

ICWA LETTERS

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Janak

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By Pramila Jayapal

He is cradled in my arms, silky soft skin against my breast. I can feel his ribs as they rise and fall, pushing against me. His small hand against my chest is a soft touch, a breeze that brushes by almost unnoticed. He opens his eyes, large slate grey circles below his furry eyebrows. It takes effort, as if a heavy weight is on his eyelids. He gazes unblinkingly into my eyes, and I see that the wrinkles of his furrowed brow reach up to and disappear into his skull, like lapping waves on a sandy beach. One perfectly formed foot moves against my chest. He is tiny, this boy of mine, his full length not even reaching from my fingertips to elbow.

I am reminded, as I look at him, of the miracle of his birth. "The chances of survival for a baby of only 27 weeks gestational age are as low as 40% if the baby is born infected..." The voices swirl in my head. I am dizzy, staring out at the distant ocean that I see from my hospital bed. The sirens of the ambulance that brought me here wail in my mind. The white caps of the waves look suddenly sinister, dangerous, reminders that there are places I have not been, places where I would not want to go. "There is no water left in your sac. We will have to take the baby out." Out! He's not ready! I say, only inside, because I know there is no choice.

Janak's unannounced birth, three months before he is due, is like a review of all the lessons of India, lessons that are only taking on real shape as they manifest themselves in my life. They are lessons that, as they become part of my own reality, become grounded in my mind like a rock sinks and settles at the bottom of a deep lake. But, as the rock sinks, it stirs up mud...a sea of questions that only occur when it is your own life that has become murky.

Is this karma playing itself out, mocking me for having ever questioned that it existed? The ancient doctrine of karma, that we all build merit with our good deeds and demerits with our bad which show up in this life or the next ones? According to this, Janak must have done something more than odious in his past lives that he should be born with a dangerous infection, unable to breathe without additional oxygen, weighing only a fragile 850 grams. Something that defies imagination that he should be burdened with the weight of the wires of all the monitoring devices to which he is attached.

Or perhaps, I think, it is not his actions in the past at all that he is being punished for. Maybe he feels no pain as he lies there. Maybe his birth is actually meant to punish me for my questions, for my actions, for something that I probably don't even remember.

But, still, I cannot stop questioning karma. I look at the other tiny creature who lies in the warmer next to my son, white splotches on his face from where his skin peeled off from the tape that attached the ventilator to his face for a

month. He has been to hell and back, that child. For a month, the doctors thought he would not survive, each day's x-rays showing larger and larger white areas where blood clouded his lungs. I look at him and doubt karma. I doubt that he or his mother could have done anything that could be so much worse than what I or my tiny son have done.

As I question karma, I hurl myself at a reaffirmation of a human being's subordinated role to some greater force. He has taught me, my son, through his birth. Everything was planned, in the way that most of us live our lives. We were to return to the States in the 29th week of my pregnancy, allowing ourselves almost three months to prepare — more planning — for the baby's arrival. Our plans were part of the illusion that we actually order the world, that we control our lives.

Janak's birth was my final immersion into India and its teachings. Ultimately, what is to happen happens, regardless of our plans. It is not fatalism, this realization. The ancient Indian philosophers were not foolish fatalists. They just understood, as I do today, that there are universal forces bigger than we are, forces that can overrule the plans we make. A lesson that I have learned in my two years in India, but today it has become crystal clear. I tell myself that I will never forget it, but I know — sadly — that as my son gets better, as his breaths become stronger and his flesh begins to fill up his too-big, wrinkled skin, that I will forget again. Someday, when he is well, the humility I feel in front of the events that have happened to me will disappear and I will begin to think again that I control my life.

Today, my actions as he lies in hospital are those of a

person who struggles to maintain some sense of control. The mother of the other child who lies next to Janak kneels before the statues of faith and prays that her child will make it. I cannot do this without feeling a hypocrite. I was not sure I believed in Gods and prayer before; how, then, can I suddenly start asking for things? I pray in my own way, to that greater force that I believe exists, that I will have the strength to bear whatever is to come, that my son will have a chance to be on this earth whether this time or next. I order books, talk to experts, get to know the machines in the neonatal intensive care unit where he lies so that I know the meaning of every alarm that goes off. Order, order, give me order in this chaos. That is actually what life is. Chaos, which we turn into order by imposing our own meanings and realities onto something, making one enormous picture of the world which we are physically incapable of grasping into something smaller (but not truer) that we can grasp.

"I would be like you," our doctor has told us, "looking for information, using my intellect to try and deal with the situation, compensating for what I do not have control over with knowledge. But, sometimes I really think that in the long run, faith and prayer hold you in much better stead." I cannot change, but I see myself clearly now, understand my coping mechanisms much better. In the broadest of senses, I see the influence of my Westernized upbringing in these moments of crisis. Unlike the Orientalists, however, who might close the case awarding a clear win to knowledge over faith, I cannot. Knowledge is limited, it has been said by many much wiser than I. Now I understand the Kierkegaardian "leap of faith." I confront Janak's life and his death from my cliff top, the wide abyss below gaping up at me and the cliff on the other side far away. □