

"The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams" - Eleanor Roosevelt

verything in this world arose first as a dream in someone's mind. Indeed, the Universe itself emerged as a dream in God's mind. Which is why it is imperative that when we give birth to a dream, we bring it to life too. Abortion of a dream is every bit as much a murder as that of a foetus.

And yet, how few there are in this world who chase and realise their dreams.

I see even successful people deeply unhappy because they are not connected to their inner selves. We hear of people in IIT and medical colleges committing suicide, professionals on the brink of depression, every second person gulping down sleeping pills, and parents concerned about the grades of a pre-nursery child. In this artificial world that we ourselves have created, dreams are believed to be fiction and never reality.

Personally, when I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, I thought it was the end of my life as I knew it then. Soon however, I began dreaming of a complete life, with or without the ailment. I knew the Universe would look after me as it had always done. I made a plan for myself and lived according to it.

Dreams tiptoe into every imagination, but we often ignore them thinking they are impossible to achieve. Often too, we are discouraged by everyone around us, leading us to lose our confidence and follow the tried and tested path that everyone else follows. In the process, we compress our spirit, dampen our life force and enfeeble our soul. Perhaps somewhere, the Creator who gave us life and sent us on this planet to unveil our magnificence weeps to see us so stunted.

And yet there is one power that we can harness to bring back our natural buoyancy, verve and daring. A power that can unfold the superhuman in us all. And that power is love. If love awakens within us, it gives us the foundation upon which to dare impossible things. This love can either be the love with which we are cared for as children, or our own passionate love for a cause, a person, a community or a profession. It can also be a realisation of the constant love of the Creator towards us.

The power of love

Love can make us believe in ourselves and then, in our dreams.

Preeti Monga, now in her 50s, was six years old when her visual disability was first diagnosed. Stationed in the remote township of Agartala, the capital of the northeast state of Tripura, and with little access to specialised support, counselling or guidance, her parents had absolutely no idea how to bring up a blind child. For a while, they toyed with the idea of sending her to a school for the blind, but since none of

the schools they visited satisfied them, they brought her up in the best way they could, showering her with love and support.

This love made her believe in herself and the power of her dreams and she kept on dreaming, dreaming and dreaming. When Helen Keller had achieved so much, why not she?

Determined not to let her disability come in the way, Preeti learnt to play the sitar and even completed a diploma from the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya. However, that was as far as she could go with that dream, for her understanding of music was insufficient for further exploration.

She then thought it would be best if she settled down in matrimony and became a good homemaker. At that stage, all she wanted was a good marriage, kids and a reasonably comfortable home. She had a host of men who were friends but no one wanted to marry her. An arranged marriage seemed out of the question as no one was willing to accept a visually challenged woman as a life partner. After a period of pain and humiliation, in 1982 she met and married her first husband. Here again, she met with difficulty. It was a marriage that headed straight for the rocks from the very beginning. He was an alcoholic who kept leaving one job after another, rendering their lives unstable. In 1986, when she was a mother of two, she decided to become economically independent so that she could leave him and take care of herself and her children.

As we can see, Preeti never stopped dreaming, because she knew she could achieve them. She just redefined her dreams. After all, in the journey of life, our original dream often changes to newer ones, sometimes even making us explore new territories.

Observing a rising trend in fitness, Preeti got the idea of becoming an aerobics instructor. In 1988, she became the first blind aerobics instructor in the world. In 1993, she finally separated from her first husband.

In 1994, she took up a full-time job at the National Association for the Blind in New Delhi as a resource teacher. From there she moved on to getting the job of a marketing and sales manager with a food marketing company. There, she met her second husband who, though much younger than her, completely shared her values and helped her craft a happily-ever-after denouement to her life.

The love of strangers

Sometimes, there are people who get no love

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The love of strangers helped Amin dream and realise a better life for himself and others.

at all from one's own family but still get ignited into dreaming by the love they draw in their later lives. This was the case with Amin Sheikh in Mumbai.

Amin's stepfather used to beat him savagely, and so did his mother. During the day he used to work eight to 10 hours a day in a tea shop, and would be paid two rupees for it. At night he would come home and bear the abuse. He ran away at the age of five, begging, eating discarded eatables, and sleeping in fear under park benches or in hidden corners of railway stations. Fortunately, he was lucky and taken to an orphanage, Sneh Sadan, at the age of eight. There he learnt what it meant to have a place one can call 'home' and people one can call 'family'. After several odd jobs, he worked with the late Eustace Fernandes, a renowned advertising artist, most famous for creating the 'Amul Girl'. Amin became not just his Man Friday but almost a son. Fernandes even took him to Barcelona on a visit. There, Amin noticed how people use a café as a space to bond and interact. In 2003, Eustace bought him a second-hand car, and he started running his own cab company with it. One day, a British woman told him that she had been in a lot of cabs but none showed her around the way he did. She went back to London and wrote a fantastic piece on him on the Internet which went viral. Many foreigners who came later specifically asked for Amin to drive them around. His business prospered and he bought another

In his personal life too, he evolved. He knew he had to forgive his mother in order to rise above the blame game. Understanding that she too was a victim of circumstances he nobly bought her a house in 2006, and bridged their bond.

From experience, he knew that apart from issues of food and clothing, living on the streets could be lonely. He yearned to open a space where people could meet and bond, as he had seen them do in the cafe in Barcelona; he dreamt of opening a similar one in Mumbai.

Friend of the Earth

Love for Planet Earth is something most of us have, but rarely does it spark a fire that electrifies us into action as it did Shubhendu Sharma.

Bangalore-based Shubhendu always wished to do something of abiding value. In a city full of software engineers, he decided to join Toyota because of their high quality work.

But slowly, he began to question if auto manufacture was in the interest of the planet in the long run, because of the pollution it generated.

In 2009, he met and volunteered to assist a naturalist, Akira Miyawaki, to cultivate a forest at the Toyota plant where he worked. This experience became a turning point in his life. He saw present-day India as a concrete jungle surrounded by barren land all around. He was obsessed with creating forests.

Love for community

Love for our community and nation is deeply embedded in all of us. However, in the scuffle of daily life, we often forget this basic love of ours. When we forget this love, a part of us remains incomplete, as Babar Afzal found

Babar had left Kashmir as he did not want to be part of a land that was full of uncertainty and conflict. He studied and was extremely 'successful' by society's standards. He worked with organisations like McKinsey in India, USA, UK, and Middle East as a technology analyst, business consultant, and a hacker who broke the codes of many. He had a great salary, great accommodation, good food, good friends and was travelling all over the world, but there was always

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something pulling him back home. His soul gnawed at him all the time. "I could see people back home, friends and family, who were struggling, who were dying. It was devastating," he says. He had to revive the place that he loved.

"The world does show its magic to those who pursue dreams," said Babar when I met him recently at a conference.

He felt he must do something to make Kashmir return to the original state that had inspired the famed Amir Khusro to rhapsodise, "If there is a paradise on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this."

We often hear about many things from and about Kashmir but most of us are not aware of the power of its creativity. Kashmir is a wonderful blend of beauty and creativity in various forms, which includes its wondrous pashmina shawls. Babar had always understood and resonated with the power of pashmina. The word 'pashmina' comes from the Persian term 'pashm' meaning wool. The real pashmina wool comes from the Changthangi goats of the Himalayas. The goats are cultured in cold weather that compels them to develop a protective skin and wool for survival. Babar knew that in the late 14th century, the poet and scholar Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani had introduced the Himalayan goat's wool to Kashmir, where the word 'cashmere' has come from. With this, Hamadani had helped develop a weaving industry in Kashmir then. Babar wanted to work in the same area. "My love for pashmina comes from a journey that is intertwined with different threads. Of the community that has protected the pashmina goat from centuries. Of a textile so pure that it rests atop everything the world calls luxury. Of a place that is being hit by the severe impact of climate change. Of a state that is known mostly for disturbances and terrorism. It's about my own journey of quitting a corporate career and taking on a mission to guard the roots of the eco-system and protect the perfection that is pashmina. And in the process give back as much to the community that has selflessly given us the finest fabric known to man."

Babar saw that that the goats responsible for the pashmina industry were dying due to changes in the eco-system, making the industry struggle for survival. He knew he needed to do something about this, else the industry itself would remain a faint memory. Apart from its beauty, he knew it had and still has tremendous economic potential. This is what Babar wished to unleash. Essentially, he wished to find an economic solution for the communities that are linked to the pashmina industry in India, the country's original and perhaps only true luxury product. Today, India accounts for less than one per cent of the world's annual pashmina production, which is estimated

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TESTIMONIAL

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... Hitesh Sahani, NOIDA, U.P.

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Babar's dream of reviving the dying pashmina craft of Kashmir made him fight against tremendous odds

at 10,000 to 15,000 tons. That's far behind China, with 70 per cent, and Mongolia, with 20 per cent. He could not allow this to continue.

Before he implemented his entrepreneurial solutions, Babar became a shepherd to empathise with the hardships of the community he had vowed to protect. In the process, he learnt many lessons, "I got to know that a flock of pashmina goats was attacked by snow leopards in a village in the outskirts of Leh. This was in the late afternoon and the spot of the incident was about 60-70 kilometres from where I was. Once I reached the spot, it was about a 1.5 mile hike to the place of the attack. As it was getting dark I started to run with only a Swiss knife in my pocket to ward off the leopard. My weapon of choice was not the biggest blunder of my life. Running at 14,000 ft. was. Soon I started gasping and fell down unconscious."

This was a terrible situation but the only reason Babar survived is because the shepherds came to his rescue. They lost their flock that day, but saved him from certain death.

Many may have given up their resolve after such difficulty and gone back to their comfort zone. This did not happen with Babar. When he woke up the next day in a Delhi hospital, his resolve to resuscitate the livelihood of the pashmina shepherds who had saved his life, only increased. He wished to revive the pashmina industry and make the lives of the shepherds better in the harsh and difficult terrains where they lived. They had saved his life; could he not save theirs?

Harnessing the power of love

Of all the love we experience and receive, none is so powerful as the love of the Universe for us. And when we follow our dreams, the Universe is faithfully on our side, leading us on, showing the way, sending people and ideas towards us. We look out for one dream, but very often the Universe gives us many on the way, knowing what our soul is craving for.

"There lies in every human being an unfathomable store of potential which remains unexplored due to various factors like social obligations, limitations in thought patterns, and the fear of the unknown," says Preeti.

Her own struggles had empathised her to the lot of the disabled and her

new dream formed: to help disabled women to carve a niche for themselves in the world. She gathered together some of the women she knew and started helping them become confident, presentable and with a skill that the world would pay for. In 2006, she founded an NGO, Silver Linings, to indicate that every cloud does indeed have a silver lining. She began counselling the members to never give up on life, and to focus on their inner positivity and potential. She taught them to handle sexual harassment at work places as well, so that they could pursue their work untroubled.

Amin continued his work as a tour guide but kept thinking about his cafe. In 2007, he met Marta Miquel, a doctor from Spain who had published a book to raise funds for a hospital she wished to set up in Orissa. At first she was his client and soon become a friend. "Even though she went back to Spain she kept in touch with me by Skype," says Amin. He was impressed by her commitment to her dream of building the hospital and the unique way she raised funds for it. It inspired him to write a book himself. It took him II months to write the book and two years to publish it.

Life is Life, I am Because of You is his autobiography, based on his life as a street child, the people who rescued him, his struggles, and how he became the success that he is now.

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"I wrote it myself, and once I finished, Dilip D'Souza, a journalist and author, did the grammar and spelling corrections," he says. Many others pitched in to make the cover design, page design and sketches.

He finally published the book in 2012. The book is now a great success and has been translated in eight languages. The sale of his book made him realise his long-cherished dream of opening his café, called *From Bombay to Barcelona* in Marol Naka, Mumbai.

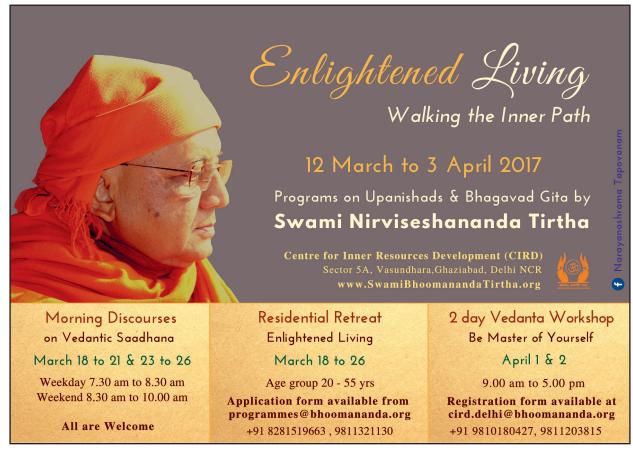
"I never thought Amin's dream would materialise, and am truly happy to have been proven wrong," said Dilip, when I spoke to him recently. Doubtless many shared Dilip's scepticism, but we should never despair, for are dreams not made from and through magic?

Apart from the miracle of his book getting published and the café being opened, Amin's faith in the goodness of humanity has increased manifold. He could not believe that people all over the world wanted to read about him and extend their help to his mission. Now, Amin is looking to delegate his responsibilities in order for the cafe to be sustainable. "My aim is that other boys and girls should get an opportunity to get a good job and broaden their minds like I did," he says. That dream too, will soon bear fruit, surely.

"Chasing dreams is hard work," Shubendu told me when I spoke to him recently. He began working ardently in the area of restoring nature using Akira's approach. Though he was working on a model that had already been implemented, he needed to experiment with the model; eventually he came up with an Indian version after slight modifications to suit the terrain. His first tryst with making forests was in his own backyard in Uttarakhand, where he grew a lush green forest within a year's time. This gave him confidence and he decided to launch it as a full-time initiative. He quit his job and devoted almost a year on researching the methodology.

After much planning, research and enthusiasm, he started Afforest, an end-to-end service provider for creating natural, wild, maintenance-free, native forests in 2011. He wishes to work till there is not even one piece of barren land left in the globe. The lofty aim will not materialise today or tomorrow, but he is happy to be adding his efforts in making this happen and contributing to the planet.

Babar founded a company, Kashmir Ink, from his personal savings and began working hard to make it a success. He says that he is the only pashmina activist that he knows of, in the world. This makes him a target of enemies too. His biggest opposition is from the pashmina traders in the region. There



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Live your dreams

- Whatever your dream, set out to realise it, but only if it is a calling from the heart. Our ego self would want us to become the next Aishwarya Rai or Amitabh Bachchan which is why half of Hindi heartland beats a path to Bollywood. Ignore such dreams. And grow up. A genuine dream is something that sets you afire from within.
- Turn a deaf ear to the naysayers. Dreams get derailed if we get influenced by them. Listen instead to the inner voice, which will guide you truly.
- Choose appropriate role models. There are many people who have achieved their dreams. Adopt them as your role models, for they will remind you that nothing is impossible.
- Express gratitude to the Universe everyday. There are many aspects in life we need to be grateful for. Gratitude is, in fact, the best communication we can have with the Universe. When we express gratitude for one thing, so many other blessings come to our notice. This is, in fact, the best prayer we can practice.
- Extend as much help as you can all around you. When we help others, we feel better about ourselves and more empowered. This empowerment makes us believe in ourselves more.
- Meditate. Meditation leads to introspection and helps us in recognising our dreams and knowing where we may have erred.
- Take inspired action. The Universe will guide us through dreams, hunches, intuition, and through the people and events we come across. Always ask yourself if anyone you meet could help you realise your dream.
- Never give up. Remember, even when everything fails, it may not be the end; it may be a bend!

has been a great organised campaign against him carried out by many industry stake holders who want him to stop his activities. Still, he is also encouraged by the valuable support he has received. "I have been lucky that I have been able to garner strong support from the Chief Minister and governor of Jammu and Kashmir, and the Vice President and President of India. This has created a big deterrent to those elements who want to disrupt our work in bringing in positive change for the community on the ground," he says.

His vision is to raise the nomads' earnings by teaching them to spin and weave cloth, and take back some of the profit middlemen were walking away with earlier. He also wishes to invest seven per cent of sales back into the region where he grew up.

Today, he envisages leveraging the power of technology to drastically improve the quality of the shepherds' lives. "I have designed an application for the nomads which will empower them in the higher reaches of Himalayas to bid for their wool when it is ready. They would get mobile alerts of weather, prices, auctions, medical emergencies, and so on. This would connect them not only with their families but also globally with buyers."

He adds, "I am discussing this development project with a few people at IIT to commence work. Then there is a plan to integrate the weavers and craftsmen on a platform which will give them design intelligence from international markets, thus enabling them to make products that are marketable at a high price," he says.

The journey has been immensely tough, but Babar's efforts are paying off. His company is getting great interest from Angel investors who want to speed up the start-up's expansion plans. His cause has also attracted some mind-blowing talent for Kashmir Ink's soon to-be-debuted management team. "The team would comprise a former creative head of Facebook, an investment banker from UK, an international journalist and communications specialist, a Harvard alumnus and business strategist, and a luxury retail expert," he says.

He is very optimistic about the future and says. "I believe that the world is waiting for us with open arms. There has not been a single attempt like this anywhere. Pashmina has been a part of the personal apparel collection of kings and queens globally, passed on from one generation to another. We have a product which is the root of true luxury, fashion, and heritage. We would be retailing across all the luxury retail destinations in the world."

Already, he has secured orders of over USD one million. The company's signature pashmina shawls are selling at USD 200,000. He has ensured that the dyes used to colour pashmina in his organisation are ecofriendly and not a health concern, as most dyes are.

Quite apart from the gratification of creating a pathbreaking initiative, what makes Babar really happy is that he is playing a role in making the people of his land a wee bit more comfortable.

When I asked him who his inspirations were, he said, "I seek inspiration from my heroes, the shepherds, the weavers and the craftsmen and women who hold the ancient wisdom, heritage, culture and religion of Himalayas. They are the ones who inspire me with their patience and courage."

In a sense, he has returned the favour by himself becoming their hero, thus completing the circle of his life and theirs.

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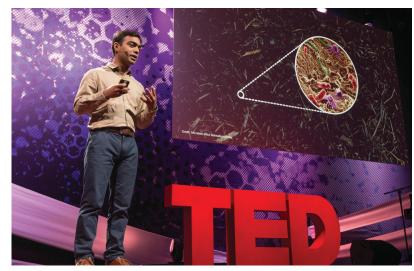
The happy ending

Preeti harnessed love for the other to help other people face disabilities, Amin provided a space for others like him, Shubhendu tried to serve Mother Earth by building forests, and Babar tried to redefine Kashmir as we know it today.

In my case, I healed substantially through alternative therapies and by working on all areas in my life, the body, mind and spirit. I have even written a book on my healing, called *Dancing with life: Living with MS.* The greatest gift I have received is that it has inspired other MS patients, and those contending with dire dis-

eases to dream of a better and more complete life. It is said that love makes the world go around. I certainly agree. It is through this love that we become complete, when we chase and manifest our dreams. It is through this manifestation that we become whole.

When 'we' become whole, 'our' world becomes whole and slowly but surely, 'the' world shall become whole too.



Shubhendu dreams of not having a single dry patch of land on planet Earth.





Jamuna Rangachari writes and manages the websites of *Life Positive*. She has authored three books for children, compiled and interpreted Teaching Stories-I and II for *Life Positive*. and published a book through Hay House

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