

The bird is set free

by Sunanda Gopal



I got married at the age of 24 and came to US. In my growing up years in the village, even though my family was poor, it was a loving and caring environment. I grew up like a free bird, expressing my opinions, thriving in studies and extracurricular activities like debate, drama, essay writing etc. My primary education was in my native language (Kannada) medium and I studied English as a second language. Since I was good in studies, picking up English in terms of spelling, grammar, writing essays was easy, but there was no need to talk in English. I hardly spoke in English even while studying undergraduate in engineering college.

After I came to US, I got admission at Iowa State University for master's program in computer engineering. I got teaching assistant job as Math instructor for undergraduate students. I could teach since teaching Math does not need whole lot of talking in English plus I knew the subject matter and concept well. But as a master's student I was very quiet and hardly spoke. Since I had to repeat several times I hesitated to ask questions since I thought professors would not understand my accent and feared my questions were stupid. The same hesitation continued in the work place, at stores and wherever I had to communicate with local people. However, I was fine communicating with other Indians or other foreigners like me. I am sad to say I felt very inferior and not in my own skin outside my familiar circle of people. When it came to doing the actual work at office, I was very competent and did great even though I did not talk much or could not express my opinions.

Eventually this feeling of not being my true self hit me hard and I realized that I have lost so much by staying in a foreign land. I felt that I compromised freedom of expression for economic prosperity in this country, better infrastructure, better ability to

balance career and family etc. Even though I gained a lot by staying here, I lost substantially in terms of living far away from parents, siblings, relatives. Especially in 80s and early 90s, telecommunication with India was expensive and hard.

I have realized now that my true strength is within and nobody or place can take that away from me. I am confident and happy being where I am. This is my home. I feel free to express my opinions. Moving to a new place, new country, and new culture is a life time experience. If we do not explore, we do not get to experience new things in life. After all, life is a series of experiences. We can be happy where we are and true happiness is within each of us.