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Genes

Anant was an unskilled worker in his early twenties who came to our house one day looking for work. When my grandfather opened the door, Anant requested him, 'Please let me work in your house. Just give me two meals a day. I have no money or family in this world and nowhere to go.'

My grandfather took pity on him and said, 'Boy, you can stay in our house as long as you want. But after some time, you should get married and take care of your family. For that, you will need money. Without skills, one can't earn money. I will teach you to perform pujas and I will pay you a hundred rupees per month as long as you stay with us.'

Anant was taken aback. He never expected to be paid to learn and even get free accommodation. In those days, a hundred rupees was a large sum of money. Anant became the man Friday of our house. All my childhood memories are inevitably linked with Anant.

As man Friday, Anant would perform all tasks without question. My grandmother would call out to him, 'Anant, go and bring vegetables from the market.' My uncle would tell him, 'Anant, go to the post office and get me some postcards. On the way back, get me a newspaper from the bazaar.' My aunt would say, 'Anant, will you pluck flowers from the garden for me? I have to make a garland for God!' I always went with Anant and accompanied him on his

errands. Anant never complained and always smiled while he worked. He used to sit with my grandfather every day and learned to perform puja with devotion.

One day, my grandmother lost her gold bangle. It was a wedding gift from her father. Hence, there was a lot of sentimental attachment to it; she started sobbing.

Everybody at home scanned the entire house but we did not find it. When night fell, my crying grandmother lit a lamp and told Anant to place it in front of the tulsi plant. When he went there, he saw a shining piece of metal in the mud.

When he picked it up, he realized that it was my grandmother's gold bangle and ran back to give it back to her. My grandmother was extremely happy with him. She realized that she must have dropped the bangle while she was watering the plant. Grandfather gave Anant a hundred rupees as a reward and declared, 'Your honesty makes you a role model for all the people in our house.' However, Anant refused to accept the money. He said, 'A reward is for someone who is not family. I consider myself a part of this family. I will not take your money.'

On another occasion, Anant wanted to buy something for himself but he had run out of money. So he took an advance of fifty rupees from my grandfather against his next monthly allowance. At the beginning of next month, my grandfather gave Anant a hundred rupees, forgetting to deduct the advance. Anant immediately said, 'Ajja, please keep fifty rupees with you because you have already given it to me as an advance.' My grandfather was proud of Anant for his honesty and patted his back.

My grandfather told the whole family about this incident and said, 'If Anant had kept the hundred rupees, I wouldn't have known and he would have made a profit of fifty rupees. Even though Anant is in need of money, his honesty

and integrity are more important to him. So he will never take money that does not belong to him.'

After a few years, Anant got married to a girl from another village. Her father was the chief priest in their village. Since Anant knew how to perform pujas very well, he decided to move to his wife's village and help her father take care of the local temple. We all cried the day Anant left home and we felt like a beloved daughter was leaving after marriage. Long after he was gone, my grandfather always remembered him and we often talked about him.

All of us children grew up and settled in the city. Time passed by, things changed and Anant faded into the background as a fond memory. Neither our grandparents nor our ancestral house in the village remained.

Several years passed. One day, I was pleasantly surprised to see an unusual visitor in my office. It was Anant. I remembered the time we had spent together wandering in the village and learning many things. Those days were filled with simple and unforgettable moments. I went and touched his feet as a mark of respect. He looked embarrassed. I told him to sit down and made him comfortable. He had brought a young man with him.

Slowly, Anant started talking. 'How is your uncle? Where is your brother? I haven't met you for a long time. Things have changed so much.' He inquired about every member of my family and I replied with all the details.

Finally, Anant introduced the young man sitting next to him, 'This is Hari, my grandson. I have one daughter. He is her son. Hari studied in our village. Then, he went to study in the neighbouring town and has just finished college. He appeared for ...'

Anant turned to his grandson and asked him, 'What exam have you given? I have forgotten the name.'

Confidently and proudly, Hari said, 'IIT entrance.'

Anant continued, 'He has got admission in Chennai. He has taken a bank loan to pay his college fees because my son-in-law cannot afford the expenses for his education. Hari says that IIT is a very good college in our country. I don't know. But the boy is hell-bent on going there. Can you please help him in any way?'

I replied, 'I can't help you from the Foundation because I know you personally. At the Foundation, we help only those people who don't know anyone and have nowhere else to go. But I will help you with my personal funds.' I saw a sigh of relief on Hari's face and happiness on Anant's.

I thought, 'Here is this bright, young boy who is going to IIT. I am sure that he will get a very good job later and earn lots of money. Why should I give him a scholarship? I would prefer to give him a loan.' I saw Hari's marks and was glad to find out that he had got admission in computer science.

I asked Hari, 'How much money are you short of?'

'Though I have applied for a scholarship and a bank loan, I still need fifty thousand per year to complete the course.'

'Okay, in that case, I will lend you two lakhs now and you can use it for your education. Please remember that it is not a gift. It is a loan without interest. You should return it as soon as you can afford to return it, even if it is a small amount of money per month. This way, I can lend the amount to another bright child like you and the chain can continue. Your grandfather is one of the most honest persons I have ever known. I am sure that the same culture and genes flow in the family.'

'Do I need to sign any document for this loan?' asked Hari.

'No, your word of honour is more than enough. After all, you are Anant's grandson.'

Anant said, 'Please don't worry. Hari will definitely return the money.'

I gave the loan and forgot about the incident.

Years later, I was travelling from Chennai to Bangalore. My flight was delayed and I was waiting at the airport. I saw a well-dressed young man sitting alone and waiting for the same flight. He was engrossed in reading some journals and I noticed his laptop, which was getting charged beside him. He seemed very familiar. After some time, he switched on his laptop and started working on it. When we were called to board the flight, he went to business class. I was left wondering where I had seen him.

That same evening, I went for a speaker series to a college where I was teaching. I sat in the last row because I was late. The goal of the speaker series was to inspire youngsters. I saw that the young man I had seen at the airport was one of the speakers and he spoke very well.

He said, 'I come from a small village and never had money while I was growing up. But I studied in IIT. Today, I am a self-made man. My experience has showed me that we can make life for ourselves. You can achieve whatever you want in life with self-motivation.'

I suddenly realized that he was Anant's grandson, Hari.

I asked my colleague sitting next to me, 'Who is he and why was he invited here by our college?'

'Hari is hardly twenty-eight, but he has become rich by making money in a hedge fund. He is a financial wizard. He comes from a very humble background. So we invited him to be a role model for our students.'

Hari continued his speech and I listened with rapt attention. Then I got an emergency call from my office and I left in the middle of his question and answer session.

I decided to get in touch with him and found his number easily on the Internet. I called Hari the next day. Hari's personal assistant picked up the phone and said, 'What can I do for you?'

I told her my name and said that I wanted to talk to Hari. She consulted Hari and then told me, 'Sir is very busy.'

'Please tell him that I want to talk to him for a minute.'

Hari came on the line. He was courteous and made inquiries about how I was doing. Finally, I asked him, 'How is Anant?'

He said, 'My grandfather passed away a few years ago.' I felt sad and did not know what to say but he ended the conversation and said, 'I'm sorry, I have to go. Thank you for calling.'

I felt the loss of an old friend. But something else was also nagging at me.

I thought, 'Hari never even talked about returning the loan. That money may be a small amount for me, but I know from my experience that he will never return the money. People who intend to return a loan don't end their conversations like this.'

I was very upset that Hari had cheated me. When someone gets cheated, that person gets upset not because they have lost money but because he or she realizes that they have been foolish enough to be tricked by someone. That hurts one's ego and I am no exception. I always thought that I understood people better and could forecast the results of various situations because I have been in the public field for a long time. When I am fooled, I realize that I am still a student.

Soon, I cooled down. I knew that anybody else in my position would have done the same thing. Anant was a man of integrity, so I had trusted both Anant and Hari.

As a teacher, a mother and a woman, I am used to giving sermons without being asked. I picked up the phone and called Hari to give him a piece of my mind. Fortunately, he picked up the phone himself.

I calmly said, 'Hari, I wanted to give you a gentle reminder. I know that Anant would have handed down his values and principles to you. So, if you remember, you have to return the loan of two lakhs.'

With an equally cool voice, Hari replied, 'My grandfather worked in your house for a meagre salary of a hundred rupees for years. He was an assistant to every member of your family. It was nothing but exploitation. In fact, you should pay our family more money. However, to honour my grandfather, I have not asked you for anything.' Then he disconnected the phone.

I realized then that only diseases and not honesty and integrity are passed down to the next generation through genes.