

Appreciation

Dr. Buddhadasa Waidyasekera

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My brother and I have had the profound privilege of being able to call Dr Buddhadasa Waidyasekera our father. It is with the greatest respect and enormous gratitude that I write this tribute. To many, he was a towering figure in psychiatry – an astute clinician, a thoughtful teacher, and a voice of integrity in the field. To me, he was also the quiet constant in the background of my life: observant, curious, and deeply humane in ways that extended far beyond his professional identity.

He was born in a little village, Hirimbura, Galle, the elder son of an Ayurvedic physician of some repute, Karapitiye Veda Mahattaya. He was proud of his southern roots and had many a humorous tale of a childhood climbing trees and playing cricket.

His first foray into education was at an underprivileged primary school, Uluwitike and he then went on to Mahinda College, Galle. His thirst for ongoing education remained a constant in his life and his readings went far beyond Medicine and Psychiatry. I know he did his best to instill this same reverence in us and in his trainees. He studied Medicine at the University of Colombo and completed his Post Graduate studies in England working at a large Mental Hospital in Runwell and later in Basildon, both in County Essex. He had the opportunity later in life to study Forensic Psychiatry and also work at Bethlem Royal Hospital South London and Maudsley.

In so far as his practice of psychiatry went, I believe his dedication to the Art was complete. I take this excerpt from his presidential address to the Sri Lanka Psychiatric Association in 2001. “Yet, are psychiatrists in a position to help war victims and refugees? My personal view is that our contribution to the manifest socio-economic problem is minimal. “Men will always be mad,” said Voltaire “and those who claim they could cure them are the maddest of them all”. He was merely repeating what the Buddha too said: “sabbe pruthagjana unmaththaka”. Let psychiatrists therefore be humble in their pursuits in trying to cure mental disorders, especially those of social origin. They must not undertake to solve problems that they cannot; they must know their limitations; or else, they will discredit their art”

He left England to return to Sri Lanka against all entreaties from family and friends. I know this was due to his love

of the country and his deep connection to the land. There were just a handful of psychiatrists in Sri Lanka at the time. Despite his staunch belief that we should be provided the best education possible, (and towards this end he did all he could) he did not hesitate in uprooting us from schools in England to rural Badulla in the early 1980's. On his return to Sri Lanka, he worked at Badulla and Kurunegala for a number of years, doing his best to establish working Psychiatric Units in these areas. I know he fell on the task with his own unique brand of passion and dedication, bringing psychiatric care to places it hardly existed.

His methods of treatment were not always orthodox but fitted the setting and the person. I recall a situation where he had ‘exorcized’ a poor woman who believed she was under the malign influence of a devil. He said the power of suggestion could be a powerful tool in practice. After a long conversation he had gently suggested to her that the ‘devil’ would leave her body on counting to ten when he clapped his hands loudly! I believe this did as much for her as years of therapy could (which was of course unavailable to her) and probably more than any medication would.

As Medical Superintendent of Angoda Mental Hospital, he worked tirelessly to improve the conditions not only for the sake of the patients but for its many employees. I recall the respect they had for him, in the stories that were reverently repeated when I first worked at Angoda. He worked in the Welikada Prison Hospital as a Forensic Psychiatrist and was often conflicted by difficult decisions that had wider political impact. He did not take any decision lightly and would spend many hours of an evening pouring over books and journals in search of inspiration. He engaged in private practice, but I recall he would often come home with a tale of a patient’s trauma having returned his fee to them.

He had a deep love for his many trainees and was as much mentor in their learning as much as assisting where he could in their personal lives in his own unconventional way. A trainee recently informed me of how he drove them around determinedly until he found a rental home for their family when they moved to Angoda and had nowhere to live.

I was witness to conversations that carried a careful respect for the people he worked with, and an unwavering commitment to understanding the person behind the diagnosis. Psychiatry, in his hands, was never merely about classification or treatment – it was about listening with patience and engaging with complexity without the need for easy answers. As a psychiatrist, I find myself returning to the questions he embodied: Are we truly hearing our patients? Are we resisting the temptation to reduce complexity? Are we practicing with both rigor and compassion?

On a personal note, he was simply the best father anyone could ever ask for. At a time when it was normal for a parent to raise a hand to an errant child, he rarely even raised his voice. His actions embodied his beliefs. To me he was a larger-than-life colossus filling a room with his wit, humour and charm. He had many hobbies, including woodwork (think chairs and wood carving), gardening (bonsai and more), music (think Amaradeva and Zorba

the Greek!) and painting. Yet his overriding passion was for reading. He bore his long illness with patience, lovingly cared for by my mother, Daya and brother, Dr Himansu Waidyasekera.

As his daughter, I carry his memory with affection and gratitude. As a fellow psychiatrist, I carry his influence with a sense of responsibility. His life's work lives in the quiet, enduring ways he shaped how others think, listen, and practice. I do not have the words sum-up all he means to us and I therefore defer to his own. This quote, from his presidential address as above, embodies his vision. "It is my fervent hope and dream to see a National Institute of Mental Health emerging at Angoda with the modernization of the Angoda and Mulleriyawa hospitals and the expansion of peripheral psychiatric services. It is indeed a dream but as the American poet Longston Hughes said, "Hold fast to dreams for if dreams die, life is a broken winged bird that cannot fly.."