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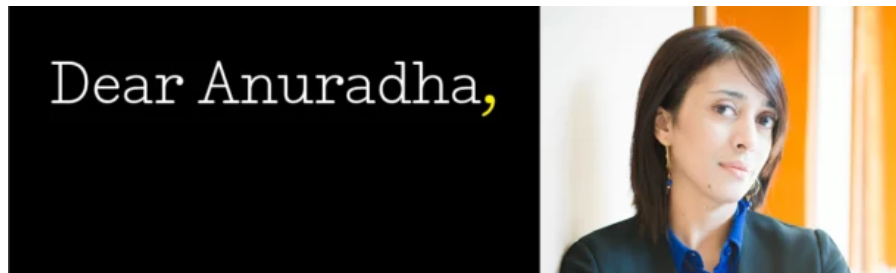
career paths / letters to my younger self

Redefining success

ANURADHA CHATTERJEE
October 29th, 2017

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Success isn't about winning power, privilege and esteem. It's about finding your talents, achieving contentment and enjoying the rewards, says Anuradha Chatterjee.



I do not consider myself to be in a position to advise others because every life, every journey is different. Hence, I have taken a predictive tone in writing this, as a letter like this would have helped alleviate my anxieties and worries when I was younger.

I grew up in New Delhi in a nuclear family, where my older brother was born into the position of lifelong privilege, and I was born into a life of neglect. While this happens to many women in India, who accept it as a way of being for different reasons, I tended to question everything from early on. While this made life at home incredibly difficult, it also made me pick up skills on how to negotiate, bargain, and get what I want. As I was not told of my talents and strengths, it left the field wide open for me, and I accidentally discovered architecture, and my passion for it.

I migrated to Australia when I was 26, where I went from strength to strength, and matured and evolved in leaps and bounds. It seemed to me a culture that was wonderfully diverse and full of optimism and humanity, but I struggled to not be a 'foreigner'. I battled intense feelings of insecurity and inferiority in not having the kind of privilege [networks, automatic cultural acceptance, familiarity with people and cultural ways of being] that was available to people who were born here, obviously exacerbated by my inherent/inherited lack of self-worth.

At some point, this was no longer an issue (or perhaps it always will be). Nevertheless, this is the wonderful, crazy, frustrating context that brings particularity to my reflection.

Once you say it

The power of words is a force to be reckoned with. I know this sounds like a new age hippy dippy, pop psychology, self-help type of proposition but I do believe if you say you will publish three books by the time you are 45, you will. If you say you will be the head of an institution by the time you are 50, you will. If you say you wish to become someone who is recognised globally for your expertise, you will. The reverse is also true: if you never say it, it will never happen. Saying it to yourself, or to a friend at a bar, and not just thinking it, means that you dare. You dare to be grand, impudent and delusional. You dare to think of yourself as equal to 'those people', who can start a company, create and sell objects and ideas, or be appointed to leadership positions. The idea is no longer abstract. It becomes concrete, and a real possibility now that you have externalised it. It

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The invisibility of women

was the same for me saying to myself some years ago 'I shall write for Parlour'. I also told myself nine years ago I shall re-enter practice – I have.

You are not invisible

For the longest time, it will seem like your work is just going into a black hole, or that the space you are in is too crowded, or that the competition is stiff, or that your work is so irrelevant or untimely that no one understands or cares. This is not true. There will be people you know who follow your work, but there will be others you don't know who also follow your work. You will discover this slowly through social media and through your travels, and you will respond by reaching out even more than before. It is not just your work, but it is you that people are keen to know. You will battle the fact that you do not fit the physical appearance stereotype, as you stand 5 feet 3 inches tall and you are a dark-haired pale-skinned Indian female person in Australia. This is exacerbated by the fact that you were the youngest in your family, with very little agency. But this is not how the world sees you. You will step out of the shadows of your inherited lack of self-worth, and learn to believe that your friends, colleagues and mentors do not see you through such limited and physical lenses: it is their interpersonal relationship with you that they value the most.

There is no such thing as a bad decision

There are no bad decisions, but yes, there will be people who say you screwed up and you should not have done this or that, or should have known better. But in the end, they are just decisions and, above all, you made them. They were not imposed on you. You will need to remember that there is no such thing as a mistake when it comes to making decisions about your life or work. You will always deliberate, decide and act based on the information and knowledge you have at hand, and in favour of your well-being and progress. The word mistake can cast you into the realm of regret and leave you doubting your own independent decision-making capacity, but remember that YOU are all you have to go by. You will therefore live by your good decisions, bad decisions, timely decisions and quick decisions, but you will celebrate that they are YOUR decisions, and the fact that their trajectory is entirely lucid to you, and you will know what to do next.

You will redefine success

There will be pressure to achieve, to be kind, to be feminine, to be a mother, a wife, a sister, have lots of friends, be likeable and, in some sense, have a 'normal' life, to be able to tell stories that people can identify with in order to relate to you. But this is not necessary. Your life is perfect because you shaped it. It cannot and will not look like anyone else's. Your life should be celebrated. Never ever shame or devalue it. There will also be the pressure to be the best and be successful, which for a lot of people may mean constant growth, or uninterrupted access to positions of power, privilege and esteem. This is a tall order because many of us will never 'get there', because we simply do not have access to the same kinds of resources. Therefore, you will redefine success as a combination of passion, contentment and reward. You will build your own narrative of what success can be so that you are successful on your own terms. There can be no winners and losers when you play it like this.

You will get there

They say patience is a virtue – a clichéd expression that I do not like – but you clearly will not have it. You will lose faith many times and think things are not moving, or that nothing will change in your favour. But you will get there. We all do. You will start to appreciate the role incubation has in allowing your consciousness to find ways for ideas and projects to manifest and materialise. It is not that they will not happen, or that you need do nothing for things to happen. But they will most certainly never happen instantly, ever, so you should never give up – another clichéd expression. In fact, they may happen when you have even forgotten about them. You need to be there when this happens. Of course, persistence (I define this as the state of being perpetually inspired) and hard work are the necessary conduits. Nevertheless, 'trust' is an important part of one's life and work trajectory, which is another way of saying 'be patient'.

You will impact others, positively

You will spend a lot of time giving, mentoring, teaching, organising, troubleshooting to the point of having a burn out, and sometimes think you are in a thankless job, marked by perfect ratings and popularity. However, your impact is greater than this. Think of the final chapter in the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, where Clarence the angel reminds George Bailey [James Stewart] of his contribution to the life of his family and the town he grew up in. It will start to become clear to you the myriad positive ways in which your life and work positively affects others, near and far. You will also inspire others by just being you, by being kind to others, always, and you will learn to be inspired by other



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women and men in the same way. Be generous in helping others advance their careers. A small nudge, a reassuring nod, an encouraging word may do a world of good, so never be stingy with compassion and kindness.

Count on your friends

You will realise at some point that there are some people who are going to support you unconditionally, and you really do not have to plan or strategise to 'win' them over. These are your friends, people who see you as gold when you are nobody, and when you are somebody. These 'friends' do not always have to be near you, or at your place of work. So build your world of supporters. Be open to making new connections and be aware that this takes work: it does not happen automatically. These people support you and your work because they are aligned to your social, moral and intellectual world. Therefore, do not try to be too strategic in your friendships: be authentic. People are attracted to authenticity, which is when your admiration and affection for your friends and colleagues is real. Do not suck up to people for strategic reasons as this will not take you far and people see through it anyway.

Finally, I wanted to close by saying that you will have this restless energy, and you will do everything, and go everywhere, and some people will see this as a lack of fidelity and focus, whereas it really is independence, fearlessness and innate curiosity. You will gain a world of experience, knowledge, exposure and friendships through your many obtuse meanderings, and you will be richer for it. You have a long way to go, many more mistakes to make, and many achievements to celebrate.

Anuradha (Anu) Chatterjee is an Indian-Australian architectural historian, academic, author and designer based in Sydney, Australia. She received her PhD from UNSW. Her third book, [John Ruskin and the Fabric of Architecture](#) (Routledge, 2017) has just been released. Anu currently works as Senior Architectural Researcher and Heritage Advisor at [Cracknell and Loneragan Architects](#).

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