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***Radical feminist empathy: Reflections on our life-stories, our right to education,
to staying the course***

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Our stories, and especially those of others close to us can inform, impinge on, and impact choices we make on our own trajectories in life. Our reflections on our stories helps us to bridge divides, speak to difference, and to inspire others. Our stories, in other words also speak to the humanity we share. Stories of our own experiences can move us to empathy, and also to act. In sharing my own story and how I have reflected on that story I believe that I bring today a radical feminist empathy, defined as empathy I can put to work, from a feminist perspective, to both my research interests, and to students I teach.

My mother's story, her early death at 45, and my own story and subsequent life choices are intertwined. She had been a doctor in British India, graduating from medical school in the eastern Indian city of Kolkata with high honors in 1941. Decades after her demise I questioned what else, besides a stroke, could explain her early death. That question arose from an early memory, of her pale and despairing face, shortly before she died. This image remained seared into my memory. Even then, young as I was, I felt that she was a woman broken in spirit, and then in body. Now, teaching in the Women's and Gender Studies Program at Virginia Tech, this became for me a feminist question, one informed by what I knew of the constraints women faced, globally, to getting an education at all, leave alone educational achievement. What was my mother's story? I knew she was a doctor, but nothing more. I know today that too many women and their lives go unheard, unvoiced. But much would happen in my life before I would get to tell her story.

In college, now in my late teens, my paternal family felt I was at risk of going off the rails without a mother's guidance, and I was pressured to marry. This despite the fact that I was an excellent student, through high school and in college! I completed college, but any further educational dreams were effectively ended when I married. However, twelve years, and a daughter later I would leave that first marriage, alert to what I had intuited earlier about my

mother's death that a broken spirit can kill as effectively as a stroke. Determined to give myself another chance, I arrived at the University of Virginia in the United States for graduate studies. I would remarry, but persist in completing my goals, against many odds, including financial hardship, poor health, and eventually a second divorce. Where tradition and culture had defined my place as a woman, I have chosen to define that place for myself.

My first act of radical feminist empathy was to research my mother's story, then to tell it. In old photographs, archival material, family anecdotes, and historical scholarship on women in medicine in British India, I sought to give context to my mother's life, aspirations, struggles and achievement. I would publish this work in a reputed American journal in 2016. The cover of the issue features my mother's 1941 medical school graduation photograph. She sits, in graduation robes, the sole woman with thirteen men. Her story is now read around the world. I gave her voice.

My mother's story, and my own struggles, would inspire my subsequent research. My parents, despite their financial constraints, had afforded me an excellent education in India, especially through high school. I now asked, critically aware of my own educational privilege, what of other women and girls, even in the 21st century, who have to struggle, for lack of money, as well as against traditional constraints to get an education? One research initiative, based on ethnographic inquiry among poor Muslim women in Kolkata, India, found economic, religious, and cultural obstacles to even literacy, despite India's Constitutional requirements and laws that all children be educated through age fourteen. I would publish iterations of this work most recently in 2016 and again in 2017. Again, translating radical feminist empathy into action, I gave my research participants, Muslim women, voice in my writing, in "educational histories" where they shared the difficult circumstances of their lives, their struggles, but also how some had prevailed and even acquired college degrees.

In a recent research project I inquired into the Asian immigrant experience in the United States, and the economic, cultural and traditional constraints to higher education for female Asian immigrants or their Asian American daughters (published 2018). Drawing from ethnographic research with community college students this research too, presented the "educational histories," of the women, across Asian diversity and experience in the U.S. In these two projects, the women's stories, separated by nationalities, continents and oceans, cultures and

religions, have, remarkably, much that is common. They speak to financial hardship, to family responsibilities that require time away from school, to cultural and gendered constraints to the women's aspirations to an education. However, they are also stories of personal motivation, of perseverance and resilience, and sometimes, of achievement. A radical feminist empathy gives voice in my published work and in conference presentations to the women's "educational histories." Even as we aspire, our circumstances are often not of our choosing. The stories I have told, my mother's, the Indian Muslim women, poorer Asian American women in community college in the United States, speak to dreams, to struggle, and to perseverance.

Teaching too for me is activism, within a feminist politics which critiques gender inequity wherever this is found. I teach to inspire and to affirm, across the spectrum of 'gender', so that my students can learn, grow as persons, change themselves but also work for change. I share my stories with students, my own, my mother's, the women I met during my research projects. In my pedagogy, I assign independently-researched papers, or open-ended response papers, where I encourage students to give voice to their experiences, to share their stories, to not hesitate to use that first person pronoun "I." We learn, I tell them, not only with our minds, but also with our hearts. Our lives, our experiences, must count. Everyone, I tell them, no matter how young, has a story to tell and to share.

I conclude with a student's story. A few years ago an Asian American female student, a recent immigrant to the U.S., confided in me about domestic violence at home. She had just been accepted to medical school, and would not be able to afford it if her parents divorced. I listened, and then gave her a list of phone numbers, including those of lawyers she could call. She returned to class after missing two weeks, and told me that she had, armed with the numbers, asked her father to back down. He did, and she wrote to me from medical school inviting me to her induction ceremony. She offered to be my doctor one day.

Here was my mother's story, and my own, a feminist radical empathy come full circle for one young woman, my student, and her dreams of further education.