one of them threw it back into the cosmos. And it continued. And it continues.

"Love is not an emotion; it is your very existence," says Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. Now I know what he means, yes I do!

IN PURSUIT OF GOALLESSNESS

To tell you the truth, goals scare me.

Picture me in one of the volunteer team meetings. "How many people do we need to bring in?" "200, no 300!" "500!" And so on it goes.

And I'd shrink inwardly, willing myself to go along with the energy and adrenaline. Don't put a negative vibe into that soup of joyful enthusiasm, okay? Be a team player. Dream big, reach high, shoot for the stars.

And all that crap (sorry).

Okay, let me break this down in a more practical way.

I think goals serve two purposes. First, they help you make a plan, and that, I can completely get on board with. I have a goal to get to work between 9:15am and 9:30am each morning, so I plan to leave home around 8:30am, or a little earlier. Kriya+meditation takes me 45 minutes, so I have to factor that time into the morning schedule. Breakfast, dressing, lunch prep... you get the drift. A rough plan/goal helps me get started. Now, I miss my goal almost every morning, but I am happy that it exists. It serves as a baseline of sorts, and it keeps me tethered to the original idea. Of course, I can tweak it each morning, if needed, and that's part of the goal setting.

Now here is the second purpose of having a goal. I think Purpose#2 is to stay motivated. And that hardly ever works for me.

I find it virtually impossible to be motivated by a goal. That ticking number only makes me nervous. Or it used to make me nervous when I was younger. These days, I stuff the goal into an imaginary trash can, and get on with my day, life, whatever. Seriously, I am unable to make myself care.

Two weeks ago, I bought a beautiful Apple Watch. It is a piece of beauty! But it became clear to me within a couple of days that this gorgeous device was wasted on me. I didn't care about the # of calories I hit (or didn't) each day, or the number of minutes I spent in active exercise. These targets felt meaningless to me, so the tracker was wasted.

I think back to my childhood, youth, early days of career. And it all feels the same. I had no goals to achieve, no real targets to meet. Perhaps I never wanted anything bad enough?

(When I met P, I knew that I wanted him in my life. But that process had an energy of its own, and I was happy to follow along. Well, perhaps it was a subconscious goal that led me towards him?)

Recently I had a conversation about yoga practice and doing a headstand. Somehow, I have never been motivated to expand my yoga practice by way of learning new poses. I feel very content taking a class or two periodically, improving my personal practice, developing a keener awareness of my own experience of the postures, body alignment, aches and pains in weird places, etc. I don't feel a particular fascination to do a handstand or headstand, whatever. Perhaps one day, I will arrive at the point of doing one of these poses. And I am perfectly okay waiting for that day, whenever it comes.

To me, the practice of Hatha Yoga is the goal. Today, I have a lot of love for Hatha Yoga practice; I feel naturally pulled towards it. So, I have reached my so-called goal, because I have discovered the love and devotion that keeps me glued to the practice. I have hit my goal, many times over.

Some days I think, what a loser you are. Look at your peers, how successful they are! But then my wise partner tells me, dude, you don't want it, and that's the prime reason you don't have all that "success."

I think that probably explains it.

Knowingly or unknowingly, I have been led forward in life by my heart. I am led by the things I love, not the ones that make sense, necessarily. I fought this flow of energy a long time, thought of myself as a drifter, a non-achiever.

However, the truth is that I have always lived for the drift. I have enjoyed the views, the fellow passengers, the people waving on the shores. I have breathed in the sunset colors, sipped warm chai at passing homes, shared gifts and stories.

I have never made a plan, and that's probably why I have drifted in strange ways, landed up at unknown shores.

To put it plainly, the drift has always been the goal for me.

Note: A good piece to end my first book, don't you think?

