

Unpacking a Gift from 21 Years Ago by Guri Mehta

As I was cleaning out my dresser, I found a small red, blue, and green hand-woven pouch, with a silver zipper on top. Ms. Macias, an English teacher I had in my Senior year of high school had given it to me fifteen years before I ever visited Guatemala, the country in which it was made. I remember sitting near Ms. Macias' desk every day to the right side of the classroom, near my best friend Tia. We would both bombard her with questions about life and all that is important to a teenager. She would willingly engage in many conversations with us.

One day she took out this little woven bag from her desk, walked over to my desk and asked if I liked it. I told her it was beautiful. And she said, "It's for you." I've now had it for the past 21 years. Sometimes I forget that I have it but often times, it finds its way back to my purse where it holds life's little necessities. I never thought about it much and yet I never got rid of it in its old age, even though it matches with absolutely nothing else I have.

Noticing that I wasn't putting an old worn out little bag in my Goodwill pile while cleaning, my husband, Nipun, thought it was such a thoughtful -- and uncommon -- gesture from a teacher. "Why do you think she gave it you?" he asked. I was a little baffled by that question. Somehow that thought had never occurred to me. "Why do you think she gave it to you and not someone else?," he asked again. High School was not a time when I felt special or unique in any way, so it wasn't that. At a loss of words, I didn't really have a response.

As I was speaking to a friend recently who teaches high school, it occurred to me that Ms. Macias was able to see far beyond the time I would share with her. She knew that my family had immigrated to the States much like hers. I'm sure she noticed that I only had a few pairs of clothes that I kept alternating. Miss Macias was the type of lady who took great interest in her wardrobe, always matched her shoes and skirts, and always did her hair and nails. In my teenager-ness, I remember asking her once why she always matched. As it turned out, Ms. Macias had a very modest upbringing, and now that she could afford few simple pleasures, she decided to go all-out just because she could. Her story, and the way she carried herself, may have been a seed of confidence that inspired me to be independent as a woman. In giving me that small gift, she gave me a reminder for my life -- to not take things for granted, to live up to my ideals, and to share.

Just thinking of Ms. Macias leaves me with a nostalgic feeling of gratitude. And it makes me wonder how many influences I have had in my life that I never fully recognize. The teachers who saw me when I wanted to be invisible, and who believed in me when I was afraid to speak in front of the class. The aunts and uncles that loved me even when I didn't give them anything in return, too consumed with growing up and my own life. The

siblings that loved me no matter how hard I was on them. The great friends I've had who could pick up my calls at 2AM and whose calls I would pick up anytime. The bosses that took time to teach me what they knew. The elders throughout life who have learned how to love unconditionally, which is perhaps the most beautiful thing anyone can have the honor of witnessing. The monks and wise-people I've been lucky enough to spend time with, and whose insights serve as signposts for which way to go.

I think we are all truly raised by a village. As my six-year-old niece wholeheartedly believes, "everyone that loves me is my big-huge-family!" Like her, I know deep in my heart that these are all my people. And I'm still continuing to be raised by the young and the old.

In the spirit of the holidays, I want to celebrate all of my big-huge-family that has shown me the way, cared for me in ways that I can never repay. The only thing that I can do is to take a deep bow of gratitude to the Ms. Macias' of the world, who take time to pay attention to the needs of those around them. Perhaps this video captures the sentiment more than my words can say: