

## MULTI-CULTURAL EDUCATION

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It was my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday in the summer of 1969 when we arrived in Vancouver, coming across Canada by train from Toronto. That was also the year that my father turned 50. Back in Guyana he had been a civil servant all his life and rose to become a District Commissioner (DC) who was in charge of administrative affairs for a specific region on behalf of the government. He then was appointed to the Ministry of Home Affairs and was a key figure in planning the visit of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in February 1966 as well as the celebrations for Guyana's independence on 26 May a few months later. After gaining independence some changes were introduced in the civil service, one of them being the lowering of the compulsory retirement age from 60 to 55, with the option to leave at age 50. Dad felt that the political situation in the years just before and after independence was no longer very attractive and that it would be best to leave before he became too old to adapt to a new country. My parents also had my own education in mind and wanted to get me settled in higher education as early as possible.

My education in Guyana during my formative years was considerably interrupted because of Dad's appointments as DC to different parts of the country. Mum would recall that she hardly had time to get the drapes hung when Dad would receive notice that he would be dispatched to another region. For me, the moving was not much of a problem . . . I would quickly pack up my toys, games and books, jump in the car and off we would go. However, my schooling suffered because I might be placed in a class where I was a little ahead in the subject from my previous school and so I became bored. Otherwise I might be placed in a more advanced class for which I didn't have the grounding to catch up easily. I don't know if this decision was my parents or the teachers, or both, to decide that it would be fine to have me be challenged but

sometimes it was quite a struggle for me to keep up. In addition I always entered not knowing a single soul and because I was the DC's daughter some kids were very hesitant to be more than classmates. They felt that they had to keep their distance. My parents would choose my friends from among their own circle of associates, perhaps the regional doctor, engineer, church or charity worker, who had children. But some of those kids, quite frankly, I didn't like. Perhaps they were 5 or 6 years older than me and really weren't interested in a playmate that much younger. In fact I often had nicer friends at school whose company I enjoyed but they didn't want to come over to play, finding the thought of playing at the District Commissioner's house rather intimidating. I of course mixed with children of different racial backgrounds, particularly those of African and Indian origin, who made up the majority of Guyana's population.

This disrupted type of education continued until I was in my teens. In the home environment the situation was rather more stable since Dad, as DC, had the services of a full staff – housekeeper, cook, driver, gardener and a washer woman who also did the ironing because Dad had to be impeccably dressed in a starched white shirt while Mum did a lot of charity work and would wear billowing cancan-type dresses. As for myself, I needed to be sent off to school in a clean, ironed uniform. My responsibility at home was to take care of the pets. We had ducks, chickens and lots of dogs. I even raised a newborn rat after it was found abandoned when the maid was cleaning behind the stove. She wanted to toss it into the river but I decided to rescue it. I named him Mickey. It progressed from sucking on a milk-soaked piece of cotton wool to a really fat rat, having been pampered with whatever food I was eating as well as thick cream skimmed from the scalding of fresh cow's milk. It was kept in a bird cage on a table but eventually gnawed its way to freedom one night. My pet-caring routine started at 6:00 a.m. when I would head downstairs, put on my little gumboots and go outside to clean the chicken coops, gather eggs, provide food and water, and then feed the dogs. After that I headed upstairs, took a shower, dressed for school and by that time breakfast would be ready.

When Dad worked for the Ministry of Home Affairs in Georgetown I was admitted to St. Rose's Ursuline Convent, my parents' first choice,

where I sat for the Common Entrance Examination in preparation for getting a higher education. That opportunity came when I was accepted to Vancouver City College to study sciences. I was keen on becoming a veterinarian but that was an impossible goal because of our family's financial circumstances. Dad didn't have stable employment while Mum did some odd jobs and then worked at Eaton's, a large department store. Dad tried all sorts of avenues to find a job, without success. One day he found out that Canadian Pacific Airlines (CP Air) was hiring and so he jumped on the bus and headed to the CP offices. A very nice gentleman interviewed him but felt that Dad was much too over-qualified for the posted job and would not remain with CP. Dad replied that if he were offered a job he promised he would not leave simply because he became bored. This is how Dad started out in the mailroom at CP, doing very basic work while learning the system. He eventually retired as the Manager of Rotables, responsible for the inventory of parts required for the repair and maintenance of the whole fleet of planes worldwide. Each part had to be catalogued regarding its origin, history of use, location, subsequent repair, distribution and disposal. In the days before computerization it required a lot of paperwork and disciplined organization.

For my part, a change in career course was necessary and I learnt secretarial sciences at Vancouver City College, which included typing, Pitman shorthand and using the Dictaphone. Mum did shorthand when she was secretary at the Chinese Embassy in Georgetown when she was young. So she fished out all her books and I had a deluge of material to study. After graduating I did a couple small jobs before being employed to work for Dr. Bert Allsopp, a fisheries expert from Guyana, who was with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) with the local office at the University of British Columbia. In addition to doing regular secretarial work, I would make arrangements for various international visitors, who spoke varying degrees of English, making sure that they were properly hosted and their itineraries in order. Bert would frequently be travelling and I often had to run the office by myself. On some of those occasions I needed to call the IDRC head office in Ottawa and one of my main connections there was Paul Stinson. He was a program officer looking after various agricultural, food and nutritional sciences projects. After a few years Paul flew to Vancouver on a short

business trip and that was the first time that I could put a face to his voice. On a subsequent occasion the supporting personnel from the outlying offices were invited to Ottawa. The prevailing impression was that Ottawa was a rather staid place where political talk was the order of the day. Staff members at IDRC's head office were therefore instructed to make sure that the girls from out West weren't unduly exposed to political banter. I had an enjoyable time and got to know Paul better, after which we maintained regular correspondence.

For a long while Paul had been eager to travel rather than be tied to a desk job and had submitted a request for an overseas posting, preferably in Asia. Suddenly, in 1980, it came through – he would be assigned to Singapore. He informed me that he could be away for up to five years, with limited opportunities to get back to Canada. I told him that I was happy with my job in Vancouver and had never given a thought of leaving. I also knew that I wouldn't go to Singapore unless we were married. So in June of that year we were married and within a week we flew to Bali for a week's honeymoon before hurrying off to Singapore to start his job. Paul had visited Singapore earlier and had scouted around for suitable accommodations. He had prepared a list of potential apartments and when we arrived it didn't take me long to make a decision.

I was quite at home in Singapore, simply because it's multi-cultural, everybody spoke English and the weather was like Guyana's, beautiful for me. We lived in an apartment building that had 80% locals. The aromas of curries, stir fry cooking and more came wafting through my balcony. There were four apartments on our floor, next to us at one time was a British guy with an Indian wife; she cooked some wonderful curries. On the opposite side in the other two apartments were local Chinese and maybe a Malaysian family. From below and above us came the sounds of Chinese music and during Chinese New Year I could hear the shuffling of mah-jongg tiles, and ladies laughing and chattering. They soon realised that I did not speak Malaysian or Chinese, but they spoke English and would say hello, hello. We never really had deep conversations or visited each others' apartments but if I ran into a problem I knew that I could certainly go knock on their doors. But I never had any trouble, and nobody ever questioned why an expatriate was living there.

Singapore was impeccably clean. Everything worked, the infrastructure was so reliable. I don't think I ever saw a traffic light that didn't work. But they tend to go a little bit overboard with some of their little by-laws. Some of their rules frustrate the heck out of you but at the end of the day you just have to chuckle and say well there could be worse laws than this. My passport bore a stamp stating that I was not permitted to get employment. Paul had the required work permit and the authorities made it clear that I did not. I had hoped that I would be able to work unofficially at the Canadian Embassy. But I soon found out that on the totem pole I was ranked rather low because they had to employ a certain amount of local staff and then they had their own Canadian staff that were transferred over there. Next on the list were the wives of the Canadian diplomats, if they wanted work. And then came people like me . . . and I never managed to get my foot in the door. One wife of an IDRC employee was a model in Canada. She was a tall, very striking girl with blonde hair and in Singapore there was a shortage of tall, striking blondes. The managers of clothing companies thought she looked very nice wearing their outfits and when they wanted to set up a fashion show she very often got the call to stroll along the catwalk. I think she was paid for it and I don't know how she managed it. Maybe she had a good agent. I know she did some charity work too. But most of the other wives did not work.

We spent four years in Singapore, until 1984. I was happy there and my husband was happy too in his job, he so enjoyed the travelling. Actually I always say that I lived there for four years and Paul lived there for maybe a year and a little bit more – he travelled over 200 days of the year. And he learnt very quickly that I was the type of wife that he could leave behind and I wouldn't be staring at the walls and pining away. I think that had to do partly with the fact that I was an only child. I was accustomed to doing things alone, I wasn't bored with my own company. I know that some of the wives did not like their husbands being away so much. When the wives got together they really voiced concern, almost distress, that their husbands were gone for three weeks, or not even a full two weeks, and would be going off again for two more weeks after coming home for only a couple days. As long as I had something to do, I was happy. I didn't have any help in the house and I took classes at the

Art Academy. I wanted to enrol as a full time student but they were full and the fellow I talked to said there is no way that we can give you a spot. However, if you want to come as a drop-in come with your easel and your pencil and set yourself up in a corner. The instructors will know that you are a drop-in and they'll give you as much attention as anybody else. I complied and joined other students in the class going for degrees, serious art students doing art history. I only attended classes in charcoal drawings since I liked the idea of having just a piece of paper and a stick of charcoal with which to create something. I also started doing batik and I studied under a fellow who was very well known in Singapore. He had done many of the government contracts for visiting dignitaries such as the queen and heads of state. The government would commission a batik from him to be presented to the important guest. I really learnt a lot and that was a whole new style of art. Then I did a fair bit of volunteering for the SPCA and all these things kept me busy.

Paul wanted to do an MBA and opted for a one-year course at the International Institute for Management Development (commonly known as IMEDE) in Lausanne, the French section of Switzerland. Paul was on a student visa and I was as a wife of a student. Each year every graduating class would present a gift to the school and all kinds of gifts had been presented over the years making it harder and harder every year for the next class to figure out something different. It also had to be something that they could afford, because everybody would be chipping in for this gift. At the time IMEDE was tossing around elaborate plans for a new building. There would be an underground university while retaining part of the existing staid building. The student body decided to present IMEDE with something to remember what it looked like so they approached me to do a complete drawing of the whole IMEDE facility, with all the trees and the lawns and everything intact for them to have – not a photograph, but a drawing. I had to start working on that fairly early and I was sure glad that they let me know what their intentions were because I put a lot of hours into that project; while Paul spent months at his desk, I spent months at the easel. The students had the original of my large charcoal drawing framed and then presented it to the Institute. The students also had a plate made which they used to create the formal invitations for the graduation gala. Just

before graduation one of the professors contacted me and asked if he could have permission to use it as his Christmas card to send out to his colleagues and business associates. For me that was confirmation that the drawing was a success.

I took the opportunity to study French, which kept me busy. A year went by very quickly, just like that. We lived in a little place called Lutry, just outside Lausanne, on a hill with grapes growing on the slopes. Our apartment was the size of a postage stamp and looked over Lac Léman which presented an incredibly beautiful scene: just across the lake you could see France where, at night, the twinkling lights of the towns stood out in the darkness. We watched as the grapevines sprouted and turned green and later saw the pickers with special baskets on their backs harvesting the grapes. We had a Volkswagen Golf, with standard shift as is common in Europe, and in the evenings I would drive down to pick Paul up at IMEDE. He usually took the train to get there in the mornings. One night the snow started to come down and wouldn't stop. By the time we decided to get moving and drove to the foot of the hill leading to our place, we knew that there was no way that the car was going to make it. So we parked it and began walking up that hill, but I was not looking forward to that climb. On the way up we paused now and then to look around. It was one of the most beautiful nights I have ever spent in my life. It was like a Christmas scene created by Charles Dickens. Even though it was bitterly cold, I can't remember being cold. I just recall the lights from the windows and the lamps, the glistening slope of the hill, the snow-laden trees and the clearness of the night even though snow continued to fall heavily. I half expected to see little kids come running out wearing old fashioned clothes – girls wearing little bonnets and boys with caps and knee-high boots, truly, like a living Christmas card.

After our stint in Lausanne we went to Basel, the German section, and Paul started working with Ciba-Geigy. We had a beautiful apartment in a place called Pratteln with an Italian caretaker. We got along well. Most people didn't speak English but I used my recently-acquired French to communicate. I started studying German to keep busy but found it hard. The local food wasn't as nice as in Lausanne, in my opinion. We had a nice neighbour downstairs, a bachelor who was Swiss German and

on occasion we invited him to dinner. He enjoyed my curry – Guyanese style, I might add. The ingredients were easy to find, particularly from shops owned by Asians who brought in just about everything under the sun. We stayed in Basel for two years where Paul's job had him sitting behind a desk, mainly. He was beginning to get bored and longed for a travelling job like what he had in Singapore. But before that could be granted he had to prove himself in the field, so Ciba-Geigy sent him back to Canada.

We lived in Mississauga, on the outskirts of Toronto, while Paul was doing product promotion which required him to go knocking at the doctors' offices, waiting to be called in, and explaining the new drugs that Ciba-Geigy was producing. After about a year he was promoted to Product Manager and put in charge of reps who were now doing the door-knocking. He was again back in an office job and we both figured that there had to be more to this, having taken time to acquire an MBA degree. Then he was informed that he had proven himself and would be posted to Zimbabwe, which was considered to be a hardship posting.

In late 1986 Paul took up his position as General Regional Manager for southern Africa, covering a little bit of South Africa, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique. We were provided with a house in Chisipiti in the eastern section of Harare, a large place with lots of yard space. The house was owned by a white Zimbabwean landlord, managed by a white house agent and was previously occupied by a white Zimbabwean family. I inspected the house and found a few things that needed tuning up and repairing. I then said, I want to see the servants' quarters. "What?" was the response. I repeated, "I want to see the servants' quarters!" This surprised them but they led me in. I was really shocked at what I saw. They had tried to sweep it but the place required a good scrubbing, and it needed to be painted. It wasn't derelict, but it was neglected terribly. I had the place scrubbed, repainted, and swept out nicely. I had the bathroom completely scrubbed, but the fact remained that only cold water was available. So that meant that for the greater part of the year the staff were not bathing properly. Yes, it can get quite cold in Harare. I said this is not going to work. I called a German fellow who ran a plumbing company and told him I wanted hot water in the servants'



quarters. He said, There is no way we can run a pipe from your house out to them, and the landlord, I can tell you right now, he's not going to let you do that. He continued, I do have a solution – a Steamy and all I do is cut the pipe above the shower head and install it there. I noticed that shower head was right over the toilet and the theory was that as the occupant showered the toilet would get cleaned. I don't know how the plumber obtained his supplies, maybe brought in from South Africa or on the black market, but they were quality parts. The kettle-like device containing a heating element was eventually installed. It was connected to an electric switch, and on turning it on a stream of comfortably warm water would be produced. The plumber cautioned that the element would eventually burn out depending on how often it was used but it could be replaced.

At the time we had a gardener named Norman and his little boy was in town. Norman sent his son to have a shower and for the first time in his life that boy was bathing with warm water. Norman had to literally drag the boy out of that shower, because he just stood under there until Norman finally said, You can't burn out the element on the first day, Madam would not stand for that. Later I discovered that the nannies, after their shift, were showering before they went home. If they didn't get a chance because they were going to miss their bus they would come early in the morning and shower. And then I discovered the guards were showering before they went home. It took a lot of new elements to keep it going!

The landlord wouldn't pay for the water heater although it was a permanent installation and the contract said that any improvements that remained in the house would be reimbursed. But what that referred to was improvements to the house, not the servants' quarters. He said, "We don't treat our servants like that." The attitude of the landlord was quite representative of many white Zimbabweans. Our neighbour had a houseboy, Noah, with about four or five kids living in a small place. One day there was a lot of wailing from next door and Noah's employer came over and asked for understanding, explaining that one of Noah's sons had died and the wailing would traditionally go on for about three days. Our landlord happened to visit during that mourning period and he heard the wailing to which I said that their little child had

passed away. He said, 'They'll replace it in no time! That was his total and complete comment. He was a nice gentleman who would sit and talk intelligently with me, but this is us and that's them. We once attended a small dinner of five people at the home of a French-American expatriate family when the dining table conversation got around to the problem of getting their washing machine back in working order as parts usually had to be obtained from South Africa. The lone Zimbabwean, a white woman who was impeccably dressed and well educated, must have found it irritating listening to these expatriates lamenting the problems of an appliance which she apparently did not have. Finally she piped-up, "We don't have that problem. At our house the washer is black!"

I employed several servants in Zimbabwe. I had a house girl named Irene although I used to do my own cooking. When my twin boys were born in 1991 I hired a nanny and she eventually asked for help because after my twins started to walk they discovered that when the nanny was chasing them it was strategic to each run off in a different direction. She would just stand there and shout in exasperation, "Madam! Madam!" I got her a young assistant and things were more orderly then. The gardener Norman loved to cook, and especially to bake. He would not hesitate to drop his rake or hoe, quickly wash up and run into my kitchen. In those few minutes Norman would have changed from his gardening overalls into stiff white attire. I didn't require that but the family before us demanded that he be dressed like a proper cook and so he just assumed the same would be the case with us. I said, Norman if you're just coming in to help me in the kitchen perhaps you can just take off your overalls if they are very dusty and make sure your hands are clean, but I don't expect you to change into whites; only if we are entertaining, then it would be nice if you are in white. He said, Madam I have so many of these white things, if I don't wear them, what am I going to do with them?

I did a lot of charity work in Zimbabwe, particularly for the Epilepsy Support Foundation. I got connected to them because one of the drugs that Ciba-Geigy was introducing was for epilepsy. They would have these fund-raising events and one of the things that was very popular was cakes baked with outside ingredients – better quality flour brought in from South Africa, vanilla essence, almond flavouring and things like

that, items that were hard to get locally. Every time we came on home leave I would return to Zimbabwe with packages of almonds, walnuts, good quality baking powder, etc. Or if we went down to South Africa I would buy there and bring them back. So my cakes would rise a little higher or be somewhat lighter. I would call Norman in and he would help with the cleaning, beating the eggs, mixing the batter and decorating. I would bake 4 or 5 cakes and donate them to the foundation's bake sales or their Christmas sales. Sometime they would sell for \$50. Sounds like a lot but it was Zim dollars. I would always bake some extra for the house and staff which we would all share.

The staff included guards who would patrol the grounds within our walled compound. I had one guard on day shift and one for nights. Things were beginning to get a little rough in Zimbabwe and on the news or in the newspapers there were reports of people getting roughed up in their homes. I felt it appropriate that we should ask for an armed guard even if it was going to cost more. We spoke to the supervisor of the guard company. He said, No madam, the only guards who can carry guns are those of President Mugabe, and the banks . . . our guys can only carry sticks. I then requested two guards, because Paul was then



Handling a snake at a wildlife refuge.  
*Cheryl Stinson.*

doing a lot of travelling and I was now by myself with the babies. But they didn't even have a stick, so on a trip to South Africa I bought about four sjamboks. They're long whips that the South African police use for people control and riots and can be lethal. The sjambok has a handle that tapers off to a long whip made from a kind of a rubber. It doesn't snap or crack like a whip but delivers a solid whack that is guaranteed to produce a resulting scream. I armed my fellows with the sjamboks and they loved them. They used to walk around swishing it in practice. Some of them hit themselves by mistake

because they were long and curled back snapping them on their ankles or wherever. You'd hear them yelling and then laughing since they felt silly. Norman, our gardener, said he preferred to wield an axe handle in a confrontation, and I got one from the hardware store . . . without the blade. The guards would come down the street at a certain hour to take up duty for the afternoon or evening shift, and each guard would peel off to go to his assigned address. Each wore a green uniform with a red neck kerchief. Some of them had helmets. When I asked whereabouts they met in town I was told that they came from the local town office at Chisipiti. I said, That's funny I'm always in Chisipiti, I don't remember seeing an office there. He explained, Yes Madam you know the big tree, that's our office, we meet under there; if it rains we just huddle closer under the tree.

I had regular guards whom I liked and trusted but they didn't always come because they might be on holiday or sick. So I always wanted to know who was on duty and I would at least call them to say good evening and ask their names and gently admonish them to not let me catch them sleeping. Usually Norman would have acquainted himself with the guard in advance, and would come and say to me, "Madam you have a new guard tonight," or "Madam it's the usual Elijah," and I would make a cup of hot coffee or cocoa with sweet biscuits every night particularly during winter. In the yard there was a most wonderful avocado tree, higher than the house. One morning Norman came running and exclaimed, Madam the avocados are gone. Apparently either the guard was in on it or he was up near the front gate sleeping or talking with someone while a thief was helping himself liberally to the low-hanging fruits. I got out a sheet and called the guard to hold it. I told Norman to climb the tree and get all the avocados that are almost ripe and toss them down to the sheet. They were huge avocados, each about 4 to 5 inches across. I asked for some cloth bags to be brought from the house and I told Norman to fill 10 bags with the avocados, some ripe and others almost ripe. He must have thought I was going to sell them or give them away to friends but I had been counting mentally: first there's the home, then Irene the house girl, my two nannies, Norman, the two regular guards. Besides these, I reckoned on Noah, the neighbour's houseboy who was really nice to us and who had a wife and four or five kids, the landlord and the house

agent. I told Norman, Make sure they are all even, with some green ones mixed with some ripe ones, tie them up and just line them up outside the kitchen right there. When the time came for the guards to switch I called the one who was going off duty and said, OK you can take one. They all were really surprised because they were not accustomed to a family sharing things with servants. Each of the staff was asked to take a bag. At the time they were beginning to feel the pinch of food shortages and some of the guards told me they would eat one or two, have the wife sell some and send the green ones to other family members upcountry. Once the guards realised that they were going to partake in the bounty, they guarded that tree better since Norman told me that from his quarters he could hear footsteps in the night and know it was the guard from the sound of his boot as well as his cough.

I had no qualms sharing stuff with my staff, especially if the items were in excess, still usable or would go to waste. Elijah, our guard, was quite a good runner; he was hoping to represent Zimbabwe. He ran with shoes, but I don't know how they stayed on and he couldn't afford a pair of new ones. Actually his feet were a little smaller than Paul's so as soon as Paul's running shoes got a little too worn for him I used to take them, scrub them, replace the laces and give them to Elijah. The excited runner would push cloth into the toe area so they didn't flop around and cause blisters at the back. Then he would pull the laces tightly and off he would go running. He would sometimes run to come on duty and now that he was hot and sweaty he'd use the newly installed Steamy shower quickly.

In Zimbabwe the staple food was milimeal, made of ground corn. It was rather like flour and used to make sadza which is a very stiff porridge that is solid enough to be rolled by hand. The locals would cook that with every meal. The milimeal came in massive 50-pound bags which the average Zimbabwean could not afford to buy. Not only was inflation reducing their buying power but also a 50-pound bag was too much for the average family. I would go to the local supermarket, small by North American standards, and ask the manager very quietly whether any milimeal was available. He might say that a shipment just came in and some would be put onto the shelves. I let him know that I didn't just want some, I wanted a bag. The bag would be loaded in my car at

the back of the store and I would hurry directly home to have Norman divide it up for distribution to all staff including the guards. I couldn't sell the milmeal to my servants nor could I give some to the household staff and sell some to the guards . . . to me that was unconscionable and would not have brought harmony to the home turf. Sometimes I would arrive at the supermarket and know that milmeal had arrived because of the *long* line-up outside the store; women with children on their backs, men without work trying to get some food. I always felt that my staff was genuinely grateful and cheerful about my efforts to acquire essentials for them.

When I became pregnant everybody in Canada expected me to return there for the birth. This was especially so after they heard that I was having twins and they tried to persuade me not to leave it too late, it's a long trip. My doctor was a nice white Zimbabwean man who indicated that my pregnancy was going fine and it was really my choice. Ultrasound examinations were performed at a private clinic run by a black Zimbabwean doctor who kept an eye on me every two weeks. His name is Steven and I named one of my sons after him because he was really so very nice. The birth was uneventful and the babies were healthy so I don't have any regrets with my decision to stay in Zimbabwe.

In all my travels I found the Zimbabweans, both black and white, were among the nicest people. The children I found particularly charming. They have a distinctive manner of expressing gratitude and greeting when they meet you – they would clap, just a gentle clap. They rarely wave or shake hands, just clap, even the littlest children. It's so sweet.

In 1993 Paul again worked for IDRC trying to improve the production and utilization of bamboo in India. We were posted to New Delhi where we had a nice house. The American Embassy women's group maintained a directory of employees, like a hand-me-down list with recommendations, but I quickly found out that great recommendations didn't necessarily mean great employees. I had a lot of unpleasant experiences dealing with hired staff and the caste system was definitely something that I needed to think hard about to overcome the consequences. One of my house rules was that every member of the staff had to wash and dry their hands before coming into the house from the bathroom. The bathroom was attached to the house but with an outside entrance. One day the

cook had gone to use the bathroom and in no time at all he was back in the kitchen. I said, Did you wash your hands? He responded that he would wash them here, in the kitchen. I emphasised the importance of cleaning up *before* entering the kitchen. He still continued to come into the house a few times with unwashed hands. I tried to determine why he was doing so and it was like pulling teeth. Tara, the houseboy, had no issue complying with my house rule, especially since he was cleaning the house, playing with the twins, handling the kids' toys, learning English by reading the children's books, and so forth. Eventually I got them to fess up: I had put a bar of soap in the servants' bathroom as well as a towel, which I would change regularly. Tara belonged to a lower caste and the cook looked down on him. Because Tara used the bar of soap, the cook did not want to touch it. So he preferred to have unwashed hands in contrast to this lower caste man with clean hands, but he still considered himself superior. I couldn't put two bars of soap . . . there wasn't enough space anyway . . . so I got a pump system and I said, Use your elbow and the soap will come out. That was accepted, and I provided them with paper towels as well.

Later on we had a fellow, Russell, who was very skinny, with somewhat long grey hair, who called me memsaab. He wasn't sure himself how old he was because records were not kept when he was born. From his recollection of British and Indian historical events and his age at the time he averaged that he was probably 90 years old. Paul and I calculated that he was *at least* 90. It shocked me that such an old person still wanted to find work but he could cook the most delicious dishes. He had learnt from the British in the days when there was no air conditioning. When summer came in New Delhi it would be HOT, and the British women would pack up their families and go up to the cooler highlands, taking their hired staff with them. The men, attended by a skeleton staff, would stay and work in the city up to a point. Russell was accustomed to packing up the kitchen, taking so many months' supplies, going up with memsaab and her family and pampering her in the cooler regions. He was at home in the kitchen and I trusted him, because anytime he wanted something he would ask me, and that included for even a small, inconsequential container. But he had one annoying habit. As soon as I walked in the kitchen he would drop whatever he was holding and jump

to attention, stamping his right foot next to his left one and standing upright with stiff backbone and even stiffer upper lip. The Queen's guards might have been impressed but it startled the daylights out of me. I pleaded with him, Don't do that, you make me jump, you actually scare me. It took me a really long time before I broke him of the habit. However he would still stiffen up, turn around and acknowledge my presence but the stamping was gone, to my great relief. But that was the way the British trained him, and I don't think he ever got accustomed to my presence in my own kitchen.

Russell got sick a few times, especially when the weather turned cold and his aging lungs could not cope. I had room for only one servant and I gave it to Russell although his family lived maybe 10 to 15 minutes from us. They refused to take in the old man in case he died and then would become a great expense for them. So since he had a job he should live at memsaab's place and it then would be her problem. I provided him with a heater, but he still got sick and I had to take him to hospital. On a couple occasions I sent the driver to notify his family that Russell was in hospital and that they had to take food for him because the hospital didn't provide food. I instructed the driver to drop in every day and quietly find out from the hospital staff if the family was bringing food. He learnt that they would take food only on some days. I told the driver that on the day he realises that he not being fed to go to a hawker's stand, buy him something warm and I would repay him. We then brought Russell home as soon as possible, because if the driver were to take him to his family, they would refuse to even open the door. It was not unusual for the hospital doctors to discharge a patient before they felt it best, especially if the patient was being difficult and didn't want to stay. So they would write a prescription and let him go. I made sure that Tara the houseboy would check on him and buy food at the hawker's stand if necessary. Fortunately Tara was willing to do that and Russell didn't mind. Finally after many months Russell just got too weak and weary. He was in no condition to work at all. So we took him to his family and I don't know what became to him. I'm sure that in his productive years he would have earned a decent salary from the Brits and able to maintain his family well, but when he became old and sick he was considered a burden to them.



Russell was the best worker I had. There were some who lasted only one day. Within that time it was clear to me that they were unsuitable and would be dismissed with the day's pay. Some drank on the job, or were extremely rude, or stole. I had a driver who complained to Paul that I had promised to give him a bottle of Scotch along with his salary. If he thought that I would give a bottle of Scotch on Friday for him to drink all weekend and then have him come in on Monday morning to drive my children to school, he should think again. I had another driver who was very good but I had been warned that out of the blue he might not turn up for work. His name was John and he spoke perfect English. After a few months of flawless employment, he suddenly didn't appear. Apparently, after he earns a certain amount of money, he would quit working and when the money runs out he would put his name on the list, present his resume and have some other unsuspecting soul hire him. I asked him if there was something that made him unhappy working for me. He responded, No, no, no, I don't feel like working. Another driver, who regrettably did not last long, worked for a long time as the personal driver for Indira Ghandi's daughter-in-law. He was always on time, impeccably dressed and flawlessly polite with enough English for us to get along. However, he had the perplexing and annoying habit of always driving on the centre line, the dividing line between us and the on-coming traffic. He would only swerve back into the correct lane when on-coming traffic honked or obviously were not going to give way, like a truck. No matter how I tried to demonstrate to him, with the aid of the children's play town that he must stay on the correct side of the road – no, he would meander back to straddling the centre line. Then I figured it out. As driver for an official car which was always accompanied by police out-riders, he would then simply drive down the centre of the road as the out-riders cleared the way ahead. And this, unfortunately, was a habit he just couldn't break no matter how much I pointed out that I was not connected to the Ghandi family nor did we have out-riders.

I once had a cook who was drunk, completely sloshed. I told him that he was fired and retorted that I couldn't fire him. He considered that it was the man of the house who was in charge even though I was the one who hired him and he had never seen Paul before starting on the job. I summoned the guard and told him I would count to three and if

the cook was still there the guard should physically throw him out. The cook refused to budge. He snickered and felt that the guard was “one of us.” The burly guard promptly put him out on the street.

Apparently my Chinese features confused the hired staff which sometimes led to a quick turnover. They seemed to like to work in Asian households. A Japanese woman, for example, perhaps would not know much English, did not talk a lot or would be hesitant about speaking up. The employees were on home territory and would proceed to rule the roost, giving instructions on how things should be done, when they would leave work and so forth. But I spoke English and was not afraid to show my temper if needed. Some of the younger ones that I hired were just a nightmare. They had the opportunity to earn a decent salary, work in clean surroundings and they all wanted to work with expatriate families. The inside joke among the expatriates was that if the servants worked for an Indian family the memsaab would be beautifully and expensively attired with a silk sari, draped with gold jewellery, and charm her guests in elegant fashion. Then she'd step into the kitchen, slap the maid and kick the cook for any perceived glitch and step back out to again charm her guests. They said that was very common, simply because she belonged to a higher caste. So that's why it puzzled me when some of them had the opportunity to work for an employer who would not treat them like that, yet they misbehaved to the point of having to be dismissed.

I went to one home that was outfitted with an elevator. It was maybe three or four stories high and I rode in the elevator and ended up in the basement where the husband and the many sons had their offices. The husband's office was a fantastic room, and just behind his beautiful desk were two Ming vases that were probably as tall as myself. There also were ornate hand-carved wooden pieces, ivory tusks, and jade. It was an unbelievable display of wealth. All the servants were dressed in white, with seemingly staff for each floor. The family were merchants and it made me wonder how many millions of rupees were coming in to maintain a home like this, as well as driving Mercedes cars and educating their children abroad. That's where I really saw the extremes of wealth and poverty, superimposed on the caste system.

In August 1994 the plague broke out and it was getting out of hand.

People were burning clothes and appeals were broadcast asking the masses to avoid traveling. Tara was due to have his leave, about 10 days, and he and his wife were going up country on the typically overloaded train as usual. I told Paul that Tara may be healthy now, but no way did I want him to go up country by that mode of transportation and then coming back to our house. It was too much of a risk particularly for our two kids. So we approached Tara and asked if he would wait until the scare was over. He responded, No, I have a wedding, I have this and that to do. I told Tara that if he were to wait we would pay for him and his wife to travel first class. He went for that, and he stayed. I think he delayed his trip by about two months and by October the health scare and panic passed after causing more than 600 casualties. The plague proliferated from the lack of cleanliness. Hygienic practices left much to be desired. Often when I went shopping in New Delhi I saw a kid run out from a store, drop his pants, relieve himself on the sidewalk and go back inside. No one blinked. Piles of such droppings could be seen everywhere. You had to be very careful where you stepped. I once took my 3-year-old sons to have their hair cut at a New Delhi five-star hotel where the all-male clients were also having facial saunas, pedicures, manicures etc. So as not to be in the way while the barbers worked on the boys I squeezed myself nearby next to a little cubicle where I could also see what was going on inside. I soon realized the used towels that were being used for the clients' facials etc were being dropped through an opening in the cubicle that had a basket on the other side. I then observed a barber shop employee, in this five-star hotel and in the privacy of the cubicle, dutifully retrieve towel after towel, neatly re-fold them and take them back into the barber shop for use on the next customer.

We had to be very careful in the restaurants we chose and inevitably went to places like the Hilton Hotel where we expected that the food would be fresh and properly prepared. We had more stomach problems in that country than we ever had before, no matter how hard we tried. We installed an ultraviolet water filtration system for the kitchen, based on the recommendations of other expatriates. There was nothing more disconcerting than to host a party and have guests telephone the next day to report intestinal troubles. Every year when we returned to Canada

on home leave I would have everyone undergo a complete medical examination. One year Steven was discovered to have a parasite. It was so rare that the lab specialists had to look up reference materials to identify it and the doctor couldn't even pronounce the long Latin name. She didn't know how to treat it but had a godfather who was a parasitic specialist. On learning that Steven was three years old, he cautioned that medications would harm the child. However, the parasite was one that flourished in unclean conditions and if the food and water Steven was ingesting was clean and he kept his hands nicely scrubbed, the parasite would not survive. Towards the end of our two-month homeleave a stool test was taken and Steven returned to India with a clean bill of health.

After two years working for IDRC, Paul accepted a job with Boehringer Mannheim, another Swiss pharmaceutical company, and we moved to a farmhouse outside New Delhi. It was one of the most beautiful homes I've ever lived in. We were surrounded by other farmhouses and many of them were retreats for wealthy Indian families. The grounds were huge and surrounded by an 8-foot concrete wall topped with shards of glass. There were two buildings on the premises that provided accommodations for seven employees, four of them being gardeners, or malis, because of the vast area of lawns. I did have some trouble getting reliable hired help, including guards who slept on the job, but eventually I gathered a group that I was happy with.

When Diwali, the Festival of Lights, was coming up, I planned a surprise for them. I went to the bank and made a big withdrawal. Indian money in general is tattered, almost falling apart to the touch. I told the bank manager that I would like to have new notes because most of them would be as gifts. I didn't specify that it was for my servants or else he might ask why I was giving so much money in the first place and would have promptly said the bank was out of new notes. He counted out some spanking new notes and I bought several red envelopes for the money and tied them with gold thread. I told the servants that I would allow everybody to work until noon on the day before Diwali, and then they could take off to enjoy the festivities. I needed the guards to remain but I wanted to know how many other staff preferred to stay behind. They quickly replied, No, no madam we're not going to go, we'll be

around. I said, OK, just have fun, but don't get drunk, and don't fall into the swimming pool. Late that night, just before the boys were to go to sleep there was a knock on the door which was very unusual. Bopaul, the houseboy, who also looked after the pool, said, Madam can you come please? I stepped out and found the whole of the back grounds was lit up. We had a long driveway with a lovely roundabout and a beautiful fountain. There must have been two or three hundred candles stretching to the gate, beautiful lights going on and on. It was a total surprise and I was really touched that they had gone to all that trouble. The boys were still in their pyjamas and I pulled them out take a look.

The next day the servants put marks on the children's foreheads, wishing them well. I called the servants and I said, I'd like to wish you all Happy Diwali. I had also prepared a hamper for each of them. It had a blanket, cooking oil, jam, peanut butter, sugar and matches and a few other essentials. I took a flat basket with the envelopes and approached Vishnu, the eldest gardener, and invited him to take one. They assumed that I would have given my houseboy more than I would have given them as outside malis but once I held out the basket it was obvious that the envelopes would all have the same amount. The old fellow was very humbled that I went to him first and gave him the honour. He should have stopped working a long time ago but he needed to support his family. Vishnu bowed slightly and was hesitant. I said, Take one Vishnu. He didn't speak any English and Bopaul said something to him. Vishnu gingerly took an envelope and bowed gratefully. I was so glad I had prepared my surprise gifts for them knowing that the night before they had prepared all those beautiful candles as their own special surprise for the boys and me.

During all our time in India the boys attended the American Embassy school which enrolled pre-schoolers from age 3 and regular students up to grade 12. There was a nice mix of children including Germans, Swiss and Italians as well as a few Indians kids from wealthy families . . . a mini United Nations. They were instructed by Indian teachers who were obviously educated in the U.S. or England. They came from upper class Indian families and had teaching degrees. The boys left the house in the morning at 9 o'clock and I'd pick them up at 2 or 3. I would prepare their little lunch bags and off they'd go. The little children learnt

reading, writing, computing (featuring cartoon characters) and had outdoor activities including swimming, tours to museums and watching the older kids playing soccer. There was a fantastic library that looked like a high school library in a modern North American high school. As the twins approached their fifth birthday I began to consider their ongoing education and opted to return to Canada where they could go into kindergarten that took 5-year-old children and continue on to high school. I felt that my decision to stabilize their education was the right course for them when they were accepted at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.