

My mom and I were walking down the street when a man whistled at her (and most likely her backless top), and shouted, “sexy!” She turned around, smiled and waved, yelled “thank you” right back at him and continued sashaying down the street. I was most horrified and demanded to know why she was letting a roadside Romeo getting away with crass behaviour. She looked at me nonchalantly and said, “darling if a stranger in a suit walked up to me at a party and said, “Protima, you have got to be the most attractive and sexiest woman I have ever met”, I would have smiled and thanked him and chatted with him”. What this Romeo is saying is the same thing. Why should I hold his lack of grooming or finesse against him. I choose to see it as a compliment, and I accept it with a smile”. I’ve learned many life lessons from my mom, but the greatest has been her ability to view things from an out of the box perspective. She firmly believed that it doesn’t matter what happens to you, it’s your reaction to it that shapes your reality, your quality of life and your destiny and she always found something positive in every negative situation. No one’s life is a graph is that only goes upwards. There are peaks and troughs, opportunities and obstacles, challenges, love and heartbreak and though it might seem that she lived in a permanent state of euphoria, her graph was more erratic and heart stopping than the Sensex on black Monday. Of course one can say that it was her controversial life choices that made it all so dramatic, be it modelling against her parents’ wishes, running away from home to “live in sin” with my dad, streaking on the beach in broad daylight, her youthful rebellion and brash, unabashed display of sexuality and also the way she loved to play to the galleries. In her memoirs “Timepass”, she writes, “I have never regretted what I did. I enjoyed seeing how people ran around and after me if I did this, and how they froze or flopped over if I did that. If I took off my clothes there was a stampede, when I put my clothes back on there was a commotion. The whole phase of playing up to the media, feeding it, scandalizing it, shocking it-it was not done out of any conviction, but simply because I was having a whale of a time.” And that epitomises her! She never ever cared about “what will people say”. She believed her life was her God given right to live and explore to its fullest and if humans had formed rules for ‘conformity’ so that they felt ‘safe’ and ‘good’, then how fantastic for them, but that if she gave them the right to conform they must equally be respectful of her right to within the limits of the law, live the life of her choosing. She would laugh at herself often, especially when she recognised a pettiness of mind and soul. She was amused by how seriously people took themselves and marvelled at their preoccupation with a “respectable” place in society. She was determined to never lead an ordinary life.

Everyone knows her as someone who was liberated, dynamic, bold, sexy, fun and vivacious. I’ve also seen a fiercely loving and protective mother who made my childhood and that of my brother Siddharth, utterly magical. We were taught alphabets on the sand slate of Juhu Beach, dined on tops of cars, in the garden, on the beach and in a tent in our living room for ‘variation’, and kidnapped often from school on the pretext of our nani being very ill, only to be taken for crazy camping time in Alibaug, Powai, Lonavala and Panchgani where we cooked baked beans over bonfires and swam with dolphins. She was fearless. She had incredible generosity of spirit. She never used us as pawns when she and my dad got divorced. Despite the lack of alimony or much financial support, she made sure we thought highly of our father, kept in touch with him, and she never let us feel we were ever going through a personal or financial crisis. As she hungered for a fulfilling relationship, many ‘uncles’ drifted in and out of our lives, showering us with chocolates and gifts. She never believed in living a dual life so we’d be included in every moment of her life, accompanying her on many dinner dates (especially if she feared the man might be the lecherous kind and had worked out signals for

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us to start nagging her to leave and take us home). We used to dance around bonfires with her friends, and thanks to lenient laws back then, even tagged along with her to discotheques and parties. (I'm told that I was put in a basket and taken off to the disco when I was barely two months old).

When I look back at the graph of her life it's replete with an unswerving spirit, abundant creativity, boundless energy and an ability to exhibit unconditional love. She would walk into a room and light it up with smiles, warmth, humour and an uncanny way of getting you to put your guard down. There are so many qualities in her that are worthy of emulation, but her curiosity and courage to explore new paths, and tenacity to see things through to fruition are noteworthy. Not only did she plunge into the world of classical dance at an age of 26 (given that most dancers began age 8, most guru's viewed her interest as a lark or passing fancy and of no great purpose), but she went on to becoming one of India's most respected Odissi dancers on a national and international platform. Fuelled by passion and unshakeable commitment to dance she got an allocation of 10 acres of Govt land in Rural Karnataka and pitched her tent with a 'khatiya' inside on the barren piece of land, in the midst of snakes and dacoits and gave birth to Nrityagram, an institution devoted to classical dance, that today boasts an award for national architecture, grows its own produce and has its star students performing and receiving the highest accolades and rave reviews in the field of dance nationally and internationally.

She was also the most non materialistic person I have ever known. She never splurged on designer goods, bags and shoes or jewellery. If you appreciated anything that she was wearing, be it a pendant or an outfit, it was yours to keep. I used to walk around Nrityagram aghast that the villagers were wandering around in the expensive Ritu Kumar clothes I had gifted her and she used to look at me with a smile, hug me tight and tell me how much happiness it had brought to their lives and that their expressions of joy had been priceless. It was not just material generosity, but generosity of spirit that was her greatest strength. She always saw the bigger picture, saw her most notable achievements as that of a higher force working through her, smiled at her detractors, felt compassion towards those that didn't understand her and ran her down based on their own fears and limitations. Though the story telling of religion, especially through her dance, was something she greatly enjoyed along with the celebratory nature of festivals and rituals, she was more inclined to a deeper understanding of the universe, metaphysics and was incredibly spiritually evolved. Her shaved head, blue robes and physical body left the planet in 1998 during a landslide enroute a religious pilgrimage to kailash Mansoravar. But she lives on! Through everyone and everything she touched with her love, generosity, wit, compassion and courage... and through me, my children and Nrityagram.