

SKEENA'S COLUMN

Gulam Ali Rathor

by **Skeena Rathor**

I am writing this 28 days after my father has passed into physical oblivion. I'm still finding it hard to speak words that say in any kind of directness, 'My father died'. I'm finding it unbearable when people offer condolences and say, 'I'm sorry to hear about your father'. I'm still mostly in the classic stage of Kubler Ross's denial. I sometimes wear long coats and dark glasses when I go out, and I get nervous about going out at all. I feel duly protected by our Muslim Sufi culture that says I'm not required to attend to anything other than my prayers for my father for 40 days, but I'm nervous that there are only twelve days left.

The Intention of this regular column for *Self & Society* is to speak about our Co-Liberation, and in wanting to fulfil a commitment I've been casting thought-experiments about my and our Co-Liberation journey that might be appropriate to share. But I'm nowhere near ready to speak so removed-ly or remotely from my insistent, constant and all embracing grief. I'm thinking about how Dada and I Co-Liberated, and I'm thinking – what about the co-liberation of grief; what is that? Could that even be a thing? Immediately I'm feeling angry and unmet. There's an outrage in me, like there was when I felt abandoned as a young mother and like I do about all those places where we feel the harrowing pains of disconnection. I will return here.

First, I want to share with you something about the relationship between me and my dear Dada – to relationalise (new word, because there aren't enough verbs for the ways we love in the English language) the grief I am speaking of. I'm afraid, because this is where it feels dangerous. I can sense the sirens in my body warning me to take shelter rather than walk out into the raining skies. As I start to allow the feelings of the relationship, I'm weeping uncontrollably, and when I start to weep, usually within a minute, I reach the feeling of the fear of the grief swallowing me up whole, and then the feeling of dying from heartbreak and heartache starts to swell and spiral in me like a typhoon that's being born to cause chaos and uproot all in its path – yes, I feel uprooted by my father's departure. There becomes an aggregated grief, like the typhoon is collecting energy from all my other griefs – all the losses that have found pebbles in my body to sit still under. Well the pebbles are being thrown in the air by that typhoon, and I am realising that life is a relentless reconciling with the loss of life and its love forces that makes us feel; most certainly, profoundly and sensorially alive. We are all endlessly losing something, and that is why there is an indigenous tribe in the world today holding grief ceremonies four nights out of seven. I'm soothed as I remember Kerga Bailey's 'grief is just love that has lost somewhere to go'.

Our relationship – Skeena and Gulam Ali Rathor – father and first-born child and daughter – through this heaving breathlessness of grief, our relationship feels like a mist has been cast over it. Suddenly it all feels like a great mystery and, I'm wondering, is part of the healing and possibility of this moment about casting a magnifying glass over this relationship and its many meanings? Is this what some of us do? We wait until our parents die to really find out what we inherited?

This last year, I was receiving, on average, about eight WhatsApp messages a day from Dada. It was only a year ago that I took him to receive his Parkinsonism diagnosis. The decline was rapid and was affecting his rational and relational thinking. There were growing extremes of expressed grief and joy, where he would laugh uncontrollably and weep inconsolably, and as part of the mania he would be sending us (his children and nieces and nephews) reams and reams of 'Islamic news' through WhatsApp. Often within the news there were sweet blessings and wishes of love and joy for your day which I would keep, but it became a daily routine to be deleting video sermons that were mostly irritating reminders of patriarchal domination culture, and still after the feeling of irritation was a gratitude I used as fuel for the fire of our Co-Liberation work.

On many levels I wasn't willing to see or believe Dada's decline. When any hint of what was being lost came up, I made a point not to think about it, and at the behest of one of my inner storytellers who had concocted a story about the more important things I needed to focus on, I handed over care for his doctor's appointments to my brother and sister.

An alternative story is that I didn't want to be in the work of tending the visible and visceral losses. I was conscious of both stories and a number of others managing my time. Oh, the stories we tell ourselves to help us to feel safe.

You see, for the last 30 years I have had the joyous blessing of a passionate, benevolent and devoted father, who had energetically created, for me, a 'safe house' that was as deep and wide

as any friendly galaxy. Every time I saw or spoke with my Dada he would say something like 'Is there anything you need?'. He would often try and guess – money? Food? Help with travel? 'What about your work?' – he always wanted to be part of figuring out the details and career plans; 'What about the kids (his grandchildren)?' – he would often finish our conversations with the words, 'I'm here for anything you need'. The significance of those words are only fully landing now, and they seem to be creating a profound desolation zone.

When I was with him he was restless until he saw me eating – although he was like this with everyone that came into his home. He wanted to know; if I had enough petrol in my car? How was my own self-care and beauty routine? (he had a thing about attending to our beauty – his skin was immaculate because of his own). Was I getting enough sleep and rest? Where was I going next, and why? Who was I meeting and why? Oh, and how were my dreams and when was I going to be prime minister? (I'm not joking – he genuinely dreamed that I was going to be prime minister, and would tell people so). It went on and on, into requests for every detail possible – could I please recount to him conversations that I was having with the children/his grandchildren, especially about how much they wanted to see him and how much they missed him. His questions and concerns knew no bounds, and although I would sometimes reply in 'back-off' tones, deep within myself I received a feeling that reminded me that 'I mattered deeply', and that love exists in the curiosity for mundane details.

Even though he had some waywardly contradictory and culturally obtuse ideas about women, it was his liberatory spirit and heart whose words I chose to hear – to his three daughters he would emphatically say, 'You can do and be anything you want'. He shifted massively as his three daughters and son grew up and into the world. And then there was his faith and belief in me – he would tell people, 'My daughter is the nicest person in the world and she's going to show people the stars'. Yes of course, my anger has been held to ransom and ruin, by 'the nicest person' tag; and yes, of

course when I was younger I would look at the stars and think – well, how? And what does that mean? But over the years, I have sculpted those words to mean – what they do when a parent utters pure, unconditional and generous love – they just mean, I have complete faith in you and I know you are a magnificent and beautiful human being that changes the world. We are all that.

My father's devotional love was so far reaching. He was literally running the extra mile as a parent. He never let me lift a bag, and always took my bags to the car or house. He would want to guide me out of the parking space, and when his grandchildren were in the car he would run after the car to the end of the estate in waving goodbye. He refused to let me do housework, saying – 'You will do enough outside this house and when you are with me you get to fully rest'; and I did, whenever I was with my father, I was fully resting, and feeling a kind of rest that eludes me everywhere else in the world. Even though I often resisted – it was in the arms of my Dada's care that something in me would feel restored and eased. My dear Mama can't be separated from this part – she is jointly responsible for setting these parenting terms and creating this love field.

So now within my grief is this completely self-centred fear for what might have left this earth plane with his leaving. I see that house that spirals in the sky in the wizard of Oz – where Dorothy *was* safe and cared for. When I touch upon this fear, I feel my body wanting to rock, and sometimes I do: I recognise it's a primal response to a primal fear – how will I be safe in this calamitous world now?

There is a very sweet irony and paradox. because it was Dada who initiated some of my fear, but it was also Dada who taught me how to fight and how to heal. As a young child I was scared of him. My first trauma memory of survival fear taking me over is at three years of age. I was a constipated child, most likely as a fear response. My father believed I was willfully withholding, so he put me on the toilet and held up a coat hanger threatening to beat me unless I did the necessary bowel evacuation. There are three

other physical and violent abuses that I can remember, and I have some sense that there are others that I can't. It's been the inspiration for my being in, studying and teaching psycho-sensory and body-based trauma integration healing, and it was Dada who held my babies so that I could do this healing and training – he often paid for it, too. Some of the Co-Liberation work has been designed on these healing modalities.

Dada was the youngest child of an opium addict father and a mother who left the family when he was 8 years old; this was his major heartbreak, and there is a story his sisters tell of my Dada nearly dying from this heartbreak. He was born and raised in Kenya, and when he left in his early twenties he changed his surname from Kashmiri (we are Kashmiris in modern origin) to Rathor – he had heard that his great grandfather was Rathor. He was wanting to turn away from something very strongly and change what we carry. Although he was loyal to preserving the spoken dignity of his family there was a tightness and cadence of pain in his voice when he spoke of them. On probing he would try and change the conversation.

Dada and I have been on a Co-Liberation journey of epic proportions. He never knew it consciously, but it was him that defied the advice of the mosques and his family in sending me to a 'mixed' secondary school. It was him that sent me to a maths tutor instead of a Quarnic tutor like my cousins. It was him that said, 'Well actually I think it's women that need to lead politics'; and when I became a mother, he said, 'Well it's mothers that need to decide what their children need'. I often got a feeling that through having an awkward, feisty daughter that he loved ferociously he was wrestling with deeply held programmes within himself, and he was painfully aware that he was coming a cropper in raising a 'good Muslim girl'. He tried; he would declare (after a good night at the mosque) new banning orders from music, dancing, singing, magazines, art-works: anything that introduced the rampant deviousness and destitution of Western culture was prohibited.

In some ways I now feel fortunate that it was as limited as it was, but I knew just as well as he did that there was the official story and then our lived story: it was an imposed embargo from a remote authority; we, his children, were smugglers, where many times he was a dealer. The real story was the Walkman that he bought me. He was led by his hopes and dreams for his children to feel their freedom because that's what he had moved countries for.

Then there are the stories of our battles. I don't know when, but gradually I started to feel incensed by Dada's behaviours and words, and by the time I was 11 I was no longer afraid. I sensed a bully who needed to be fought, and in introducing me to politics and community organising which he did when I was 9 and in insisting that if I didn't agree with something, I should make my case and ask every question of it, he helped me seed my power to be in whole-bodied active rebellion.

So I refused to attend a scholarship test for a private school – he was devastated, and furious. I had hollering arguments with him about politics and the rights of women. There were screaming defences of my mother – he famously threw me down the stairs after one of these rows. My loud and embarrassing pulling him out of betting shops – I would grab his coat and pull with a ferocious rage for the heartache it wreaked upon my Mama; he was a gambling addict for some years. My refusal to wear 'our clothes' and observe religious rules, and then my refusal to have an arranged marriage and my ultimate rebellion in marrying a Jewish man – he sobbed, and was disowned by some members of his family; but for me this was a moment I saw the white flag move from half mast to full mast; that day, in some ways he gave up. I was 23 years old. Something died for something else to be reborn. I'm still not sure what.

So this was a revolutionary relationship for both of us. He escaped something, and so have I. We both moved from being victims and survivors of abuse to creating conditions for recovery and restoration.

Most essentially and most powerfully my beautiful Dada accidentally schooled me in the power of forgiveness as the art of compassionate mercy – of self-forgiveness and the forgiveness of others as one whole action of mercy and two necessary halves of forgiveness. Mirabi Starr in her book *Wild Mercy* says this:

The Arabic word *rahim*, found in the opening lines of the Quran and repeated many times a day in the salat [daily prayers] means 'compassion'. *Rahim* is also the word for 'womb'. Forgiveness is the very face of the divine feminine. Each time we allow mercy to enter the shattered spaces of our hearts, we participate in the divine nature. To forgive ourselves is to forge a contract with the divine mother.

Together, Dada and I embodied this divine contract – forgiveness of the most debilitating of hurts both received and dealt – this compassion is a womb, and it can birth unimaginable change. He showed me that through mercy, human beings can unlearn addiction, violence and harm without 'therapy' and with ceremony, ritual, spiritual surrender and commitment to *Rahim*.

At the very deepest levels of soul and collective consciousness, I think my relationship with Dada was about experiencing the kind of forgiveness that heals the harm. I remember the moment I wanted to forgive him. I was 28 years old with flu, and Zahra, my second-born baby, about nine months old at the time, had the same flu. Andy, my then husband, was away. Dada came to stay. He carried Zahra all night so that I could sleep. I remember waking during the night and hearing his footsteps move past my door. Up and down the corridor he walked, consoling his poorly grandchild. When I woke in the morning in his exhausted eyes I saw the mirror of our love. He was exhausted with trying 'to make it right'. I wanted to forgive my Dada because I loved him and because he loved me. A few months later I discovered EFT – Emotional Freedom Technique and other trauma healing modalities – and began the work of integrating the memories of the abuses.

Last year after feeling swallowed whole by the combined heartbreak of the mass dying of our

ecosystems and the leaving of a great love, I read Stephen Levine's book *A Year to Live a Year to Love*, in which he asks, 'If you were told you were forgiven for everything you have ever done, what is it in the heart that rejects that self-mercy?'. In that question I was able to see what I was 'suffering' - the substance of the 'cross' I am carrying - what I haven't forgiven myself for and what I am not forgiving in the 'other'. This suffering is the calcified pain, the substance that remains of the traumas experienced, and the shame and guilt of how I have hurt others. These feelings are active particles that can calcify, toxicate and create 'sore spots' and dams in our physical, emotional, energetic and spiritual body. They can start to collect like frozen ice cubes in our waters - and we are mostly water. It's ice that's in service to holding the toxicity/the pain at bay. These particles are the unspent and unexpressed grief of those moments where we lost something. They are our streams of tears that didn't get to flow. Quite possibly, those ice cubes have compacted and created whole frozen rivers, seas and oceans. They murk up our rivers because they often leak the dark matter as they float around; they make it hard for life to breathe and flourish.

Our waters, as is so in the earth (the oceans can be considered to be the earth's lungs), are the breath of life - the deep root of life; originally, all life came from water, so they relate deeply to our air energy and thus our lung energy. In grief, there is massive activation of our water body. Our lungs move differently, trying to expel this grief. Our breath becomes laboured and raw. There is pain in our chests. There's the heaving of the sobs. There's a rebirth to feel the contractions of. There's an enormous opportunity to move and melt these frozen parts that carried our frozen needs, to reclaim the luminescence of our inner rivers and streams so that they may become liquid light once more able to act as the essential womb of light - Rahim.

Last year I was wondering, well if like our earth, I had seven seas and five oceans - I reckon I have at least one ocean and three seas to cry. Part of me now wants to leave my life, to become one of the Mayan Shaman women, known as 'the

sensitive women' who feel and weep for the world. I think these last two years, as his physical body, through Parkinsons, started to release its grip on life, I saw Dada enter this kind of weeping.

Julian of Norwich, in her making of the mantra 'All will be well and all will be well and every kind of thing shall be well', dismissed the idea of sin as a concept; 'I believe sin has no substance', she said. Under the religions of patriarchal culture we are fashioned as sinners, and sin as something we carry indelibly where the only way through this 'hell hole' and towards everlasting paradise is to obediently observe and commit to the 'word' of God. But what if sin is just the casing of forgiveness? I'm thinking of sin as harm. Julian asked us to replace the idea of sin with love. If we are beings of liquid light - love - where there are the shells of sin, there is forgiveness to be released from inside it - these are the pearls from the oyster that add their hue of light to our ocean floors. This is what being in the forgiveness project that is my Dada and me is teaching me.

So then I know, in Dada's 'walking on' (this is how the Lakota say it), he has given me a glorious treasure map, and the journey laid out is the grief. So then how to grieve this amazing teacher, motherist, father and my biggest cheerleader in ways of Co-Liberation that honour his soul and our relationship?

I have received many songs, poems, stories, flowers, cards and texts. For every thought and wish I'm very grateful, and I am also enraged by the way this Western whiteness culture does and doesn't do grief. The common theme - are words offered remotely? There's a range even here. The short texts with a sweet message of acknowledgement. The longer message or song or poem intended to soothe with very sweet words. The message that says, 'How are you?'. Oh hallelujah - there's possibility for connection! The message that says 'I'm here if you need to talk' - thank you, dear divine mother - when? When someone dares to call me and, even more courageous and kind, those dear ones who have shown up at the door or given physical 3D time - my knees buckle with relief.

Grief is also about feeling left 'more alone' – especially if you're being left by one of the two people that made you. So grief tending surely is all about being met – in the flesh, voice to voice, and preferably body to body.

I grew up in a non-Western culture and in my culture of origin we have the month of muharram – a yearly 40 days of mourning, where there is a daily offering of prayer, storying, chest beating, singing and eating together. It releases the aggregate grief of the year, and I remember feeling the softness in the bodies of my parents and close family and friends after the month of muharram. In our culture, when someone dies, no matter how loosely you know them, if you are in the same country and it's physically possible, you visit them. You visit because 'the bereaved and the ill are closest to God', so then you too get your chance to experience this thin veil; but you must go in person to ask for the story of the leaving, to ask about last words shared, to hold their bodies and tears, to pray with them and for the soul journey of the lost beloved, to eat with them and feed them, to sing devotional chants and mantras. You have a 40-day window in which there is more to be gained and then also a year. There is also grief and ancestor ceremony every Thursday evening – with spectacular eloquence and just how he had imagined and prayed for his passing: this is when Dada walked on – he was in the middle of the Thursday evening grief and ancestor ritual, and he was calling in the spirit of his Father because it was the twenty-something anniversary of his death.

So as I sit with this treasure map gifted by Dada, and I long for the Co-Liberation of our grief. I need to grieve with you as you've allowed me to do so in reading this, and as my dearly beloveds are doing so every day. Still it's not enough. I want to be clear and say, it's not enough. Not because there is something wrong with me or you, but because we are living in the paradigm of separation.

In Co-Liberating grief we get to remember who we are and what we love – together – where the memories are safer because they are our stories aching to be shared. It reconnects us to reclaim

our interdependence – ahh, through my heaving sobbing chest – my body opens and realises how I depend on you and what I depended on in the person or love I lost. When I grieve with someone, in the mirror of their face blushed with remorse and recognition, I see that I belong to them and to all that we have both lost.

A few nights ago I threw myself into the bows of a young tree and she bent backwards to hold me – and there I was, belonging to her. I so want to belong here with you when my grief climbs to the fever pitch of the feeling of dying over and over. I've also figured out that I need to grieve according to my inner compass rather than any outer scripture. I don't want stages, timelines and gateway analysis – I don't want to intellectualise this grief. I'm weary of how our obsessive readings and writings take us further away from ourselves and each other. In expressing and living out our grief, we become able to be as irrational as love is – it re-wilds us – freeing us from the taming shackles of this power-over culture – instead it holds the kernels of our power-with.

Grief is a portal, a gateway to our love. The suffering of it is a purifying fire that can light us up to experience more expansive, deeper, truer joy. In grief lies that moment where, pinned to your cross, you can look up to the heavens and have a conversation with whoever and whatever, about forgiveness, just as Christ did, so then it's a step towards salvation of the most extraordinary kind. I feel my grief 'saving' me. Saving me from a life un-lived and un-felt. As a great Sufi said, 'We have to die for this love, what a bargain'. This love and its dying and our dying is where we touch the divine – the creator of all. Can you feel it? That place that, as another Sufi put it, is 'out of your mind for God', the place that is ceaselessly desperate for union.

And there is a great dying that we are all part of now, and being present to it is like the being present to the death of our beloveds. If only we felt it that way. Dada was intensely supportive of my work for Extinction Rebellion and in politics, but he refused to accept we are on a path of extinction. He wasn't a 'climate denier'; he cared nothing for the science either way. For

him, every story was a question of – how will this affect my children's sense of well-being? He didn't want me to live in the shadow of any fear – there had been enough. There is something deeply wise in that response for all of us.

Dada was the ultimate motherist. He was all about unconditional generosity. He was in daily active fierce protection and nurturance of his children, his grandchildren and his nephews and nieces. Dada was an inspiration for my work on so many levels; his story and our family story have offered kindling for our Co-Liberation fire. But like I half-said at the beginning of this piece, I don't yet feel able to speak about my and our Co-Liberation in ways that speak directly to the praxis that we have designed.

For now, in wrapping up our time together and because I want to Co-Liberate in and with grief and with Dada, and for all of us as one, this is what I want to say.

Darling dear beloved Dada,

Thirteen thank-you's for Co-Liberating with me so prolifically and passionately. For stepping so bravely on to these foreign shores to cut the chords that have imprisoned us for generations. You remained faithful to the calling. For resourcing the healing of our family and inherited trauma. You prayed hard for this and its happening. For physically crying the ocean that you did so that we could sail upon it towards our freedom. You were exhausted by its relentless tides, but I can see the more beautiful land approaching, Dada. For the sparkle of joy you endeavoured to shower over every conversation. Goodness, the stomach-aching laughter you ignited for your children. For accepting everything I threw back at you and the extra I threw forward. You had the strength to catch the pain. For your daily prayer for redemption – I heard your begging on the ja - namaz (the prayer mat) and for asking for my forgiveness in more than words. You are forgiven everything – like you said, 'No more pain – make new prayers now'. For carrying your grandchildren against your heartbeat the way you did. I've never seen love like it, and I thank God that I saw it and felt it, and that you gifted it to me too.

Dada I was always excited about seeing you, from the times as a young child when I waited for you to come home from work, to the time I drove to see you for your 80th birthday the week before you walked on.... I'm still excited about our meetings. I long for them, and as you walk on, Dada, I'm walking behind you and I have your back.

With love always, your child
xSkeenax

About the contributor



Skeena Rathor is a Kashmiri Sufi ordinary mystic and mother of three young girls. Co-Founder of Extinction Rebellion's Vision and Guardianship Crew, Co-Founder of Compassionate Stroud and Founder of Politics Kitchen. An Independent District Councillor, Brain Body, Heart Intelligence

teacher and trainer, and Early Years and Trauma Specialist. Co-Creator and Founder of the Co-Liberation Project. She can be contacted on coliberation@protonmail.com.