A Marriage Made in Heaven
Category : November/December 2000
Published by Anonymous on Nov. 01, 2000

BOOK EXCERPT

A Marriage Made in Heaven

How strangers Ehud of America and Vatsala of India, in a year of candid correspondence, reached across the ocean to arrange their own marriage

Vatsala and Ehud, Sperling, Vermont, USA

What could be missing in the life of a highly successful, Jewish American book publisher whose books sold in 28 countries, and who had maintained positive business relationships all over the world over his 25-year career? What could make me, a Tamil Brahmin clinical microbiologist at the peak of her professional career, look beyond the ethnic barriers for assertion of my values that were based on Sanatana Dharma? Apparently, we were on a mission: a search for a true soul mate.

In India, where I come from, it is unheard of that a prospective bride would introduce herself--in writing--to the prospective groom, without the protective shield of her family around her. In the USA, it is unusual for a man to agree to marry a woman without first living with her and finding out if they are compatible in day-to-day life. Deviating from both these practices, we chose to explore each other's minds, get to know

all our thoughts, ideas, dreams and fears, in writing. Over an 11-month period, we exchanged a total of 99 letters, and in the end, when we finally got married, we felt that we had known each other all our lives. Sharing our story of "how we met" with friends and strangers always ended up with their request for reading our letters. To honor their request and support them in their earnest search for ways and means of finding a meaningful and positive relationship in their lives, Ehud and I wrote A Marriage Made in Heaven: A Love Story in Letters. The following are excerpts.

March 3, 1995

For years, just like millions of my fellow Indians, I never missed reading the Sunday paper. I rushed through the endless speculations about movie stars joining political parties or forming their own, skimmed past articles on local thugs snatching gold chains from the necks of women on busy avenues of Madras, and got hold of one particular section: "Matrimonials." Weekend after weekend, my discerning eyes scanned the columns in search of the door to my future. When I first began replying to the advertisements in an effort to find a husband for myself, I replied--by mistake or by chance--to many such ads. In the majority of cases, I never heard back. In a few cases, I received very negative and highly insulting replies. Thus, I learned the science and the art of reading the fine print.

I was seeking a levelheaded, simple, normal, total human being whose value system was the same as mine, who was not suffering from any manias or phobias. This man had to be focused and successful in his chosen or given mission in life. He should move through his life with a cheerful and generous

attitude. Week after week I scanned the ads, sighing, "Oh, God, does such a person exist? Where is he? Can I ever meet him? God, will you please show me the right way, give me courage to reach the goal that You have set for me?" One day, an unusual matrimonial advertisement strikes my eye--

"I am the owner of and chief executive of a successful international book publishing company based in Vermont, USA, seeking an alliance with an Indian girl with a view to immediate matrimony and parenthood. I am slim, handsome with a yogic physique, looking considerable younger than my 40 years, thanks to careful habits and yoga. Born Jewish, a lover of and publisher of books on Indian culture and religion with a long association with and friendships in India, divorced with no children or any encumbrances. I offer stability, status, international travel, financial security and commitment to my future wife. Any girl marrying me will be free to maintain all her cultural links and religious practices and receive my support. Caste, Religion or Region no bar. I invite correspondence from parents or eligible girl themselves. I am looking for a girl in the age group 22-32, slim, beautiful, spiritual minded, capable of sharing my intellectual, social & professional life, fluent in English & rooted in Indian culture. Write with horoscope and background information."

"Dear Advertiser," I wrote back:

"This refers to your advertisement that appeared in the Hindu dated March 5. May I introduce myself? I am B.R.Vatsala, a tall, slim, brown-complexioned woman with well-defined sharp features. Born on January, 1, 1961 at Jamshedpur, Bihar, in North India. I moved to Nagpur as a student and spent five years earning a bachelor's and a

master's degree in microbiology from Nagpur University. All through my student years, I received many laurels for academic and extracurricular achievements. Besides studies, I have other interests, too, that include painting, knitting, tailoring, photography, and reading for fun. I enjoy nature. I also happen to be a health enthusiast and a strict vegetarian. I have a calm and friendly disposition. I get along well with people and am concerned about their welfare. Presently, since 1991 December, I have been on the staff of a 200-bed pediatric hospital in Madras, working as chief of clinical microbiology services. As regards my family and cultural background, we are educated, upper-middle-class, Tamil brahmins, Hindu Indians originating from Madurai. My father worked for TATA Iron and Steel Company for over 45 years. My mother has been a devoted homemaker. In between being a great wife and a mother to six children and eight grandchildren, she somehow found time to maintain a very peaceful, spiritual, happy environment at home and successfully composed nearly 275 original bhajanas, songs and prayer chants in Tamil. All my siblings are college graduates who had responsible jobs prior to their marriages. I am looking forward to meeting a suitable man with whom to share life and grow, hence this letter. I am enclosing a photograph of myself. I would be grateful if you could write back at your earliest convenience."

Thus begins the journey of discovery..... After an initial meeting between Vatsala and Mr. Ramakrishnan, Ehud's close friend, a correspondence begins between Chennai and Vermont.

April 19, 1995

Dear Dr. Vatsala: Thanks for your charming letter and the enclosed photographs. Having the postman deliver our missives is certainly appropriate. Developing a relationship through correspondence may be old-fashioned, but it seems a lovely and fitting means for getting to know each other. I'm glad you had the opportunity to meet Dr. Ramakrishnan. When I spoke to him on the phone the other day, he reaffirmed his favorable impressions of you, but I don't agree with him: you don't have a good smile, you have a great smile.

May 5, 1995

Dear Mr. Ehud Sperling, Namaste. Your letter plus the copies of the snaps have arrived. They are quite a treat. Thank you. I have gone through the pictures. You look good. In your letter you have raised a point regarding my adaptation to life in a small town in the USA, away from my family and job. Call it sixth sense or anything, but while writing to you about my job and family, I thought you might wonder how I'd feel about relocating. This is, in fact, a sensitive issue. I have been thinking about it for quite some time. I do cherish my family ties. Loving my family does not block me from starting a new chapter in my life. With growth, branching out and making an independent existence is inevitable. While pursuing my studies, I lived away from my family for almost 12 years, seeing them only during vacations. There was a purpose to that separation. Now, too, I am free to move away, as there is a holy purpose to it, and its name is marriage. I am aware of a deep need in me to share life, warmth and closeness, to develop dependable, solid, genuine relationships and to share love, share the experience of life, reciprocate human feelings. Sharing is the key word. Just being alive, just being a woman who can think creatively with compassion, affection and concern is a great feeling. I need to bring out my complete

potential as a human being, as a woman, and share these profound feelings with another human being who feels the same, whose needs are same as mine.

June 23, 1995

Dear Vatsala, Namaste. Thanks for your recent letter. I've been traveling and have just now returned to Vermont. I really appreciate your opening up your head and your heart on the matter of marriage and a change of life. It gives me a lot of insight into who you are as a person. It strikes me that your name fits very well with the sentiments expressed in your letter. You certainly express yourself as a loving and affectionate person and it is somewhat serendipitous that you work in a children's hospital, as one of the Sanskrit definitions of Vatsala is "child-loving."

Certainly, the relationship between a man and a woman embodies the whole mystery of creation and the meaning of life. Marriage takes place not only in this world of comings and goings, but on a deeper, more mysterious plane. A healthy, loving and positive relationship between husband and wife is one of the most important goals we can aspire to.

I'd certainly be interested to hear why a woman of your background and cultural upbringing would entertain a relationship with someone from another cultural and religious background. For my part, there is only one religion: that is the religion of truth and wherever I've encountered it, whether it's been in a Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, Islamic or Shamanic form, I've recognized it as beautiful. The religion of words spoken by the hypocrite and the egotist is for me uninteresting. Let me

know them by their acts, not their words. If someone is acting well in a relationship to his fellows and to himself and reflecting God's beauty, then for me, this is religion.

As to my own personal journey, it has been heavily influenced by the Hindu tradition. This has happened spontaneously and mysteriously. At one of the most challenging points in my life, a time when I was filled with despair, a Shri Mahant of the Anand Akhara appeared, moved into my home in New York and pulled me out and up. Ganesh Baba was 92 years old at that time, a mendicant with only the clothes on his back, and one of the most unusual and extraordinary men I've ever met. I've published many books on Hinduism and have among my best friends devout Hindus. In fact, I'm very much looking forward to my annual visit from my dear friend and author, Harish Johari from Bareilly.

I understand and appreciate the frustration in simply corresponding when a meeting would help accelerate matters. However, I think we should try to take pleasure in what is turning out to be a marvelous exchange of views and ideas. It's the first time I've ever had such an interaction, and I've been thinking about it in relationship to how I've gotten to know other people. In most cases, when you meet someone, you have to react to and assess the packaging before you get the opportunity to find out what the contents are all about. In our case, we have the good fortune of being forced to explore our inner natures with each other as a prelude to meeting. I look forward to your next letter.

June 30, 1995

Dear Ehud: That came to me as quite a surprise: you telling me the meaning of my name in Sanskrit. I have yet another name at home: Mukta. To understand each other we simply have to do surgeries on ourselves and be true in presenting our various aspects--no masks, no pretensions, please. I have been thinking deeply about the role of astrology, psychology, culture, religion, color, language and social norms that give identity to a person. My ethnic definition is India, Hindu, Brahmin, brown-skinned woman speaking Tamil and Hindi. I live in an urban, middle-class locality. Born under a set of lucky stars, I happen to have a strongly creative, multifaceted personality and goat-like perseverance on reaching my goals. Likewise, you too have an ethnic definition of yourself that gives you your identity. What happens when we take ourselves and our ethnic definitions very seriously to the extent that we exclude anything and anyone outside of them? This is a pathological condition, this is excessive obsession with oneself, and this is the starting point for a sad process of decay. I firmly believe there is more that goes into the making of a human being than just his ethnic/cultural/religious/social background and inheritance. With this deep-rooted belief about what in a human being is real and what is acquired, I have learned that my passion is for the real. It appears childish to see and judge a man from what he has acquired. I'd rather seek humanness, strong commitment to honest living, good thinking, better actions and deeply compassionate and kind love in a person than take him on the merit or demerit of the circumstances of his birth, or whatever external factors that have made him what he appears to be. This is the motivation that has made me reach beyond ethnic boundaries and definitions. No one is a better human being just because his ethnic definition is the same as mine. No one is bad just because he happens to be an ethnic outsider.

July 12, 1995

Dear Ehud: Dr. Ramakrishnan came to the department this morning. He wanted me to have a chat with you on the phone. I was slightly nervous and a little embarrassed. However, while speaking with you I felt much at ease. You did sound friendly, not cold, aloof or indifferent. It did feel nice speaking to you, though at times I could not understand what you were saying and had to ask you to say it again. Worry not, we will improve. It is just a game of accents. In a fairytale manner, in our October meeting we simply might like each other and go ahead with a positive decision. Or, as Dr. Ramakrishnan put it, in case we do not like each other, we can tell him separately and he will take care of how best to tell us. Well, on my part, if I had not liked you, and liked what I am doing, you would not have received these many thousands of words from me. If for some reason you feel/think that I may not be the right person for you, courtesy of Dr. Ramakrishnan, I will receive and accept the news. No fuss.

July 14, 1995

Dear Vatsala: It was lovely speaking to you on the phone, if only for those brief, awkward moments. Your recent letters are quite beautiful and engaging, and I want to reflect upon them and give them my full attention and a considered response. I'd like to ask you to have your horoscope done according to the Bhrigu system. It should be sent to me within the next couple of weeks, if possible.

July 22, 1995

Dear Ehud, Namaste. I too loved talking to you. I liked your voice on the phone. I am relieved to know that you found my recent letters beautiful and engaging. Regarding your

request for a horoscope, Ehud, I must work in this direction because I care for and respect your wishes. Do you have one for yourself? Where, how and by whom will you get it compared? What happens if our horoscopes don't have the desired degree of compatibility? In India, no matter how good they are in all other aspects, if the horoscopes don't match, weddings are dropped like hot potatoes. If you find it fit to go ahead and get married, well Ehud, you will find a nice Indian bride who is capable of lots of love for her man and who is keen on filling his home with kids. And depending on the compatibility reports, if the verdict is unfavorable and you decide to call it quits, then, well, I will be hurt and feel lost, but I will learn to live with it, get over it, and go ahead in life, accepting it as what else but a wish of God.

September 11, 1995

Dear Vatsala: I sent Harish Johari your horoscope prior to his arrival in Vermont. Soon after he arrived, he and I sat down in my study to discuss the horoscopes. It turns out we have very compatible horoscopes. In the category called gunas we achieve a 26 out of 30. Everything on paper seems quite perfect: the shared goals and values, the intelligence that shines through your letters, the commitment of virtues that I am also committed to. It is all quite remarkable. My dear Vatsala, let us try to set aside our fears and worries and meet each other without trepidation, opening our hearts without expectations or fixed ideas, but letting the spirit move us and have what's true and appropriate realized.

The first meeting

On the morning of 19 October, Anna, Ramakrishnan and I drove to Fisherman's cove, the Chennai hotel where Ehud was

staying. What if I find Ehud--in person--very different from his letters and the photos? My panic on encountering these what-if ghosts brought tears to my eyes, and my palms grew sweaty. Ramakrishnan knocked at Ehud's door and Ehud stood in front of us. I returned his namaste. Ehud asked me some polite questions and on receiving short, polite replies from me, he got busy with Anna and Ramakrishnan chatting about weather, travel, job books. Coffee was ordered, and in-between sips, Anna asked Ehud what his plans were for marriage with me. "I will have to think about it and tell you tomorrow" was his reply. The next day, I took Amma's blessing before leaving home. "Be brave. Conduct yourself with truth and fairness. Trust in God and always seek His help. He will not let you down because He alone knows what your needs are," was her sage advice. When we knocked at Ehud's door, he was all smiles, bubbly, very cheerful. "Anna, I have made up my mind to get married to Vatsala." Anna turned to me, took my hand in his, and asked, "So, Mukta, are you willing to marry Ehud?" I looked Anna straight in the eyes and said in a loud and clear voice, "Yes, most certainly." Two days later, amidst the loud noise of Deepavali firecrackers, Ehud and I were engaged.

November 10, 1995

Ehud: The enormity of the decision that we have made shakes me up from time to time. Two chronically independent and self-made people have decided to let go of their independence, have found that despite so many years in this world, their capacity to love is intact and they have committed themselves to each other. My God, my God.

November 20, 1995

Dearest Vatsala: I'm very much enjoying receiving your

letters. I've read over many of the letters a number of times, and I really feel connected to you in the process. Please don't you worry about any restriction on love. For love to flourish, it must be unbounded. As we are graced with a deep love for each other, for that love to be healthy we must share it with others, with our children, with our parents. I am your refuge, your abode, your safe haven. So I also feel graced and blessed as you do: we have carefully and meticulously explored each other's goals and values, aspirations and inspirations, and were diligent in our explorations of each others psyches. We were fortunate enough to be blessed with the ascent of love, loving each other and what we stand for, and looking to support, augment and enhance each other's lives, and to create one life together with our eyes and hearts open.

February, 15, 1996--the wedding approaches

Today Ehud and his friend Payson Stevens came to pick up Amma and me at Trivandrum airport. As soon as I saw Ehud, the pain of leaving, my fears of an unknown land--all the worries that I carried with me--dissolved and vanished. I felt as if no care in the world could touch me. In between greeting arriving guests, shopping for saris and attending the colorful Maha Sivaratri celebrations, Ehud received disconcerting news from his friend Dr. Ramakrishnan--the priests engaged to perform the marriage ceremony had just told him they would not conduct a Vedic marriage for a non-Hindu man and a Hindu girl. Ramakrishna's mother consulted an elderly priest who, upon hearing our story, concluded this marriage would be good for the Sanatana Dharma. In his long years, the priest had seen vast changes in the cultural fabric of India. Many young people were rejecting the age-old traditions and practices that he had grown up with. He saw in our marriage an opportunity for the Sanatana Dharma to reassert and

establish itself in a new form in a new land. He told Ramakrishnan's mother that he would gladly come out of his retirement and perform all the Vedic rites himself. Our inter-religious, cross-cultural, international wedding had his complete blessing. The wedding ceremonies started before the crack of dawn, around 4:00 am. Ehud tied the first knot of the sacred mangalasutra around my neck, signifying the permanence of the wedding vows. Guests threw rose petals. The second and third knots were tied by Debby, Ehud's sister. She took on the role of her mother, accepting me as a member of her family and offering me the honored position of daughter-in-law. Ehud led me seven times around the sacred fire to offer prayers and thanksgiving to Agni. I stepped on a grinding stone and Ehud slipped a ring on the second toe of both of my feet. Debby did the same. I was now a permanent part of their family.

Epilogue

Ehud and I eased into our day-to-day life together peacefully and in harmony as if we had known each other for decades. I knew his mind well. I had inquired into it, delved into it, and gauged its responses for a year. I knew his aspirations, goals and values--and I had them in writing! No, I had not fallen, but I was very much in love with Ehud. Having become an integral part of Ehud's life and landscape, I do not feel like a separate individual anymore. Is this the total union that Ehud and I were talking about in our letters? What a strange kind of merging this is. We continue to live in two separate bodies, but our inner selves apparently have one and the same goal: living a peaceful, happy and harmonious life, loving and caring for every soul connected with our household. Marriage Made in Heaven, Ten Speed Press, PO Box 7123, Berkeley, California 94707 USA. phone: 800.841.2665. web:

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