

listenN: Today in Episode 17 I'm talking with creative writer, teacher, and mindfulness meditation instructor, Dr Ranjini George. We discussed the importance of practicing one's craft of writing, how her love for teaching interwove with her practice of meditation, and the importance of being present in all situations to let the words come through. She also takes us through a mindfulness exercise to help bring us back home to ourselves, the page, and our creative journey. Hello Ranjini, welcome to listenN.

Ranjini George: Hello Brian, wonderful being here on this rainy afternoon.

listenN: Yes, I think it's very poignant for our conversation to be a little in the container of the rain and the clouds. I wanted to talk with you about your profession and how you have woven creative writing and mindfulness together in such a unique way. But, first of all, maybe you could just explain to me and our listeners, how do you describe yourself? What title do you give yourself?

Ranjini George: What title do I give myself? Well, I think of myself, my goal of myself, is really just loving awareness. The structure, who Ranjini is, in terms of, I am a teacher, I am a writer, I am a mother, I am a wife, I am a friend, I am a daughter, I am a sister. I see that as just, what form I'm taking in this particular lifetime, and part of my practice is not to identify with that structure of my form. And it's interesting you say that because just this morning I was thinking every day I journal and there are aspirations and things that I work on. One of the things I'm trying to work on some more is just being in that state of awareness, is just responding to the world and to my life and to perceived obstacles and challenges and perceived failures or even successes as just part of that egoic form and that egoic structure. As we move towards more egolessness, as we have a greater sense that... I remember Eckhart Tolle saying, we get hypnotized by this world of form.

Ranjini George: And because I had a down moment this morning, my writing was not going the way it was going, and I thought that's the ego again because writing is something that's joyful and it gives me happiness. But it's the ego that wants this product and sort of makes this demand, "Oh, you're not good enough. It's not going fast enough." And I think whenever I can return to just being present and just return to the sense of being ness, I just feel a greater sense of joy and sometimes even more bliss.

listenN: That's an interesting point that you made around the ego and its connection with writing because so many people don't like writing or they don't like the process of writing. And as a creative instructor, do you feel that that's because they're coming at it from an ego point of view? And that's because the ego is so predominant in our society that most people don't enjoy the writing process.

Ranjini George: Mm-hmm (affirmative). But the writing process is... It's joyful, it's wonderful, but it's also hard and it also requires practice. It also requires mastering the craft

and again and again I have... I've been teaching now for a long time, I have students or just people I meet who say I want to be a writer and... Which is wonderful, but then there's this feeling that writing is just something you can do and that there's no craft to master. We say if you want to be a good pianist, if you want to be a surgeon, if you want to be a physicist, I mean, there is learning. There is a craft, there is practice. And I think the same thing goes with writing that sometimes we are sort of unrealistic. We have the inspiration, we have the desire, but there is also a period of apprenticeship. A period where we may write, we may journal, but we go about learning the craft.

Ranjini George: How do you tell a story? How do you create a character? How do you think of conflict? How do you create narrative arc? How do you bring in setting? What point of view do you use? What are the different kinds of points of view that you could use? So there's a long process of, there is a process of learning and [inaudible 00:06:31] you asked Brian because I was just reading this right before our talk and I just read it aloud to you. It's from Natalie Goldberg's book, Natalie Goldberg is one of my favorite writing teachers and I use her books in my class and, in *Writing Down the Bones*, she says that students often say that they want to form a book and she says, "I told him take it slow. Just let yourself write for a while. Learn what that is about. Writing is a whole lifetime and a lot of practice."

Ranjini George: We want to think we are doing something useful, going someplace, achieving something. You want to think I am writing a book. Give yourself some space before you decide to write those big volumes. Learn to trust the force of your own voice. Naturally, it will evolve a direction and a need for one, but it will come from a different place than your need to be an achiever. But writing is also learning the craft. How do you tell your story in the best possible way? It's learning from people who've studied in that field and it's also learning from within a community of other writers, I think.

Ranjini George: And writing is also practice. So, someone who's running marathon, he runs every day and he runs every day, but every day is not a marathon. And people have the misconception that if I'm working on something for a long time it should be published, otherwise there is no use of it, it's, it's not productive. But it's practice. How do you get better without practice? So I think that culture is really focused on productivity and it is, which is a good thing, in some ways, but sometimes there's an imbalance and it's just focused on immediate, something that's quick and fast and writing is often a slow process. Sometimes a poem can come quickly, but it's showing up day by day.

listenN: Yeah. And that's something that I find interesting because, as you say, we're a society about productivity. And so now we have all these self-published books, which are great, it's a great way for people to get their writing out into the world. But it's also helping validate that ego piece which is saying, Oh, I must have a published book in order to validate my writing. And what I'm hearing you say is that it's a different process. And this is where I find the concept of creative

writing and writing and learning the craft of writing and the connection with mindfulness so interesting because... It's almost like you really do need that skill and tool of mindfulness in order to help you navigate that journey of committing to writing.

Ranjini George: Yes. Yeah, I think with... One of the Paramitas in Buddhism is the Paramita of patience. Another one is right effort. Another one is discipline. And I think all these things manifest in the writing life.

listenN: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Ranjini George: And the ability of just being present. So there's a certain discipline, you sit down and sometimes there's flow and inspiration and sometimes nothing much happens and that's okay too, but you sort of... It's the same thing as when you're a meditation practitioner, you practice every day, you sit down and some days you may have what you call a good meditation sitting and on other days your mind is all over the place, but you still sit. So there is a discipline in just showing up and in just being present to the page. So just... One of the phrases that Natalie Goldberg uses, she says, "Step aside and let the words come through". So I think of that, "Step aside and let the words come through", because whenever I feel frustrated and dissatisfied and when I'm hard on myself it's usually because the ego has kicked in and I do want that product, I want to feel more productive and I've lost patience with that process.

listenN: Welcome back. I'm talking with Dr Ranjini George, who is sharing the story about her desire to bring the vastness of her spiritual journey and the practices that she learned into the writing classroom.

Ranjini George: Teaching is something I... I wanted to be a teacher when I was in grade five. My mother is an English teacher and I was surrounded by books and I wanted to be an English teacher. And so from 1989, so, a long time, I've been teaching. I did my PhD in the US so I started teaching language and then literature and later on when I immigrated to Canada I did an MFA. Years before I began the MFA I got really interested in creative writing, so I was doing a lot of writing workshops. Then I started teaching creative writing. Teaching was something I was doing full-time when I was teaching in Dubai and Oman and part-time now in Canada with the School Of Continuing Studies, with the University of Toronto. And my meditation practice was something that began in my 30s but was a parallel stream, it was something else that I was doing, so they were two different things.

listenN: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ranjini George: When I was in my 30s I was just going through things and I wanted to find ways to feel more stable, more at peace. So I started with yoga and then I read a lot of Eckhart Tolle, Wayne Dyer, Pema Chodron, Dalai Lama. And I started taking a

lot of courses, so I studied with teachers like Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and others. And many... In 2011 I was at the Stupa and the Stupa in Boulder, Colorado at the Shambhala retreat center. And we were going through a meditation practice with the teacher, the main teacher, who was the main teacher of Shambhala. And at that... While I was at the Stupa I had this sense of lost ness and I had this deep desire of wanting to bring in these practices that I had learned into the writing classroom. And so I taught my first meditation and writing class in November 2011. And so now I teach some what you call regular creative writing classes, creative writing introduction, creative writing proofreading, memoir. But I also teach classes like meditation writing, pilgrimage to the sacred feminine, because the sacred feminine, from all the different meditative wisdom traditions, is of great interest to me. And I'm part of the title, discipline in your writing, where I brought in meditation practice and writing.

listenN: So, that's fascinating when you're talking about the two parallel streams kind of coming together at that moment in time in Colorado and how it... I guess this is the question, is it now... Are you able to separate the two or is it just infused? Meaning that, when you teach a introductory, introduction to creative writing class, can you separate the two anymore or is it now just so integrated into your whole process of creative writing?

Ranjini George: So, I think I've... In a sense that I may come from a meditative space and some of the strategies that I use may come from that space within me, but I do compartmentalize what I teach. So when I teach a meditation and writing class we do walking, we do some sitting, I directly talk about meditation because it's in the course outline and students have actually registered expecting to work with these two things which, are in a sense one, in the classroom. But in my creative writing intro there may be people who have absolutely no interest in meditation and they've signed it... Signed up for the class just to learn the different... The toolbox of the writer's craft. So even if I have an aside here and there... And it's just that I carry that awareness within me and I hope it sort of infuses my teaching, but I don't talk about it.

listenN: Right. And so... Because I'm always fascinated by writers and how they work with language and words and how they come to craft their communication. And then on the flip side, I've always been very interested in meditation and mindfulness and I'm noticing... I've been to a number of conferences, for example, that are kind of, not business type conferences, but more creative business type of conference, and they're now starting to introduce mindfulness into these conferences. Like they'll do a little moment where somebody will come on stage and take everybody through an exercise and everybody always feels fantastic afterwards.

Ranjini George: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

- listenN: And so, I would think that the stress of writing, the loneliness of writing, the solitude of that creative art form and mindfulness, they would just go hand in hand, but they kind of haven't. We see... I think of the stereotypical creative writer and it's somebody who's locked in a cabin somewhere in the woods who's partly depressed or partly alcoholic and trying to bang out their next masterpiece. We don't really see them, kind of... And so, I guess where I'm going with this long ramble is... Have you seen people embrace this in a way that's... As something new or has mindfulness always just been a part of the creative process, it's just maybe not been described that way?
- Ranjini George: Well I think all writers have to be awake. They have to be awake and present to themselves and to the world. So in a sense you use the mindfulness practice of deep listening. I mean, you have to listen to yourself and you have to listen to others and to the world around you. You have to be awake your life to actually put that on the page. But, at the same time, the creative... I don't... Besides sort of, that being awake, we've seen that with the addictions, the suffering that so many creative artists have gone through.
- Ranjini George: I don't think it has to be and has been part of the process for all. It may be with some, like with Henry David Thoreau. With some writers I think it's there, but I don't think it's always been part of the creative process. I think they are connecting to a state of flow. They are connecting to inspiration. So they are connecting to this transcendent realm of flow and energy and creativity, which is in nature, which is in the world around us, and which we share. But in the rest of their life, it may not really be there. And that's... I mean... And then a lot of the instructors that I work with are wonderful, balanced human beings and great writers, but they have no interest in mindfulness or meditation practice.
- Ranjini George: And I think it's really, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, one of the precepts is that we are not... We don't have fixed mind, even about mindfulness. So, for me it works. And I do believe, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, that mindfulness is a source of happiness, but it may not be something that everyone goes to. Now personally, I feel that mindfulness meditation, I feel that meditation helps me to drop into myself. And that the meditation practice has helped me to connect to my own authenticity. It has helped me to actually connect to my own story, to my own mind.
- Ranjini George: It has, as Natalie Goldberg says, you know what Patrul Rinpoche, the Tibetan teacher, said, he says, when we sit on the meditation cushion we unpeel the layers of our heart so we face great storms of grief and anger and joy and jealousy and all these different emotions, but we learn to sit on the cushion even as we experience all that.
- Ranjini George: And she says that the writer does that with the blank page. So we sit there with our writing and we, maybe write, working on a memoir, and as we go back into our life, because writers have to live twice, as we go back into our life, we may

experience all these emotions. And then the process itself of writing, I think meditation practice really helps me on a personal level to stay with the process of writing because it's not an easy process. There's no... There's very little money as you're working on it. A story could take months and months and so there's no, as you said... It is solitary.

listenN: Yeah.

Ranjini George: But I think the difference in meditation practice is that as we feel these disturbing emotions, as we feel inadequate, as we feel confused we just realize we... Instead of reaching out towards some kind of addictive behavior, whatever that addictive behavior is, we use the practice to stabilize ourselves.

listenN: Welcome back. I'm talking with Dr Ranjini George, who is discussing the significance of journaling as a practice of mindfulness, because like meditation, journaling takes us home. We are listening to ourselves.

listenN: When you said that writers have to live twice, that's the first time I've heard that, but that was very succinct and very eyeopening because, as you say, you're going to relive every experience. Whether it's just the one you had today going to the store or one you had from an early childhood. And I've never thought of it that way, that was really beautifully put.

Ranjini George: It's actually, it's a chapter from I... I sort of suggest that people read if they haven't read, Natalie Goldberg's, *Writing Down the Bones*, and one of those, one chapter in there, is called *Living Twice*. She has a wonderful story. I took a workshop with her, I think it was last year in Santa Fe, and she went through cancer, some, I think two years ago and survived through it. And then later on she wrote this memoir, which has been published, *Let the Whole World Come Thundering Through*, and as she was working on that memoir, she said initially when she start... When she worked on it, she would feel terrible, she felt it was really difficult to sit down and write and to go back to that very difficult place because when you're writing you have to almost relive that again. So one of her friends said, "If it makes you so unhappy just stop doing it, don't write the memoir". And she said, "I'm a writer and that's what I do".

Ranjini George: I mean, every job has its challenges and I think Haruki Murakami, who's one of my favorite Japanese writers, he's a marathon runner, so he runs. But there is something about writing that, you're sitting at the desk and you're sitting at the table and it seems as if you're not doing much, but there is all this invisible work and hard work and energy. You have to find a way to sort of dip down and connect.

Ranjini George: One of the images I really like is one from Thich Nhat Hanh and it's one that Natalie uses in a different way in her book but that what we do with our life, that our suffering, can be garbage, but it can also be compost from which fruits

and vegetables grow and that is something that Thich Nhat Hanh says and then Natalie, in her book, talks about the compost.

Ranjini George: So I think what we do is... I was teaching a memoir class in Mississauga last night and we had... One of the things we do in a creative writing class is we have writing workshops. And it was... Three of the stories that people shared were very, very difficult stories. It was about the loss of a parent, it was about unforgiveness and forgiveness, so there was a lot of crying in the classroom. Even as they read their stories, shared their stories, and as people listened to their stories, they wept too.

Ranjini George: So there is the sense that with writing you're really encountering your experience and your heart, but what you're doing with this is that I think you're making your lotus. If you're an artist you will paint something beautiful, if you're a musician you might turn that into music, but as a writer you turn that into words and I think that is your lotus and that is your offering to the world.

Ranjini George: Interestingly, in a number of the stories, it was the death of this awful mother that people were sharing, at a time when each person was, they were quite young. So there was a sense of sharing. You're sharing your story and your story also uplifts the other person because it was strange, because they had not talked to each other, had written independently, and... But there's a sense that this is... Loss is such a universal experience. So your grief then, even though it's there, your sorrow, even though it's there, is less solid. You realize that all beings suffer, suffering is just a part of the human condition. And so, I mean you, and this was a memoir class. I didn't talk about meditation, but I did talk universality. I mean, the first noble truth is that life has suffering. And so what we do as writers is that we take that suffering, we find shape, and we create something of beauty, and I think something that will help others. Because I think one of the things that the writers felt is that they were less alone, that they were not alone in the suffering.

listenN: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ranjini George: And it sort of lessons it. I think the suffering becomes less solid.

listenN: That whole concept of, if you say it, if you put it out, if you get it out from inside you, you learn that you're not alone in the world. And there's others who share, who have experienced the same thing and writing I think is the ultimate form of that. Well, I mean, art in general, but writing because it's personal. You can paint a picture and people will say, "Well yes, you painted that picture but it's not... You didn't make the paint". Whereas, like with writing, it's like you're choosing the words and the words people associate with you as a very personal way of communicating and I think that's what makes writing so raw.

Ranjini George: Mm-hmm (affirmative) Yeah, I remember Margaret Atwood saying that the tools are very simple in writing. You have the page and the pen, your laptop and then your mind, your mind and your heart. So, unlike someone who's producing a film where you have so many people being part of that vision, it's very different. And it is, I mean one of the challenges of writing is the solitude, there's just no way around it. I mean, they are... I have students who go together, they sit and, go to a cafe together, they sit down and they write together, but you can do all that and you need community I think to keep going. But you need people who will read your writing and someone you can share your writing with, but it is these long hours of sitting at the desk.

listenN: Let's go to the beginner mind or to the beginner person who's just learning the process of writing and maybe wants to introduce some mindfulness into it. What would be your recommendation? Like what... How do you dip your toe in that water, so to speak?

Ranjini George: So one of the things I do is, I journal. I'm a prolific journaler. I've been journaling almost every day for the past 18 years. Journaling to me or, as Julia Cameron, in *The Artist's Way Morning Pages*, is a good thing. It just keeps us in touch with words. I wake up, I get my coffee, before I do my coffee there's some prayers and all that, some meditation and then I get my coffee and I sit down with the page. And I have no idea what's going to come, but I just write.

Ranjini George: I would say get a journal. Read. You have to read a lot. As Stephen King says, "If you want to be a writer, you have to read a lot, write a lot". And, and some of your listeners may not want to be writers, they just want to write. I think if you want to write, get a notebook, get a pen, or if you use the laptop, and put aside some time for writing and just make it a part of your life. So when you start, it could be just 10 minutes. In a 24 hour day you have 10 minutes. And with the mindfulness, I think with the meditation practice, the meditation practice is.

Ranjini George: just a way of going home. It's just a way of actually learning to be friends with yourself, to listen to yourself. And in a way that's what you're doing in a journal and you're listening to yourself. You're awake to the world. You may hear the sound of bees. They might, you might see the sunrise outside your windowsill. Awake to the world, you're awake to the radical grace of being alive because every day is a gift. And then I think, in the beginning stage, I think that's what meditation practice does. It really just gets us to be more present.

listenN: Welcome back. I'm talking with Dr Ranjini George, who's about to take us through a mindfulness exercise that we can use to help bring us home to ourselves, the page, and our creative process.

Ranjini George: Okay, so what I'm going to do here for your listeners, and I, usually when I teach mindfulness practice I teach... I give the instruction and we do it over one hour, but here I'll just, sort of, touch on it and it's very simple. And if you've never

practiced meditation, it's all mindfulness and you don't know what these terms mean. It's easy. The instruction is very easy. It's... But, at the same time, it's profound, as I said, and difficult. So I'm going to use the gong and we'll go into a short, five minute practice and instruction.

listenN: Right?

Ranjini George: So, Thich Nhat Hanh, the great Zen meditation teacher, he said, "Listen, listen, to the sound of the bell that calls you back to your true home. Listen, listen to the sound of the bell that calls you back to your true home". Because often we don't want to go home to ourselves because they, sometimes too much of suffering within us. And so part of that meditation practice is really just going back and making friends with yourself. Looking at yourself not with judgmental eyes, but with loving kindness.

Ranjini George: So, the first step is really mindfulness of the body. So feeling, if you're sitting on a chair, feeling your feet on the floor, the weight of your body on the chair. Your palms resting on your thighs, and your gaze is lowered, so your eyes are not fully shut. Your eyes are 9/10 shut. Just, relaxing into your body. It's just sort of relaxing your feet, your calves, your thighs, the groin area, the naval region, your chest, your shoulders, your arms, your neck, the back of your head, your face. Relaxing your jaw, your forehead, your eyelids, the crown of your head. Just connecting to your body. Your body might be in pain, it might be free of pain. You might be tired, you might be energized. So whatever it is, just connecting to it.

Ranjini George: So you take, in meditation practice, there is a formal posture. So, as I said, if you're seated on a chair you feel your feet on the ground and your palms on your thighs and you can come a little forward on the chair so that your spine is straight. If you have a bad back, you can rest your back. But if you have a strong back you can come a little forward so your spine is straight. You can think of your spine like a stack of silver coins and a silver thread holding you up from the crown of your head. Then... So your back is strong, soft, open front, whatever comes up, comes up. Your jaw, your face is relaxed, mouth is slack and your eyes are 9/10 shut. Then connect to how you're feeling. We are human beings, we are not human doings, and often in life we become human doings. We race around. So, just connecting to how you feel, noticing it, with nonjudgmental awareness. You may be feeling positive, negative, neutral, whatever it is, just connecting with it, noticing it.

Ranjini George: Then we go to mindfulness of breath. So usually, we're really caught up in the past or the future, what we are going to do, our hopes and worries for the future, our regrets and sorrows of the past, or the happiness of the past. Sometimes we've experienced something and it doesn't exist anymore in the present. Just coming to the present moment, whatever it is, and connecting to your breath. You can think of your breath as a pathway and the mind as a horse.

So, following the pathway of the breath. This is relaxed breathing, just regular breathing, just following the inflow and outflow of your breath. We come into this life, into this particular form, with our first breath and we leave it with our last. Just follow the inflow and outflow of your breath. Thich Nhat Hanh has a phrase, "breathing in, I know I am breathing in, breathing out, I know I am breathing out".

Ranjini George: In. Out.

Ranjini George: The third thing is mindfulness of thoughts. The idea is not to arrive at a state of no thinking, but when you notice a thought, just touch it, let go, and come back to the breath. So when you realize you're thinking and sometimes we don't realize we're thinking, we're just caught in the thought, before we suddenly realize we hear the gong and we realize we've been thinking all this while, but when we realize we're thinking, just coming back very gently to our breath. Let's just try that for a minute. Taking the posture, feeling your feet on the floor, your palms on your thighs, your spine like a stack of silver coins, strong back, soft, open front, relaxing your jaw, slack. Your mouth is slack, it can be slightly parted. You can rest your tongue on your upper palate. Your eyes are lowered, almost shut, 9/10 shut. Just follow the inflow and outflow of your breath.

Ranjini George: So I'm just going to close with the gong, with the wish that you may be peaceful, happy, and light, in body and spirit.

Ranjini George: Okay. Thank you Brian.

listenN: Thank you. That was amazing.

Ranjini George: It's a breath break. Lama Surya Das, he talks about taking breath breaks. It's a good idea that something that I do during the day, even if it's just for a minute here, a minute there, as I'm having my cup of tea, just remembering to take breath breaks. When you go for a meditation retreat in a place like Plum Village, which is in the Thich Nhat Hanh tradition, they have this bell that... Every once in a while the bell goes off and then you stop whatever you're doing and you listen to the sound of the bell and then you continue. And it's there in all traditions, like ours and the monastic traditions and the Benedictine tradition. The idea of just, the five times in the Islamic tradition, five times when people stop and pray. So, just this idea of returning home, of slowing down.

listenN: Mm-hmm (affirmative) And that's a nice segue into something that I know is a passion of yours as well, which is food.

Ranjini George: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

listenN: And the concept of mindfulness and food and writing and... I love the name of one of your courses, Food, Breath, and Words.

Ranjini George: Mm-hmm (affirmative), mm-hmm (affirmative).

listenN: Share With me your passion for food.

Ranjini George: Food... I mean, one of the things that people do in meditation practice sometimes is that they use it as an escape. Like they want to escape from the world, escape from their suffering. And part of this practice, part of mindfulness practice and part of meditation practice is really enjoying this incarnation in the human form with all its challenges and difficulties, but also with its joys. So like in the Shambhala tradition, they have calligraphy, they have flower arrangement, and it's just sort of appreciating all the physical aspects of life that exist in this particular form as a human being.

Ranjini George: So for me, food, the presentation of it, the creativity within food, the fact that my mom was a terrific cook. You know, my grandma, sort of, is a great cook too. And when I taught in Dubai, many of my students, my students in Dubai, at Zayed University, they were the first generation of women to go to university. So their mothers and grandmothers never went to university, so what they knew was the kitchen. So the first book that I did came out from their stories about their mothers and grandmothers and their recipes and all that. And then of course food is, it's a wonderful practice. Every time we eat, enjoying... I love coffee, so enjoying that morning cup of coffee, enjoying the food on my plate, and trying to eat without... Being mindful and see when I'm eating out of greed, when I'm eating out of, because I'm bored, when I'm eating because I'm depressed. So, bringing that... And that said, I sometimes still do that. I reach out for the cookie and I'm depressed and I know that I'm using the cookie because I'm depressed, but I do it, but I do notice it. So, I think it's part of the practice.

listenN: Welcome back. I'm talking with Dr Ranjini George, who is sharing her love of food and how it taught her the significance to the awareness that in this incarnation it is the love and process that matters and not the end result.

listenN: In your first book on cooking in Dubai, I believe it was called Through My Mother-

Ranjini George: Through My Mother's Window, yes.

listenN: Yeah, yeah.

Ranjini George: It is available through Caversham Booksellers and it's available, you can get it online.

listenN: We'll put a link to that in the episode notes, but is there any particular story from that, that still resonates with you?

Ranjini George: Yeah, so what happened is, when I was teaching at Zayed University, I taught Emarati women students and they would tell me stories about things and, and so this whole idea for this book, because I've lived in the Emirates for such a long time, a total of nine years and then again for three and a half years. So, the stories that they told me, I just... Before I left I wanted to do something. I wanted to give back, in a way, and I also want to have a record of this experience, my experience there. And so what they did was they interviewed their mothers and their grandmothers who sometimes spoke English, sometimes Arabic only, and then they would translate it. And their mothers and grandmothers would tell them stories of the old time, about life that they experienced and would sometimes, they would include some of their favorite dishes that they made, say during Eid or Ramadan, which is the time of fasting and Eid, celebration.

Ranjini George: So, I remember one particular story that really stayed with me was of a woman who, whose husband was a pearl diver, which was one of the professions. And then when the ships came, the ship came back and then she runs out and then she realizes that her husband has died at sea. That story was something that I found really poignant. There are lots of other stories like that, because Dubai is a city really changed very dramatically in the last some years. I mean, now it's one of the, a really rich city with high rise buildings and just a very beautiful, multicultural, vibrant, sort of, Hong Kong in the middle East. So it's really... But it did change from, it changed very dramatically.

Ranjini George: So, some of their stories were about... A very simple life and a different way of living all together. And, as I was finishing the book towards the end before I was moving to Canada, moving back to Canada, my own, my father passed on and when that happened I decided what about my mom? And so I actually dedicated my book to my father and I included some of the stories and recipes of my mother, so I have a little bit of my own memoir going through that.

listenN: Oh, that sounds fascinating. I love those stories that are brought from the past, but the recent past, so you can still kind of see yourself there and it's not like a history, it's more like, Oh, this was just recently, but it still was another time. And I find that storytelling very, very emotive, like it, it's easy to trigger your reflection of that time. The-

Ranjini George: Yes. And one of the interesting things that came up with... Just recently I was working on my book and I was sort of... Sometimes it takes so long and you're so frustrated and my sister reminded me of her sister-in-law, who loves to bake cakes, and she takes hours and maybe a day or two making, and then we sort of finish it off really quickly. She has nothing to show after that, but sometimes as writers we get so hung up on this finished product and prosperity and leaving something and recognition and prizes. And I think that's part of the downfall, you know? So, why she is really willing to spend all these hours creating something that is... Looks simply beautiful and tastes amazing and that gets

done and there's no trace of it. But that, it just contributes to that moment, joy, and sharing and her generosity of spirit.

Ranjini George: There's a sense, I think, in where I think all these practices, it's very useful because we are so hung up sometimes, so focused on that finished product, on that book or that recognition or that publication and I think why can't we sometimes write just for the joy of writing, just like we cook or sing or play the piano.

listenN: Yeah, well that's, that is really, a beautiful sort of, summation of everything that we've been talking about because I saw some Tibetan monks do a sand mandala at the ROM, oh, 20 years ago. And it was just incredible and then, as you said, they swept it all up, but what they did is, they put it into Lake Ontario as a prayer, they put the sand from the mandala. And if you think of food and they talk about... You put love into your food and then people are ingesting it and they're taking it in and so that is an interesting, like that is such a beautiful, symbolic thing to think of writing as it's your gift to others. It's not the end product that matters. It's the words that you're putting down, you know? So, I really appreciate that, that was really beautiful. Thank you for sharing it that way.

Ranjini George: You're welcome.

listenN: Is there anything that you'd like to talk about that you feel like we haven't touched on?

Ranjini George: Well I think... One of the things I remember one of my teachers, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar says, he says that if you, if you're a saint... We have talents and the Bible has a story about that. When we have talents we use them. So, if you feel you have a talent for singing, sing. If you have a talent for cooking, cook. And there's a sense of doing it with a sense of playfulness and generosity and doing it to express your own creativity and also doing it perhaps in a way to benefit others and to share that with others.

Ranjini George: Like the sand mandala, which was, perhaps it was in the formation, I don't know what you... If you remember from 20 years ago, but it could have been a formation of a Green Tara or whatever, but that sand, with all its blessing and intention and hard work, is there in Lake Ontario. The food, sort of gives joy. And so I would think of... Not to take ourselves so seriously, in a sense. I mean, as much as we do and as much as we pay attention to our actions and our words, body, speech and mind, but to also bring to it the sense of playful creativity.

Ranjini George: I was thinking of this, this morning, I was thinking how a flower, it blooms beautifully, whether it blooms in the forest, I'm seeing, whether it blooms on an altar in a temple. Whether it's trampled under someone's boot. So there's a

sense that, whatever this talent is, whatever your creativity is, whatever... We are creative, just as the rest of creation, just as everything around us. Just sort of expressing that without being hung up and fixated on what others are doing, what it should look like, and things like that, the end result.

listenN: Or the end result

Ranjini George: And there might be an end result and we might hold within us the aspiration of the hope, the certain end result with writing. But to be realistic that, if you really want, if it is a serious goal to actually master the craft, then you have to practice it, you have to practice it, and you have to learn the craft. So there has to be work, not just the intention. There has to be the practice and the effort and the patience and everything, I believe, in terms of it manifesting, has its own time. So, like a bamboo tree, in a bamboo... You planted, there's no sign of anything for seven years and then it's growth. You're planting... You plant an acorn, that Oak tree is going to take a long time. You plant hostas they grow quickly. You don't know what kind of tree you are in that garden.

Ranjini George: This is wonderful story about two earthen pots and one earthen pot had a crack, you may have heard of this story Brian, but the servant would take... Fill the pots up with water and take them up the mountain to give it to the master. And one pot, because it had a crack, half the water would spill out, so the pot with the crack felt really sad about it, but then the master said think of all the flowers that you have watered and that have sprung up on the way up. So we don't always see the final purpose.

Ranjini George: My husband got this mug from a friend that's... It has The Great Gatsby written on it. And I love it because The Great Gatsby was not a success in his lifetime and now it is, it's considered one of the greatest classics of American literature. But yet he, himself, during his lifetime... People judged it as a failure and it sort of went under for many years and I think later on, started gaining recognition. So, Van Gogh and his odds. So, I think if we are fixated on the final product, it can be a source of depression and can really take away our joy and it's really feeding our ego. So we can really, my point is, that we can really just be present and be a hundred percent present and try to offer whatever we have with the purest of intentions.

listenN: Yeah, I think that is such a nice connection for writing and the creative process of writing, to remind people to be present, to use mindfulness, to see it as a journey and as a process of something that's happening in the moment, as opposed to, being in front of it and thinking of the end result. I think that's such sane advice in this crazy, crazy, social media, have the perfect life, have everything done, world that we're going through.

Ranjini George: Yes, yes, absolutely.

- listenN: Well, Ranjini, I really, really appreciate your conversation with me today. I've taken a lot in. Thank you for taking us through that practice of mindfulness, that was really beautiful. Thank you so much.
- Ranjini George: Thank you Brian. It's been wonderful talking with you and may our listeners get what they need from this conversation. And as we move towards the season of winter, which I've had much resistance to because I'm a tropical girl, I grew up in Calcutta and I lived in Nairobi and Kenya and warm countries and Dubai. Winter is something that I've had, when I moved to Canada I had a great resistance to, but I sort of embrace it and I, try to embrace it, but sometimes I resist it still, but I try to embrace it, but it has a lesson. It has a lesson that, as nature, in a sense, goes into the spirit of hibernation and what seems like sleep where nothing much is happening, there's still stuff happening. In spring, we will see it.
- Ranjini George: So bring that same awareness, as human beings, into our lives, just allowing the flow of life, allowing the flow of seasons. You may be going through... Our listeners may be going through a time that may be spring where lots of things are happening in their life and lots of success and summer, things are coming to fruition, harvest and autumn, or they might be going through some kind of winter in their personal lives or in their writing life or creative life. But, just, instead of fighting that flow, just realizing that we too are just a microcosm of theirs. We're just part of it and we are not exempt from these seasons. So go into this, go into winter, and embrace it.
- listenN: Well those are lovely words for us to thank our listeners for being with us and I really appreciate and thank you for being on listenN.
- Ranjini George: Thank you Brian, thank you.
- listenN: Oh, you're welcome, take care.
- Ranjini George: Take care.
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