

A Letter To My Son...

By Shyrose Jaffer-Dhalla

Salaams to you my dear son,

You are my joy and my most precious pearl and I look forward to seeing you grow up to be a mature, responsible young man someday. Allah (s.w.t) has given me the formidable task of nurturing your body, mind and soul so that you may become a worthy member of His religion. I am daunted by this task and afraid, with each day that passes me by, that I have not given justice to the duty that has been bestowed upon me. There is so much to do and so much to say and sometimes I am afraid that I may not live long enough to teach you all the lessons that I would like to. In all of the multitude of lessons that I must teach you, there are some that are extremely important and others which are not so urgent, but they are all important nevertheless. I have asked myself if I had only one letter to write to you before I die, what would it be? What is the most important thing that I would choose amongst the thousands of things that a mother must teach her son? The answer, my son, is in this letter which you now hold in your hands. I am about to tell you about that thing without knowledge of which you can never be successful, about that which you will encounter at every point in your life and the importance of which will shape the destiny of your life. That important lesson, my dear son, is about Respecting Women.

Remember, my son, that a woman gave birth to you. A woman is your sister. A woman will be your wife. And someday, you may even become the father of a young woman. Throughout all the most important phases of your life, be it birth, growing up, making a family or becoming a father, a woman will be beside you in some sort of a relationship with you. The way that you will deal with these women in your life will make you the man that you eventually become. She will perhaps be an authority figure in your life, your blood relative, your life companion, your off-spring and much more. At various points in your life women will provide the blessings in your life, they will be an "ehsaan" to you so to speak, for without them you could not exist, live, or procreate. Though Allah (s.w.t) will give you the eternal task of protecting them and providing for them, the women in your life will forever be the ones who will bestow their bounties as precious jewels of kindness to you. You will forever need them and the kind of love that only they can give. And so, if you want to be successful in life, you must learn how to respect a woman.

Our greatest prophet of Islam, Prophet Mohamed (s.a.w) brought an end to the oppression of women by replacing their murders (at birth) with love, tenderness and deep reverence. He showed us what a woman could be by respecting his wife and his beloved daughter. And Allah (s.w.t) gave us our most precious and valu-

able gifts, the ahlul bayt (a.s) through these respected women. The life stories of each and every Imaam are full of examples of their teachings and respectful behaviour toward women. The historic tragedy of Kerbala has poignant references to the deep love that Imam Hussein (a.s) had for his sisters, Zainab (a.s) and Ummeh-Kulsum (a.s). Our religion teaches us to respect women and it gives them rights, privileges and a very high status. Respecting women then, my son, is perfecting your religion. It is being a true Muslim. It is obeying your Lord, Allah (swt).

As you grow up, the different relationships and circumstances in your life will define what the term, respect, means to you. As the meaning of the word is enhanced for you, over the years, let the effect be a cumulative one, so that even though you become advanced in years, your respect for women has grown ten-fold. Your attitude towards women should always be one of humility and tenderness. As a child, the respect you show your mother and grandmothers shall be manifested in your obedience and love to them. You should be eager in your willingness to serve and please them. As you grow older, let your relationship with the other women in your life, like sisters and cousins, be a reflection of what Imam Hussein (a.s) has taught us about what a brother should be. This means treating your sister, no matter what her age, as a respected mother. It means cherishing her, loving her, showing the utmost tenderness towards her and treating her as a trusted friend, advisor and confidant. Never disrespect your sisters by ordering them around, teasing them or refusing to share your possessions with them. And as you become a young man, protect your sister's hijab and chastity by guarding her as Hazrat Abbas (a.s) did; never jeopardize your sister's honour by allowing your friends to be near her needlessly. Your maturity as her guardian should forbid you from ever allowing yourself to be a go-between her and another man. Your sister should be your most precious and beloved jewel.

Your respect for a woman should include more than just good behaviour towards her. It should be inexplicably tied into your attitude, your convictions and your personal thoughts. Your respect for a woman, then, should translate into your need to always be fair and just in your dealings with them. Your respect for them should prevent you from treating them as possessions or mere decorations in your desire to be more powerful. You should not be part of the oppressive stances towards women that lead women to have to conform to certain unattainable

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and unnatural standards of beauty and shape. In your respect for women, you should be able to love them whatever their physical challenges and weight. Do not allow yourself to be a part of those who choose the worthiness of a mate according to the fairness of their skin. Lower your gaze, my son, when in the presence of a woman, and do not objectify her or view degrading pictures of her. There is disrespect inherent in treating a woman for the satisfaction for your pleasure alone. Allah (s.w.t) has made a woman to be your respected partner in a union that involves give and take in every aspect of your relationship.

A woman brings a certain something to your home that no money or paid servant can ever provide. When she is in her father's home she is considered a mercy to her family; her innocence and sweet ways delight all around her. You need look no further than your own home to see what a daughter means to her father. It is there in your father's eyes when he indulges her, when he lovingly carries her on his shoulders, when he allows her to choose what car he will buy or when he cannot bear to see the tears in her eyes. Someday, my son, you will take a young woman from her father's home to make a new life for her. Please, my dear son, do not abuse your good fortune. When you pluck a tender, beautiful rose from her father's garden, do not allow her to wilt in your home. Build her roots, nurture her with your love, let her bask in the sunshine of happiness and shower her with kindness. Understand that the hard work that she does in your home is not what she is accustomed to and that whatever she does, it is out of pure love and goodness. Never trivialize your wife's labour and imagine that you could pay someone to do the work that she does. Remember that every object she dusts, every floor she sweeps, every back breaking job she does is laced with unconditional love and no expectations of material rewards. In that, every thing she touches becomes an act of love towards you and Allah's (s.w.t) subsequent blessings and mercy towards her becomes a mercy towards you. It is a priceless gift from her to you.

They say that bringing up a daughter can be quite challenging for it is a great responsibility; I believe that bringing up a son can be an equally formidable task if not more, for it means bringing up someone's future husband. Someday, when you will be in a position to be someone's protector, provider and source of comfort, you will have a sense of power that can easily be misused. I fear the wrath of Allah (s.w.t), my dear son, and I caution you to always remember what your religion has taught you. As a husband, do not bring shame to the mother and family that has brought you up. As a son-in-law do not abuse the generosity of the family that has entrusted you with the most

valuable member of their home. Be fair, be loving and be approachable. Never make your wife feel as if she owns nothing in your home simply because she hasn't paid for it; doing so lowers you and means that you have not understood what wealth really means. Do not tower over her menacingly when you are in anger. Never use harsh words or make her feel as if she has no home to go to if you turn her out. When you amass great wealth and personal success do not forget, that it was her support and willingness to stay at home with your children that allowed you to concentrate on your career. When she supports you in your role as a breadwinner understand that you and her both return home just as tired, only for her, the duties of a wife and mother still await her. Work at home with her, side by side, my dear son. There are blessings in this for you. And you will see the respect and gratitude in her eyes.

Your role as a husband requires you to be a protector and source of comfort for your wife; be careful that you do not become the one that she fears or the one who gives her the most pain. Always keep the fear of Allah (s.w.t) in your heart and never, ever terrorize the person who gives herself in every way to you. Your behaviour, when you are angry, will be the final test of my upbringing of you. Do not shame me, my dear son, for I shall never forgive a son who threatens his wife. Remember, that the day you lay a hand on your wife will be the day that you lay a hand on me. It will be my biggest disappointment and I will turn myself away from you. Even if your wife chooses to forgive you, I shall never. I cannot bear the thought of my son disgracing me so, and I pray that Allah (s.w.t) protects me from ever having to face such a day. May Allah (s.w.t) guide you, my dear son.

As you progress in your journey towards manhood, cultivate good habits, for someday, I must ask for a young woman's hand in marriage for you. If you choose to engage in a life of indulgence and excess, and you stay out until the late hours of the night or smoke or drink, it will become my duty to prevent some young girl's life from being ruined; how can I allow some young girl to marry the type of man that I wouldn't want my own daughter to marry?

I trust in you, my son, and I pray that Allah (s.w.t) leads you to the Right Path. May your life be rich with love, warmth and true happiness. May you never see a day of poverty, despair or ill health. May your home be a haven for you, where the playful sounds of children, and the aroma of good food permeates the air. And the true laughter of a fulfilled woman, your wife, fills your home with the sound of contentment.

Your mother