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Joining the family business

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I grew up on a diet of literature and science, given that my grandfather and granduncle were Gujarati novelists and poets of repute, and my parents, committed medical doctors and scientists. These two career paths were almost a natural progression in the family business, and given the struggle it took for me to write this piece I believe I chose between the two wisely! When my parents talk of my childhood, the usual refrain is not about whether I did well academically, or whether I was an adorable child, but that as a four-year old observing a caterpillar dangling by its own spool of silken thread I asked “how does it know how long the thread has to be for it to make a perfect little home?”. I am sure many children have said similar things but that my parents wear this initial proof of my “scientific temper” with pride is perhaps a reflection of the milieu in my home growing up. Given this, it was very unlikely that I would end up an investment banker.

My earliest childhood memories are of long walks with my parents on the verdant CIBA-Geigy Research centre campus in Goregaon, Mumbai where I grew up. These walks were a mini-discovery process for me, and through encounters with all forms of insects, birds, flowers and the occasional fox and snake began my interest in Biology. My father, Dr Ashok Vaidya, is a clinical

pharmacologist and my mother, Dr. Rama Vaidya, is a reproductive endocrinologist. My parents, today in their 70's, still continue to work ceaselessly with a passion and motivation for science. It was through them that I first learnt biology. In the 70's and 80's, the Ciba-Geigy research campus in Mumbai had a critical mass of bright and dedicated clinical and basic researchers. The beautiful environs of the campus – lush greenery, old-world bungalows and above all witnessing often the enthusiastic scientific debates– left an indelible impression on my mind

During my early years another key influence was my uncle, Dr Akhil Vaidya who is a molecular biologist, in the US. He used to visit us frequently and would always bring with him many books. One such book that he gifted to me when I was thirteen was “The Brain” by Richard Restak. That's when the penny dropped that in the recesses of the brain lay the answers to my caterpillar question, of how ants and bees communicated with one another and how my cat had formed such tight association to an earlier house many years after we had moved. It was during this period of time that my interest in Neuroscience began to crystallize.

At the end of my schooling, I was faced with my first significant decision. I had the opportunity to join medical school or join St Xavier's College in Mumbai, for a Life Sciences degree. It was the latter that I felt allowed me to ask and pursue questions in biology for the sheer fun of it. The Life-sciences program at St. Xavier's is unique and faculty encourage their students to problem solve, experiment and enjoy the process of a broad-based education in basic life-sciences. A summer spent working with my uncle in his lab at Drexel University in Philadelphia introduced me to bench science and the rigors of lab work and I was hooked.

After my undergraduate degree, I left India in 1992 to start my thesis work in the Neuroscience program at Yale in the US. My thesis advisor Professor Ronald Duman, besides being a terrific teacher and thesis guide, also mentored my growth as an independent scientist. It was these years that were seminal in further shaping my interests in Neuroscience and in particular in the neurobiology of mood. Graduate school in the US requires you to go through a rite of passage- the qualifying exam, which if you

emerge unscathed, allows you to begin your Ph.D. work. Amongst my qualifying exam committee was Professor Amy Arnsten. She has had a lasting impact on my view of how to successfully juggle the multiple hats a woman scientist wears – scientist, mentor, friend, mother, wife etc. While I had already witnessed the struggle many women at Yale went through to balance these multiple demands, it was important for me to see that it was doable if one set ones own parameters rather than jumping through the hoops set by the world. Amy sent me a card congratulating me after I finished my qualifying exam. More often than not the bells and whistles or flowery touches are frowned upon in the world of science, but that Amy marched to her own band was clear to me from that fact that she did not hesitate to tell me in her own unique way to celebrate. While it was a small gesture of Amy's, it left a big impact, there is no cookie cutter model of the traits one has to have to be a scientist other than the ability to truly enjoy doing science.

It was also during my years in graduate school that I met my husband, Ajit. Unlike the other key people in my life, Ajit was not in any shape or form involved in science – in fact he is in the corporate world. His interest in my research and sometimes startling insights into a research problem I am grappling with has been an important lesson to me that a scientific temper is not the solitary purview of scientists. Ajit & I have had to pay our dues by spending many years apart to follow our own career aspirations. After a couple of years (together for a change) in the UK where I did a post doc at Oxford we returned to India in March 2000. I was returning to India, 8 years after I had left to join the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research in Mumbai, as an independent researcher.

The past seven to eight years at TIFR have had all the hues that every scientist in India has to go through. Rewarding, frustrating and humbling at the same time. The process of setting up my lab, building the animal house, writing grants and guiding students have been quite rewarding. I have enjoyed the scientific freedom that I have been given at TIFR. I am still at the early stages of my career and have much to look forward to. I know that being in India, at TIFR, will provide me the platform and support

structure to continue doing the only thing I've ever wanted to do in my life. Along the way I have also contributed to the family business by adding on the latest member – Alina Vaidya Mahadevan. Through her eyes I find myself rediscovering the wonders of biology. Motherhood has also served to reemphasize how important family, in this particular case my in laws, are in supporting the constant juggling act of full time science and motherhood.