

The Power of Milk Moments by Aditi Chokshi

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□“I hate you, Aditi! I hate you!” my little brother screamed to me just minutes after my college graduation.

□As I pressed the outside corner of my eye to prevent a tear from escaping, I reminded him not to use hurtful words when he feels upset. Together we searched for the source of his frustration and then addressed it: we would get “New York” pizza once the crowds cleared.

□At the time, my little brother, Anand, was not so little – he was thirteen. Anand was born with cataracts, faced some developmental delays while growing up, and at the age of twelve with the onset of severe seizures, was diagnosed with both autism and epilepsy. I coordinate Anand’s care for my family, building relationships with his doctors and educators. I try to help increase my family’s understanding of Anand’s condition. I haven’t yet missed an appointment or teacher conference, even if I can only call in on the phone.

□Being Anand’s older sister has involved moments big and small and has been the most formative relationship of my life. I believe big moments in life are the ones that grab us awake, the ones that force us to stand up for what we believe in, to deliver precisely when the stakes are high and many are counting on us. Over the past few weeks, I’ve come to learn that this is a room full of big moments – past, present, and future. Through your glistening passion and relentless spirit we’ve discovered that collectively there are many depending on us – all the children short of money and mentors and the love they deserve to feel, all the patients who will die waiting while we figure out how we get life-saving medicine we already have into their hands, all those losing their lives today so that their children and grandchildren can vote with their voice not with their blood. Wow. No pressure. But despite the enormity of your challenge you’ve persisted. All of us have kept going. But with our unrelenting spirits we must ask ourselves – deep down – when we are called upon how are we sure that we put forward our very best selves?

□ You see, the big moments jolt us awake but what we do once we are awakened – I believe that is the true substance of our character. And I believe it is the small moments – moments that no one knows about, moments that no one sees, moments when we know absolutely no one else is watching – that truly define our character

□At my home, even mundane experiences such as pouring a glass of milk became an opportunity to build an environment where Anand could thrive. When Anand was little, I would make sure one milk container was only a quarter full and at the front of the fridge. The nearly empty container relieved my mother’s fears about another spill and kept

Anand feeling confident. As Anand reached for the container, I would remind him to pour over the sink and coach him on how to hold the gallon steadily with both hands. With a little encouragement only a few drops would escape his cup. One of the biggest lessons Anand has taught me is to look for the “milk moments” of life – small opportunities to selflessly enable someone else to succeed.

□Tutoring, playing sports, working on the computer – I experienced many “milk moments” growing up as Anand’s big sister. And to be honest, I think it was simply the fact that I saw how much of a difference my persistence made that kept me going. I mattered to shaping Anand but I was also making a difference, slowly but surely in my family – with my mom, my dad, and my sister.

□Anand has opened my eyes to “milk moments” all around me. In college, when I was teaching art classes in Harlem my most memorable student was Ashley. She was a gentle slightly chubby little girl with glasses from Puerto Rico who, without glossy pursed lips, sequined jeans, and gold hoops, was a misfit among her other Latina counterparts. Her parents were old. Her oldest brother was nearly 40. It was a small line she had once mentioned to me. But I remembered it when our end of year art showcase came around. I thought back to my own family and realized her parents might not understand why they should attend. So I called her parents, not once, but twice over the coming week. And on the day of our showcase – there they were. Upon seeing them, Ashley hugged them and broke down in tears, and I did as well. She was 13 and her parents had never before attended an event at school. For me that hallway, that classroom, that embrace – lives on in my mind forever. There is a deep reciprocity in “milk moments,” where seemingly inconsequential acts allow us to discover the depths of our own character.

□We can never know when the smallest act will turn into that never ending ripple. How many Ashley’s are we missing because we just aren’t aware to look for them? I’m not saying it’s always easy. By definition “milk moments” are often invisible to others, often thankless. I’m sure all of you have felt the tension. Your dreams are so big and so great and so just – in comparison the small moments feel insignificant, in an extreme sense of justice, perhaps even irresponsible. How do you have time? I’m not saying that organic compassion alone will solve the world’s problems. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be here at Harvard, taking the time to step away from our fight for social justice. A teacher fighting for inner city school reform might tell me that calling Ashley’s parents is not part of sustainable, scalable strategy. She might be right. But does that take away our ability to reach out in the one “milk moment” we can?

□My ask of you is to look out for and embrace the next “milk moment” that presents itself to you. There are no rules for this – no “once a day” or “twice a day” – but surely sometime over the next two weeks a small opportunity to help will present itself. Reach out and grab the next “milk moment” you notice. You see, Anand – his phone calls, his emails – they never let me forget the power of the small. They served as a reminder of our humility, our solidarity, and of the power of “milk moments” to shape the fiber of our character so we are ready when we are called upon.