

## REMEMBERING SUHAIL – A GEM OF A PERSON

I had not known him before. It was on our way to the US that we met briefly at a transit airport for the first time. He was working at a mid-level position in a small NGO in Pakistan whereas I belonged to influential – many allege, elitist – Pakistan Administrative Service. We were both going to the same university in Minnesota, and our first interaction remained limited to exchange of pleasantries alone. We next met at the campus as part of a small group members of which had come from all over the globe. Whereas we remained busy in the University during the days, at nights I tried to finish some of my left-over work from my office back home, which I was supposed to submit as soon as possible. I was little anxious and tense those days as I was not being able to finish the work as per the required timelines. As if this was not enough, one fine evening my laptop broke down, which was the proverbial last straw. How would I be able to work from home and finish the assignment, I had no clue. Almost exactly at the same time, Suhail bought a new laptop out of the scholarship money we got, and was very excited about his new purchase. He intended to use it – amongst other purposes – to chat with his family back home. On noticing that I was frantically trying to get my machine fixed for meeting some essential deadlines, he offered me to have his laptop for as long as I needed. There was nothing else I could have ever prayed for in those days, and I readily grabbed the opportunity. “How would you chat with your family?”, I asked just out of formality. “You don’t worry. I would do that on my mobile”, he reassured me. It was an act of extreme generosity on his part; otherwise who, in one’s right senses, would himself hand over one’s brand new laptop to a near-stranger for uncertain time, and that too of his own accord? At least, I am not certain about myself. By the time my assignment ended, and was duly submitted, we had become good friends. He was a man of simple nature and amiable disposition, and readily endeared himself to me as well as all other fellow Humphrey Fellows. He did not seem to be very well off though – while rest of us took independent rooms or accommodation, he opted for a shared one. Similarly, unlike some of our other married fellows, he did not have his spouse visit him in the US during our stay. He wanted to buy a camera for himself too, and when he finally did, he voluntarily took upon himself the job of capturing each and every moment of our yearlong stay. One must admit here, it’s because of him that we can turn our laptops on today and relive the moments of our memorable stay in the US. A camera in his hand also enabled me to do a dream project: jointly we both, with the overall facilitation by Kristi Rudelius Palmer and a Peace veteran, Dick Bernard, were able to capture interviews of ten such persons who had dedicated their entire life to working for Peace – while many had done so during Vietnam war, at least 2 had worked during the second world war too – and to save the same for posterity to see and learn from. They were mostly aged and ailing and we feared all their work and experience would be wasted if not properly recorded and saved. The fear was not unfounded; 4 of them have left for the eternal abode since. I am happy today that their legacy lives on: <https://www.facebook.com/Dream-World-1461225510855011/>

The year seemed to pass in a blink of an eye, and soon we were back in Pakistan. Our contacts became few and far between. By the time he came back to Pakistan, he had already lost his earlier job, and it was with much difficulty that he found a new one. He became a school teacher in a small town in Sindh – one of the four provinces that constitute Pakistan. It was no less than a shock, I still remember, when I saw his message an early morning that he had been diagnosed

with brain cancer, and that too at a pretty advanced stage. I immediately got in touch with him. He had even worse news to share. Right at the time when he was lying in a hospital bed in Karachi and was diagnosed with the cancer, his wife was lying in another hospital of the same city having undergone a miscarriage of a full-term boy. When they needed each other's shoulder to cry on and share the grief, they were sulking silently in hospital beds in different corners. Sensing that at such an advanced stage, he needed high level intervention, I conferred with some of other Humphrey Fellows I had been in touch with, at home and abroad, and all of us decided to raise funds for him and send him to the US for treatment. Next few days were spent in raising funds and as soon as we got enough of them, we applied for a visa for him. To our utter dismay, and surprise, the Visa Officer did not find him good enough to be issued a US visa. The Visa Officer also did not find compelling reasons, and family links, which would get Suhail back home later. His pleadings that did he have any better links when he was issued a US visa for Humphrey Fellowship a few years ago, and what other interest a last stage brain cancer patient could have in the US other than getting treatment – and that too on full payment, fell on deaf ears. Once the initial shock on visa refusal was over, we once again got our act together and decided to reach out to our friends in the US. Anne L. Howard-Tristani, Humphrey's niece whom I had befriended during my stay at the US, and Kristi Rudelius Palmer, our former course director at Human Rights Center, University of Minnesota Law School, went out of the way to support us and do whatever best they could do to get Suhail a visa. After having done all our homework, we applied again, and this time Suhail was issued visa – primarily, as I said, due to the lobbying done by our friends from the US. However, in this wrangling back and forth which wasted 2-3 months, precious days had been lost, and by the time he landed in the US, the cancer had spread to spinal cord too. He became paralyzed soon afterwards; other remedies did not do any good to him either at that belated stage. We were thus left with no choice but to bring him back home to let him spend his last days with his family, his aging mother, his loving wife, and two young boys aged 7 and 5 years respectively. His situation turned from bad to worse with every passing day, and in a hospital emergency this Monday, he breathed his last – regretfully, not peacefully at all. And here I am penning down a few lines in his remembrance. What an irony, he used to praise my writings skills not knowing in a few years from then, the same would be used initially to write an emotional plea for him and later to compile his obituary.

Also, many a persons around are reaching out to me offering condolence and showering praise on me that I did a great deal to help him. But in my heart of hearts I know, and am confessing hereby, that my act of raising around \$70,000 and that too by getting donations from others, was far smaller than his act of handing over his brand new laptop to – as I said – a near-stranger, and that too without having raised even an eyebrow. It was just an indicator and provided an insight into his great person. He had a much bigger heart than all of us put together. He took the first step years ago. I merely tried to return the favor.

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