In South Asian culture, respecting teachers is considered sacred. It is a theme that not only can be found through a variety of historical texts and scriptures but also an idea that is preached in every household.

I grew up listening to my parents reminisce about the relationships they shared with their college professors—professors that created an emotional or academic impact in their careers. During my trip to India, I was able to meet my father’s mentor, his professor from thirty years ago. I was both fascinated with imagining him learning and making decisions in an educational institution like me and shocked at the picture of my father sporting a moustache.

I met my Hindi professor, Gautami Shah—who hereafter will be respectfully called Gautami Ji—two years ago. Being a part of the Hindi Urdu Flagship program, I was required to take a discussion course in Hindi a year ago. To be honest, I did not pay much attention in this class and was not a star pupil. This particular spotlight, admittedly more personal, is not about an academic epiphany I had during her class. I was simply and unfortunately average with a grade that matched my enthusiasm.

When I was asked to write a spotlight on a professor that was married to another UT professor in honor of Valentine’s Day, I immediately thought of Gautami Ji. Unlike my contributions in class, I was more than capable of finding out background information about my professor. I learned that she was married to a Statistics Professor on campus by the name of Dr. Peter Mueller. I thought she would be perfect for this spotlight and expected to learn more about her experiences. What I actually learned turned out to be the academic epiphany I had during her class. I was searching for in college, a feeling of respect connecting me to the experiences of my parents.

STANDING OUT IN A CROWD
To provide some background information, Gautami Ji majored in Psychology in India. In a judgmental South Asian society that revered engineers and doctors, Gautami Ji proved to be a maverick of her time.

After taking her first anthropology class, her interests soon morphed and she became passionate about understanding the relationships humanity shared with each other. Oxford English dictionary describes anthropology as, “the study of human races, societies, and cultures,” but at the time, Indian society saw it as a major to interact with the native tribes of the region. It was not given the same respect bestowed to a student who majored in engineering or medicine. Gautami Ji was, in all honesty, a pioneer in a society struggling between modernist and conservative thoughts.

Gautami Ji further channeled her passion for anthropology by completing her graduate studies at Purdue University. On the first day, she met her husband who was, at the time, a graduate statistics student on a Fulbright Scholarship. What brought the two together was the International Student Center, an initiative designed to raise cultural awareness and foster community among international students.

Smiling, Gautami Ji retold a story, in which she had asked Dr. Mueller to dance with her at a party. He refused. Rather than letting this experience affect her night, she continued to the dance floor to dance. Many years later, she found out that he rejected the offer because he could not dance. This humorous anecdote illustrates an important point tied to experiences and perspective.

EXPERIENCING GROWTH
College is an era of transformation, transforming oneself emotionally, physically, and mentally. Gautami Ji learned how to make a decision, to take responsibility, grasp opportunities when she saw them, and explore herself. College was a time of transformation for her, where she could ultimately grow. She could throw out ideas, have debates with friends throughout the night, and understand the importance of perspective, her ideas, and how they related to others. She was able to transform and change herself-change her own perspective and ultimately, explore.

This spotlight is not about her “research” but her search of perspective throughout her life. Today, she teaches an elective on the transformation of the South Asian movie industry of Bollywood and its perspective on society and the representation of women. Today, she teaches a Hindi class, intended to help students learn a new language. Language is another form of perspective. Gautami Ji does not want students to think in English when they speak Hindi. She expects her students to think in Hindi not only to increase fluency but to allow them to experience a new perspective.

BUILDING PERSPECTIVE
Perspective. I cannot think of a professor who has defined and made the meaning of this word more ambiguous. She has travelled to more than thirty countries since college and has mastered more than seven languages. Those are her experiences and her perspective. Ultimately, Gautami Ji taught me to reassess and understand my own story, to take advantage of the experiences in front of me.

As I conclude this spotlight, Gautami Ji challenged me to understand my passions and my interests. She challenged the meaning of perspective, an idea that she has championed her whole life. As I culminate this spotlight today, I am thinking of my perspective, my story, and the decisions that I will make. What is yours?

SUCHI SUNDARAM

"The person you must be most answerable to is yourself and live with that decision."

"Everything in life is about layers"

“it’s your life, you have to answer to yourself"