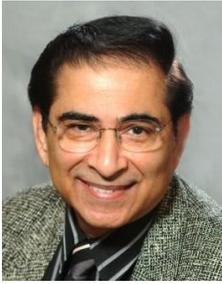


My Dagger and I



Harish Malhotra

Harish Malhotra, MD, is a diplomat of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology, a Distinguished Life Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association, and a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at Rutgers Medical School in Newark, New Jersey. He is the past chair of department of psychiatry of Overlook hospital, Summit. He has been practicing psychiatry since 1977. His book [Metaphors of Healing](#) is available on Amazon.

My family lived in Meerut in 1959. I was in ninth grade.

Every year, since the 17th century, Meerut held an annual *Nauchandi* fair. Whole villages would come from far and wide to attend this event. The town would spend a lot to decorate the place with laces and leaves. People from all over the state would converge, and put up stalls and shops to display their wares. You would see unfamiliar and surprising stuff being sold. For example, there were shops that displayed face masks, beards and wigs, which were not available in town then. I cannot recall any shop in town that sold facemasks, moustaches, and dresses that were used for stage drama.

The well-known Kamla circus would come to *Nauchandi* fair. A festive atmosphere would reign in the whole city. Local Indian restaurants, *dhabas* and *Halwai ki Dukan*, would sell sweets of different kinds. Toy shops were plentiful with kids crying in front of them, and parents telling them, "We will come again."

It was one summer day when I visited the fair with my father. Mom was away to visit my aunt in Lucknow. From afar, a certain shop caught my attention. I became oblivious to everything else that surrounded us the first time I laid my eyes on the "sharp things" that were being displayed there. The swords, knives, and daggers were like a magnet that drew my attention.

Buoyant with excitement, I asked my father, "Pitaji, can we see those daggers, knives, and swords?"

My father was surprised. "Why do you want to look at them?"

I replied, in the excited voice of a ninth grader, "I just want to look at them."

My father shook his head. Helpless at my insistence, he led me to the shop. Engrossed with the novelty of the objects, I continued to fill my eyes with their "wonder." Then I saw it... there it was... and it took my breath away. It had a glass handle with different colors. Its blade was at least 6 inches long. Its beauty was held by a leather holster. "This is 'my' dagger," I said to myself.

"Pitaji, I want it. Would you please buy it for me?"

My father was surprised, "What do you want to do with this dagger? This is used in killing people. Besides, you're only in ninth grade."

I explained, "I just want to hold it and have it as mine."

My father continued to decline, "No, I don't want you to have it. It is a dangerous weapon. I don't want you to carry a weapon."

Tears slowly welled in my eyes. I became very solemn, and I stopped talking to my father.

My father took notice of the silence. He said, "Come on, let's go and have a nice dinner somewhere."

"I don't want to have dinner," I said with a voice that nearly wouldn't come out because I felt like choking.

My father said, "What happened? You said you were hungry but now you suddenly lost appetite."

I could no longer contain the tears, which started to fall. I cried hard. "I want that dagger but you won't get it for me."

My father tried his best to change my mind. "The thing is unfit for you, so I am not going to buy it."

Hoping that I would be diverted, he further coaxed, "Okay, let us wait until your mom returns then we will see if she approves."

Upset and angry, I cried all the way home. "I never ask for anything, but when I finally do, you don't get it for me."

The whole evening was spoiled because of my tantrum. My father was upset, too, because he just could not get through me. He was not able to convince me that having the dagger is pointless.

In the next two days, I remained withdrawn from Father. He tried to bring me around, thinking that my sad mood has something to do with Mother being away. However, I could not be budged. I remained sullen.

Next time we went to the fair, I pestered my father again. I cried, and carried on with my demand. My father finally threw in the towel, and bought me the dagger.

I became the happiest ninth grader in town!

After couple of weeks, one afternoon, I was wearing a pair of shorts, with the dagger hanging on my side. Our house was right above the bank where my father worked. I was playing in my usual playground, the street right in front of the bank.

One of my father's customers saw me. He asked the guard of the bank, "Who is that kid with the dagger?"

"This is the bank manager's son," replied the guard.

The gentleman walked into the bank and went straight to my father. "What your son is doing is very dangerous. After all, it's illegal to carry a 6 inch dagger. Secondly, anybody can hurt him by that same weapon."

My father immediately asked the guard to get me and very gently, he coaxed, "I want you to go upstairs, remove the dagger from your belt, and leave it there. This gentleman says that somebody can snatch this dagger from you and hurt you."

Meekly I obeyed. "Yes, Pitaji."

The next day near playtime, I went to the small side table to get my dagger but it was empty. I searched around the living room – under and behind all the furniture. Nothing. My search included the other rooms

in the house. Again, nothing.

I informed my mother, "Mataji, I had left my dagger here yesterday. I can't find it. Did you see it?"

She came over. "Where did you keep it?"

I pointed to the side table, "Right there."

She spent the next twenty minutes looking around the side table and under the table. We could not find it. We asked the servant, "Bhim Singh, did you see a dagger here?" Still nothing.

When my father came home in the evening, I told him my efforts at locating the lost dagger. He looked worried. "You should have kept something like that more carefully." He made his own search of the same for half hour. It yielded the same result: nothing.

I missed it so much. It was such a loss for me because I had gotten it through a ton of tears and a few days of "silence" – a big sacrifice for this bubbly, talkative kid. I didn't have the strength to ask for another dagger. It was "the" dagger for me. As time went by, it was slowly erased from the memory of a busy teenager.

I had finished medical school in 1968. I was looking for something in a large metal storage trunk. There it was... my long lost 6-inch dagger, laying there still perfectly the same, untouched by time. It was the surprise of all surprises for me. I felt strange as I informed Mother.

She said, "Yes, I know. That dagger has been there for many years."

"You knew?"

"Yes, I did. I put it there."

It all dawned on me and I smiled. "So all the searching was just an 'act' with you and Pitaji?"

"Yes, it was. In your stubborn love for the dagger, we were sure that no amount of explanation would influence you from parting with it. It would start another long episode of crying and sulking, which we did not know how to manage. So we made the dagger 'misplaced'."

The return of the dagger was uneventful. My excitement with it had been doused by time, but it has been with me since the day I rediscovered it in 1968. At the present time, it is still with me in the drawer of my night table.



“The dagger” – bought 1959, “lost” 1959, found 1968, in night table 2014

The dagger brings many memories: me pestering my father, seeing his sense of helplessness as I nagged him, his final surrender to my insistence, my father and mother turning into effective “actor” and “actress.”

However, it remains only that: One of the precious memories in my treasure box. The dagger was the “apple of my eye” in ninth grade. Everything paled in comparison with my obsession with it. However, it does not hold any special role in my life now. I’m not even sure whether I should keep or throw it away. When I think of discarding it, the memory of my parents’ tender love makes me keep it with me.

When you feel that something is absolutely important, remember that the perceived value of a thing changes in the passing of time. What is important now is not going to remain important in ten years' time. What is not important today may become important in the future.❖

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