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The Quiet Gift of Mentorship: A Personal Journey Toward Mathematics

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For some time, I have been reflecting consciously on my own path: how I came to mathematics, how I grew within it, and how the people and experiences around me quietly shaped the way I think, teach, and understand the world. My relationship with mathematics began early, sparked by success in competitions and nurtured by curiosity.

I pursued Pure Mathematics at Sharif University in Iran as part of the first cohort of a newly established program. The curriculum was rich and rigorous, yet it did not fully satisfy my deeper questions. What is it about mathematics that draws me in? Why does thinking, learning, and discovering bring me such joy? These questions stayed with me when I later continued my studies at the University of Toronto, all while raising twins and navigating the inevitable ups and downs of graduate school. The fear of not understanding, of being lost in a concept's darkness, was painful. But, that pain became a powerful motivator. It pushed me to seek clarity, to find pathways through confusion, and ultimately shaped my approach as an educator. When I became a professor, my teaching philosophy centred on guiding students through that same journey: embracing uncertainty, persisting through difficulty, and discovering the beauty that emerges from understanding.

In recent years, my reflections have taken a new direction: Over the past couple of years, I have been holding weekly online sessions with my father to read and discuss Rumi's poetry. Together we explored themes of morality, spirituality, and the human condition.

These conversations awakened memories I had not revisited for decades, such as the moment in grade one when my father gifted me a copy of "Good Stories for Good Kids: Book One" by Mehdi Azar Yazdi, a collection that retells stories from Rumi's Masnavi in a language accessible to children. The book had no colourful illustrations, yet its stories opened a world of wonder. I did not know then that those stories would accompany me throughout my life, resurfacing whenever I encountered Rumi's work, whether through commentaries by scholars like Allameh Jafari or through my recent sessions with my father.

One story we discussed recently tells of a man from the desert, who wishes to meet the Khalifa (Caliph) and explain how difficult his life is. Wanting to bring a gift, he carries with him the most precious thing he owns: a small bowl of water from the desert, where water is scarce and treasured. When the man reaches his destination, the Khalifa accepts the humble gift with kindness. Then, in an act of generosity, he orders that the same bowl be filled with gold and jewels. Before sending him home, the Khalifa instructs his guards to take the man to the great river, Dejleh, the Tigris, since that is a shorter path easing his journey back home. When the man sees the vast, flowing water, he becomes deeply ashamed of his small offering. He wonders how the Khalifa could accept such a modest gift and yet return so much treasure. The story ends with a reminder that the entire world is like a jug overflowing with understanding, knowledge, kindness, and beauty, just a drop from the endless goodness and power of the divine creator. In Rumi's telling, creation itself is the bursting forth of this hidden treasure. And if one knocks on the door of knowledge sincerely, the creator grants the feather of thought, lifting the seeker like a shahbaz, the royal falcon, into higher understanding. (The Masnavi of Rumi, Book One, Story IX: The Arab and His Wife)

This story resonated with me, because it mirrors how I have come to understand my father's influence on my own thirst for learning. My father is a retired high school mathematics teacher. His small library of math books shaped my earliest encounters with the subject. Concepts such as the name and its referent, limits, and integration first appeared on his bookshelf, inviting me into a world of symbols and ideas. Although he never encouraged me to pursue mathematics professionally, and at times even discouraged it by warning that the path may offer little comfort or financial reward, what he instilled in me was far more powerful. His values, his commitment to truth and justice, and his love of learning guided me more strongly than his cautionary words.

Only later, through my own teaching, did I realize how skillfully he had prepared me for my journey. He trained my mind with subtle techniques, building confidence without ever placing himself at the centre. Like the Khalifa in Rumi's story, he accepted my small bowl of water, my early curiosity, and quietly returned a river. He stood behind my shadow, yet his influence shaped every step of my path.

And his impact extends far beyond me. Over the years, I have witnessed countless moments when strangers approached him in hospitals, banks, and museums, recognizing him as their former teacher. They speak with warmth and gratitude, sharing how this humble, moral, humanity-loving educator changed their lives. Hearing their stories always reminds me of the quiet ways he guided me as well. During my undergraduate years, he sent me letters in his elegant handwriting, each one carrying a blend of moral guidance and gentle encouragement. In them he urged me to respect others, to speak up for the truth, and to meet the challenges of independence with courage. Those letters were small lanterns in a difficult time, illuminating the strength he hoped to cultivate in me. Together, these memories and encounters reveal a legacy built not through awards but through quiet, consistent dedication to students and to the transformative power of education.

As I continue to reflect on my own path, I see more clearly how mathematics and mentorship, intertwine. My journey has been shaped by curiosity, persistence, and the profound influence of a teacher who never sought recognition. In many ways, the values he embodied, humility, truth seeking, and a deep respect for learning, continue to guide my work within the mathematical community today.

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