

Chapter 25. Thank You for Carrying Me Through, Thank You for Your Labor

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This piece is my thank-you letter to my mentor. It also mirrors bits and pieces of my early journey as a queer writer in the English language. With this piece, I intend to communicate that writing and the motivations behind it are often subjective, as is writing mentorship. Some learn to write because they are aware of its powers, and some aren't exposed. In the latter situation, people like my mentor are the real harbingers of positive changes for people like me.

Subject: Thank you for carrying me through, thank you for your labor.

प्रिय Ranjit जी,

My heart rejoices to share that in fall 2022, I will begin my rhetoric and composition studies Ph.D. at the oldest U.S. public university. This news still feels like a dream. I know I couldn't have achieved this without you carrying me through. Do you remember how frustrated I was when I expressed my desire to return to academia to you after years of surviving corporate burnout and accepting myself as a gay man in India? No words can quantify my gratitude to you for being my guru. Writing became a way to answer questions related to my sexual identity. You introduced me to that kind of writing. Through exchanging long WhatsApp messages after our day jobs, you guided me on how to analyze my actions and others' reactions by picking up specific instances I was going through at my workplace as examples. Such relatable situations prompted me to notice the society around me, empathetically yet constructively. You bridged my process of peeking inside my ideologies and anointing my voice, even though it was dissent at times.

You exposed me to writing as a powerful way to be an activist. I learned that commonsense is not universal but always contextualized. You reaffirmed my gut feeling that nothing was wrong with me, though until 2018, being a gay man was a felony according to Indian law. You introduced me to Indian Queer history and connected me with local Queer activists. I happily started embracing my "frivolous" (according to many) parallel beliefs, locating opportunities, and gathering support for people like me. I started recognizing writing as my source of seeking solace, poking holes in my anguish. Thanks to you, I could begin the journey of helping myself and people like me.

I am not sure if you know this, but before meeting you, I had almost given up the hope of beginning my graduate studies. Reasons were many, be it financial constraints or upheavals in my personal life. Solutions always seemed far-fetched.

Requesting help was anxiety-inducing, which often translated into frustration. Yet, you sensed what I was capable of if given opportunities and mentorship. I remember you guided me on my writing improvement, even canceling your plans to do so.

I sometimes wonder if I'd ever be able to put a number to the things I am indebted for by your existence in my life. Should I be more grateful to you for scaffolding me to develop a better awareness of myself or prompting me to be a harbinger of liberal change or other things? I know my writing journey under your apprenticeship hasn't been a cakewalk for you. I remember how often you would be in the middle of your work, research, and (even while) doing groceries, but still you attended to my panicked calls because I'd be so anxious to put my thoughts on paper. I didn't understand the exact efforts you put in, at least as much as I should have then. But now that I tutor in the writing center, researching writers' efficacy, I acknowledge those conscientious efforts were so invaluable.

Your selfless investment in my writing development helped me mediate my visions to read, mushroom my thoughts about societal issues, and provide the ability to translate my aspirations into practice through writing. Learning those critical thinking skills proved to be life skills for me. I give back to society by replicating your mentoring style. I feel I am a better and happier person now because I could help my tutees anoint the notions that are paramount to them via the act of writing, similar to how you did. I dedicate my tutoring to your trust in me. I apologize for those panicked calls I made, and I appreciate your dedication so that I stayed focused on the visions I had for myself. Maybe I hadn't said it enough earlier, but you became that straw in the ocean, which became my driving force to build a better future for myself.

I appreciate you trusting me when I didn't know my potential: tapping resources that interested me, leading to lesser anxiety. Learning to write was a solitary process for me for most of my educational trajectory in India. I had to figure out the areas for improvement in my writing without even knowing its nitty-gritty. I was all alone, except for some empathetic but overburdened teachers in high school who would also sit with students beyond their working hours. Because of a lack of resources, I could not flourish as a writer since I hardly had anyone to turn to. As a result, writing first became frustrating and then daunting. Writing was a practice where I only restated what I had read, often something I couldn't relate to in the real world, without adding my voice to the topic.

This is why I hope you know why I took longer to invite and put your mentorship into action, because what you would ask me to do would often contradict my previous writing literacies. Do you recall, during the early days of learning about academic writing, how I was a bit taken aback when you told me to read "Shitty First Drafts" and "The Importance of Writing Badly" and instructed me to summarize and compare them? I remember calling you just after reading the titles of those readings containing words such as 'Shitty,' 'Drafts' (with an 's'), and 'Writing Badly.' I, in fact, remember the brief conversation I had with you:

Saurabh: I think I downloaded something (readings) weird.

Ranjit: What do you mean by weird?

Saurabh: One has the word “shitty” in the title, and the other is about not writing well (shitty). I am a bit confused.

Ranjit: You have the correct readings. What the authors recommend in the article may sound a bit different than what you are used to, but I want you to trust me. Perhaps we can talk about things that are conflicting to you once you have read them, but for next week’s assignment, please read and compare them (smiling).

Saurabh: Oh, okay. Are you sure?

Ranjit: Yes, trust me.

Obviously, I did what you suggested, then, but please know I called because it was something I had never seen celebrated before. It was almost awkward. From a young age, I felt pressure to score the highest through the summative assessment we received on our examination papers. Trusting you illustrated a new path of assurance, support, and calmness in my writing transformation. From the bottom of my heart, I want to extend my appreciation for all these conversations with you that provided me an outlet to express my writing-related inquietudes. The writing strategies you shared to engage with the text and unravel my thoughts on readings were previously unknown to me. Such guidance helped me overcome my enigmatic and convoluted ways of writing and notice things around me to analyze broader meanings.

For example, sensing my interest in movies, I remember you once asked me to watch *Aligarh*, a biographical movie based on the life of an Indian linguist, Ramchandra Siras, and had me write a reflective piece on it. At that time, I did not quite understand why you did that, but being an English composition instructor and writing mentor, I now do. I appreciate you incorporating multimodality and my interests. You helped me notice and explore societal conflicts. I learned ways to relate and empathize with others through my writing.

Though learning to write was mostly liberating and stimulating, I’d often have moments of fear of failure, nervousness, and inhibition of my writing not being on par with other students. In those instances, you took me out for a meal/coffee, wrote me encouraging letters, or said, “*Slowly cooked food tastes better*,” an Indigenous metaphor, which often proved to be encouraging for me. I often use the same metaphor while teaching, too. Thank you again. प्रणाम.

आपका शिष्य,

सौरभ आनंद