

MY STORY

By: Vineetha Athrey

Can you imagine being slapped with rejection and isolation by your entire peer group for not quite cutting it in a class discussion, while you grieved over your loved one's death?

The year 2007 is burned in my memory as one I will never forget.

As a single child I was conceived after two miscarriages, and the doctors had passed the verdict that I would mostly be the only child for my parents. So I became the apple of my mother's eye; and she became the sister I could never have and a best friend for life. It was a bond of extreme attachment where both of us thought that each would die without the other. At the age of three when I was struck by a nasty stomach infection and couldn't eat a bite without throwing up all over, the doctors had pretty much given up hope that I would even survive. Unreal as it may seem, I survived only because of two things - an 85-year old Ayurvedic practitioner's moss-green potions and my mom's incessant prayers and care, night and day. From then on, she was all I really cared about and clung to for emotional support. So long as I had mom around, I didn't need a soul. She became my shield from the big bad world.

On her part, mom lived her life vicariously through me. Everything she couldn't do, she wanted me to do. She couldn't ever go up on stage to save her life, so she decided that I would be fearless on stage! When I was just over three years old my school organized a dramatics competition and mom pushed me to participate in that and win, and in every other competition that came my way. As I grew older I would sometimes get annoyed when my boy friends joked that they would gladly marry me if it meant that they would get her as the mother-in-law. We were so close that if she went away to my grandmother's place without me, I would call her 10 times a day!

Unhappily, I was not fortunate enough to have her around for long. On an ill-fated day on August 11, 2007 my mother succumbed to cancer. And with that, my life changed forever. Imagine being in the pit of a well, drowning, screaming for help, but knowing that there was no one around, nobody who even knew you were there, let alone pull you up. That's how I felt constantly. When awake, I was listless. When asleep, I would wake up choking from horrible nightmares. On a really good day it only felt traumatic and I would spend the whole day obsessively reconstructing every bit of memory of the time I had spent with mom. On a bad day I felt completely suicidal. With her gone, my home was filled with dead silence.

Sadly, I did not even have a lot of time to grieve. I was studying at that time and had to get back to school in a week. So I did. And initially it was all well. As soon as I went back, friends and fellow classmates poured in, hugged me and told me that they would be there for me forever. I believed them. The state I was in, I could have believed Medusa herself, with her head full of pissed-off snakes hissing away wildly!

We had a major class discussion coming up, and if you walked into the campus at that time you would hear all students sharing anecdotes about how important and intense the upcoming discussion would be. And then came the dreaded day. I still remember that Friday vividly. The topic was whether the Indian media was going overboard with its news coverage. In the backdrop was the news piece where a petty thief in a remote village in North India had been beaten up mercilessly. All the television channels had pounced upon the gory visuals of this story and these looped visuals were being played 24/7. It made the viewer nauseatingly sick. If you are an Indian reading this, you would be shaking your head knowingly; after all that's what is being served to you on a visual platter even today. Anyway, all of us had prepared well and had rehearsed our strong points several times over. Many of us had stayed up the previous night. My team had researched, debated and prepared the arguments carefully. There could be no room for error. We even knew the turns we were going to take. This was our first 'public

appearance' outside of a classroom. And a good performance would contribute to our grades. The amphitheater on the college campus that was chosen to be the venue had a Roman feel to it. And at 4PM slowly all the students and faculty members began to take seats. The count was about 80. And the Dean went up and announced the start of the discussion.

If you were among those sitting on the steps of that packed space that day you would have felt tension so thick you could touch it with bare hands. Some of the faculty members opened tiny spiral notepads to jot down feedback, adding to our nervousness. One of the girls ran up to a corner and threw up. The first person to start the discussion was my classmate Debohari. He made a persuasive argument against media's intense in-your-face coverage. After this, up went another classmate Ram. Then it was my team's turn to go. We looked at each other nervously. It had been decided that I would go up and open our team's stance on the issue. "No problem", I told myself, "I have practiced this several times." But there's a ton of difference between practicing in the privacy of your room while your roomies dole out kind encouragement, and standing right in the middle of a large amphitheater with 80 pair of eyes fixed on you, all set to offer, not kind encouragement but sharp critique at the first chance!

I took a deep breath and forced myself to not think about how they would react, what they would say, whether they would like me, and so on. Struggling to stay focused, I pulled my never-to-fail technique - start by looking at a point in the horizon. There was pin drop silence. I heard, "Vineetha, your time starts now". Right then, the unthinkable happened. Just as I was about to start, I saw mom's face, and had an absolutely unwarranted thought - how would she react if she saw me up on a stage, ready to address a crowd of 80? Instantly, I was overcome by very strong guttural emotions and the desperation with which I had been missing her came back gushing. Till date I can't explain what precisely happened after that. But I froze! *I felt stuck!!* I forgot the topic, my research and all the points with which I was going to beat my opponent and wow the audience! I panicked and thought hard. Nothing. Crap! I had a discussion to do! But not

even a word came to my mind. It was as though the silence had followed me from my home to that stage.

I could hear the audience murmur. Someone from my team prompted me impatiently, "Vineetha! Just start", "Don't stand and stare. Start NOW!" When I looked at this girl all I saw was a frown, and a few sniggers – doubtless, from the other teams. I threw a glance at Debohari. But all I could remember was how flawless his speech had been minutes ago and how I was standing on the same spot making a public spectacle of myself, a horrible example of how not to be at a group discussion.

By then the audience was fidgeting and the murmurs got louder. I was too scared to look at my team. When I did, I saw DISAPPROVAL written all over their faces. If you had been sitting among the audience that evening and if you had looked at me, I mean really looked, you would have even seen tears that I was struggling to control. But to the cold metal gavel that made a loud CLANG indicating that my time was up, it made no difference.

Years later, I was to understand that there is a certain 'Zone of Operation' – the space of supreme creativity and inspiration – from where you could deliver your best performance in every area of life. When I understood that, I was to look back at this moment as one where I was completely outside of that zone. But on that fateful Friday, everything was a blur. There was no concept of creativity or inspiration; only, bad performance.

But the worst was not yet over. Later that evening, one of the girls came up to me just as I entered the hostel, and screamed, "You ruined it! You killed everyone's chances. You may have lost your mom and all that, but it's really not cool to go dumb in a discussion." I couldn't believe she said that. Some of the other girls rushed over and pulled her away. It's been over six years hence, but even now when I think about that evening her last words still ring aloud in my ears. They were – "Next time do everyone a favor. Just don't show up for these group activities if you can't handle it". My close friend

Pooja Gautam nearly slapped her. There was a fight. But I remember no details after that. I was too shaken to even eat that night.

After that incident, it became an unspoken rule among my classmates to leave me out of all activities. I became a social outcast on the campus. It shattered the trust I had placed in them. Weren't they the same people who had promised to be there for me forever? One evening I heard some girls tell a new joiner that I was this person who froze in the middle of an important class discussion. I was too *emotional*. I would be a *liability* in group activities. I couldn't figure out if this was callousness or self-preservation or both on their part. My best friends Pooja Gautam and Snigdha Poonam told me to stay away from everyone and protected me constantly. "But don't we all fail sometimes. I had lost my mom 10 days prior to that incident, dammit! Does that not matter at all?" I asked rather innocently. Snigdha just hugged me, an incredibly sad look in her eyes.

It was thanks only to these two closest friends that I survived that year, socially speaking. I realized that my mother's persistent rooting for me had instilled in me a sense of entitlement to two things: Love and Success. I had assumed that I will always be a star performer everywhere and that everyone will love me. But now, what followed this event shook that assumption up massively. More importantly, I saw what losing control of myself and my emotions could do - *it could render me speechless!* And I felt absolutely unprepared to deal with that. I was so scared and scarred from the entire experience that subconsciously, I decided to bury my emotions completely from that point on! It was after all emotions that had crippled me on stage. I had done theater and performing arts all my life so I knew it couldn't have been stage fright. But when thoughts about my mother had erupted on my mind I had lost control completely. So subconsciously I made a choice that my emotions will never, ever ground me again; even if it meant going about life robotically. This was a powerful lesson, one I wasn't going to forget. *Ever.*

So I spent the next two years projecting to the world that everything was perfect in my life. It helped that we live in a world where most

connections are only functional, so people bought into my charm while I got busy chasing my career. These demons didn't dent my professional life. I had a dream job, one that anybody would kill for, so the fact that I was on an 'emotional mute' personally speaking didn't matter to anyone. Not letting my emotional side even so much as peep out gave me a great sense of control. But deep down, I was scared to death! Every moment my biggest worry was to not tumble out of this false sense of control. I didn't know at that time that what I needed was not control, but a sense of oneness with my purpose and the creative source. But I didn't know it back then, so I was doing it all wrong, and I was going about it in an unbelievably stupid way.

In order to protect myself from judgment and humiliation in the future, I gave myself no chance to imagine vividly, feel deeply and live truly, because *true living* meant, not living with this false sense of control but living from the zone of creativity, hope and life force. Instead, my life became all about avoiding pain and humiliation. If I saw random strangers with their parents I felt as though someone had stabbed me. For a while I completely stopped going out because I couldn't take the crazy amount of happiness that the world had.

I shudder to think where I would be if I had continued being that way for long. But while I was in this mess, barely 5 miles away from my home lived this beautiful girl Malli who I had met at my theater group a few years ago. I hadn't even seen her in years and barely recognized her when I bumped into her at a coffee shop. Malli is so emotionally astute that her first question to me was if I was OK. I flashed a flaky, plastic, over-bright smile I had practiced and perfected over the years. But then, we started talking. She knew that I had lost my mother rather suddenly and was perceptive enough to figure out that something wasn't fine with me. So she shared with me, a mere acquaintance at that time whom she hadn't even seen in years, all the *skeletons from her cupboard* - of how she had lost her father very unexpectedly and had spent years not coming into terms with it and never living completely.

Malli looked me in the eye and said, "Vineetha, don't get into that trap. Life is too short and too precious to not live it all out fully. I have known you for many years so I can see one thing for sure - you have lost your zing. Get it back, *whatever it takes.*" We talked a lot that night. An hour-long coffee meeting stretched into nearly five hours. But by the end of it, something was beginning to crack open within me. My life force was coming back. The truth was beginning to sink in. I had seen death at close quarters, and it had taken away my mother, who had been my lifeline. It could come back and take me away any day. When that happened, what would be the three things that would really matter? I figured that they would be -

1. Was I happy?
2. Did I live with passion and creativity?
3. Did I create value?

Questions are a source of great power, and these opened me up to the fact that living meant creating, contributing, and building a legacy you would be proud to leave behind. To do all of that, I had to start really caring. And I couldn't possibly care truly until I opened myself up to others; until I gave up being worried about how I was 'performing' and how I was 'being judged', and reached out to others with genuine empathy. For that I had to put myself out there, and not stay hidden inside a self-made bubble. Was I going to avoid conflict, confrontation, and challenges just to retain a false sense of control or was I going to find my special place in the world? Life was short and it could all end in a flash. So why had I locked myself up in a closet shit scared? As Steve Jobs had said, I was naked anyway.

When I was with my mother in the hospital one evening, a few weeks before she passed away, she had said something that hit home now - "Treasuring and respecting life means treasuring and respecting each moment. Life after all is a string of such moments. The future is a dream. Even the most amazing, life-changing things do not happen in some distant future. They happen NOW"

So when my life ends, would I have created something meaningful? Would I have lived a true, complete, and a kick-ass life? Until then, for over 15 years I had read and tried a lot about psychology, spirituality and self-help, but all of it from a curious, intellectual standpoint. What followed this realization was years of deeper understanding and study of various schools of spirituality. And when I found that none of them gelled well with my demanding, fast-paced lifestyle I took it upon myself to design something practical that fits into my daily life smoothly. In other words, that's when I came up with **In The Zone Spirituality (ITZS)™** - the concept of staying **In The Zone, All The Time™**. If life as I knew it could end without warning, then having high-quality moments - moments when I am creating something, when I am being truly happy and spreading that joy to everyone around, when I am In The Zone - cannot be a matter of a few instances left purely up to chance. It was out of this purely selfish need that In The Zone Spirituality™ was born.

Once I found myself deeply committed to this kind of life where passion, creativity and happiness would be the center of my life I automatically began to experience profound changes in me and in all of my relationships. Most of all, I was no longer blindly matching up to the preconceived expectations of other people and society at large, hoping I won't falter, and if I did, that people won't ridicule me again. Committing myself to living fully enabled me to identify the crippling influences that stopped me from living such a life, and how I could neutralize their influence (you will read more about these techniques in the subsequent chapters). I found the right people and resources to make this a reality. This time my life changed irrevocably *again*. But it was like a terminally ill patient first slipping into near-death and then by some miracle recovering rapidly. This change and the results it brought about were swift. Buoyed by these, I kept sharing these ideas, concepts and techniques with friends and a few select clients that I decided to take on. And much to my joy, I saw their lives transform in beautiful ways too.

However, I hadn't imagined writing a book and reaching out to a wider audience. Which is strange because writing and speaking are my biggest forte, but somehow this idea hadn't even crossed my mind until last December, when I visited the picturesque Coorg to attend a spiritual retreat hosted by His Holiness The Dalai Lama. And it came from an unexpected, even a bit unintelligible, source. On the very first day of the retreat I found myself sitting next to a French nun. We started chatting and I asked her as to what brought her to Tibetan Buddhism. After all, this is known to be - might I add, from my very limited knowledge - rather strict and rigorous, and even requires a monastic life at some point. So meeting someone who had chosen this voluntarily made me very interested in her story. I told her about my journey as well, starting from my mother's death and how that entire year had panned out, to where I was now. I shared the fears I had battled (and some that I'm still battling!), my hope and dreams for the future, what had brought about this change in perspective and how I had retained this through the years with the help of these techniques.

Just as I was finishing she interrupted me with a question that both surprised and shocked me - "When so much has happened in your life, *why* are you still so happy?" I was sure I hadn't heard her right. She repeated - "I mean, why are you happy, how *can* you be happy, even after going through something so sad? If you hadn't told me your story I would have never guessed that you could have been through rough times at all." It struck me that she believed that if you have gone through rough experiences, you *simply cannot* be happy. This shocked me! I asked her what had stopped *her* from being happy. Suddenly, her eyes welled up and she burst out into tears. And the sorrowful story of her life came tumbling out. A few years ago she had lost her five-year old son. Soon after, her husband had walked out on her. And her life had never been the same ever since. She had wandered through many spiritual roads before meeting The Dalai Lama. One look at him, and she had chosen to follow his path. Even after embracing this she often felt tired of looking for meaning and motivation, and was secretly worried that there might be no way out. Believing that maybe she should commit herself more to

spirituality in order for it to work in her life, she had completely given up secular life a few years ago and had become a nun.

Listening to my story, she said that the passion with which I had told her about In The Zone Spirituality™, it had opened her up to something that had only remained a possibility all this while - staying In The Zone, All The Time™. I will never forget the way she held my hands, or her earnestness while I shared my life lessons with her. We parted ways and I never thought I would see her again. But the following day, she searched and sought me out amidst 30,000 people! This time her transformation was very sharply evident. She told me that after our chat, she *felt* like a different person. She felt that what I had shared with her had given her, her life back. She said that until that point she had grown comfortable with being a victim and all the spiritual techniques she was using had helped her make peace with this victim-hood. Now, for the first time, she felt that she had a choice, a voice and real responsibility. That she herself could be the change agent in her life. She had spoken to her husband after four years of not even seeing him, and was looking forward to going back to France to restart a life she had left behind! She was excited to tap into her instincts and allow *them* (and not her fears) to guide her, and to live with imagination, rather than be crippled by negative emotions or the trap of rationality. She felt a great new sense of direction, a new purpose that came from the very core of her personality, and it had filled her with bursting enthusiasm. She wasn't scared or without hope any more. Through all of this, both of us cried unabashedly. It will remain my greatest regret that in all of this excitement I didn't even ask what her name was! On the first day she had mentioned it, but my lack of familiarity with French names had made it impossible for it to really register. Or perhaps, this was life's way of telling me that names and faces are not important; messages and stories are. Especially since her parting message was (she said it was a request) for me to go out and share all of my theories and techniques with as many people as possible. "God alone knows how many people are suffering across the world because they don't know a thing about this concept of staying in the zone, all the time. I wasted so many years knocking on the wrong doors, and in

being trapped in logic and emotions, completely ignoring my deeper instincts and imagination. If you could put in some effort to take these concepts to people, you would be changing millions of lives – people who are stuck in bad jobs, unhealthy relationships and uninspired lives because they don't know how to get out of them or are too scared to try. Changing their lives is your mission”, these were her words.

I came back to my home very, very moved. I will never forget her face or the sincerity with which she spoke. As I dwelled more upon this idea, and spoke to a few friends, it became clear to me that this indeed must be done. But there was a hitch! I had a great career going as a television journalist and when I announced my decision, many people thought I had gone crazy! But I knew in my heart that this had to be done. It was the true extension of who I am at the core, and helping other people transform their lives, become happy and achieve their highest selves gave me my true purpose. Luckily, I met all the right people, found access to all the right resources that made this a reality. Paulo Coelho might be more right than I had thought. If you really want something badly, then the entire universe indeed conspires to help you get it.

So that's my story. I sincerely hope that you will find the energy and zing to stay In The Zone, All The Time™ too. And I hope that reading this book and knowing my story will make a difference in speeding up the process. See you on the other side. Godspeed!

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