

Prema with one of her students

Dispeller of darkness

I know God will not give me anything I can't handle. I just wish that He didn't trust me so much," said Mother Teresa. I am sure that is what went through Prema's mind as she stood surveying her class of wild and unruly students in a Columbia county in the US. A special educator with over 20 years of teaching experience back home in Bangalore, Prema Narayan took up a lucrative offer to teach in the US in 2005, primarily for monetary reasons. Most of us have known people among friends and relatives who have attempted the same, but have come back at the first

A SPECIAL EDUCATOR
DISPATCHED TO A PUBLIC
SCHOOL IN THE US,
DESCRIBES HOW SHE
TRANSFORMED THE UNRULY
STUDENTS THROUGH LOVE
AND PATIENCE

by Purnima Coontoor

opportunity, not having been able to withstand the pressures of teaching the students of a public school in the US.

Where others failed, Prema triumphed. Back during a summer break in Bangalore, Prema's eyes are serene even as she recalls her mind-numbing experiences as special educator in an alien land, for she has made peace with the situation, the students and with herself. Her exposure to a culture vastly different from hers has only strengthened her faith in God, in karma, in the values of 'shrad-dha' and 'saburi'— the lodestones of faith and patience. It also reinforced her faith

in spiritual pursuit as espoused by Sai Baba, and in the power of love and compassion. Prema has truly converted adversity into a life-transforming experience.

The initial days

I was very happy when I was one of 80 from Bangalore selected to teach in a high school in America. The pay was very good, and I was quite looking forward to a different experience as I landed in South Carolina on my mission. We were exposed to an orientation class for 10 days, where we were encouraged to wear Indian clothes to school and speak about our culture. I prepared very hard for my class, as they were not a regular bunch but students with learning disabilities that I would be teaching. These students are not required to give exams but are graded on their performance in class. I was asked to take up maths, and I later found out that it was their most hated subject.

No orientation, however, could have prepared me for what was in store. My very first experience in an American class made it very clear that our value systems are different. In India, a guru is given the status of God, but over there, it is exactly the opposite. At the orientation, we were told that teachers were supposed to stand at the classroom entrance and welcome each student by greeting 'Good morning sir/madam.' The first day, nobody wished me back – in fact, I heard one of them mutter 'Good morning, bitch.' The sight of this all-black class of 31 students was scary – not because they were black but because of their attitude, and they were just 16-19-year-olds! The first day, they did not allow me to teach at all. They had no books or pencils with them – they made paper balls out of the worksheets I had prepared for them, and threw it at me. They called me all kinds of things – I have never heard such profanity in my life. I felt like crying, but somehow did not let my feelings show. After school that day, all of us Indian

teachers (six of us) wept and cursed our fate at being forced into this situation by our families.

That was more or less the pattern in each class every day – students walked in and created a ruckus by not settling down. They easily got into fights, pulled each other's hair and slapped each other. Just to create confusion they would pull the fire alarm so that a fire drill happened. They meddled with the overhead projector and other equipment, to force me to write a referral (a complaint to the principal). They wanted to be suspended from class for a day or two, or sent into detention where they could spend the entire day watching TV.

They often called me a beggar, because they assumed (and rightly) that I had come to their country only for the sake of money. They would call me mean, cheap, and a stripper and asked me to get back to my dirty country. Sometimes they would come with firearms to class, and threatened to blow me up! If they were allowed to use the computer, the only sites they would visit were the porno sites or 'gang' sites. I later learnt that they belonged to gangs and indulged in criminal activities because they could make quick money that way. When I asked them, they would say, "You have come here for money, right? Similarly, if I work for a gang I make 1000 dollars in one hour." The only things they discussed in class were gangs and sex. They would ask me if I would have sex with them, or ask me to strip. They would get horny if they saw me in a saree, as my midriff would be exposed. A boy even used to masturbate in class. I later discovered that he was a hyperactive kid who was not taking his medicines properly.

Learning process

It was not a question of learning – I had to unlearn all that I had learnt as a teacher back home. I had to change the entire concept of teaching, as I had known it, because these children were

too different from our children. I learnt that these students came from broken families, and worked for a living after school, maybe in a super store like Wal-Mart, or at a gas station. One of my students was a garbage picker. He used to stink so badly that others refused to sit with him, but he did not care. There was nobody at home who asked him to shower. I learnt that they mostly hated their mother as she indulged in relationships with multiple partners, and father because he was into drugs, and they did the same. They changed partners frequently, and often had same-sex relationships. I realised that they were extremely street smart, and did not like or require traditional learning. Their attention spans and comprehension were extremely low and they hated serious work. If I gave them a work sheet with fill in the blanks, I had to tell them the exact page, exact line and exact word and then they would look it up and fill it. They were happy doing mechanical work, like copywriting. These students needed special educators because they had learning disabilities – some were autistic, some hyperactive, some with Down's syndrome. I also learnt that they could not tolerate white American teachers, as they felt persecuted by them.

Once a boy touched his leg to mine intentionally, and I instinctively tapped him on his knee, asking him to behave himself. He immediately called up his mother, and complained that I hit him. The situation went out of control, and I had to finally apologise to the student, as I knew for sure I was the one who would be suspended if the matter was taken to the principal. The students there have all the freedom, but teachers are not supposed to touch them or even talk to them sternly.

I now have great respect for Indian values and culture. We take our families, parents, children, students, teachers, education and society for granted, hardly aware of the fact that we are extremely blessed with brains and cul-

ture. No wonder our people are doing well abroad, for they come from stable backgrounds with good education. It is very unfortunate that the basic fabric of western society is faulty – they have a lot to learn from us.

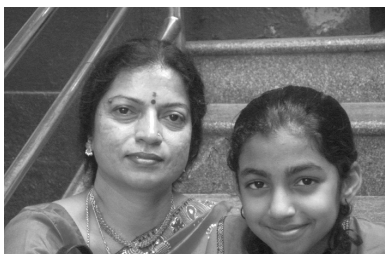
How I coped

I can say without hesitation that I am alive and sane today only because of God's grace. I would leave home every day only after performing pooja and praying to Lord Ganesh, for the safety of all Indian teachers. I would read Sai Satcharita and Gurucharitra and write a letter to Shirdi Sai Baba every day. I told him that since he was the one who brought me here, he was the one who needed to take care of me. It is true, there is nobody there except God whom you can turn to – your family is far away, and you can't just take your bags and leave. Sometimes you cannot even tell your family everything, as they would feel traumatised and ask you to leave immediately. The only thing that kept us going was the cheque we received every fortnight. We felt a sense of achievement as we sent the money across to India, and felt better as our financial problems were solved gradually.

Nevertheless, within the first six months itself, I got through to the students and slowly became friends with them. I realised that these children were starved of love and stability. Therefore, my policy was not to retaliate to anything they said. I allowed them to call me anything they wanted, and did not write a single referral. I realised they would just sit there in detention and waste their time. They used to scream 'Ms. Narayan, Ms. Narayan', and I let them, happy that they were chanting the name of God!

On occasions when they threatened to blow me up the next day, I would be petrified of going to school, but I would resolve to see the image of Sai Baba in each one of them, and that gave me the strength to face any situation. Before they came into class, I would

chant 'Om' loudly, so that they would be exposed to those vibrations. I also had the photo of Baba behind the white board, and one day somehow it got into the hands of a student. They made fun of it and passed it around and threatened to tear it up, and asked me if he was my grandfather. I told them it was my father. I explained to them why I wore the ash mark and bindi on my forehead. I realised that they were curious about our culture, and they listened with great interest.



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The transformation

Slowly they started talking about their family problems, and I counselled them. When they threatened to break things, I would say, "You are always breaking things, relationships, tables, and chairs. What are you going to build?" They were amazed that we spent our lives with the same partners. I would speak to them about trust and love. I stuck posters with good sayings in the class, and asked them to read it. I put a thought for the day on the board every day, and forced a student to read it by turn, and explain what it meant to him/her.

I realised that with love and patience,

you can win over anything. I started making them squat with crossed legs on the floor and chant 'Om' thrice, so that they could calm down. I gave them incentives like candies if they did some work. I equipped my class with all the gizmos because I realised they liked it. I started giving examples and lessons from real-life situations. I used to make them read from the menu card in a restaurant, or ask them to fill up a form for driving licence. They appreciated that. They also appreciated honesty. They hated lies. To stop them using bad words, I started writing all the bad words they uttered on the board in every class. Gradually, they stopped using them. Whenever they used the f... word, I would ask them to make more words with f..., and turn it into a word building activity. I also challenged them that if they spent the day without uttering the word, they would get a pizza party the next day. They also liked the fact that despite extreme provocation, I refused to write a referral and haul them to the principal.

My patience paid off, and by Sai Baba's grace, I received the most precious compliment when my students asked me to come back for the next semester. After the first year, I did not want to return, but the school management wanted me back. I now have two more years to go before the contract expires. I would never wish to go back, as there is a lot of work in the field of special education to do here in India itself.

It is definitely karma that exposed me to this extreme situation. When you worship mammon, you have to pay the price. But I have learnt to be patient, my faith in God has increased, and I have realised that giving unconditional love and trust is an antidote to negativity.

The strength of Indian culture is spirituality. Spirituality helped me cope with adversity. ☺

Contact: purnima.coontoor@gmail.com

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Mail us at editor@lifepositive.net