

Say Om

By Divya Manikandan

The apartment where my mother and I lived when I was six had a doorbell chime very different from the one most people are accustomed to. Unlike the familiar buzz or shrill “ding-dong,” the previous tenants of our flat in the city of Hyderabad, India had programmed the *Gayatri Mantra* – the holiest Hindu Vedic chant – to play every time a guest arrived at our door. As an embarrassed six-year-old who did not want her friends to hear this song every time they visited, I spent many hours wondering why this high-pitched prayer had been made the background score of my childhood. It wasn’t until nearly two decades later that I would discover the reason.

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“Be careful in there. He has a lot of anxiety about this one.” That was the parting instruction I was given by the nurse practitioner before the shot was ordered and I was sent into the room to administer it. I was covering for the medical assistant responsible for the patient’s intake during his lunch break. I had been assigned to women’s health for the day and had in the last several minutes hurried over to pediatrics to fulfill the need for an HPV vaccine.

After a quick read-through of the most recent chart note, I learned that our patient “Jay” had high-functioning autism. The notes indicated he was a soft-spoken fifteen-year-old who had had some trouble making friends in school, but who loved math and science. Physically, he was a healthy teenager but struggled with severe anxiety, particularly regarding needles and medical offices. As I prepared the shot in the lab, I went over a few game plans in my head. Patients around Jay’s age were liminal in many ways – old enough to be reasoned with, but still children, not responsible for their own bodies and governed by strong emotions and phobias that deserved acknowledgment. How was I going to approach this? I could try reasoning it out, and treat Jay much like I would an adult, giving him the rundown of every step from cleaning the muscle with the prep pad to the spiel on what he could expect after the shot.

Alternatively, I could recount my own experiences. How, even with my noodle-thin arms, I had felt barely anything while receiving this very vaccination a few years ago but had some soreness later that night. I hoped my honesty with that last bit might build trust. Another option would be to distract him, ask him about his favorite movie or have him count down from one hundred in intervals of three. I could also team up with the parent. Perhaps they had some ideas based on what had worked for them before. Brimming with plans A through D, I walked into the room, believing that once I saw Jay and spoke to him I would somehow know what to do.

When I pushed the door open, however, I was stunned to find that my patient and his mother were both Indian. While their identity had nothing to do with the vaccine, it threw me off a

little. The clinic where I was an MA was a faith-based, rather conservative place of medical practice. The care followed the directives of the Catholic Church. I was the only person of color on the staff, and often the only non-Catholic person in any employee or patient room I walked into. Most of our patients were White, some African American or Hispanic, but never before had I encountered someone South Asian in our office. When Jay's mother opened her mouth, she sounded exactly like mine — a feature that warmed my heart. Her accent revealed she was not raised in the United States. She was *from* India, much like I was. I was surprised she and her son found themselves in a small, suburban, openly Catholic clinic rather than in the larger health systems I knew our Indian immigrant community often preferred. That said, however, I also knew there were several South Indian communities that were Christian by faith and chose not to think too much of it. Instead, I embraced the rare opportunity to serve someone who came from *home*.

“Hi. I’m “Reema” and this is Jay,” the mother said politely. “He has a little anxiety about this vaccine. But we are going to get through it together. Right Jay?” Jay had found a spot on the ground and nodded to it. “You’re very brave Jay,” I replied with a smile and tried to search my patient’s face for some indication of how he felt. Yet, whatever was going on in his mind, he kept tucked away for himself.

At that moment, watching him, I remembered my own childhood, filled with unique anxieties, and one where physical force had been the only approach used to immunize me. I remembered vividly the nights I would lay awake, even as a young girl, playing the future needle in my mind, catastrophizing every vaccine appointment before it even happened. Instead of busying myself with putting together all my supplies, I felt pulled to talk to Jay the way I wish I had been spoken to as a young person.

I pulled the rolling stool closer to him and sat on it, bringing my eye level to his. “Jay, I was eighteen when I got my first HPV shot. I had just moved here, to a new country, from India, by myself. I was enrolled in a college where I knew no one. My university told me I should probably get this vaccine. They said it would prevent cancer and gave me this whole lecture on public health, but ultimately they told me I was an adult and I had to make the choice. Vaccine or no vaccine.”

Jay looked up at me shyly. “So anyway, I made the appointment to get the shot but on the morning of, everything in my body begged me not to go. I was so scared it would hurt and I would be all alone with no hand to hold. I didn’t want to cry and embarrass myself but I was an adult. I had no parents around to tell me what to do. I had to make a decision. Would I let my fear be bigger than the choice to do something good for my body? This HPV shot you are here for was actually the first grown-up, brave thing I ever did for myself.”

Jay looked at his mother who then looked back at me.

“How would you prefer we do this?” I asked. “I can explain everything I do as I do it, or you can just look away and I don’t tell you what’s coming.”

“The first one sounds good,” said Jay softly after a pause.

“You’re so brave Jay,” his mother said, clutching his hand. “Remember what we talked about at home, *na*? When your heart beats too fast, just keep chanting.”

I smiled. If my grandmother were here, that is exactly what she would ask me to do too. I put on a fresh pair of gloves and pushed Jay’s sleeve past his shoulder. “I’m going to use a small alcohol pad to clean your muscle. It will just feel cold. No pain. ”

Jay began breathing heavily and winced at my touch and pulled his arm away. He began slowly rocking back and forth while he whimpered. His mother wrapped his arms around him and held him steady. “Does it hurt?” I asked. He shook his head.

His mother gently directed his chin away from me and looked into her son's eyes. “*Om Bbur Bhuva Swaha. Tat Savitur Varenyam. Bhargo Devasya Deemahi. Deeyo yo nah prachodaaya,*” she sang quietly but surely. Behind my mask, my lips parted in surprise. Jay’s mother was reciting the Gayatri Mantra. Eight thousand one hundred and twenty-two miles away from home, away from that old apartment where I was six years old, now in a small, suburban Michigan Catholic oasis, an ancient Hindu hymn had found its way back to me.

She went for another round and this time Jay murmured the words with her. She looked up at me, mid-chant, and beckoned with her eyes that I should move forward with the shot soon. I nodded and as I brought the needle over and stabilized Jay’s arm and upper body, I joined them on their third round. The words came back to me as though they had never left my six-year-old mind.

But when I said them that day, I no longer did so with embarrassment. That was the day I discovered the power of my old doorbell. *Om Bbur Bhuva Swaha.* O unmanifest, the absolute, the divine across worlds material, spiritual and celestial. *Tat Savitur Varenyam.* That revered, Holy Sun, most luminous. *Bhargo Devasya Deemahi.* We meditate on your radiance. *Deeyo yo nah prachodaaya.* Guide and enlighten our intellect and consciousness. Inspire us with your divinity.

Divya Manikandan is a graduate of the University of Michigan, where she studied Health and English. She hopes to go to medical school one day and keep writing about the world around her. Her work has been published in the Lookout Journal, Earth Island Journal, the Scarlet Leaf Review, Off Assignment, Auxocardia and others.

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