My Turn
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Mapping my Life

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My heart sings with joy and a million thoughts zoom through my mind as I sit to write this essay on a topic which is so pivotal to my identity. I consider myself especially fortunate to be a beneficiary of a rich legacy-my religion, Hinduism. Steeped in tradition and rich in the collective wisdom of 8,000 years of the Vedas, I journey in this life with confidence, completely sure that the guidelines for dharmic life, namely, the yamas and the niyamas if diligently followed, can give strength to my character and a sense of direction and fulfillment to my life. Unconfused about my roots and at peace with myself, I can truly say, "I am proud to be a Hindu."

Hinduism can be compared to a giant banyan tree with many roots. It branches out in all directions, spreads its cooling shade far and wide, and yet it has one great trunk. Under this great canopy of protection of the world's oldest and most diverse religion is a solace. Here we can find all the answers to every situation in life. India's sages with their spiritual achievements over eons past have presented us with a rich life-transforming tapestry of information. The mosaic of many beautiful intertwining paths has created within us tolerance and respect for the many sects and beliefs that exist inside and outside of Hinduism.

Our rishis tell us we are not the physical body, mind or our emotions. We are divine souls on a wondrous journey. As we mature, feelings of anger fear and conflict fade into the background and compassion, peace and harmony begin to become dominant. Thus we proceed through reincarnation, which is several cycles of birth and death, gradually evolving into the mind of light and finally union in God. So there is a reason why we are put on this Earth.

Hinduism believes that we take birth in a physical body so that we may have a chance to evolve to our highest divine potential. So we are all souls, garbed as students in Earth's school of learning, and working at mastering life's experiences. It is up to us to discover and perhaps in this lifetime to achieve perfection. This is a great responsibility as well as an exciting open-ended opportunity, waiting to take shape. All these options and power lie within us, ready to bloom and reach lofty heights of satchidananda. I fully understand that my actions and the reactions that result are my karma and to create a positive balance is totally in my hands. I feel I am completely in charge of how I carve my destiny-not some divine tribunal sitting in judgment over me.

By doing yoga asanas and controlled breathing such as pranayama, one invigorates and keeps vital one's life force. Deep concentration, leading to meditation stabilizes the mind and body, eliminating the need for psychiatrists, drugs and alcohol. Vegetarianism and love for animals and plants shows our great reverence for life. Healthy mind in a healthy body sure does make a lot of sense. Desires are not suppressed but expressed so as to respect the opposite sex. The protective shield of brahmachariya (celibacy) is a wonderful vow to be cherished and preserved. It is one of the greatest teachings of Hinduism. Devotion, discipline, respect for elders and obeying our guru's teachings form the very backbone of our personalities. By applying these philosophical truths to daily living, qualities of integrity, sincerity and perseverance all automatically follow.

I feel that following the simple and sublime path of Hinduism, uncluttered with doubts, is worth striving for. Fearless as an army general, I feel well equipped and mentally prepared to face life's challenges.

As a first generation American and the only child of Indian parents, I have sometimes wondered what life will be like when my parents are no more. On the one hand if my parents predecease me, it will be monumentally upsetting, however it is reassuring to me that I will always have my religion to nourish my curiosity, guide me and illuminate my path in life. My actions-based on my Hindu beliefs, upbringing and viewpoints-will serve as a solid platform from which to work and blend harmoniously, with the great fabric of different cultures and ethnic groups one finds in America.

Amey J. Muzumdar is 14-years old, a freshman in high school in Oak Brook, Illinois. He wrote this essay as an entry to the Hindu Student Council as part of their

Hindu Heritage Week celebrations.