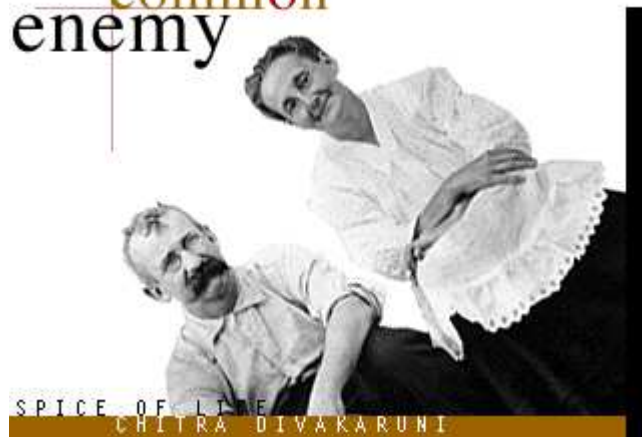


the common enemy



BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR AS
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Why it's time

"do you know why our children get along so well with our parents?" a friend said to me one day. "It's because they have a common enemy -- us!" The grandparent-grandchild bond is certainly a powerful one, less complicated in many ways than the relationship we have with our own children. An old Bengali saying points to its unique nature. "A child," it says, "is like money you've earned through hard work; a grandchild is like the interest that money generates, and therefore far sweeter."

My own fondest childhood memories are of the holidays I spent with my grandfather in his village home in Bengal, following him around as he dug in his garden or went for a morning walk through the sugar cane fields. I know my parents made many greater sacrifices for me than he ever had to, but somehow when I think of love the image that comes to me is that of my grandfather sitting up in the middle of a sweaty summer night (we didn't have electricity in the village then), fanning me with a palm-frond fan, his silver hair glimmering in the moonlight.

I would not, of course, say this to my mother. Much as she loved her father, and willing as she was to send me off to him during my summer holidays, there was just a slight resistance, perhaps a small sense of competing over territory. I sensed it without knowing what it was as I grew older. Once, when I was particularly tearful after he'd left (he'd been staying with us in our Calcutta home for a month), she snapped, "For heaven's sake, don't carry on as though it's the end of the world." I thought she was quite heartless, of course, and a bad

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daughter besides -- until just this last month, when I caught myself saying almost the same thing to my son.

Since the children were born, both my mother and mother-in-law have come to spend extended periods of time with us. Such visits are common enough in the Indian culture, and generally welcomed. In our case too, my husband and I knew how wonderful it would be for the children to have their grandmothers staying with them. Since both of us were harried working parents, we looked forward to the love they'd provide our children with, the careful eye they'd keep on the baby sitter, the stories they'd tell and the songs they'd sing (not to mention the great food they'd cook). We looked forward to enjoying the benefit of their years of experience. We were right, mostly. The grandmothers did all we'd hoped for -- and more. They wanted the best for our children even more than we wanted it. What we hadn't counted on was that their definition of "the best" wasn't always the same as ours.

My mother didn't see any problems with giving the children a candy bar whenever they wanted one. "You're only a child once," she'd tell me. "Anand's not going to come ask me for chocolates when he's 40 years old like you."

"But mother," I'd protest, "You know it's bad for his teeth. Besides, I remember quite well we weren't even allowed to have sugar lozenges when we were little, not unless it was a special occasion ..."

And my mother, who should have been a lawyer, would say, "Well, having their grandma here is a special occasion, isn't it?"

If the children hurt themselves -- little things, a bump, a skinned knee, they'd cry louder and longer if my mother-in-law was around. She'd rally to the occasion. "Bad table," she'd shout, shaking a finger at our dining table. "Bad table to make Abhay fall off!" She'd kiss and cuddle Abhay and together they'd thump their fists on the table, "punishing" it.

"But he's the one who climbed on it when I've asked him not to. You should be telling him that that's what happens when we do dangerous things. You must teach him to take responsibility!" I'd say.

"Goodness!" my mother-in-law would say. "You're talking like he's ready to go off to college next week!"

"How come when we were kids we never got any sympathy if we fell down?" my husband would add. "We just got a spanking for not being careful."

"Maybe I'm wiser now," she'd tell him. And off she'd go to her room with Abhay balanced on her hip -- no doubt so that they could feast on the contraband Indian sweets she kept stocked in there.

"I don't like it one bit," I'd tell my husband. "The kids go running to her for every little problem, and instead of teaching them independence, she's pampering them."

"Just like your mother did when she was here! At least MY mother doesn't insist on treating them with home remedies when they're sick. Remember when Anand had an ear infection and your mother wanted to clean out his ears with warm glycerin?"

"OK, but MY mother didn't tell them ghost stories that made them wake up screaming for three nights running, and MY mother never ..."

We'd end up not speaking to each other at dinnertime.

"Anand, Abhay, look!" my mother-in-law (or my mother, whoever the grandma in residence at the time was) would call gleefully. "Your parents are fighting again! Just like kids!"

I miss the grandmothers when they leave after an extended visit, but I must confess -- is it too undutiful of me? -- I feel a certain lightness. I have my family to myself for a while, I think, as I start putting the kitchen to rights. (The grandmothers, who don't think highly of my homemaking skills, always reorganize everything the very first week they arrive). I imagine all the wholesome, Spartan activities we'll engage in: long hikes and swims instead of chocolate and Indian mithai; reading "Winnie the Pooh" in the evening instead of watching "Three's Company," which both grandmas -- and thus their grandchildren -- are addicted to. We'll go to the Children's Discovery Museum, which the grandmas always find too noisy. Or to Concerts in the Park, which the grandmas, brought up on sitar and tabla, think quite unmusical.

But when I tuck in the children and tell them all my plans, I find them in tears.

"I miss Nanna-ma," says Anand, sniffing a little. "Why'd she have to go away?"

"When's she coming back?" sobs Abhay. "I want her to lie down with us and tell us about the Hanuman, the monkey god."

"For heaven's sake," I start to say, irritably. Then I bite

my tongue.

"I miss how she smells," says Anand, "like sandalwood powder and sugar."

"And how she's all soft and squishy when you hug her," says Abhay.

I take a deep breath. My grandfather had smelled of garden earth. His fingers had been firm and soft at the same time. No one could rub little legs tired from too much running like he could.

"I know you miss her, sweethearts," I say finally. And then, though it's hard, really hard, I add something I'd so wanted my mother to say that time years and years ago, when my heart was breaking. "We'll bring her back pretty soon. Promise."

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Do Grandma's visits drive you crazy? Tell us your tales of filial piety in [Table Talk](#).

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