



# **COURAGEOUS CREATIVITY**

**FEBRUARY 2012**





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# EDITOR'S NOTE

**SHAHANA DATTA GUPTA**

Shirin Subhani and Shahana Dattagupta were inspired to become curators of stories of courageous creativity after experiencing firsthand, the transformative power of creative thinking and expression that involve emotional risk and personal vulnerability in a collective forum. For more about Shirin and Shahana, please visit the "About Us" page on Flying Chickadee's Web site: [www.flyingchickadee.com/about.html](http://www.flyingchickadee.com/about.html)



# EDITOR'S NOTE

One of the most memorable gifts from my tenure in the corporate world was enrollment in a program called *Leading Change*. At twenty-eight, I was the youngest recruit amongst the twenty chosen from six-hundred in the firm. And so, what caught my attention most was the concept of “leading from any chair.” Nearly a decade later, this was refreshed while reading *The Art of Possibility* by Benjamin Zander and Rosamund Stone Zander.

To me, “leading from any chair” really means that leadership is neither assigned nor granted. Like initiative, it is simply taken – from anywhere and everywhere. In my own evolution, leadership has moved from the “front” to the “back” – increasingly, I see myself as someone who brings up the rear, shining light forward so that others may find their own paths. Many a time, I find leadership in followership – following the lead of those I lead! And ultimately, the subtlest (and most difficult) leadership, I find, is in gentle, present, conscious listening and witnessing, catalyzing a transformative change in the other.

This month's contributors share their insights on courageous and creative leadership. In our feature, “Where Do You Put the Fear?” Wellness Coach Valerie Burlingame talks about how leadership often emerges by acting past one's fears. In “Leading Like a Child,” Alisha Robertson reminds us that each of us was born with a leading instinct; that, “at age seven, no one hesitates to go first”! With “Every Little Counts,” our young contributor Aditi Reddy exemplifies the ability to lead from any chair. Through our interview with PlayGarden founder Liz Bullard, as well as in the piece “What's the Difference?” by Sangeeta Naidu, we're presented with a touchingly unselfconscious view of leadership – one that is grounded in dreams and service, with no attachment to outcome. Poet Ashok Vyas and artist Chandrika Marla show us the subtle – both speak of the leadership in gentle, loving presence.

We hope you are just as inspired as we are, by all our contributors and their singular ways of leading the world!

Shahana.

**“LEADERSHIP ... LIKE INITIATIVE, IT IS SIMPLY TAKEN – FROM ANYWHERE AND EVERYWHERE ... [FOR ME] LEADERSHIP HAS MOVED FROM THE “FRONT” TO THE “BACK” – INCREASINGLY, I SEE MYSELF AS SOMEONE WHO BRINGS UP THE REAR, SHINING LIGHT FORWARD SO THAT OTHERS MAY FIND THEIR OWN PATHS.”**



A scenic view of a mountain range with green slopes and a paraglider in the sky. The image is used as a background for the text.

**“THE WEAKNESS OF THE HEART DOES NOT PERMIT; OTHERWISE WHICH IS THE DROP THAT CANNOT BECOME AN OCEAN?”**

- Khalil Gibran

**“A LEADER DOES NOT NEED ANY PODIUM; HE OR SHE CAN BE SITTING QUIETLY ON THE EDGE OF ANY CHAIR, LISTENING PASSIONATELY AND WITH COMMITMENT, FULLY PREPARED TO TAKE UP THE BATON.”**

- Benjamin Zander

**“IF YOUR ACTIONS INSPIRE OTHERS TO DREAM MORE, LEARN MORE, DO MORE AND BECOME MORE, YOU ARE A LEADER.”**

- John Quincy Adams

**ON COURAGEOUS CREATIVITY...**

**“I WASN’T THE BEST STORYTELLER AND I CERTAINLY WASN’T AN ARTIST, BUT AT SEVEN, NO ONE HESITATES TO GO FIRST. TO BE THE LEADER...WE JUMP FROM OUR CHAIRS WITH EXCITEMENT AND SHARE OUR STORIES AND OUR IDEAS WITHOUT HESITATION.”**

## **LEADING LIKE A CHILD**

**ALISHA ROBERTSON**

A Texas native, Alisha is a philanthropist, dreamer, volunteer, and is currently traveling around the world working with social cultural projects and organizations that focus on education and teaching economic self-sufficiency. She began dreaming at an early age, and picked up her traveling addiction during college. She gets her motivation from friends, family, and countless amazing people that cross her path. She writes about broadening horizons, volunteering, and connecting with cultures from around the world on her blog Small World Pursuits.



# LEADING LIKE A CHILD

*“...And as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.” ~ Marianne Williamson*

I stood in the Cairo airport at the juice bar fumbling through my things. I dropped five euros on the floor from my recent trip to Rome without notice. A small voice called out to me. He chose to speak up. Handed me what was mine. His name was Emmanuel. He was six. Leading by example. Leading like a child without hesitation.

For me, it all started in a second-grade classroom. My classmates and I – making up our own stories, drawing illustrations, and then bringing our chairs all together in a circle to stand up and share our grand ideas, our imagination, our stories. We would all jump up and down, waving our papers around, wanting to share first. I wasn't the best storyteller and I certainly wasn't an artist, but at seven, no one hesitates to go first. To be the leader. Even if we know we aren't the most creative or the smartest or the most talented, we jump from our chairs with excitement and share our stories and our ideas without hesitation.

As I got older, I found myself always waiting for perfection. I can say it continues to be one of my biggest struggles. I have to constantly remind myself that there doesn't have to be perfection before action. If we're always waiting for perfection, our ideas will always remain ideas. There may never be action, because there may never be perfection.

There will always be someone who can probably do it better. But will they? There will always be others with the same goals or same ideas or same initiatives. We can work with them, not against them. We don't have to be afraid because someone has gone before us.

If you have a dream and a passion to take action you don't have to be an expert to start leading from where you are sitting right now. Perhaps your seat at this moment is in a cubicle, working without passion, staring

**“I HAVE TO CONSTANTLY REMIND MYSELF THAT ... IF WE'RE ALWAYS WAITING FOR PERFECTION, OUR IDEAS WILL ALWAYS REMAIN IDEAS. THERE MAY NEVER BE ACTION, BECAUSE THERE MAY NEVER BE PERFECTION.”**

# LEADING LIKE A CHILD

at your screen saver, and thinking about how you may be wasting your talents. This was my story. This is also where I changed my story.

In 2008, I lived in Chile for one year teaching English. In addition to teaching, I was learning about the people, the culture, the struggles, and the success stories of communities lifting themselves out of poverty. This is where my vision of leading a foundation to help support a better world really started tugging on my heart-strings.

But, upon my return to the States, I started working again in what I would call a traditional environment. Immediately I knew I wasn't where I was supposed to be, and that I shouldn't let my dreams stay dreams. I wasn't working toward my vision. I reminded myself that leading and chasing dreams often takes courage and the acceptance of the unknown.

Therefore, nine months ago, I left to begin an around the world volunteer journey to learn more about some of the major global issues that I am passionate about working with. My worldly pursuit is to learn out in the field so that I may better respond. I have been working with social and cultural projects and philanthropic organizations that focus on education, human rights, and have goals of teaching economic self-sufficiency.

When I decided I would quit my job and go on an around the world journey to learn, I also started writing about my planning, goals, and experiences along the way to share my insights and to help others believe in the transformative power that can be created through education, interaction, and taking the lead of your own life not only for yourself but for others.

I grew up in Texas surrounded by people with a hospitable spirit, encouraging teachers and mentors, and a strong independent mother who always inspired me to be a leader. But, I didn't travel much as a child nor did I have much of an opportunity to learn about people around the world.

**“PERHAPS YOUR SEAT AT THIS MOMENT IS IN A CUBICLE, WORKING WITHOUT PASSION, STARING AT YOUR SCREEN SAVER, AND THINKING ABOUT HOW YOU MAY BE WASTING YOUR TALENTS. THIS WAS MY STORY. THIS IS ALSO WHERE I CHANGED MY STORY.”**



# LEADING LIKE A CHILD

I spent many summers with the sun beating down on me creating a fiery blaze on my face that may have somehow affected my ability to stay in one place. I became a dreamer, a wanderer, and became fascinated with the world.

I've been the teacher and I've been the student. I feel very fortunate to have had many forms of education. Outdoor education. Formal education. Education from sitting and simply listening and observing people of this world.

I have been shaped by what was and choose now where I head.

But, the best lesson I've learned of all is to lead even if you feel you are not adequate for the task. To make a difference. To be that leader when someone else is hesitant. To share a story with others so that they as well may choose to lead regardless of status. Education status. Social status. Gender Status. Age status.

Being a leader and a passionate advocate for someone who does not have as strong a voice as your own is just one of a hundred things that can change your life. It has changed mine.

**“I KNEW ... I SHOULDN'T LET MY DREAMS STAY DREAMS ... I REMINDED MYSELF THAT LEADING AND CHASING DREAMS OFTEN TAKES COURAGE AND THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE UNKNOWN.”**

**“...I WAS ON MY WAY HOME  
WITH HIM  
WHOSE PRESENCE (IN MY HEART)  
MAKES ME FEEL AT HOME  
EVERYWHERE...”**

## **GLOW OF SELFLESS LOVE**

### **ASHOK VYAS**

Ashok is a poet, priest and program director. He is interested in life, its beauty, its potential, its ability to manifest 'love for all' by rearranging itself. He believes that the way we see makes our experiences, and what we experience makes our world; so, on a subtle level, we can creatively modify our perception about our surroundings. Poetry emerges as a vibrant prayer in this effort: At some point, the poet becomes non-existent and poetry writes itself... and in the process, life gets written with all its beauty and glorious fullness. Ashok is starting to learn Sanskrit again.



# GLOW OF SELFLESS LOVE

*I was not sure of finding him there  
it is probably that time  
when he goes back to his home  
from the park*

*I am back in this small town  
after many years  
but  
I still feel  
he is the same  
as some of the trees  
or  
these curvy roads  
of this sleepy hill station*

*Once arrived  
I feel cosy  
each and every spot  
makes me feel at home*

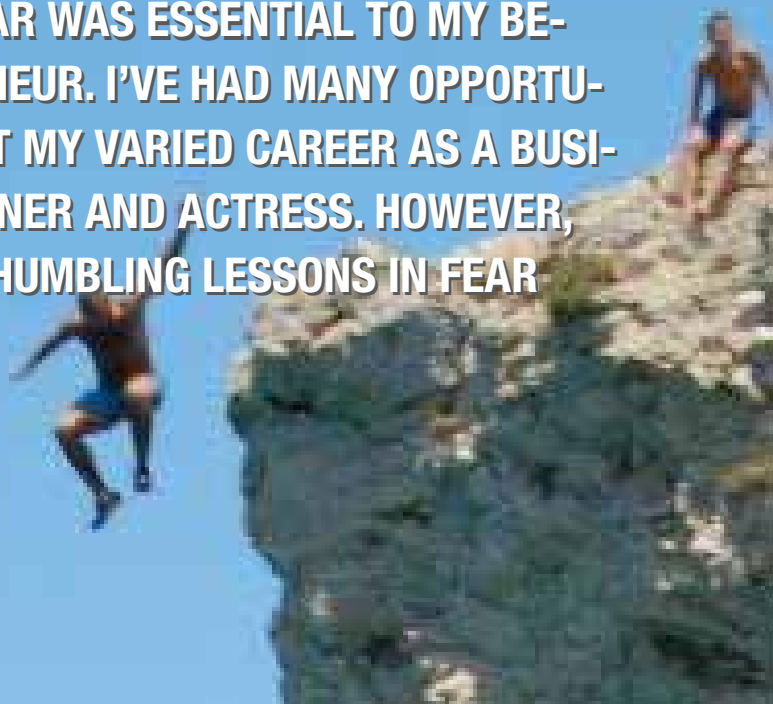
*but  
without  
his reassuring smile  
and  
glow of selfless love in his eyes  
I miss something  
and  
lo  
here he comes  
with his stick intact in his hand  
taking quick steps  
with  
a playful smile*

*he looked at me  
tried to recognize me  
“white hair”  
broad smile  
“still you are in time”*

*Now he looked into my eyes  
as if reading beyond  
all that my expression was willing to reveal  
and then  
before proceeding  
he held my hand  
and stated  
“In order to connect well  
it is important to learn to  
disconnect,  
don’t be afraid of yourself”*

*and  
then he laughed  
in a way that  
I couldn’t stop laughing  
with joint laughter  
I was on my way home  
with him  
whose presence (in my heart)  
makes me feel at home  
everywhere in the world.*

**“LEARNING TO ACT IN THE FACE OF FEAR WAS ESSENTIAL TO MY BECOMING A LEADER AND AN ENTREPRENEUR. I’VE HAD MANY OPPORTUNITIES TO PRACTICE THIS THROUGHOUT MY VARIED CAREER AS A BUSINESS OWNER, COACH, EDUCATOR, TRAINER AND ACTRESS. HOWEVER, I WILL NEVER FORGET MY FIRST REAL HUMBLING LESSONS IN FEAR MANAGEMENT.”**



## **WHERE DO YOU PUT THE FEAR?**

### **VALERIE BURLINGAME**

Valerie is an accomplished teacher, mentor and coach in the area of women’s health and wellness. As the Chief Visionary Officer for Vera Wellness Inc. Valerie has helped to create wellness communities where clients and health professionals thrive. Valerie moved to Seattle after owning and operating a yoga studio and a not-for-profit theatre company in Chicago from 2001-2008. Since finding a happy match with the founders of Vera Fitness in 2008, her creativity, passion for wellness, and deep desire to ‘esteem people’ are felt in everything that Vera Wellness is and does.



# WHERE DO YOU PUT THE FEAR?

Learning to act in the face of fear was essential to my becoming a leader and an entrepreneur. I've had many opportunities to practice this throughout my varied career as a business owner, coach, educator, trainer and actress. However, I will never forget my first real humbling lessons in fear management. I hope these accounts of how I learned to face my fear will help you lead and bloom wherever you may find yourself.

## **Lesson # 1: ACT ANYWAY**

It all started when my Mom pulled up in front of the Denver capital building with my two-year-old sister and six-year-old me in the back seat. It was a snowy Colorado evening and there was no parking to be found. Mom needed to run up to her office, pick up her paycheck and get to the bank post haste. Instead of schlepping us with her, she parked in the fire lane with the flashers on and made a mad dash into her office. Before she left she gave very clear instructions: "When the security officer comes, tell him your Mommy will be right back and please don't give us a ticket."

The security officer came, I unbuckled my little sister from her car seat and we hid in the footwell with a blanket over our heads. Mom came back to a \$150 parking ticket and decided then and there that it was time to rid me of my fearful streak.

My first level of training was walking up to strangers in the mall and asking them the time. Some parents teach their kids about 'stranger danger' and put them on soft monkey-tail leashes to keep them safe, but I don't think my Mom was too worried about me being abducted; she was more afraid of how my shyness and fearfulness would keep me from creating relationships and forming healthy bonds. So, whenever we went to the mall she'd stand back and point out a little old man or a girl with a shopping bag and say, "Okay, Valerie, just go up and say- excuse me, do you know what time it is?"

**“SOME PARENTS TEACH THEIR KIDS ABOUT ‘STRANGER DANGER’  
... BUT ... MY MOM ... WAS MORE AFRAID OF HOW MY SHYNESS  
AND FEARFULNESS WOULD KEEP ME FROM CREATING RELATION-  
SHIPS AND FORMING HEALTHY BONDS.”**

# WHERE DO YOU PUT THE FEAR?

I remember, even now, the catch in my throat, the pain in my leaden legs, begging me not to go. I recall how huge the subject of my inquiry looked; how little things in their appearance, a dirty smear on the edge of a hem or a shirt too tight, all seemed to be signs of an axe murderer or a child abductor. I remember the dry tongue and the urgent need to pee. The crazy thing is that even now, twenty some years later, I know these are symptoms of inauthentic fear and yet they still happen to me all the same. Not when I have to ask a stranger the time, thank goodness, but when I make a sales call or before a big presentation. What I learned slowly over the years was how to act anyway.

Now that I am an adult I can easily do a little test to see if I should proceed. I ask myself: Is this authentic fear? Fear that makes total sense because the action I am contemplating could lead to serious injury or death. If the answer is no, I act. I do it. I've learned over time that my inauthentic fear is actually a pretty big indicator of how important something is to me and how urgent it is that I respond.

## **Lesson # 2: CREATE A SCRIPT AND PRACTICE**

When I was ten, I distinctly remember coming home from the library and telling my mother that I needed to find an agent and a trade paper because I wanted to become an actress. I had no idea what either was at the time but I had read that they were absolutely essential to a career in the performing arts.

Weeks later, a list of agents' phone numbers written neatly on a piece of paper, I remember the terror I felt when I went to pick up the phone and inquire about how the firm selected their talent. Staring at the phone didn't help. Thinking about how beautiful Julia Roberts was didn't help. Imagining myself as a movie star or singing on Broadway didn't help - in fact they all made me feel worse.

So I did what any ten-year-old girl would do, I asked my Mom for help. Together we wrote out a script of what I might say to the person who answered the phone. Turns out simple things like remembering to say 'hello' are really good to write down when you are scared!

**“I ASK MYSELF: IS THIS AUTHENTIC FEAR? ... I’VE LEARNED ... THAT MY INAUTHENTIC FEAR IS ACTUALLY A PRETTY BIG INDICATOR OF HOW IMPORTANT SOMETHING IS TO ME AND HOW URGENT IT IS THAT I RESPOND.”**



# WHERE DO YOU PUT THE FEAR?

We made my scripts on colored 4x6 cards and I had them all set out before me when I dialed the number. It was like a web of choose your own adventure scenes, a card for every twist and turn in the phone call's plot. I got my very first lessons in stage presence and performance from the practice I got making these phone calls, script in hand, over and over again.

Like an aspiring knight in the practice ring with a wooden sword going over the parry and thrust, I made calls; calls for closed auditions, calls for open auditions, calls for agents, calls for scripts and calls for casting calls. Making the calls despite my fear, having a script and employing the practice of trial and correction were critical to not only getting better but getting more familiar with the fear pains and acting anyway. I don't really think I was all that talented a performer when I started but I got really good at putting myself out there - and it turns out, that was a skill worth cultivating.

## **Lesson # 3: FORGE CALM A.K.A. FAKE IT TILL YOU MAKE IT**

As a young performer I had more audacity than talent, but that didn't totally make up for how afraid I was of every audition and even worse, every rejection. The most important skill I learned to master in my fifteen years of being an actress is what I call forged calm.

When many of us think of the word 'calm', images of a meditating Buddha or a sage come to mind. How opposite is this from the weak-knee and racing heart rate of the fear state? This is why I like the term forged calm. A forge is a hearth used for heating metals before they are shaped. The heat of fear has a lot in common with the red-hot coals of the forge, and the work a smithy does in transforming lumps of hot metal into tools seems to me just as laborious as cultivating calm is to the untrained student.

I learned to cultivate calm in acting class and on the mat as a yogi. There are many ways, many techniques, and many teachers. The biggest myth to overcome is that others are just born able to be calm in the face of

**“MAKING THE CALLS DESPITE MY FEAR, HAVING A SCRIPT AND EMPLOYING THE PRACTICE OF TRIAL AND CORRECTION WERE CRITICAL TO NOT ONLY GETTING BETTER BUT GETTING MORE FAMILIAR WITH THE FEAR PAINS AND ACTING ANYWAY.”**

# WHERE DO YOU PUT THE FEAR?

fear, or even less true is the idea that they don't get scared at all. Nothing could be further from the truth. Ask someone you admire for their courage, how they handle fear and I promise you they'll have a few tips for forging calm.

One very simple and powerful way I forge calm goes like this:

1. Notice the fear and name it.
2. Identify if it is authentic fear (if not, proceed to the next step) Best to use your inner wisdom here, you may have an even better way of measuring if the fear is authentic than the one I mentioned at the beginning.
3. Take a breath in, hold it, exhale slowly (repeat up to 20 times)
4. Go inside and embrace the fearful part of yourself. For me, she often shows up as a frightened little girl. I let her know I hear her, and that everything will be okay.

## **Lesson # 4: BE A HUMBLE STUDENT**

Today, I am a wellness coach. I sit with people and hear about their pains, frustrations and aspirations. Trying my best to hold a safe and inquisitive space, I learn so much about how my clients deal with their own fears, where they put them and how well that works. I grow from every session.

Today, I am a business owner. I watch my staff confront challenges, come up with innovative solutions and act in the face of their fears. I try to pick up tips and use them within the week so these skills can become a part of my repertoire.

Today, I am a trainer of coaches to be. These bold students show me every class the courage it takes to step up and say: I want to make a difference. I must make a difference. In order to do this I will learn to master my fear. Just matching their courage is a worthy task.

Leadership is something you do but mostly it's a way of being. Strive to be a humble and curious student of the people and the experiences that surround you, and incorporate the wisdom you find into your own life as soon as possible. Over time, acting in the face of fear can feel exhilarating and even fun. Best of all, it keeps you sitting at the feet of the Master called Life.

**“OVER TIME, ACTING IN THE FACE OF FEAR...KEEPS YOU SITTING AT THE FEET OF THE MASTER CALLED LIFE.”**



# play



**Digging in the dirt.  
Swinging in the sun.  
Chasing butterflies.**

SEATTLE CHILDREN'S  
**PLAYGARDEN**

A Garden for Everyone

[www.childrensplaygarden.org](http://www.childrensplaygarden.org)

# grow



**Kids on two feet,  
Kids in wheelchairs,  
Kids who communicate  
differently.**

SEATTLE CHILDREN'S  
**PLAYGARDEN**

A Garden for Everyone

[www.childrensplaygarden.org](http://www.childrensplaygarden.org)

# learn



**Where therapy  
happens and children  
don't even realize it.**

SEATTLE CHILDREN'S  
**PLAYGARDEN**

A Garden for Everyone

[www.childrensplaygarden.org](http://www.childrensplaygarden.org)

**“I REALIZED THEN THAT EVERY LITTLE COUNTS. IT DOESN'T MATTER WHERE YOU ARE FROM, WHO YOU ARE, HOW OLD YOU ARE OR ANYTHING REALLY, IT JUST MATTERS WHAT YOU HAVE TO SAY AND HOW YOU SAY IT.”**

## **EVERY LITTLE COUNTS**

### **ADITI REDDY**

Aditi Reddy was born in London but for the past seven years, has been living in Mumbai. She is currently in the 10th grade at the American School of Bombay. In her spare time, she loves to read and play piano.



# EVERY LITTLE COUNTS

It was a seemingly normal day in November. I had been assigned an individual research project in school for my history class. Late at night, as I was contemplating what topic I should choose for my project, I glanced across the words surrogacy in the 'controversial' section of a website. I'm not sure why but the subject really interested me and after reading a few recent articles on surrogacy, I decided to use it as my topic.

From the moment that I decided to research surrogacy I was hooked. It might be hard to believe that a teenager would get so wrapped up in an assignment for school but once I started studying the issue, I honestly couldn't stop. I was intrigued by the whole idea of surrogacy and how women could voluntarily give up the very children who had started their lives in these women's own wombs. The fact that I couldn't understand why these women would go through this process was probably one of the main reasons that drew me to the subject.

As time went on and I started to delve deeper, I found out some things that shocked me. I figured out some of the reasons why women went into surrogacy, but even after finding answers to the questions that I had been struggling with, I was still not satisfied. I learned that a large number of women did not enter surrogacy willingly and even those who did were not met with a smooth and easy process but somewhat of an uphill battle instead.

Did you know that in certain surrogacy clinics, surrogates are required to stay in the clinic for the full nine months of their pregnancy? They are allowed to visit their families only once a week, if not lesser than that. I found this especially appalling because one of the restrictions to being a surrogate mother is that one must have already given birth. Clinics only take those who have children and then don't allow them to take care of their own children. They justify this by saying that their surrogates don't have access to proper fruits and vegetables in their own localities. I also found out that some surrogates are actually forced by their families into surrogacy due to the compensation involved.

**“EVEN THOUGH IT MIGHT SEEM LIKE ALL I DID WAS CREATE A PETITION STATING MY VIEWS, I FEEL THAT I HELPED TO CONTRIBUTE TO SOMETHING BIGGER. IN MY OWN WAY, I MADE A DIFFERENCE.”**

# EVERY LITTLE COUNTS

I was quite shaken that these sorts of things were taking place. To me, this seemed extremely unethical and also it looked as if the intended parents were getting a better deal than the surrogates. I was upset that the government was not doing more to help out the surrogates. In my opinion, they were being treated as second hand citizens in their own country which seemed outrageous.

Another component to my school project was that some sort of action be involved on my part. I came to the conclusion that the main thing that would be helpful for surrogates in India would be awareness of their situation and so, I decided to create a petition for their improved rights. Through this petition, I described the current conditions of the surrogates and appealed to the government that they should do a better job of protecting them from exploitation, with a set of more stringent laws. Specifically, I requested for the health, welfare and rights of the surrogates to be enhanced and asked for overall laws that would ensure that surrogates are well cared for and allowed to see their children.

There were many other things that I could have done to spread awareness but I thought that a petition would be the most effective as it's very efficient and many people can get to it. It was quite surprising how easy it was to make the petition itself. I came across a website called change.org on Facebook. It is a great website that takes you through all the steps necessary to create a petition. It even goes on to give you tips on how to promote it and who to address it to. My primary goal when creating the petition was just to inform my classmates and my school community of the current situation of surrogates in India. Many of my classmates didn't even know what the term surrogacy entailed and I felt my primary goal should be to alert them of the situation.

Even though it might seem like all I did was create a petition stating my views, I feel that I helped to contribute to something bigger. In my own way, I made a difference. Currently my petition has almost 200 signatures and the signatories are from all over the world. As the signatures kept rising, it started to dawn on me how much a small action that I had taken, had helped increase awareness about the plight of Indian surrogates among so many people.

I realized then that every little counts. It doesn't matter where you are from, who you are, how old you are or anything really, it just matters what you have to say and how you say it. If you succeed in informing people, then you've found a way to make a difference.

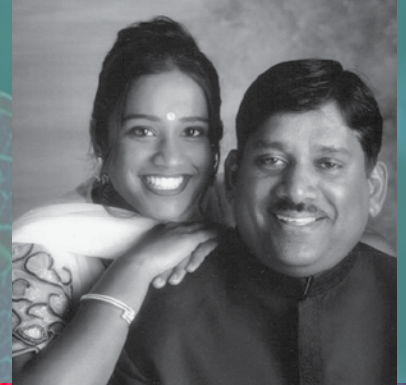
You can read and sign Aditi's petition at [www.change.org/petitions/india-help-protect-indian-surrogates-from-exploitation](http://www.change.org/petitions/india-help-protect-indian-surrogates-from-exploitation)



**“IN SANSKRIT, SEVA IS UNDERSTOOD AS ‘STRING.’ IT SYMBOLIZES THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS BETWEEN OUR BEING AND OUR ACTION. EACH OF US IS THE BEGINNING OF THE STRING, WITH THE CAPABILITY OF REACHING OUT TO ALL CORNERS OF THE EARTH. WE ARE ALL CONNECTED IN THIS THREAD OF EXISTENCE, ARE WE NOT?”**

## **WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE? SANGEETA NAIDU**

Sangeeta Naidu is a military brat who calls Seattle her post. She’s lived all over the world from London, U.K., Anchorage, Alaska to Varanasi, India. She’s seen sorrow and happiness equally. She’s lived (and danced) a million lives, lived them to the fullest, and looks forward to the adventures that await her.



# WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

I do not know if I have ever seen myself as a person making a difference. I see those who support me as the ones making a difference. I am just the vehicle for their contributions. Seva (selfless service) was an integral part of my upbringing. In Sanskrit, seva is understood as 'string.' It symbolizes the interconnectedness between our being and our action. Each of us is the beginning of the string, with the capability of reaching out to all corners of the Earth. We are all connected in this thread of existence, are we not?

For the last few years, I have been involved with two organizations that are very important to me: The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Habitat for Humanity. Both are near and dear to my heart and I truly believe in the work that they do. I see the amazing changes both of these organizations have made in our world, whether it is raising awareness about depression and inequity, suicide prevention, or equal housing for all. That is what motivates me to serve. I am too a part of that string. So, it becomes my duty, my dharma to serve. We are one big family, we depend on each other for our existence, and we cannot exist alone.

I was asked how I keep the faith that my smallest of actions does make a difference. I am not sure if this is a concern of mine. This question reminds me of something I think about often. During a discussion on karma, Professor Frank Conlon at the University of Washington told me that both an action and a non-action produce a result. That statement resurfaces in my life in various ways. I cannot become attached to the results of my actions. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna explained that when we focus on outcomes instead of our (right) action, we are thinking only about ourselves, and we become bound to things. And as a result of that attachment, all kinds of obstacles come into our lives.

How does my own action impact others? When I first publicly shared my personal story of depression and suicide, this feeling of shame came upon me, but when I looked up, all I saw were tears – tears of compassion. Once I shared my experience, I think I might have triggered something in those around me and inspired them to start sharing their experiences too. I cannot say that I take the initiative to mobilize others to work toward

**“ARE THE FRUITS OF MY LABOR NECESSARY TO SEE? NOT AT ALL. I KNOW THAT MY COMPASSIONATE ACTIONS WILL PRODUCE RESULTS, WHATEVER THEY MAY BE. AS LONG AS I GIVE SELFLESSLY WITHOUT HARMING OTHERS, I HAVE FULFILLED MY CALLING.”**



# WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

making a difference. Sharing my loss helped me heal. I believe people find that healing contagious. They are motivated by humanity, sympathy and compassion. I am happy to know that people have been motivated to see change through my story.

I believe that everyone has a desire to contribute in some form. I have chosen to contribute in ways that have personal relevance to my own life. Are the fruits of my labor necessary to see? Not at all. I know that my compassionate actions will produce results, whatever they may be. As long as I give selflessly without harming others, I have fulfilled my calling. If that inspires others to contribute, to educate themselves on matters they would otherwise have never given a second thought to, to volunteer with me, or find their own path to giving, then somehow that balances out the billions of acts of ignorance, greed, and violence that create suffering in our society. Acts of compassion bring healing to our world.

At sunset on June 9th, 2012, I will be walking with thousands of others to raise awareness about depression and suicide prevention. This year marks the tenth anniversary of my father's death by suicide. He served the United States Air Force for over twenty years. I walk in his honor and in honor of all military servicemen and women that have suffered and continue to suffer from PTSD and other mental illnesses. For more information on depression and suicide prevention, please visit: [www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org), and for my donation page, visit: <http://theovernight.donordrive.com/team/airforcenaidu>.

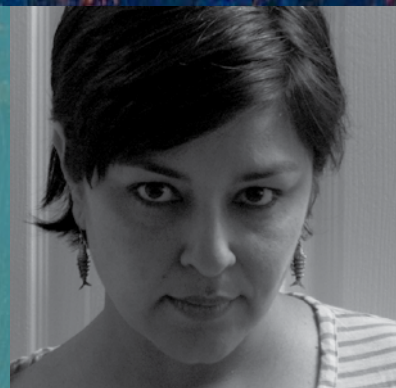
Also, in July I will be building with Habitat for Humanity in Fiji, my father's birth place. To learn more about them and the work I will be doing in Fiji visit: <http://www.habitat.org/cd/gv/participant/participant.aspx?pid=93243725>



# PREGNANT PAUSE

## CHANDRIKA MARLA

Chandrika grew up in India and graduated in fashion design from the National Institute of Fashion Technology in New Delhi in 1991. She moved to the United States in 1998, and presently lives in Chicago. She worked as a fashion designer for many years before she transformed into an artist. Her work has been exhibited in Chicago and New Delhi. You can see more of her paintings at [www.chandrikamarla.com](http://www.chandrikamarla.com)



# PREGNANT PAUSE



**Pregnant Pause**  
**Acrylic and oil pastel on canvas**  
**24" x 36"**  
**2010**

This painting talks about the strength women can draw from one another. We see two women in conversation. Their color and shapes suggest how different they are, but their proximity reveals their friendship. They seem not to question each other's choices, and despite their differences they find support and reassurance in their solidarity.

**“I BECAME QUITE SINGULARLY FOCUSED ON HOW TO BUILD A PLAYGARDEN HERE IN SEATTLE... SOME WOULD HAVE SAID I WAS OBSESSED. I TALKED ABOUT IT ALL THE TIME, SEARCHED THE INTERNET AND VISITED SEVERAL CHILDREN’S GARDENS ACROSS THE COUNTRY.”**

## **IN DIALOGUE WITH LIZ BULLARD**

Liz completed her undergraduate work, and graduate work in Speech and Hearing Sciences at Indiana University. She moved to Seattle in 1986. She has three children, Claire, a staff assistant to Sen. Maria Cantwell, Hannah, a member of the national champion crew at Western Washington University, and Sean, a senior at Garfield High School.



# IN DIALOGUE WITH LIZ BULLARD

**SS** – Hi Liz, Thanks for talking with Courageous Creativity! In your experience, what do you think it takes to be a leader? Did leadership and taking initiative come to you naturally or is this something you feel you had to develop and work on?

**LB** – I don't really see myself as a leader. I had an idea that I shared with others and we fed on each other's enthusiasm. I was very fortunate to have the avid support of Dr. Abraham Bergman early on. He led the way through much of the bureaucracy of the Parks department and had invaluable experience with public projects.

**SS** – What was your childhood like? How did you feel about school and the education system? Did you always know that you wanted to work with children when you grew up?

**LB** – I grew up in the Midwest, the seventh of nine children. My parents practiced benign neglect, letting us out the door in the morning and expecting us home when the street lights came on for obligatory family dinner. We went on epic camping trips and weekly Sunday outings to the woods, Lake Michigan, small Midwest towns. My parents passed on their love of books and their love of nature.

But for some reason, I hated school. I did everything I could to get out of going... faked being sick, overslept... anything at all. Looking back, I realize I was bored in the classroom, and didn't like the complete focus on paper and pencil work. The freedom and exposure to books, art and play that I had at home was much more enticing than the sit down and work quietly on worksheets that I experienced in school.

I'm not sure I thought much about being a grown-up until I practically was one. Half way through college I began to seriously consider what I wanted to do. I have always been smitten with kids. I was fascinated by child development and specifically language acquisition. I was lucky to be offered a fellowship to study child language acquisition in graduate school and was one of the first speech-language therapists to work with children in the birth to three age range.

**“LOOKING BACK, I REALIZE I WAS BORED IN THE CLASSROOM, AND DIDN'T LIKE THE COMPLETE FOCUS ON PAPER AND PENCIL WORK. THE FREEDOM AND EXPOSURE TO BOOKS, ART AND PLAY THAT I HAD AT HOME WAS MUCH MORE ENTICING...”**

# IN DIALOGUE WITH LIZ BULLARD

**SS** – How did the idea of creating a place like the PlayGarden first come up for you? Did you know as soon as you had the thought that this is something you simply had to do, or did you take time to think about it for a while and spend time planning and talking to people before deciding to jump in?

**LB** – I read about a PlayGarden in Manhattan - the Rusk Children's PlayGarden, in a Garden Design magazine and was instantly consumed by the concept. I became quite singularly focused on how to build a PlayGarden here in Seattle. . . some would have said I was obsessed. I talked about it all the time, searched the Internet and visited several children's gardens across the country. I was fortunate that literally everyone I spoke to thought it was a good idea. My research period lasted from February to August and then I made a decision to try my hardest to make it happen.

**SS** – How has your role as a parent played into all this?

**LB** – When my kids were little we went to the park every day. Sometimes two or even three times a day. . . sometimes two or three different parks. . . the “ride your bike” park, the “swing park” the “woods,” or the “beach park.” We had so many choices. I am the biggest fan of Seattle's parks. However, when I realized how challenging going to the park was for many families of children with challenges, I was struck by what a bitter injustice this was. These are the hardest working parents and kids I know with schedules most of us would buckle under. . . hours and hours of therapy, doctor's appointments, tutoring. When there is finally a moment when the family can relax and have some fun, they are met with unwelcoming unaccommodating parks.

**SS** – I really like the concept of having camps for children with mixed ages and also the fact that your volunteers are teenagers themselves. How did you come up with the vision for these two things? And how have you seen things evolve since you first started?

**“...THE MAIN DRIVING FORCE WAS THAT ALL KIDS SHOULD BE WELCOME REGARDLESS OF THEIR LEVEL OF ABILITY. THE PLAY-GARDEN IS “A GARDEN FOR EVERYONE” ... HAVING FOUR- TO TWELVE-YEAR-OLDS TOGETHER ALSO ENSURES THAT ... EACH CHILD CAN PLAY AT HIS/HER OWN LEVEL.”**



# IN DIALOGUE WITH LIZ BULLARD

**LB** – As I began to develop programs for the PlayGarden the main driving force was that All kids should be welcome regardless of their level of ability. The PlayGarden is “a garden for everyone.” If we have children with challenges right alongside children without, it seemed an easy step to incorporate a wide age range together. That way parents can drop off all of their children at one camp. They shouldn’t have to drive their “challenged” child to the “special” camp and the others to their respective camps.

Having four- to twelve-year-olds together also ensures that no one is comparing one child to the next. Each child can play at his/her own level. The older children may take care of the younger ones and the younger may look up to the older kids but it might also be the other way around. The common element of outdoor play brings everyone together and is a great equalizer.

I knew from my own children that teenagers are ultimately cool. What better way to make sure everyone is having fun than having playful teenage boys and girls playing alongside the kids?

I have to say that an unexpected outcome of the mixed age ranges and inclusive programs is the interactions between the siblings of children with challenges. Our staff often remark on how the siblings who have special needs brothers and sisters are the kindest children they have ever met. But we know that siblings have complex relationships, even more so when one has an overriding special need. You can visibly see the relief and instant understanding between two children who share this family constellation.

We have also seen children with challenges who are often viewed as the “baby of the family” rise up and begin to take care of and teach younger children. It is fantastically empowering for them.

**“I KNEW FROM MY OWN CHILDREN THAT TEENAGERS ARE ULTIMATELY COOL. WHAT BETTER WAY TO MAKE SURE EVERYONE IS HAVING FUN THAN HAVING PLAYFUL TEENAGE BOYS AND GIRLS PLAYING ALONGSIDE THE KIDS?”**

# IN DIALOGUE WITH LIZ BULLARD

**SS** – Since the PlayGarden is such a community project, you must have a lot of different voices and opinions speaking to you. How did you/do you decide which ones to pay attention to and which ones not to?

**LB** – That was easy. I'm stubborn and know what I want. Seriously, I think because this was such a new concept there weren't a lot of dissenters not were there other "experts" who had differing views on how the PlayGarden should be designed or operated.

The neighborhood was so supportive as well. They were so pleased to have the park improved.

**SS** – How did the idea of having a preschool be part of the PlayGarden come about? Do you think it might ever grow into a school for older kids?

**LB** – We held five years of summer camp here at the PlayGarden before our buildings were built. It was always a dream to run year round programs so when the facility was complete we started a two-day a week preschool. I spent twenty plus years helping families' transition from their early intervention program to the public schools when their child turned three years old.

It was invariably an angst-ridden experience. Once again, parents are asked to make a choice to send their child with challenges to a special education program. The high therapy and educational needs for many of these children dictate this type of setting but we thought we could offer something different - an inclusive nature based outdoor experience. We now have preschool five days per week.

**SS** – I can't begin to imagine how satisfying it must be for you to think about the journey of the PlayGarden; how it grew from simply being an idea, a vision to something physical, real and such an amazing community resource. Could you talk a little bit about that?

**LB** – Honestly, it feels like a dream come true mixed with a lot of blue collar work. It is incredibly rewarding to see children and families playing here and I am humbled by the wide spread support we have. It truly is a labor of love and I am overwhelmed by my good fortune in creating the best possible place to work. We are now into our seventh year of programs. Some of our first campers are now counselors. Amazing.



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