

Eulogy of Odeen Ishmael

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Distinguished guests, including the Ambassador of Guyana, and other government officials here today, and dear friends. On behalf of our extended family, we thank you all for being here today with us.

In 1954, Adlai Stevenson, the renowned American diplomat, addressed a group of undergraduate students at Princeton University.

Said the Ambassador:

*“Don't be afraid of being out of tune with your environment, and above all pray God that you are not afraid to live, to live hard and fast . . . *it is not the years in your life - but the life in your years that count . . .*”*

Odeen Ishmael was 6 years old when this speech was made. He never heard the speech. But truly, **he lived the speech.**

My dad was born, the son of poor farmers, in a small Guyanese village with a grand name: Britannia. Odeen was the first born son of Hamid Ishmael and Zowrah (“Zora”) Kahn. They lived in a small wooden one-bedroom house, built on a piece of rented land. The kids had no beds, so they slept on jute rice bags in the living room floor. My dad would later tell me that they slept comfortably, because they knew no different.

There was no running water or electricity, so dad as a child, would have the job of carrying water in buckets, from a water pipe on the main road of the village back to the little house.

His mother Zowrah, had 2 other boys, and pregnant with her fourth child, she suffered complications in this little village with no medical care. As she laid dying in their tiny house, she called for Odeen to to be brought to her. And little Odeen, a child of 4, said goodbye to his mother that day, as she and the baby died due to complications in childbirth. His mother was only 21 when she died. She was buried in simple wood coffin that was draped in white cloth.

This is where Odeen Ishmael started and nothing much was expected of such an unlucky child. But flash forward 40 years, and this poor Guyanese village boy would be in the Oval

Office of the White House, presenting his credentials to the American President as the Ambassador of the Republic of Guyana to the United States.

After dad's mother died, his father would remarry to Ruabza, and in the end the family would grow, making dad the eldest of 12 siblings. The 12 brothers and sisters did not have much, but they had each other. They entertained each other, debated everything including politics and cricket, and grew up in a modest but happy childhood.

From the very early days, young Odeen showed his generous spirit. At Easter time - a time when children in Guyana flew kites as part of the holiday celebrations - my Dad spent his time in that little house helping children in the village make and fix their kites.

Dad grew up in an age when the British occupied Guyana. British soldiers - the men in khakis as Martin Carter would call them - would pass through the village in armored cars as a show of force to suppress any thought of rebellion. In this environment dad, as a young teenager, was introduced to the politics of freedom and independence, by his Uncle Farouk. Uncle Farouk was a supporter of a young charismatic Guyanese rebel named Cheddi Jagan.

Dad would meet the famous Cheddi Jagan when he was a teenager, in a chance encounter at a ferry station. Dr. Jagan gave him some words of encouragement, and Dad never looked back. He was captivated by Dr. Jagan's cause. He would join the People's Progressive Party, and campaign around the country for Dr. Jagan and the PPP.

Dad was a rockstar; I remember as a child my Dad and I would be in a car traveling through remote parts of Guyana, and every now and then people would call out, "Odeen!" as he went by. My Dad would wave hello, and the car would drive on.

In Guyana, he literally was a country music star. In fact the music you heard when you walked in today were my dad's songs. He played guitar for the villagers, and would enter contests on the radio. In one such contest he sang an original song that he penned, in dedication to a girl he had fallen in love with. A girl named Evangeline. The song is a country music ballad, but written in the Guyanese context and it goes:

*I left my home on the coastland from far up Berbice way/
Then I traveled to the south to reach Rupununi far way/
I got a job as a cowboy tending cattle all the day/
But as I ride on the savannah my heart wanders far away/
I left my sweetheart on the coastland, and now I am sorry for what I've done.*

He won first prize in that song competition.

He was a cricket star in his village. He was fierce bowler and avid batsman, often scoring into the hundreds. One day playing cricket, he was up to bat, and Evangeline happened to walk by the cricket ground. The bowler delivered to Odeen, and the wickets flew. He was out, scoring 0 runs - a duck-egg. He would later blame it on Evangeline - saying that she had made him lose his concentration.

Evangeline was his true love. He would have to leave her and the village life behind, however, when he moved to the big city - Georgetown, Guyana - to attend the University of Guyana. There his leadership talents would be honed, as he with his best friends - Moses Nagamootoo, Navin Chandarpal, and Sash Sawh - would form the University of Guyana's chapter of the PPP's youth arm - the Progressive Youth Organization.

Those young lads have all come a far way from those days. Mr. Nagamootoo is now the Prime Minister of Guyana, and the late Mr. Chandarpal and the late Mr. Sawh were both senior Ministers in the Government of Guyana.

At UG his academic excellence was unmatched, and he captured the Mahatma Gandhi Centenary Gold Medal for academic performance. Someone would congratulate him on all of his academic achievements at UG, and he would remark:

“All the university degrees and awards in world do not matter, if you cannot have the girl of your dreams.”

And so Odeen would head back to the country from the city, and marry Evangeline. Odeen and Evangeline would have two children - me and my younger sister, Nadeeza. He loved us dearly.

In one of those country songs, he wrote about my mom and me (and this was before my sister was born):

*There stands a lady with a little boy /
And they stand there so happily /
There stands a lady with a little boy /
And they mean the whole world to me /*

One day as a kid in Guyana, I was playing cricket barefoot in the fields, and severed one of my toes when I ran over a piece of broken glass. A man from the village - not medically

trained in anyway mind you - sewed up the wound with a needle and thread, but the nearest doctor was in a town a very far distance from home. I remember distinctly my dad literally carrying me on his back, with my wounded and bleeding toe, to catch a bus that would then take us to the Mahaicony - the town with the doctor.

Dad struggled, as I was not a light child, but out of his love for me he carried me. That is just one small example of the many selfless acts of such love he showed to me and my sister over the years.

Meanwhile, his political career was taking off in remarkable ways. At age 24, he was elected to the leadership of the youth arm of the PPP - the Progressive Youth Organization, becoming a member of the governing central committee. And at age 32, he became a member of the governing central committee of the party itself - Dr. Jagan's People's Progressive Party.

At that time, Guyana was in the depths of dictatorship rule. My father and the PPP's goal in the opposition was to bring freedom and democracy to Guyana. My dad would feed me a rich diet of political history as I grew up. Instead of reading fairy tales as a kid, I would read lovely pieces of literature such as, Cheddi Jagan's, "The West on Trial," Walter Rodney's, "How Europe Underdeveloped Africa," and Jawaharlal Nehru's, "Glimpses of World History."

My dad was committed to fairness and kindness to his fellow- human beings. Guyana, at the time I grew up there, was bitterly divided by politics and ethnicity. But yet, as a young child, I remember distinctly my father teaching me lessons on why we should treat everyone equally, and importantly, why we should never make generalizations about people based on their physical characteristics or what party they belong to.

I remember that he would illustrate this to me by telling me stories from the Bible, such as the Parable of the Good Samaritan about the Samaritan that helped an injured Jewish traveler on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. But he would change the story a little to make it fit the Guyanese context, to teach me as a little child to treat all Guyanese with dignity and kindness, no matter their background.

He loved Guyana, and he was a Guyanese patriot. But yet he was forced to balance his love of country, with his love for his family. Suffering severe and unfair setbacks in his teaching career in Guyana, because he was despised by the ruling government at the time, my mother fearing for our family's security and for her children's future, pushed the envelope and convinced him to move us out of the country.

I know he was deeply torn by this, as he did not want to leave his dear Guyana. But in the end he accepted a teaching position in the Bahamas and we left the country under the cover of darkness.

In the Bahamas, Dad like he did in Guyana, would touch a lot lives with his teaching. A good friend of mine who consistently did not do so well in high school, would later tell me that my father was his only high school teacher that would give him words of encouragement and support. That high school student now holds a Ph.D. and is a university professor in China. I met him in Boston when he was completing coursework at Harvard University, and he told me that my Dad has always been his inspiration in life.

Of course, Dad also mentored other successful people in his teaching career, the most famous being a young man named Bharat Jagdeo who would go on to become President of Guyana.

He was also my teacher in high school; he taught me history. And true to himself, he always managed to give me a lower grade than I thought I deserved; you know, just to make sure he was being fair.

Dad would miss Guyana though and would visit often. He used his time in the Bahamas to organize political support for the democracy movement in Guyana, and continued to play his part in the struggle for democracy in Guyana.

October 5, 1992. A watershed day in Guyanese history, as the struggle for democracy was won. In Guyana's first democratic election as an independent nation, Odeen's hero - Dr. Cheddi Jagan - ascended to become the first democratically elected President of the Republic.

And who would Dr. Jagan appoint as democratic Guyana's first Ambassador to the world's most powerful democracy? It was Dad that got the call.

Dad moved to the USA in 1993 to take up the post as Guyana's man in Washington. The character of my father was seen in what he did when he took up the office in Washington. At the time, there was a lot of bitterness by many who supported the PPP in its struggle against the dictatorship government that had just fallen.

There was a lot of political pressure, therefore, for my Dad to fill the Washington Embassy with his party supporters. But what did he do? He kept almost the entire staff of the embassy intact. He did this because these were all people who were doing their jobs, and doing

it well. He did not care what party they supported; it only mattered to him that they were serving Guyana's interest.

He would go on to serve with distinction in Washington, serving not only as Guyana's Ambassador to the United States, but also at the same time as Guyana's Ambassador to the Organization of American States - a grouping of the Western Hemisphere nations.

At the OAS, he would rise to become the Chairman of the Permanent Council.

As the Guyanese Ambassador to the USA, he would play a critical role in Operation Uphold Democracy - a U.S. led military operation in Haiti joined by Caribbean Community forces, including Guyanese soldiers. And after the troops were on the ground to keep the peace in Haiti, he would make it a priority to visit the Guyanese troops to give them moral support.

Then that awful day came: September 11, 2001. Dad was in New York on that day, and we thought we had lost him because we knew he had meetings in Manhattan, and we could not get into contact with him as cell phone coverage was down. Luckily he was unharmed.

On September 12 - the very next day, Dad addressed the opening of the 56th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, speaking on behalf of all the Latin American and Caribbean nations. On a day when many in America would distrust the Muslim world based on the religious affinity of the 09/11 terrorists, Mohammed Ali Odeen Ishmael would make it clear to the nations of the world that terrorism is unacceptable:

"We extend heartfelt sympathy to the Government and people of the United States, and particularly to the victims of the dastardly acts that have been perpetrated . . .

The terrorist acts of yesterday must strengthen the resolve of the international community to condemn in the strongest possible way, all forms of terrorism which are a threat to international peace and security.

[We] reaffirm[s] that those responsible must be brought to justice and we stand in full support of the Government and people of the United States at this time."

For his stellar work in Washington, he would receive the Martin Luther King Jr. Legacy Award for International Service. For his patriotism and service to Guyana, the President of Guyana awarded him the Cacique's Crown of Honor - one of Guyana's highest honors. And before he departed Washington he ascended to the position of Dean of the Latin American and Caribbean

diplomatic corp in Washington. Upon his departure from Washington, the United States Congress paid him a unique and special tribute by passing a joint resolution in his honor.

In his later years, he served as Guyana's ambassador to Venezuela, handling the tense border crisis between the two countries. And in his last mission as ambassador, the President of Guyana asked him to open Guyana's first embassy in the Middle East - in the State of Kuwait. He opened that mission to Kuwait, and made history as the first Guyanese ambassador to Middle East.

He spent much of his later years writing. Dad always loved to read books, and so he spent his later years writing books. He would write many books including books on Guyana's history, and books documenting Guyanese folk legends

His professional accomplishments were remarkable, especially given his humble beginnings. But what many will remember about him was his kind and gentle soul.

In the 1970s, one of his young uncles - Adam - fell ill and needed brain surgery. It was Dad who volunteered to accompany a young and scared Adam to Caracas, Venezuela, to perform the surgery that was not possible at that time in Guyana. It was Dad that kept Adam company and raised his spirits as he prepared for surgery. And it was Dad that had to bury Adam's body in Venezuela when Adam ultimately succumbed to the disease.

Just a few years later, Dad's brother-in-law would pass suddenly of a heart attack in a distant town. And it was Dad that volunteered to travel to that town and accompany the body back home to the family. It was a harrowing journey as the hearse broke down on the side of a remote road in that hot Guyanese sun.

And of course, in 1997, my father would do his duty once again when his hero, and now his dear friend, President Dr. Cheddi Jagan, passed in Washington DC. Dad had the honor, as the Guyanese ambassador, to escort Dr. Jagan's body back home to Guyana on a special flight, this time with full military honors.

Sadly, over the last 8 years, my dad began to suffer a chronic and incurable muscle disease, whereby his body's muscles began to degenerate at an alarming rate. Not able to move about freely, he retired from the diplomatic corp and took up residence here in Ocala, Florida, to be close to family and medical care for his ailment.

In retirement, even though he was physically disabled, his brain was as active as ever, and he continued his many writings, and served as a Senior Research Fellow at the influential Council for Hemispheric Affairs.

And it was in these later years, that I grew to appreciate the deep love that he and my mom, Evangeline, had for each other. She took such good care of him in his later years, so much so that one of the doctors in the intensive care unit was surprised how good of physical shape he was in, despite his disease; the doctor told me that without my Mom's excellent care, dad would probably have passed years ago.

My father was not the most emotionally expressive person. But in his last days, he called for my mother often, and whispered as well as he could, "I love you," of course bringing the whole room to tears. And he would say the same to me and my sister Nadeeza before he passed.

Of course, we did not need words to know how much our dad loved us. And with all our hearts, we loved him too.

And for me personally - what did this man mean to me? Well simply put: he was my hero. He was my inspiration. Ever since I was a child - I looked up to him in every way. He always encouraged me to follow my dreams. When I was young, as many kids do, I wanted to be an astronaut and walk on the moon. Rather than try to direct me to something more practical, my dad encouraged me every step of the way to become an explorer of space. And when I would decide to leave my physics career behind, and attend law school, instead of questioning this change in career paths, my dad did not miss a beat and supported me completely. He told me that whatever makes me happy, is what he wants me to do.

He was always there for me when I needed him, and he made me so proud to be his son. Dad - I am heartbroken, and I will miss you dearly.

He passed on January 5, 2019. That poor country boy from Guyana who would rise to keep the company of presidents and prime ministers. In his career, he had all the trappings of a prestigious and powerful international diplomat. But the old country never left his heart, and he seemed to yearn for his little village in Guyana. In his last months, he began to contemplate his life and began listening to one special song. It is an Irish folk song, called "My Father's House:" and the chorus reads as follows:

*In my father's house we were poor but we were rich in love /
No TV, but music there was plenty of /
And my mother hummed her melodies and we all sang along /*

In my father's house when I was young.

He passed at home, in his bedroom, on a sunny Saturday afternoon. He was surrounded by his family. The sun was glistening through the windows. And in the air, were the melodies of his favorite childhood songs.

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