



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Photo: Vedika Singhania

'We live and love on a fissure': An Interview with author Jerry Pinto

Edited by Maya Vinai¹

*Jerry Pinto is one of India's most prominent names in literature; equally appreciated and applauded by staunch critics and connoisseurs. Apart from being an author, he has worked as a journalist and as a faculty member in his native city of Mumbai. Apart from his fiction, non-fiction, poems and memoir, he has written books for children and has put together some very well-received anthologies. Jerry Pinto's works have won him a plethora of accolades. His first novel, *Em and the Big Hoom* (2012) was awarded India's highest honour from the Academy of Letters, the Sahitya Akademi, for a novel in English; the Windham-Campbell Prize supervised by the Beinecke Library, Yale, USA; the Hindu 'Lit for Life' Award, and the Crossword Award for fiction. *Helen: the Life and Times of a Bollywood H-Bomb* (2006) won the National Award for the Best Book on Cinema. His translations from Marathi of Mallika Amar Sheikh's autobiography *I Want to Destroy Myself* was shortlisted for the Crossword Award for Fiction. Furthermore, his graphic novel in collaboration with Garima Gupta was shortlisted for the Crossword Award for Children's Fiction. His translation of the Dalit writer Baburao Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste* won the Fiction Prize at the Bangalore Literary Festival in 2018 and his novel *Murder in Mahim* (2017) won the Valley of Words Prize, and was shortlisted for the Crossword Award for Fiction and the Mumbai Academy of the Moving Image Prize.*

But there was a time when he feared rejection. In this interview Jerry Pinto touches on various issues, revealing the story of how he became a writer, a career option which wasn't

¹ This interview was conducted via e-mail by the students of the course *Contemporary Indian English Fiction* of BITS-Pilani (Hyderabad Campus): Srushti Kulkarni, Rohan Singhavi, Saransh Chandak, Mukesh Kumar, Moloy Das, Muskan Mittal, Deeksha, Raghavi, Vineela, Deepak, Vaibhav Chauhan, Khushali Saraf and course instructor in-charge, Dr. Maya Vinai.

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then recognised as a very reliable job prospect in India. He also discusses his social engagements and his connection with the city of his birth, Mumbai.

Q. It requires a lot of courage to expose, though indirectly, your own relationship with your mother through the novel *Em and the Big Hoom*. What inspired you to come up with a work that revealed so much of your own relationship with your mother?

A. Thank you for the presumption, the kind presumption with which you begin: that it must have taken courage. I don't know that it did. Honestly, I don't think it did. I was 16 when I went to college and I remember thinking: I can now be anyone I want to be; I don't have to be the son of the mad woman anymore ... as I was in school; it was close to my home and there were no secrets. Celeste's father was a drunk; Jerry's mother was 'mental', Satish's dad smuggled watch parts. College was going to be cool and anonymous and I could be a new version of me ... and I felt so bad even as I rejected my mother that I made a promise to myself: I would not conceal this part of my identity that I was a son of a bipolar mother. I would not make it my calling card, I would not turn it into the cornerstone of my identity but I would not deny her either. And so I told my first-ever friend, Jehangir Palkhivala, one afternoon, and he didn't seem particularly worked up over it and we went back to playing the mad word games that we devised for each other. And I told other friends then, people who would know that I was vulnerable in the moment of telling and in its aftermath, people who would respect that vulnerability. They shared their stories with me too, and pretty soon I had come to the conclusion that my mother's condition was like diabetes, it was a matter of some bodily chemicals that were out of sync. And if one is not ashamed of a diabetic mother, why should one be ashamed of a bipolar mother?

Q. All your previous works have been non-fiction. How did you come up with the thought of writing a novel? More than fiction, *Em and the Big Hoom* looks like an autobiography in a more simple sense.

A. This is an autobiographical novel. But it is also a novel; it is not an autobiography. It is not an account of how things happened. The raw material has been drawn from my life; the shaping of it, the creation of these four people, is craft. So was it tough? When it was too tough, I could always draw back and say to myself: 'Mendes. You are writing about four Mendeses. Get on with it.'

I am the narrator, in one real way. I am telling the story. I am even narrating the narrator. The decision to make it a first-person account was really a literary one because a family story often seems like a single unitary history, as if there is only one story in there. But actually there are as many stories as there are people and as many stories as there are listeners. So the 'I' of the book is an attempt to say, 'Do you know anything about your family? And how do you know what you know?'. The only difference is that some writing you want to do and some writing you must do. It's best when the 'want' and the 'must' come together. So I would take it as a kindness if you, and my readers, would not conflate my life and the lives of those around me too closely with the lives of the characters in my novel.

Q. You are a *Mumbaikar*² right from your birth. Can you tell us about your relationship with the city of Mumbai?

A. I have always maintained that literature in its production, cultivation, dissemination and judgement, is a phenomenon of the city. To understand even the rural novel or a novel set among a tribe that has somehow escaped modernity, a novel set in Utopia (equally Good City and No City), one must understand the city in which the novel is produced. Even if a novel is written in a sylvan retreat, it is because a phenomenological and ontological city has been decreed into existence by the writer.

Bombay is the city I cannot live in; it is the city I can never leave. I have never lived anywhere else except for a three-month stint as a Chevening scholar when I went to London. I remember landing in London and thinking, ‘Has there been a riot? Is there a problem?’ That was because there was no one on the streets. Everything looked empty and chillingly eerie. Bombay invades me and evades me. It enrages me and repels me; but when I return home, I find myself relaxing. I find myself in control again. I know how to deal with this city in an instinctive way that I don’t for any other city.

So the city I live in is water to the fish, air to the birds: it passes unnoticed. As a writer, one responds to minute changes and to tectonic, seismic shifts in its interior geography. At one level, the cutting of a tree that was in one’s line of vision becomes a major event, the closing of a grocery shop to make way for another ATM is significant. On the larger level, it is the political and the economic changes that make Mumbai such a significant place. Here everything is in flux and this instability, this constant change makes people fearful and anxious. This free-floating anxiety is what right-wing and parochial forces feed on. The greatest shifts in Mumbai’s destiny have happened as I have grown up in this city: the mill strike called by Datta Samant, the collapse of Mumbai as a productive economy and its transformation into a speculative economy, the growth of the suburbs and the stresses of four-hour commutes in sub-human conditions, the increasing intolerance, the communal tensions of 1992 and 1993, the bomb blasts that followed and the terrorist attacks. Then there were the floods that left so many people stranded for days and killed others.

I began writing this book 20 years ago, maybe more than that. I wrote 27 drafts of it and sometimes I think there have been 27 drafts of the city outside my balcony. This is the way it must be. A city that remains unchanged over 20 years must be in the state that Pompeii is: petrified, frozen in time. Much of the changes have, as everyone knows, been for the worse. We live and love on a fissure; at any time, some tectonic plate will shift and we will all be crushed. You would not wish that on an enemy but for a writer, it is a source of unending inspiration, of magnificent material.

Bombay is also a city whose literary credentials have been vastly underrated simply because my city finds itself in the headlines for all the wrong reasons. Until David Davidar wrote *The Solitude of Emperors*, I hadn’t even thought of it as a literary city. Here’s what Davidar says:

² Anyone who is born and brought up in, or who resides in, the city for a long period of time, in popular parlance is known as a *Mumbaikar*.

It was a city of poets and cafés, and all-night sessions of drinking and versifying, a place to rival Joyce's Dublin or Cavafy's Alexandria or Pessoa's Lisbon. Dom, hammering away with one finger at his typewriter in Sargent House, spectacles slipping down his nose as the poems ran wild in his head, Adil holding court in his eyrie on Cuffe Parade, Nissim spinning his demotic verse in coffee houses and poets' gatherings, Kolatkar with his strange fierce epic about gods of stone, Imtiaz and the agate-eyed women who glided through her work ... what a time that was, the nights of writing poetry and drinking and partying and fucking the beautiful young women we all shared.³

And I was there. I showed Dom my poems. I met Nissim when I was still in college. Imtiaz has always been a personal friend. So has Adil. And then think about the generation to which I belong: Ranjit Hoskote, Arundhathi Subramaniam, Mustansir Dalvi, C P Surendran, Jeet Thayil, Vijay Nambisan. Some may have left but they were all here and we learned from each other, listened to each other, cross-fertilised each other's work. Which other city has had a Poetry Circle – started by Menaka Shivdasani, Aqil Contractor and R Raj Rao – an institution that brought out its own journal and offered support, encouragement, the occasional picnic and careful workshop criticism for years?

Bombay has played muse to Kiran Nagarkar and Salman Rushdie, Amit Chaudhuri and Suketu Mehta. What Bombay means to writers cannot be answered in a couple of paragraphs. You'd need a book to address its cultural life. I am going to work on such a book.

Q. Your writing style in the *Em and the Big Hoom*, includes readings from letters, diary entries etc. It adds to the dark theme of the novel. How did you come up with this writing style?

A. You do what it takes. You reach out for forms and you take what you need. I think we're all like that. If the word is there, you use the word. If it isn't, you make it. You need to go inside her head now: write a diary entry for her. You need to see how she would present herself to him: write a letter from him to her. You need to see them together, step out and introduce a character looking at them. Then you take a deep breath and begin to collate. And then you hope that it will work.

Q. 'The Big Hoom's story has the mythic resonance of India in it.'⁴ How did you come up with the character of the Big Hoom? Was it inspirational or your imagination?

A. The Big Hoom was based on my father. He was inspirational in many more ways than I can possibly say. But that's in the real world; on the page, it's a different matter. I was worried when I finished the book that Em was so big a character that she would suck the oxygen out of the rest of the characters. Then I would have to rewrite the book as a dramatic monologue. Or do something else. I don't know what but something else. You can't build a book out of a single character. Or I can't, at least. So I thought about building up The Big

³ David Davidar, *The Solitude of Emperors* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007) 80.

⁴ Deepanjana Pal, Book review, 'Em and the Big Hoom', *DNA (India)* Online <https://www.dnaindia.com/lifestyle/review-book-review-em-and-the-big-hoom-1688014>

Hoom and giving him more page space but when I went back for a last read, he seemed to be doing well. He was quiet but he was fine. He was one of those supporting characters who by being there ensure that the lead actor gets an Oscar. Em is centre-stage yes, but I was finally quite happy – inasmuch as I can be happy with what I do – with how The Big Hoom worked out.

Q. Generally the life of an actor is filled with controversies. Writing about them would mean inviting controversies yourself. This is about your famous award-winning work *Helen: The Life and Times of a Bollywood H-Bomb*. Why did you prefer writing about an actor? Did your stay in Mumbai, the hub of Bollywood, influence your idea?

A. Everything is an influence. The films you have seen influence you, the college you go to, the friends you make there, their political positions, the poems you read, the books in the library, the ones you read and the ones you didn't. Each change is tiny, a micro-reorientation, but eventually these add up and you become the person you are. So here goes. I am now nearly 50 years old so I did not live through the glory days of the Helen age; I caught the end of it but what an end: Sholay's *Mehbooba Mehbooba*, Don's *Yeh mera dil pyaar ka deewana* and Inkaar's *Mungda, mungda*. In each one, Helen who had vamped her way through three generations of heroes – Prithviraj Kapoor in Raja Harishchandra, Raj Kapoor in Anari and Rishi Kapoor in Phool Khile Hain Gulshan Gulshan – was still hoofing it and drawing whistles and coins from the stalls. This was obviously a woman who was star material.

And then there I was. Jerry Pinto, Roman Catholic Goan boy, my community mocked and scorned as winos, wastrels and wantons, watching a woman called Helen. How could I not be interested?

Finally, my political position has always been one in which I side with the small guy. Which is why I chose to write a book about a woman who was a supporting actor through her life, not about a star. I am not interested in stars; many other people are and they are welcome to them.

Q. You have researched the lives of Helen and Leela Naidu, both of whom are gorgeous and talented. What do you think are the important qualities that separate them from the others? What is that 'X-factor' they possess which has brought them so much fame and success?

A. Leela Naidu was never famous; she was simply herself. She walked away from a film career when she was no longer getting the kind of roles she wanted. She became a radio producer, a dubbing artiste, a magazine editor, a columnist ... she was so talented she could do almost anything she wanted.

Helen was her exact opposite. She could do one thing and she did that beautifully: she could act in Bollywood schlock and give her roles some grace. That takes a lot of effort.

Leela came from privilege. Her father worked with Marie Curie; her mother was a journalist from France; she was educated in Geneva. She married into the Oberoi family and had twins. Then she got divorced and married Dom Moraes and that didn't work out much better either.

Helen came up the hard way. She walked from Burma to Assam during the Second World War. She was plucked out of school and sent off to dance. She made some bad mistakes but then ended up as the happily married Mrs Salim Khan.

I met with no cooperation from Helen in the writing of my book on her.

No two women could have been different, no two processes could have been more different.

Q. A relationship shapes the character of a person and also explains his actions. Your book *Helen: The Life and Times of an H-Bomb* doesn't much elaborate about Helen's relationships. Anything you would like to add to this?

A. I was fascinated by Helen, the figure on the screen. I was not interested in her private life. I have never been particularly interested in that sort of thing. I much prefer the nuances of art, even that of popular cinema, to the ordinary doings of poor forked beasts.

Q. In the world where women, from a mother to a wife, are given the utmost importance in our lives, why did you prefer naming your first book 'Surviving Women'? It could have also been something like 'Life with Women'?

A. My first break as a writer of books came when Shobhaa De wrote a book called *Surviving Men* for Penguin. It did well enough for Penguin to think of someone to write a rejoinder. I didn't get much of a choice with the title and as a first-time author I didn't even imagine I would. It was either say, 'Yes' or 'No' so I said 'Yes'. I'm guessing you haven't read this book for if you do, you will see that it is slyly feminist. But hey, that's par for the course. People will judge a book by its name and I wanted men to do that and then be persuaded into thinking about women not just as mother figures and sex objects and goddesses to be dragged down into the mud but as human beings.

Q. The book, *Surviving Women*, deals with the issue in a very sensitive manner and corners a wide part of the women clan. Did you ever feel that you could receive a backlash from a part of the society?

A. A young lady whose name I have forgotten wrote to me from Penguin and asked if I might be interested in writing *Surviving Women*. I thought this was a bit dangerous – I have several powerful women as friends and this kind of book was sure to upset them – but I thought I could weasel out of it with some skillful retelling of other men's stories. But then she left Penguin India and was replaced by Ravi Singh, who came to Bombay to see me and other writers from the city. I saw him walking down the aisle of the barnlike fourth floor of the Times of India building and decided I had a friend. I was not wrong. A year later, I sent him *Surviving Women*, written as a series of accounts of the bad times some men had had with some women and got my first rejection. 'This is fun,' Ravi wrote, 'but it will be even more fun if you're in there, telling us what you think.'

And so I fumed and fretted and rewrote it and Nilanjana Roy wrote in *The Business Standard* that it was guaranteed to raise feminist and chauvinist hackles alike, it's still out there and selling unless Penguin has slyly put in on 'Print-on-Demand' without telling me.

Has there been a backlash? I have had women come up to me and say they have given it to their male friends, their brothers and their cousins as gifts. So, no, not yet, anyway.

Q. In this society of widespread choices of careers and goals, what made you choose the field of writing?

A. Whenever I start a new year of teaching journalism at the post-graduate Social Communications Media course (SCM) at the Sophia Polytechnic, Mumbai, I think how wonderful it is that so many young people think of media and writing as career options, which they are now. I began only because I was lucky enough to have a good friend who kept urging and encouraging me to write. I was at the time making a living by teaching mathematics privately. No one in school or even in college had ever said to me, ‘You have talent, why not try your hand at writing?’ It was my friend Rashmi Palkhivala who would keep saying I should write for the papers, I should write funnies. I said, only half-joking, that my ego would not take rejection. So she said, ‘You write them, I’ll type them and take them to the editors. You won’t have to know whether they rejected you or not.’ In the next week, 12 pieces came pouring out of me. She typed them up and took them to Mid-Day. They accepted 10. I was over the moon but within 20 seconds, I was asking: ‘Which were the two they didn’t like? And why didn’t they like them?’ The Buddha is right, there is no end to desire.

But here I must also add that I did not think, when I was a journalist, that I would ever be able to write a book. And then I had the great good luck to get Ravi Singh as an editor and publisher. Someone has to give you courage, someone has to stand behind you and root for you, someone has to say, ‘I think you can do this if you try’. Unfortunately, our world seems to consist of people who say, ‘Do you really think you should be trying to do that?’ and other such comments.

Q. *Asylum and Other Poems* was your first attempt at poetry. How difficult and different do you feel is poetry, from your other fiction and non-fiction?

A. I write poetry very very slowly. I have no idea why. I write it all the time but most of what I write is so mediocre that I tear it up the next morning so that no one will ever know I committed these follies. I find it difficult because I think it is a difficult form. We all start by writing poetry, seduced I think by how simple a truly good poem looks. And it’s such a do-able size, one thinks, as an adolescent. I could do that. Then it becomes apparent that one has to have huge linguistic resources in order to write the simplest poem. One may feel despair but one cannot say it, one must make the reader aware of that despair. How does one sum up all that one wants to say and yet leave space for the reader to come in and make the poem her own? Ezra Pound was right. He made it simple for all of us. Make it new, he said. What he did not say, clever man, was that you are going to have to read a lot to know what is old to write something that is new. So every time, I write a poem, I keep asking myself: is it what you wanted to say or what you think poems should say? Will it be able to make its way into the world and yet leave spaces for others to make it into part of their world? Does it sound like me or does it sound like someone I’d like to be? And you should know that the answers to these questions may vary depending on the time of day, the

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internal weather, oh anything. So yes, I like the way you phrase it: my first attempt at poetry. That is what it is: an attempt.

It is not an easy thing to be a poet in India. Publishers keep asking: who reads poetry these days? To which the answer is: who reads anything these days? And since no one is reading, let's just shut shop and go home and post our best ideas on social networking sites. No, the publishers say, people are reading. Well, then, there is a subset of those readers who would be interested in poetry. How shall they be served? My second book of poems is nearly ready. I have a contract with a major corporation. I have no idea whether they will or will not honour that contract. But that's true of everyone from royalty to newcomers, no one has a publisher, no one has the assurance of a publisher waiting for the next manuscript. So what makes the next poem come? It is the pressure of wanting to be born, its insistence. You can only want to make poetry happen and that is why it happens.

Q. You are associated with an NGO called MelJol, which works for children's rights. Why did you particularly choose children's rights as your mission?

A. MelJol is in nine states in India and its program, the one we piloted and proved in rural Maharashtra, is in 100 countries. But the story begins when I read about Childline in a newspaper called the *Metropolis* on a Saturday in 1996. I thought it was a good idea: street children attending to a helpline for children in distress. I called the number, wrote a cheque and forgot about it. But a week later, three social workers came looking for me. That was the whole Childline team then: Jeroo Billimoria, who had invented it; Prakash Fernandes, who drew the charts and did the writing; and Meghna Sawant, who did everything else. Billimoria wasted no time.

'We need your help,' she said.

'I'd love to help but what can I do?' I asked.

'We are thinking about a training manual. You could edit that for us,' Billimoria said.

That was more like it. Editing I could do. That was something I had done for years.

Over the next few weeks, I found that I had much to learn. The social development sector has its own locutions, its own formulations. But behind each clunky phrase is an idea. For instance, one does not 'help' people understand child rights; one 'orients' them towards child rights. This sounded silly when I was editing it. But later, it was explained to me. If you say 'help', you are assuming that you are in a superior position of power. Help always flows downwards. If you say 'orients', you are both on the same plane, you are offering a suggestion as equals. To many this may sound like not calling a spade a spade. I don't think so. It's about caring enough to make sure you try and do what is needed, not ride in to reform everyone and show them how things should be done. Too often, volunteers assume that they bring sound common sense to the development sector. They do, but every volunteer would do well to remember that those who are professionally involved in development work have studied several models, tried various methods, and are standing on the shoulders of the giants of their field.

A little humility goes a long way.

I learnt this in one long and insight-packed night. After several weeks of email exchanges, Billimoria rang me up and suggested that we meet in the Childline office for half an hour so she could orient me to the needs of editing a manual in the development sector.

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At around 7pm, we sat down at a computer, I cracked my knuckles, she ordered tea and we began work. At 2am, the watchman of the building came in to complain. Billimoria emailed the file to herself and we went off in search of one of her friends who had a computer at home. At 3am, we were ensconced in front of a computer of some bemused friend who had opened her door, asked if we wanted some coffee, and then gone back to sleep without giving us any. At 5am, it was done and I had learnt that if you want to help, you have to relearn several things.

Over the course of the next five years, I edited eight or nine manuals for Childline. I did their reports, edited their proposals and then the inevitable happened. Childline became a government project. It had funds. It was in 50 cities. It was big and it would survive.

‘I want you to work with MelJol,’ said Billimoria in 2001.

I liked the idea. MelJol was a small struggling organisation at the time. It had no funds though it was doing pioneering work in child rights. By the way, the term ‘child rights’ does not mean children going on strike for their rights; it only means that children have the right to survival, to development, to protection and participation. In the face of every child labourer, in the body of every child sex worker, you can see a violation of the basic rights of the child. MelJol works with children in the school system, with teachers in schools, to strengthen the notion that children have rights.

If you think this is unimportant, consider this. Most teachers think of the good student as the student who listens to the voice of authority and obeys immediately, without asking questions. Every Indian child internalises this; a good child is an obedient child. Without a tradition of asking questions, without a tradition of asking for facts, without a tradition of independent thinking, the same children can turn into the cannon fodder of fascists. MelJol believes that India will reap what she sows in these classrooms. Where democratic values, tolerance, and a respect for differences are sown, we will reap an inclusive India.

For some years, I worked with MelJol, doing precisely what I had done with Childline. And then one day, Billimoria blew into town again. We drove to a school in which the students greeted Sumitra Ashtikar, our executive director, with the kind of approval reserved for film stars. They roared the MelJol song and danced the MelJol dance, Sumitra leading with panache, and they almost made me cry. Then suddenly, Billimoria asked whether anyone had a bank account.

No one did. She asked who had been inside a bank. A very few had. She asked how many children had parents who had bank accounts. Not too many. Less than 40%.

On the way back, during the long drive from the outskirts of Panvel to the office of MelJol, located in a municipal school in Bombay Central, she outlined her plan. ‘A bank for children, no, we’ll call it a child savings scheme, the word bank brings all kinds of problems with it. And we have to have a passbook. And maybe a bank day, on which deposits are made, and withdrawals. No, they can’t just withdraw. They have to say why. It should be written in the book, put in another column, there. No, we should use the MelJol clubs for this. It should be one of their activities. Where should the money be kept? With the teacher. Later we can have them open accounts in the banks. Or the post offices. Even where there are no banks, there are post offices. We need to talk to the post offices ...’

And so it went. By the time we were back in the city, Sumitra and I were exhausted but we knew that we had another project to start. Neither of us was sure it would work. But

today hundreds of thousands of children are learning the concept of savings, not just in rural Maharashtra but in 20 countries all over the world. MelJol's concept lives and breathes in Egypt and Vietnam, in Brazil and Kenya, in Argentina and Serbia and is teaching children to take charge of their lives and their futures.

I know my role was small but it was one which gave me immense satisfaction of the kind you could experience tomorrow. You could be a lawyer or a doctor or a teacher or a homemaker. Your skills are needed. They can, with a little rejigging, be put to use. The social development sector needs corporate help more than ever before. It needs help with setting up systems, writing financial plans, corporate planning, things that will establish institutional longevity. As the global slowdown begins, it will have to turn self-sufficient. I still work pro bono with MelJol as executive secretary to the board of directors. More information can be found on www.meljol.net

Q. Winning the Hindu Literary Award, the Crossword Book Award and now the Windham-Campbell literature prize, definitely proves your mettle and hard work. We are keenly looking forward to your next. You have been highly successful at your experiment with fiction. So can we expect another fiction in the near future? What are your future plans?

A. I am going to write and read and watch films and travel and volunteer and learn, have as much fun as I legally can. What will I write? The kind of book I want to read. That might be fiction and it might be a script. The rest is all bells and whistles. Meanwhile, can you hear the gods laughing as I make plans?

Q. Sir, you as a highly experienced writer, journalist, and columnist stand as a true inspiration to the youth of our country. Any message you would like to give to the current generation?

A. Inspiration? That's a new one. Okay, then here's the advice:

1. Read a lot.
2. Work hard. Work as hard as you would want someone you were paying to work for you.
3. Be there. Show up. On time.
4. Volunteer. Work as hard as if you were being paid.
5. Connect.
6. Empathise.
7. Count your blessings.
8. Be a friend to get a friend.
9. Find balance. Between work and family, between family and friends, between saving and spending, between laughter and tears.
10. Value yourself. You're unique. No one else knows this. You do. Value it.

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