

Love Letters to My Child in These Hate-Filled Times

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Abstract

In a series of three letters, Pavithra describes to their unborn child what it's like to be pregnant. The first conveys the terror of carrying a new being into a violently homophobic and racist world. The second and third letters recall the desire and beauty that the unborn child sparks in them. In the fourth letter, Pavithra writes to Noor Momo, now six years old, reflecting on the realities of parenting amidst ongoing violence and the uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this final letter, Pavithra invokes Noor's aunts: her sister Raksha, and her dear friends Kriti, Batool, Mabel, and Marie. The words Chitthi, Masi, Khala and Chyama refer to "mother's sister" in Tamil, Hindi, Urdu, and Nepali, respectively.

Keywords

Queer pride, parenting, despair, hope, children



June 13, 2016

My darling baby,

Two days ago, your Pappa and I celebrated your coming with some of our nearest and dearest friends in a lovely all-gender gathering. As we made cranes for health and happiness, we talked about how parenting, like origami, is an art. We reminded ourselves of the beauty in imperfection, collaging magazine images with prayer paper to decorate candles that our community will light when the birthing begins. "If the sky that we look upon should tumble and fall, or the mountain should crumble to the sea, I won't cry," we belted out in our raucous and joyous circle of love, "as long as you stand by me."

A few hours later, the sky did tumble and fall as a madman went on a shooting rampage in Orlando. Fifty beautiful young queer folks were killed at a gay nightclub during Pride, a sacred space for so many who are pushed out daily from the rigid and punishing society we live in. One young man, trapped in the bathroom, texted with his mother that he was going to die. I have been growing you within me for seven months now, and I wonder how I would go on if that was you. Texting me, announcing your death, trapped in terror when you had gone out to dance with pride, to celebrate the beauty of your body and all bodies, to love as you desire and deserve to.

There are those who would caution me against such morbid thoughts at this time. Those who want to know with great insistence whether you are a 'boy' or a 'girl' so they can determine your fate for you before you have the chance to breathe in air on your own. They mean well because they find safety and security in this world, this world which is so terrible to those whose sex, gender and sexuality take a freer expression than that prescribed by law or religion. They imagine their child won't be trapped by a gunman with a distorted sense of what being a man means, a person who has more faith in assault rifles, militarized police forces and fear-mongering fundamentalists than in other people, the divine, or beauty.

We too hope our child will not one day find themselves at the mercy of such a person.

But what we want for you, our precious baby, is to dream and live beyond the myopia of control and terror. We want you to know the great freedom that comes from shedding the rules that are supposed to define how you move through this world, who you love and how you express intimacy or pleasure. We want you to know that we are queer and we are proud, that we embrace our queer friends and family, and that we truly believe that a queer world is a more beautiful and joyous place for us all.

With love for you, no matter who you become,
Amma



July 6, 2016

My darling,

I imagine you asking me, "what's it like to be pregnant Mamma?" And I would tell you, it's a magical time. A time that reminds you that all life is magical. In my college application essay, I wrote about the sacredness of life. I attributed the idea to Hinduism, before I came to

learn that this was wishful thinking in a religion whose history and culture have been rife with designating the profane and the polluted. I hadn't realized then that this belief in life's magic was perhaps my own faith, an enduring belief in the divine as what is most real beyond the shifting facades of disillusionment and devaluation. The strangeness of carrying another being within, of becoming two heartbeats in one body, as my friend Rachel so eloquently described it, is constantly at odds with the ordinariness of birth. There is nothing quite as mundane as bearing a child, except dying perhaps. And you suddenly realize, this is it. There's not much more to life, and yet it is magical. We forget the ordinary magic of life all the time, but there are moments like these that remind us. I wonder if this is the clarity your Pappa is granted in witnessing and holding space for dying people. He told me last night that he's always thought we were magical beings. Reconnecting with your Pappa has been a slow coming into being of the essence of myself. I forget who it was that said that the greatest love is to grant the ones you love the freedom to become themselves. If I can teach you this one lesson, not in theory but through how we live our relationships, then I will have done enough as your carrier into this world and your guide through it. There is no real fresh start in life, as I have relearned again and again, despite my best attempts at wiping the slate clean. Our lives, individually and collectively, beginning from before any point we choose as origin, are already accumulations. Yet birth, and the ongoing coming into being it heralds, offers a glimpse of the creative energy that is immanent within those accumulations. This is what saying 'yes!' to the excess of life and death creates - glimpses of magic and clarity in the most ordinary. Take these as our gift to you, our precious baby.

With love always,
Amma



July 31, 2016

My darling baby,

I couldn't sleep very well last night. I must have had too much caffeine. I knew I shouldn't, but the sweet milky cha that Kriti Masi offered was too delicious for me to turn down. I think I've been up since about 3am. That seems to be the hour that wakes me these nights when restful sleep slips out of my grasp. I finally got out of bed around 6am when morning light filtered in through the leaves. Do you know that the Sufis have as many words to describe sunlight as the shifting hues of the day? This morning light, this early gentle awakening, is dearest to me. I aspire to awaken daily at this time, to breathe in the light with the freshness of dawn.

I learned about light during a retreat I went on once that reaffirmed my desire to be alive. There are a million ways to experience divinity, but by then, I had forgotten that beauty and faith are essential. I was retreating because I faced a major life decision and doubted myself. As I learned then (and ought to remember more often!), you may ask for clarity, but you cannot expect resolution. Sometimes, all you can do is ask questions and find courage to face the powerful under-currents that inevitably surface.

I was alone on the retreat. On one of many long silent walks through the hills, I tried to practice the affirmations my retreat guide had taught me. I was to repeat **या जमील**¹ when I observed beauty, **या नूर**² when light or shadow caught my eye. Simply fill yourself with the light, my guide had advised me. So I sat down on a large rock when I made it up a hill, closed my eyes, and imagined myself filling with light. I could visualize light but it felt like a mere optic, a trick of my mind. Feeling restless, anxious, and unconvinced, I gave up and lay down, staring up at the trees. They looked unreal, like a painting rather than the real thing. I traced the edges of the leaves, their arrangement along the spreading branches, the way they layered to make deeper shades of green.

Some time passed this way. Without realizing it, I had indeed filled with light as it filtered down through the leaves. When a cloud passed over us then, I felt the sudden anguish of light being taken away. I don't know if it was the yearning of the leaves I felt in that moment or my own, but I understood.

We are all beings of light, though we may not remember. When you forget the wonder of being alive, watch how the trees soak in the light, an endless play that appears still and static until you see their leaves dance, turn, and reach for more.

This is the place I carry in my heart that reminds me when I forget. I will take you there one day, **इंशाल्लाह**.³ I will teach you to live with this knowledge so it may carry you through your days.

In love and light,
Amma



Post-script: after your birth

September 19, 2022

My darling Noor Momo,

It is strange to read the letters I had written to you when you were still a part of my body. You were already a presence for me then though you were not yet out in the world. Looking back on that time, I recall moving with ease - not physically necessarily, but guided by a sure sense of belonging. Since your birth, from that moment of releasing you from my body, I have sought after that harmony. As I shared with Marie Aunty, birthing you broke me open in a way I could not return from.

Every day since your birth has presented a test of one kind or another, demanding that I become a better version of myself than I feel able to. Being a Mamma is a daily feat - equal parts courage, resourcefulness, and vulnerability. I had never been as terrified as the first time I left you, ten days old, to go to the grocery store. You were perfectly safe with two doting grandmothers, but I no longer knew how to function on my own. It is a difficult feeling to name, like being separated from one's most essential organ. You are my secret heart walking

¹ Pronounced "Yaah ja-meel." Literal meaning: "The Most Beautiful," one of the names by which to invoke Allah.

² Pronounced "Yaah noor." Literal meaning: "The Divine Light."

³ Pronounced "Inshallah." Literal meaning: "if Allah wills it."

outside my body at the mercy of the world. Parenting has not been easy for me, as Batool Khala and Mabel Chyama can tell you; but it has taught me that our capacity for joy can grow with struggle, if we continue to open our hearts. Together you and I have learned to say I'm sorry and to forgive ourselves.

We were not wrong to name you Noor: you are the very grace of **अल नूर** embodied. As a toddler, you would sprinkle Pappa and me with an invisible powder from your neck—your magic dust, we joked. I knew you were magic when you made up the word “groy” at two years old. It is at once a blessing and an unsettling to become transparent in this way, to be seen truly and mirrored in who your child becomes. You knew intuitively what so many, clouded by hate and a lack of imagination, fail to discern, that girl and boy are not enough to convey the rainbow multitudes of being. You asked me the other day what my name meant. When I said “pure,” you explained to me that it means I am fully of myself. Never having known myself with such certainty, I am remade by you.

You hold my dreams and give them a shape.

Like Raksha Chitthi, you are an artist. You tell me your work is building. All around me—on every stray surface and in every niche, along the sidewalk and in between tree roots, in the studio and on my writing desk—I find delightful little worlds created by you. You fill our home with magic gardens and altars. With you, showers become dance parties and decisions become games. When I drop you off at school each morning, you are serious about telling me that the most important thing is to have fun. You remind me that we get to dream and build everyday, and what an adventure that is!

The world has, and hasn't, changed since you were born. Each passing period feels like an escalation and each apocalypse another revelation. (One day we can talk about what this time has been in a past tense, but it is yet too soon to say what will become of us all.) We do our best, your Pappa and I, to keep hope alive in the midst of an ongoing pandemic, to keep fighting for a world we want to live in. It's not easy. Several months ago, a gunman attacked an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, just a few hours away from us. When I dropped you off the next morning for your last day of kindergarten, I felt a fear that no one should feel, a fear I imagine every parent feels these days. We mourn, we gather, we continue.

My prayers for you are my prayers for us all. May we be free of the impulse to harm. May we become practiced in acting with compassion for ourselves, as for one another. May we have the courage to build the world we desire. May we live knowing that all that we are comes from and returns to this earth. May we remember that shadows are of the light.

Thank you for being my child, and for allowing me to be your Mamma. You are love. You are light.

Yours,
Mamma

