

Anita Apa, I will not mourn you...

I feel so proud to say that you stand tall in line with those who make history; not just make history, but change the course of it. You stand with those who embrace humanity with all its shortcomings and reach out to transform lives, not just make a difference.

I will remember you as a stalwart. An advocate of life itself. An embodiment of how life should be lived and not merely spent. I will cherish you as a hero. One that truly shared her strength with those around and made others feel they are needed. You made all of us feel special. You made us see ourselves as people capable of something, no matter how petty or how magnanimous. Your unwavering honesty lent us the courage to face ourselves and to face the world. You have been our shoulder to cry on and the first person we ran to for support, for advice, for shelter, for accountability, for being good all over again and for admitting we've failed.

I will remember you as an advocate of children. Your passion for children, privileged or disadvantaged, able or special, was unparalleled. You had the invaluable knack of bonding with them in a way which made them warm up to you within seconds of meeting you. And they never forgot you afterwards. Even those you met only once or twice would talk about you or refer to what you said for days to come. They took lessons for life to cherish. You always asked me about my children whenever we met. And it was everyday once. You would tirelessly listen to my meanderings. I have never come across a more attentive and active listener. You always had valuable advice to offer to ease my pains of newly discovered motherhood. You always enriched my thought process; your precious wisdom and insights opened up whole new vistas of hope, positivism and the courage to dream and hold on to dreams. To face life as it came and to find fresher perspectives no matter how dark the tunnel seemed. You incessantly bolstered the courage of working mothers like me to deal with the continuum of dilemmas to attain the perfect home-office-social pressures balance that we perpetually struggled with and still do.

I will remember you as an activist. And no ordinary one. You embodied your activism and not paid mere lip service to the stands you took for others and for the causes you firmly believed in. You lived your activism every day. The doors to your office remained open to all. We all knew that we could walk into your office without an appointment and you would see us, hear us out and help us untangle whenever we found ourselves twisted in a confused mass. I rarely remember being disallowed in your room. I think a million like me can vouch for that, irrespective of designation, qualification, caste, creed, religion or any other socio political affiliation. You interacted with people for what they were as humans, not from where they came from or what baggage they carried. You prodded them on to talk, often about things they would never otherwise talk about. Things they loved, things they hated, things which irritated them, things they wanted but could not get, things they have achieved but didn't want them anymore. You always made time, even if you were not at your best health wise. You made time for everyone. For the director, for the senior managers, for the office assistants, for the chowkidars, for the guards doing duty at the neighbor's premises, for the driver who left 5 years ago, for the gardener who had a bad case of diabetes. And you remembered all their woes. You followed up on our everyday miseries and made us look beyond with a good laugh. You had an instinct for humor and never failed to dig out the lighter side from the most dismal of situations.

I will remember you as a leader who took pride in nurturing diversity. You had a unique yardstick to measure our strengths and weaknesses which was smarter than any textbook prescribed performance appraisal system. You were the best HR person around who found the most innovative solutions to the most complex of policy matters.

I will remember you as a much loved story teller who would hold audience enthralled with her childhood fables and her countless anecdotes as a dynamic teacher. You were a teacher who brought the world to the classroom and gave full liberty to your students to explore and find treasures which enticed them. You always told teachers, both old and aspiring, that, they held the key to change. That they were empowered more than they think they were. For no one came in between the teacher and her students in class if she really wanted them to experience learning as it should be experienced.

I will remember you as a prolific writer who tirelessly edited our drafts and pinpointed persistent grammatical blemishes; the commas, the hyphens, the semi colons which we, somehow, never placed in order. When you found a piece of writing amenable, you were quick and candid in your praise. I was few of the luckier ones at SEF, who had the good fortune of writing your speeches and your letters. I can't thank you enough for giving me those opportunities. The only thought of writing a piece, no matter how procedural, on your behalf, elated me to another pedestal altogether. I would always remember and cherish for life the moment when you asked me to write the preface for Zubeida Mustafa's book on SIUT on your behalf. That was one rare juncture in life when I felt the exhilaration of being someone you trusted enough to delegate such a significant task to. I remember the thousand knots in my stomach when I went to show you the draft. I know I will never feel the same again like I did when you wrote remarks at the end of the foreword. What's most remarkable to note here and I would like to highlight it not as my personal achievement but as a gesture of your generosity, that when Ms. Mustafa wrote an email to commend the preface, you told her that I wrote it and had her email forwarded, for me to read. I can't think of a more magnanimous and selfless response. For me, the honor of writing on your behalf was an honor in itself. By actually giving me credit for whatever little I did, you, for the umpteenth time over, reinforced your own stature as a person whose parallel it is impossible to find.

There will be no other like you Apa.

I am not prepared to mourn you for I want to celebrate the values you personified, the stands you bravely took for countless people across all stratas of society, your lifelong struggles for justice, honesty, education and peace which you held so dear, your words of wisdom and your savyness for life which set you apart from all the rest.

I do feel an overwhelming sense of bereavement of losing a loved one, but I will not mourn you.

Ambreena Ahmed
August 11, 2014.