

The Lame Surgeon

Category: Getting Motivated

written by Neeta Nayak | October 12, 2024

Had Dad not passed this month fifteen years ago, we would be celebrating his birthday today. He was born—and died—in October.

This was the time when India was still a British colony. Vaccinations, antibiotics and potable water were not yet available, and infant mortality from infectious disease was high. When dad was two years old, his mother noticed that her active baby went from running to limping, and his left leg looked strange. Terrified, she took him to a country doctor who diagnosed paralytic polio and stated that his leg would be paralyzed forever.

My grandfather was determined to beat the odds. Rushing his toddler to Madras, which had a state-of-the-art hospital in Southern India, Dad was put through nine surgeries on his left leg by the time he was nine years old. Premature limb lengthening surgeries were the norm. He was left with a permanently shortened, atrophied leg that he dragged around for the remainder of his sixty-seven years.

It wasn't an easy childhood. He was bullied by school mates, and some of his teachers called him "the lame boy."

Rather than being drowned by the negativity, he used it as motivation to show this world he was more than just a paralyzed leg. Through sheer determination, he became a champion table tennis player and captain of his varsity cricket team!

He wanted to be a pilot but was disqualified due to disability. His parents hoped he'd become a sedentary bank officer, sitting at a desk.

He did the unexpected in his career choice. He asked himself what would be the most physically demanding, mentally challenging job in his times. He chose to become a surgeon.

As a surgeon, my father had to stand on one leg for hours on end at the operating table, working on everything from brain bleeds to burns. Everything from limb amputations to tumor removals.

He also chose a career in academic medicine. He wanted to teach the next generation everything he'd learned along the way. Surgery techniques, yes. But, also, life lessons.

Instead of feeling sorry for himself, Dad was determined to overcome every obstacle thrown his way. He did not choose the easy path, but rather the one that gave him a fulfilling life.

"It's not what life gives you that defines you as a person, it's what you make of it." That was his lifelong motto.

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