

In The Still Smoldering Pain Of The Loss Of Avtar Kaul

He was quiet and unobtrusive, in this world but not quite of it. He had his feet firmly planted in life but he belonged to another realm.

Avtar's friendship was an unconditional gift. When he talked he did not want to score a point but point out the granite realities of life. To express his love he spoke less but acted more. He thought life was an inscrutable pain but believed one should keep one's chin up. Though socially sensitive, he could dismiss society with a snap of his fingers. In the stillness of his thought he considered life to be a bad bargain but to mitigate it he resorted to the responsibilities of his job, balm of human relationships, and the euphoria of the satisfaction of senses.

I first met him a few days after my marriage. He was heart-full, helpful, and naturally courteous. He connected with me as if he had known me for quite some time. I felt an instant assurance of his civility and humanity even at the incipient stage of our relationship. He struck my inner chord where others had just hovered over it.

His frequent visits to New York were a rhapsody of delight. He came without the slightest pretense of a high-level official's visit abroad. Instead, he eased himself generously in the contours of my home. He talked instinctively and uninhibitedly immersed in my family environment. We would gaily shop daytime and blithely chase the splendors of Scotch in the evenings. His reputation as a drinker was more myth than reality. In his later years his resistance to drinks plummeted and the grandeur of his original family name Sharabi lay in dust. His earnest inclination to melt with his friends was a rapturous experience.

One day while shopping at the now defunct department store Alexander's, he

went into women's brasserie section, while I kept a discreet distance from it. He sauntered into different parts of it looking for a bra for his wife. After selecting its style he felt lost about its size. He anxiously looked at me and asked me in Kashmiri what his wife's bra size should be. At this time I could not control my put-on indifference and burst into exploding laughter to the utter amazement of the American bystander shoppers. I, by intuition, rather than by any concrete knowledge, guided him to the right size.

He worked hard at his work in Pan Am and then Delta Airlines. But more than that he took ownership of his responsibilities. For decades he would leave his home in the stillness of the night to reach his job to meet the international flight schedules. He took great pride in his work.

He loved his family deeply but due to the filter of his inherent shyness it would come out muted while it was meant to be intense. For his children, Nimpoo and Ankush, he had a special corner in his heart.

Character and personality are the twin pillars of a human being. While Avtar's character was made of high mountain peaks but maybe some people without much penetration of mind would find fault with his personality. He believed in honor, a salient point of Kashmiri Pandit culture. For it he was willing to sacrifice his money and convenience. He was serious-minded and passionately did not interfere in other people's lives.

At his home things did not quite work to his satisfaction. A man's life is at the mercy of the vagaries of chance. Elements of his family life were unfixable tangles. But Avatar stoically did not complain. Though worldly-wise he preferred to live for the moment. In it was his salvation, his catharsis. The world in front of him was merciless and without a redeeming value.

The biggest rendezvous of his life was with his health. In 1996, while in New York with me, he stumbled into a serious diabetic situation. But he brushed it aside as a non-threatening event. This apparently defiant, or more correctly, a dangerously careless disposition to his health, culminated into his early demise. Throughout his several decades of bout with diabetes he played truant with it. What was it in Avtar, a down-to-earth person, that defied a reality? It was his fatalism. When a situation seems unfixable just throw it out of your existence.

But for his health he was a highly responsible man, an ardent family man, a beloved friend. In the company of his friends his time melted like an ice slab on a summer day.

For times to come Pan Am and Delta Airlines histories will note with pride the contributions of a highly conscientious worker in 60's through 80's in their New Delhi offices. His primary and secondary families will miss his willful and heartfelt generosity to them. His wife Billy will find no one to match his sincerity and commitment, in spite of the inevitable arguments that ensued between them, which are unavoidable wounds of a modern marriage.

And I, forever, have lost a beloved friend, imbued with nobility and a tenacious commitment to the values of life. His boat was small, as is every human being's, but God's ocean is large. He returned the temporary gift of his life to God in stoic perseverance and calmness on November 6, 2013. All this time I was unable to write this tribute.

Avtar, in his silent and ineloquent ways, said a lot to life.

Suffern, New York, August 28, 2014; Revised August 28, 2014, Revised August 28, 2014.

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