A 29-Year-Old's Undying Legacy of Love
by Siddharth Sthalekar

It's just been a couple of hours since I heard the news. One of my dearest friends, and inspirations, whom some people called a 'Love Warrior' passed away last night in a road accident on the outskirts of Ahmedabad. Raghu Makwana, or Raghu Palathi as he was fondly known in his communities was driving on his three-wheeled motorcycle to a relatives home before he came to his untimely death at the age of 29. Most of you who know me, or have been associated with this blog would be familiar with the story of Raghu. When he was only 1 year old, he developed polio in both his legs and was limited to a life of walking with the help of both his hands along the ground. It's hard to imagine a mental state one would have in such a situation. You'd expect resentment, negativity and a state of resignation. Or perhaps that's what we are conditioned to expect. Not Raghu. Raghu was an anomaly. A flag that stood in all those winds of Maslows theories and conversations that said you need 'at least this much' to be in a 'giving' frame of mind. Raghu was an anomaly because he ran on something that none of these theories seemed to factor in - an unextinguishable, un-definable and at times irrational value called Faith. At the age of 20, Raghu left home in his village to live a life of contribution. Armed with merely 300 rupees in his pocket, but loads of that faith. Through various serendipitous encounters, he found himself in the eco-system of the Gandhi ashram and eventually serving women and homes in the Slum community. Stories of his journey and acts of generosity are endless. But some of my most transformational moments with him came through the smallest conversations. Often, over the last few years there were times when I'd be feeling scarce. After conversations with friends and family I'd wonder how I'd look after myself. Inevitably I would come across Raghu bhai at these times and sit down with him for a conversation. It's hard to explain what transpires in such interactions. Here I am with my bank balance, intellectual capital, skills, a family structure that support me, and right next to me was a man with limited physical capability, a bank balance that would last me a few days and almost no family support to speak of. Yet, his radiant eyes and shining teeth would send forth the most beautiful intentions you could imagine - Siddharth bhai [brother], how can we serve our friends more?

Through the last three years that we've known him, we've had several adventures in faith together. Some of my closest friends have spend hours driving through the slums with him to get a glimpse of the fuel that moves him. Leaders of organizations, intellectuals, injured dogs lying in the gutters of a slum, or kids that would be bubbling with enthusiasm on his backseat - everyone has been on one of his incredible rides. He would embrace it all as he zipped through the narrow mud roads of the Tekra [slum]. Smiles and waves would cheer him on as his motorbike clattered with the food for the elderly women he served. Sometimes, we would head out for what I called Mini-pilgrimages - walks with no money or telephones. Raghu would be on his tricycle with a musical instrument in hand, and me on my feet. Through walks like those you could see his secret sauce to life. Squatting on the floor he was always at a
vantage point. It was almost as if he was forced to approach each situation and person with humility, and that allowed him to see the divinity in everyone. From his funders, to kids that he served on Sundays, everyone was a manifestation of the Divine, or The One above; was the term he used.

Once, while we were returning from one of his numerous talks - we were both hungry. It was past lunchtime, and we hadn’t figured out where we would be eating that day. I found the car parked outside the McDonalds on Ashram Road. Immediately, I cringed - this Golden Arch represented every value I did not approve of. But not with Raghu, he looks at it and says innocently - we’ve heard about this McDonalds place a lot - let’s just eat here; I walk in, with Raghu behind me walking on his two hands. Clearly, this was not what the McDonalds staff and guests are used to - we were a unique combination, Raghu and I. It was a weekday afternoon, and we go through the queue and get our food really quick. As we sat on our table, my eyes were darting around the room to see everyone’s attention come our way. Raghu, was used to it though - glances from people, often with pity, wondering how he lived his life. But he held them with grace, almost to say; I can see why you’re suffering when you look at me, but honestly, I’m pretty happy ;)

Gradually, one of the guests mustered the courage to come over. As I saw him walk over, I tried to make it a bit more comfortable for him. Immediately, I introduced him to Raghu and told him a bit about his work. As people saw us talking, more guests joined in. Slowly, even the janitor, and attendants at McDonalds came into our circle. Stories were shared about Raghu in the slums, the women he served and the homes he offered Tulsi plants to. How he lived in the spirit of Service, and how his upar wala; always took care of him. I took a step back and was amazed - here we were, in a McDonalds! Raghu’s presence had transformed it into a temple of sorts. All around, you could see people inspired by the way he lived his life. That was the true work of Raghubhai. It wasn’t limited to the meals he offered to the aged women in the community, or the hundreds of Tulsi plants he offered to homes in the slum - it extended out to the thousands of people who had been touched by his spirit. As the emails and Facebook posts pour in from across the world, you start to get a glimpse of what his true impact really was.

As I write this, I’m still struggling to come to terms with his passing. I notice my mind help but drift to the most obvious question - Why do Bad things happen to Good people? or Why would a soul that dedicated so much of his life to alleviate the suffering of others go like this? or Why did he have to ride his bike on the highway on that particular day?; I see myself taken over by a whirlwind of confusion as I start to imagine a hostile world that’s out to get us. Immediately, I hear Raghu’s voice from within - his eyes shining bright as he says with a smile. You can; have all the answers Siddharth bhai. We just have to have faith that the Upar Wala; has something beautiful in store for us. We just have to keep playing our part on this beautiful stage called Life;

Jai Jagat [Glory to the Earth].