



The sum of our parts

BY RANVEER M.S. VASDEV

The clock flashed 4:30am in bright red lettering. He blindly felt for his frameless glasses, put them on and took a deep breath. With a familiar difficulty, he angled his legs over the edge of the mattress, shifted his 86-year-old frame to sit, and rubbed his sore wrists. He paused, sitting for minutes in the silence of the early

morning. With effort, he pushed on his thighs to stand and shuffled towards the bathroom.

Once-simple tasks, like getting out of bed, took far longer than they used to. My grandfather, Jagmohan, or as I called him, “Grandad,” embodied the progressive nature of aging. His joints ached. His

vision blurred. His strength faded. Day by day, Grandad was dying, and his body kept score. Still, Grandad understood death’s eventuality better than most.

At 15 years old, he and his family were refugees of the 1947 India-Pakistan Partition. In his hometown of Parachinar, Pakistan, Grandad personally witnessed childhood friends and neighbors murdered in the streets amid citywide riots. Fearing the same fate, he and his family purchased tickets to leave the city by train. As a government employee, Grandad’s father was granted a last-minute opportunity to leave by plane. After boarding the plane, Grandad sat in its barren cargo hold, sandwiched between overzealously packed suitcases. His turban, stuffed with his mother’s jewelry, rested against the window colored by the soft orange glow of distant fires. That night, Grandad barely escaped with his life. As it turned out, those who fled by train were massacred. Eyewitnesses described the carnage as horrific, with blood-soaked passenger carriages and bodies littered across the tracks.

No stranger to his own mortality, Grandad welcomed death as an old friend. Over the years, we talked openly about the subject. When asked if he was afraid of dying, he smiled gently, reached out for my hand, and said, “I’ve had a full life. When it’s time, it’s time.”

One of the great joys in Grandad’s last year of life was my decision to apply to medical school. A retired mechanical engineer who could speak 11 languages, he held education in high regard. Throughout his childhood, he studied every night under gas-lit streetlights and dreamed of attending medical school himself. However, his family could not afford it. This did not prevent him from becoming a lifelong learner. Grandad was a voracious reader, a talented stock trader and an admirer of Urdu poetry. Given his childhood aspirations and passion for knowledge, my admission to medical school filled him with pride.

Grandad's health significantly declined in the months before his death. He suffered from atrial fibrillation, mitral regurgitation and heart failure. His hospital visits grew more frequent and faint crackles were heard in both lungs. But, as fluid leaked into his alveoli, Grandad's heart overflowed with love. He loved to eat sliced cucumbers from the garden, topped with freshly cracked black pepper. He loved to sing along to Bollywood films, skipping over the words he had once known by heart. Above all else, he loved his family.

Grandad's love for his family was unconditional. It was a love known only by those who had struggled their entire lives. His expression of love ranged from slicing mangos for his grandchildren to paying for part of my college tuition. It was a love that made my memories of him enduring—sitting on his shoulders as a child while he watched the news, learning stock trading fundamentals from him on Sunday mornings and holding his hand after his mitral stent surgery. It was a love shared between grandchildren and grandparents. A love greater than the sum of its parts.

Weeks before his death, Grandad grew increasingly excited for my White Coat Ceremony. During a visit with his primary care provider, he said, "I don't care what you do to me! Give me any drug, do any surgery. I need to see my grandkid's White Coat." Perhaps, the excitement proved too much for Grandad's heart. Perhaps, it was just his time. Grandad died 11 days before the ceremony.

As my family grieved and prepared for his funeral the following week, I sat down to write his obituary, but was at a loss for words. How do you summarize a Grandad's life—and all that he endured—in just four paragraphs? How do we measure life at all? I could not grasp such a sublime but fragile concept, and yet my understanding of life and living would quickly change.

Medical school presented a quantitative framework to understand our body's composition. Cadaver dissections, biochemical signaling pathways and glass histology slides revealed that we are a concert of anatomical architecture and molecular

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constellations that will both grow and decay. After much formaldehyde, many multicolored pens and several hours on the microscope, I initially believed that we are the sum of our parts: a mere collection of organs, tendons, cells, etc. Yet, my grandfather exemplified that we are so much more. Grandad was not just an 86-year-old diabetic male with decompensated heart failure and an extensive cardiovascular surgical history. He was a survivor of religious persecution, a dedicated student and a champion of altruism.

This perspective is shared with the Hippocratic oath that Grandad never had the chance to hear. A modern adaptation reads, "I will remember that I do not treat a fever chart, a cancerous growth, but a sick human being." With this perspective, completion of my preclinical years and more than two years since Grandad's death, I can answer the questions once posed by his obituary. The measure of human life is non-discrete, precious and, most importantly, derived from our connections with others. These connections are everywhere. They are at yearly holiday family dinners. They are in the initial seconds of a trauma admit. They are exchanges of stories. They are in long-

anticipated hospice care discussions. They are born in the first few moments of life, and they are cherished in its last. In all of these moments, our existence has value not because of how we spend our time, but who we share it with.

Two days before the White Coat Ceremony, I looked admiringly at Grandad as he lay in his casket. He looked peaceful: his arms at rest, shoes freshly polished, black suit ironed and maroon turban wrapped around his head. The slight bulge in his left lapel reminded us of his pacemaker, and all that his heart endured. Holding Grandad's hand one last time reminded me of the loving man before me. It was the same hand that frantically packed canvas suitcases amidst the sounds of riots and gunfire. The same hand that placed a ring on my grandmother's. The same hand that lifted me onto his shoulders to watch the news. The same hand that cut mangos, that pointed out trending stocks, that held mine when asked if he was afraid of dying only to say, "When it's time, it's time." I was wrong. Grandad welcomed death's eventuality, not because of his childhood experiences, but because he lived a full life, saturated with meaningful and loving relationships with his family. Because of you, Grandad, I know that the human experience is a celebration of our interactions and we are far, far greater than the sum of our parts. **MM**

Ranveer M.S. Vasdev is a third-year medical student at the University of Minnesota Medical School, Twin Cities.