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On New Year's

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

I don't believe in resolutions, never have. I find the idea of resolving to do or undo certain behaviours quite unsettling; as if with each year we are meant to be different people with different habits, different ticks, and different selves. No, I'm for continuity, for engaging with the past if you will. On the eve of this New Year, I will carry forward what is true. Only that.

If I had to count fifteen things that my father taught me (because I could count upwards and onwards forever), these are the things I would count and take with me on to the next year and the many after that.

One: my father taught me never to be scared. While my mother taught me later, just when I needed to know it, that it is alright to be afraid; my father taught me that though circumstance may allow it, insist on it even, that I never need be. He always told me, and in time I began to believe it, that I was a capable and intelligent person and that I could handle whatever was thrown at me.

Two: Papa taught me to wipe my eyes first after crying, then blow my nose. The reverse is totally wrong. One is never to blow their nose first and then wipe their eyes, which is frankly pretty disgusting but beyond the reach of a four year old child.

Three: he taught me and showed me the meaning of sacrifice. I am still learning -- there are miles to go. But by the way he lived his life my father taught me that there are causes larger than ourselves and infinitely more worthy than our own existence. My father could have had an easy, comfortable life. But he didn't choose it, because he believed in something greater than himself.

Four: my father never really got angry with me, but if I did something typically bratty to my younger brother Zulfikar, then I had crossed a line that was unacceptable to my father. I wasn't allowed to fight with my brother or be mean to him in any way. It never mattered how old I was or how trifling the action was. My father taught me that it is my brother and I against the world. He taught me to never let anything get between us.

Five: Papa taught me that you always have a choice. I think of this on a daily basis. The very notion of choice has made difficult decisions empowering and adverse situations surmountable.

Six: he passed his love of history onto me. What a gift. I learnt about Palestine from my father, I learnt about Che Guevara, I learnt about martial law. He taught me to appreciate the journey, to pay attentions to those moments -- so brief -- when everything changes and movements are made

and destinies subjected to the force of the present. When I was little, three or four years old, my father would sit with me into the evenings and talk to me about history. It never occurred to me to just ask him to read me Cinderella. I was awed.

Seven: my father taught me to mimic accents. When I was seven years old I did a mean Margaret Thatcher.

Eight: Papa taught me to take charge. Just because I am a girl never meant I had to sit on the sidelines and wait for instructions. He barely ever dressed me in pink and never told me I couldn't do something.

Nine: he taught me how to swim when I was tiny, before I could even walk properly. By the time summer had passed, I would have forgotten how to swim, so he would re-teach me every year. I must have been five years old before it stuck. He would make me wear bright orange armbands, and secretly let a little more air out each time, then wind up a toy boat for me to follow which would be placed by the edge of the pool. My job was to swim after it. When Zulfikar was three I tried to teach him how to swim, I failed. Papa taught him too.

Ten: my father taught me to be alone and to be strong. From a very young age he prepared me for a life without him. I would hate it when he talked like that and my stomach would feel knotted and my heart would hurt, but he did speak like that because part of teaching me about my family and my history meant telling me that life would be difficult at times and that I would have to learn to live it with dignity and grace, as he did -- he was such a graceful man -- or not live it at all. When I was around ten years old my parents had taken me and my best friend Nora to the Ebla swimming pool in Damascus. We weren't swimming, just having lunch. We were not prepared to swim at all. Just as we had left our table and were heading back to our car, Papa stopped by the swimming pool. 'Fati!' he shouted looking in 'What's this?' I knew better but I stood next to him and peered down. He picked me up and threw me in the pool. We used to do things like that all the time, water fights were our favourite, but that day I wasn't in the mood. I got angry and after I pulled myself out of the water I told Papa that he was never allowed to do that to me again, at least until I was fourteen.

Even though he had been smiling and laughing (he had a khe khe khe kind of laugh, it made you want to laugh too) he lowered his voice and said 'But Fati, what if I'm not alive then?' That made me angrier and I cried and made him promise he'd live till I was 100. When we buried Papa I was fourteen and four months old.

Eleven: he taught me to have a sense of humour. Whenever something makes me laugh I want to share it with him. Every joke and every funny movie makes me miss him even more.

Twelve: Papa taught me to stand up for my beliefs (always root for the underdog was the qualifier, my father didn't raise Republicans). In *To Kill A Mockingbird* Harper Lee had Atticus Finch -- possibly the greatest character in all modern fiction -- tell his child "I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and see it through no matter what'.

Thirteen: he taught me to love Elvis Presley.

Fourteen: how are we at fourteen already?

Fourteen: my father taught me that an education was the greatest thing I could ever give myself. I wasn't crazy about high school, but I adored every moment I spent in college classrooms where I learnt to think critically and developed my sense of self. He was the first person who pointed out that I could write. He encouraged every play I wrote in third grade and every poem I penned in the seventh. He started me on this journey.

Fifteen: to persevere. My father taught me to persevere.