

Interview with Ramona Advani

**Interviewed by Polly Sonifer
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PS: This is Polly Sonifer, interviewing Ramona Advani, on February 19, 1998. Good evening. How are you today?

RA: Fine, thanks.

PS: Good. First of all, Ramona, would you just tell me a bit about your family, who you are, your birthplace, your birth date, what your family was like when you were born, just kind of general background.

RA: Sure. I was born September 22, 1964, and I was born here in Minneapolis, at the University of Minnesota. My parents both came from India. They'd come here as students, graduate students, in 1960, and my mom had gotten her master's in psychology, and my dad had gotten his MBA. I think my dad finished up before my mom, and went back to India--or no, I'm sorry. Other way around. My dad finished up before my mom, and took a job. My mom went back to India, and they were planning to get married there, but for one reason or another, decided that they would settle here, so my mom came back and they got married, and a year later, had me.

PS: Are you their only child?

RA: No. I have a younger brother, Reuben. He is seven years younger than me, and he also was born here. Currently, he's residing in Costa Rica and he's been there since September. He was living in New York before.

PS: Tell me about what you know about your parents' background in India.

RA: Okay. Well, let's see. My dad was born in Karachi, which is now part of Pakistan, but he was born before India's partition. My mom was born in Bombay and lived there all her life until she moved here. My dad moved around quite a bit in India. I think most of his growing-up years that I've heard about were in Jodhpur, which is in Rajasthan. But eventually, I think probably when he was an adult, his family moved to Bombay, and that's where he met my mom. I think they were probably together in India, in Bombay, for several years before they came here for graduate school. Kind of a general background about them.

PS: Did they have an arranged marriage?

RA: They didn't. They did not. They met--I'm trying to remember the stories--I think they met taking a class together. They were both taking a class, and I can't remember which class it was. It might have been a psychology class or a sociology class, or something like that. My dad is Sindi and my mom is a Parsi, so they're from different groups, and are different religions, also. My dad is a Hindu and my mom is Zoroastrian, so, you know, their marriage, besides the fact that it was not arranged, was unconventional for other reasons, also.

They've always told me that they were very determined to get their parents' blessings before they got married, which is part of the reason that they waited so long, but eventually they did get those blessings, and that's when they got married. That might have had something to do with why they decided to stay here, too, that it would be easier not to have to combat the tensions of being from different groups in India.

PS: Do you perceive them having a good marriage, as you would describe a good marriage?

RA: I think so. They've been through a lot together. My dad's health hasn't been very good for--well, he's had heart problems for about twenty years, and those problems have had a varying degree of impact on his life, sometimes not seeming to have much impact at all, but at other times being more severe, and I think they've weathered those problems well together. They're both pretty strong-willed people, so I don't think it's always been completely smooth sailing, but they've seemed to work out their differences. So, yes, I think they have a good marriage. I think they've been good role models for me and my brother, in terms of what to look for in a relationship.

PS: So when you were born, were they living here in Minneapolis?

RA: Yes. I think when I was born, they were living either on the university campus, or very close to it, in an apartment. I don't remember that place. I don't know how old I was when they first moved, but they moved, eventually, to northeast Minneapolis, into a duplex there, or a double bungalow. I remember that place, vaguely. We were there until I was about--I must have been five when we moved, because I went to kindergarten in northeast Minneapolis, and then we moved to Apple Valley. They bought a house and moved to Apple Valley, and that's where I grew up.

PS: Let's talk a little bit first about what you remember about being under five, living in northeast Minneapolis. What language did they speak to you when you were a small child, and what was that all like for you?

RA: I don't think they ever formally tried to teach me Hindi or Gujarati, but they spoke it around me, so I did end up hearing both languages and understanding, but I think that I primarily spoke English. I don't remember speaking Hindi or Gujarati, except for, you

know, maybe certain words.

PS: Do you have any of those language skills at all, at this point?

RA: Yes, I do. It's kind of scary when I try to exercise them, but I definitely understand both languages fairly well. My most recent trip to India was 1994, and I tried to use the language a little bit while I was there, and it was hard, because I'm not used to speaking it, and so I'd spend ten minutes trying to think of how to tell the taxi driver where my friends and I wanted to go, and I couldn't remember and we'd have to go and get my mom to come down and tell him and then, you know, maybe ten minutes later it would suddenly hit me, like, "Oh, yes, that's how I wanted to say it." So I feel like if I had the opportunity to speak on a regular basis--I guess I shouldn't say, "if I had the opportunity," because I certainly could with my parents, but if I made the effort to speak on a regular basis, I think I would have conversational skills. I don't know that I would always be grammatically correct.

PS: Do you read and write?

RA: No. That I don't do. So, yes, they spoke both languages in the house and maybe even--my dad also speaks Sindi, but because my mom doesn't know that language, he didn't speak it very much in the house. But he does know Gujarati. I guess I should back up. My mom's mother tongue, I guess, would be Gujarati. That's what she and her family speak, mainly. And my dad's would be Hindi, but he, growing up, also learned Gujarati, and that's probably in his oral history, as to why he learned that, and how he learned it. So, anyway, Gujarati and Hindi are common languages for both of them--Gujarati, Hindi, and English. So that's why those languages were spoken around me.

PS: What were you like when you were a really little kid? Did you eat Indian food? Who did you socialize with? Who did you play with?

RA: Before five, when we lived in northeast Minneapolis, I remember--we've always eaten Indian food, and my mom's made both, but at least, I would say, half our meals have been Indian, and at that time, probably, even more. My friends, I think, people I played with, were people in the neighborhood, but then also kids of my parents' friends who were Indian. So I think I had a fair amount of exposure to other Indian kids when I was really little. I remember that two of my good friends, who lived on the same block that I did, were Indian, and so I can remember playing with them quite a bit. A lot of those kids, like in later years, I think their families either moved or our families didn't stay in as much touch once we moved out to Apple Valley, and our social circle got a little bit smaller. So, at different times growing up, I had Indian friends who were around my age, but I think definitely when I was under five I did.

PS: Did you go back to India at all when you were a very small child, for visits?

RA: We went when I was two, and I don't remember that trip at all. I've seen pictures, but I don't remember it. The first trip I remember was when I was eight, we went, and that was, by kids' standards, for quite a long time. I got to miss, I think, three months or four months of school. I can't remember what month we went in. For that matter, even when we came back. I think we must have gone in the fall sometime, and must have come back in the spring. My whole family had gone, but my dad returned without us, earlier, because he couldn't take that much leave from work. So my brother and mom and I stayed on.

PS: So your brother was a small baby at that time.

RA: Yes, he was. If I was eight, he was one, or between one and two.

PS: What did you do while you were there? Did you go to school? Did you stay with family? How was that?

RA: Funny you should ask. I was just cleaning out a box of mine the other day, and I found a journal that I had to keep. That was part of my school assignment, was I had to keep a diary. So I had forgotten all of the things that we did during that trip and what I thought of them. I'm not sure how accurate a reflection it was, because I knew that it was for my teacher to read, so you can see there are places where my mom must have read it and circled spelling errors and I had gone back and corrected, so it's probably a little bit of a cleaned-up version of what an eight-year-old thought of India.

We stayed with my grandparents, mainly, and they lived, at the time, in Bandra, which is a suburb of Bombay. I remember it seemed like a very, very far distance to the city, where my dad's relatives lived, but we kind of went back and forth between them. I guess when I say "very far" it seemed like it took a couple of hours to get back and forth. I don't know if it really did, but that's what it seemed like.

Some of the things that I had written about during that trip were how it was so crowded there. I was very struck by how crowded it was. It was kind of interesting, the first series of entries, I talk a lot about missing my TV, and I missed American food, and I missed having my own bed, and that kind of thing. I missed my car. There was an entry where I said, "I miss having a car. I'm tired of walking everywhere. I wish we had a car."

So a lot of like, you know, the modern conveniences, during that trip, I didn't see in India. I think my aunt had--did my aunt have a TV? One relative had a TV, but most of them didn't, and few people had phones. A few of our relatives had phones. But gradually--I think, you know, that trip, I think, and at that age, I was more focused on people, so India was kind of more about my family and friends, and who I was making friends with, and who I played with, and that kind of stuff, than really appreciating cultural differences. I

think I was pretty adaptable and acceptable, so I don't know that I was really appreciating cultural differences or whatever, and just took it in stride.

I think, from what I can remember and from what I can tell from reading the diary, it seemed like I really enjoyed having a family, beyond my mom and dad and my brother, there. That was the first time that I probably had experienced that, that I could remember, so having cousins to play with and having aunts and uncles and grandparents around, I think, was important to me then and now.

What else did we do? You know, it seemed like we did really spend most of the time with relatives, but, in terms of event-type things, I think my uncle took me to the zoo one day and to a dairy farm where they bottled milk. What else did we do? To the beach. The beach was quite an event. I was very excited about the beach. Actually, I still remember that. I can remember collecting all these little shells from the beach, and we brought them home, and my grandma made me put them in a thing of water, and I didn't know why she wanted me to do that, and then she called me out onto the balcony later to look, and there were all these little--the occupants of the shells had all come out. [Laughter] So that was kind of a shock, because I never had really realized that anybody lived in there. [Laughter] So, I remember the beach.

I made friends with a girl who lived in the--my grandparents lived in a three-story flat, a three-story building, and they were on the second story, I think. On the first level was a family, and I made friends with one of the girls who lived with that family. Her name was Bunny--Bernadette--and I remember my mom telling me--I'm trying to think. I hadn't really met other Indians who were Christian at that time, so she was the first person I met who was Indian, but not Hindu or not Zoroastrian. While I was there, I think, not Bunny, but Bunny's sister, must have gotten confirmed, because I remember either going to the confirmation or going downstairs to see her when she went up, and she was wearing a really pretty white dress, and I was kind of fascinated by all of that.

We were there during Diwali and Dusera [phonetic], and I wrote about both those events there. I think I got sick. We had gone to Colaba [phonetic], where my dad's family lived, for Dusera, and I guess I must have gotten sick, so I spent the whole time in bed and everybody else was--I could hear them outside on the balcony having fun, and they had firecrackers and stuff, so they'd have to come back in and tell me what was going on.

On Diwali I was not sick anymore, and I remember my uncle brought these sparklers, we got to play with them, we got to set off firecrackers, and that was kind of exciting.

There was one religious festival that I didn't name when I wrote about it, and I don't really remember--like, when I was reading about it, it kind of seemed vaguely familiar, but when I wrote about it, somebody must have described it to me as a celebration of water, and I'm wondering if it was perhaps--yes, I have this vague recollection of going

to the water with flowers and platters of food, and maybe an idol of Ganesh, but I'm not sure if I really remember that, or that's just something I've seen on other occasions, but I think that might have been what I was writing about. I wrote about really having fun. Then we came back and people sang songs and I wrote that this was the most fun religious ceremony I've ever been to, or something like that. So it must have made quite an impression on me, but I don't really, unfortunately, don't really remember it now.

I guess the other things we did weren't really all that different from what I might have done here. My cousins and I played. There were a number of entries devoted to this play that we were creating, and I apparently had some major role in it. I do vaguely remember that, that I had a starring role, and we'd have to have play practice, and then I think eventually we did a performance for the adults, but I don't really remember what their reaction was.

PS: Did you go to school there, or did they home-school you?

RA: No, I didn't go to school there. I think the arrangement was that my teacher had given me some homework-type stuff to do while I was there, some math stuff maybe.

PS: Four months' worth of it?

RA: And then I just had to keep this journal and that was, I think, it. You know, I'm wondering if maybe the summer before she had come and given me some tutoring ahead of time. Now that I'm thinking about it, I think that might be true. I'd have to check with my mom.

PS: Did you speak Gujarati while you were there?

RA: I don't think I did. I think, more often than not, my relatives might speak to me in Gujarati or Hindi and I would answer in English. They all spoke English, except--well, I know my mom's--yes, the kids did. The kids all spoke English. I don't think--I don't know if it was this trip or a later trip, but I remember one of my younger cousins being really fascinated with the fact that I lived in America and my American accent, and she would try to mimic my accent all the time. It would drive me crazy. [Laughter]

So, yes, I don't think any of my cousins were anxious to teach me Hindi. All of my cousins are on my dad's side, so actually none of them would even speak Gujarati, they would just speak Hindi, and maybe Sindi, also.

PS: So did you go to India any times after that?

RA: Yes. Then the next time I went was when I was in eighth grade, so I would have been about twelve, or twelve going on thirteen, something like that. I think each of the

trips became increasingly fun for me, or at least that's how I recall them. The eighth-grade trip, I think I got to spend more time with my cousins than I had before. Yes, the eighth-grade trip and the trip that I took after that kind of meld together in my mind, so I'm not quite sure what I'm remembering from each trip. I went in eighth grade, so when I was about twelve, and I went again my junior year in high school, so that would have been when I was fifteen or sixteen, and that trip I do remember as being kind of--well, at the risk of sounding melodramatic, kind of life-changing. The eighth-grade trip, I'm having trouble picking out anything specific that happened. That might have been the trip during which my cousin got married.

The eighth-grade trip actually, cousin--that's not the trip my cousin got married. I have four cousins, and two of them have always lived in Bombay, and the other two are brother and sister. The trip that I was describing earlier, when I was eight or nine, they lived somewhere pretty far away, so I really didn't get to see them very much that first trip. Rajesh [phonetic], my male cousin, is just, I think, one year older than me, so we were pretty close right away, and his sister is two or three years older than me, and she and I always were--well, I shouldn't say always--but we were pretty close, also. So, right from when we first met.

So I think when we went back to India, when I was twelve, they had moved to Chembur, which is like another suburb of Bombay, and so we got to spend much more time with them. I can remember, I think that's the trip where all of us cousins stayed at their house in Chembur, and that would have been the house of my dad's brother and his wife, and I just remember having a great time.

I remember my cousin confiding in me about this boy who lived in--the place where they lived was called a colony. It was like a grouping of bungalows and flats, and I remember her confiding to me about this boy who lived a little down the street, or whatever, that she kind of liked, and we walked by his house to see if he was there, and, you know, it was all very, I don't know, adventurous.

I remember, then, my other two cousins, who lived in Bombay, came and stayed for a while, too. Who knows, it might have only been like two days, but in my mind, it seemed like a week, or weeks. I remember with them came their parents, too, so it was kind of fun. My dad had all his siblings around him, and I had all my cousins, and it just seemed like a really fun time. My uncle, my dad's brother, was always a great trickster and joker, and he always had like magic tricks to show us, and that kind of stuff, so we just had a lot of fun.

I remember we used to pick on my younger cousin quite a bit. Of all of us cousins, she would have been the second youngest, and my brother would be the youngest, but for some reason, he kind of got elevated into the older kids' group, and got to play with us, but poor Nalina [phonetic], who was, you know, in terms of seniority, really should have

been more part of the group than him, got excluded. She was kind of the one who was always a tattletale and that type of thing, so we were--I don't even know why I'm telling you this story, because it's not very nice, but we had made up this club, and I think my uncle may have even encouraged us, called, for whatever reason, the Goat Club, and all of us who were in it were goats, but she couldn't be a goat; she had to be a mule. So we named her "Mrs. Mule," and she ended up telling on us, and my aunt came and scolded us and made us feel really bad until we let her be part of the Goat Club also. [Laughter]

So, anyway, it was a fun trip. That trip I can't really remember much else about, except that I think that was the first time that I had to come back before my mom did, and so my dad and I came back, and my brother and my mom got to stay for the full three months. I remember just being really lonely and depressed after I came back, just because it was such a contrast from being in that warm climate and warm atmosphere with all my family around, to be here in the winter. It was kind of culture shock, going back to school, and then coming home and waiting until my dad got home, and it would just be my dad and me. So, that's what I remember about that trip.

PS: I want to hear about the transformative trip a little bit later. When you went to this school system here in the United States, by then you were living in Apple Valley?

RA: Yes. I went to kindergarten in northeast Minneapolis, but then we moved after that.

PS: Were there any other Indian children, or even other children of color, in Apple Valley?

RA: No. I think this might be a slight exaggeration, but I think, in terms of diversity, it was me, maybe, at some point there was a girl, either in my class or the class above, who was Korean, but she was adopted, and then a boy in my class who was black, and that was really about it. He kind of had special status because his brother, I think, was a Vikings player, so he wasn't just any old person of color, kid of color. He was--

PS: Famous.

RA: A celebrity, right. At least those are the only people I can remember.

PS: Do you have any memories of how it felt to be one of a few kids of color? Was there any teasing? Was there any special honor or status that you gained? How were you accepted? What was it like?

RA: You know, it was kind of a mixed bag, Polly. I certainly remember being teased at different times. I can remember probably one of my first days of school, in first grade, there was a boy on my block who was in third grade and he would follow me home from school, going "Woo, woo, woo, woo, woo, woo," and saying, "Indian! Do you shoot

cowboys?" and things like that. I think this went on for a couple of days at least, and eventually I told my parents, and my dad said, "Well, you just tell him the next time he does that, that he's ignorant." And so I thought, "Oh, that's pretty good."

PS: Did you know what "ignorant" meant?

RA: I don't recall if I did. I like to think that, yes, I did, that I was very smart, and so I must have known what it meant. But that actually is kind of a relevant point, because the next time he did do it, I called him "ignorant" and he continued doing it, so that night I told my dad and he said, "Well, I guess we're going to have to go over and have a talk with him." So he and I and one of my friends trooped over there and I was pretty excited, because I was quite sure my dad was going to beat him up, or put him in his place somehow. But, instead, my dad proceeded to just talk to him very nicely and say, "I'm Mr. Advani. I'm Ramona's dad. We live across the street." This boy was, of course, mortified that these people were talking to him in front of all of his friends, and he told my dad that I swore at him. I said, "I did not swear at him," and my dad said, "Well, what did she say?" and he said, "She called me 'ig-ig-ig' something." So he obviously did not know what ignorant meant, and he was in third grade, so even if I didn't know, I think there was a little more of an excuse for my not knowing, being only in first grade. So, at any rate, my dad offered to show him on the globe where India was. I don't think he took my dad up on the offer, but he left me alone after that. So I remember that.

Then I can remember, you know, sporadic things. I think that after I moved to Apple Valley was the first time I was conscious of race or of being different. So I can remember feeling really tense and nervous anytime there was discussion about India in social studies. Well, I don't even know if we had social studies in grade school, but when we were talking about other countries, I'd get real nervous when we started talking about "Third World countries."

PS: What was the nervousness about?

RA: I didn't want to be singled out, and I didn't want it to be emphasized that I was different.

[Tape interruption]

PS: So, you felt nervous when--

RA: Yes, I felt nervous, I guess because I didn't want attention drawn to me. I didn't want attention drawn to the fact that I was different. I was already kind of a shy kid, and to be singled out as different was just mortifying to me, especially because I think I, at that point, interpreted difference as being a negative thing. I think that was kind of reinforced by the teasing, and just what I saw around me.

On the other hand, I remember when we were studying India at some point, my teacher had asked my mom to come in and show slides and to wear a sari. I remember at that time, too, you know, I didn't want her to come in. I don't think I told her I didn't want her to come in, but I was embarrassed. I just thought, "Oh, the kids are going to make fun of me." But then she did, and everybody was so interested, and she looked so pretty, and everyone told me how pretty my mom was. I think because the slides showed scenes of India that were not what was being taught in the school, that kind of helped also. I liked that aspect of it.

You asked me earlier, I think, whether being Indian made me--I don't remember how you put it--special in any way. Sometimes it did, but there were very much two sides to being different, to being Indian, for me, at least in those grade-school years.

When I was in first grade, my grandparents came and lived with us for almost a year, and that made me kind of different, too, I think, in terms of--I don't think many of my friends had grandparents who lived with their family. But I don't recall, you know, I don't think I was embarrassed about that. It was just something that made the Advanis even more different than we already were.

PS: Were you ever conscious when kids came over, when friends came over to your house, that the food was different, or your house smelled different, or your parents dressed different? Was any of that ever something that was an issue for you?

RA: It probably was, but I don't really remember it being an issue. I didn't have a lot of friends that came over, except my neighborhood friends, and they got pretty used to my family, pretty quickly, so then I wasn't very self-conscious. I'm trying to think about--yes, I think for the most part, my mom didn't wear saris in the house or anything like that, and she had short hair, so there weren't some of the obvious differences that there might be in some Indian families. Outwardly, I don't know that they were all that different from anyone else. So I don't think that was quite as much of an issue.

PS: How was school for you, academically? Was it pretty easy?

RA: I did pretty well in school. I liked it. I was good at it. My parents certainly expected me to do well, but there wasn't--you know, we had a lot of tensions at different points during my growing-up years, but I don't think my academic performance was ever the source of it. I think if I had not been doing well, it might have been, but since I did do well, I don't remember them ever putting any undue pressure on me during high school or junior high or grade school.

PS: So was grade school kind of a piece of cake?

RA: Yes, grade school really wasn't bad at all. I remember I was a really strong reader. I did well in reading and writing and those types of things. Because I was born at the university--I'm kind of foggy on the details here, but my mom had been asked if her child would participate in a study, and so every year until, I think all the way through grade school, I would have to be tested, either at the university or they'd send somebody out to the house to test me. I did well on those tests, and I think that that was sort of positive reinforcement for me, and kind of built up my confidence that I was smart and I could do well in most things.

Now, physical education was another story. I wasn't a very athletic kid, or adolescent, so that was kind of traumatic for me, having to be in a gym class. I didn't like that very much. But, in grade school, in terms of math and science and reading and all the things that they teach you in grade school, I remember that as being a breeze. I think things got more challenging after that.

PS: Let's move into the junior high and high school years. What were those like? What changed for you? What kind of new things came up in your family?

RA: Well, let's see. Junior high was kind of a big change. I think up 'til then, in grade school, I was very, very shy. I'd make friends, and once I had made friends with somebody, I was pretty talkative. In fact, I think I got sent to sit on the bench outside the principal's office more than once for talking during class when I wasn't supposed to be. But I was pretty shy and I didn't make a lot of efforts to go to people's houses after school or that kind of thing. I just played with my neighborhood friends, and then I'd see my school friends during school.

But when I went to middle school, I think my horizons started broadening a little bit, so I got a little bit more socially active, and maybe started feeling peer pressure a little bit more. I think academically things were still pretty easy. In eighth grade, I think that's when my dad had his first bypass surgery, and up 'til then, he'd been in excellent health, so that was kind of something that changed all of our lives pretty dramatically.

You know, the older I get, the more this sort of fades in my memory, but I've always thought of those middle-school years as being kind of the hardest, and I'm not exactly sure why anymore, other than that I felt awkward, and I think I was more conscious of what other people thought. In grade school, I would be self-conscious if people singled me out as being different or made fun of me or something like that. I think, otherwise, I was pretty secure being with my family and that kind of thing. I think in middle school, I started to be more aware of what other people thought and about being popular and that kind of stuff, and I think that was stressful.

PS: So did you perceive yourself to be popular or not?

RA: Well, I think I was well liked. But again, I think this might have been--what am I trying to say? I think I was well liked, but being popular in middle school suddenly meant something different than being--I don't know if there was something about being popular in grade school, but being popular in middle school suddenly brought in these factors like not exactly dating--I guess some people maybe dated--but other things like just having somebody that you were going with, I think was the term, and just the whole boy-girl type thing, and that was not something that was acceptable in my family.

So there was a lot more, I think, pressure to go and hang out with people and go to dances. They were not dances like in high school, but they were still dances, and they were still dances where boys and girls were kind of checking each other out. I don't know if there were really--yes, there were probably parties and things like that, and that really didn't fit with what my family was comfortable with, so I think I started to feel some of that tension of wanting to be--I felt like I was already well liked, but I wanted to kind of make that next step, maybe, but that clashed with my family and my family's values, and what they were comfortable with and what they had grown up with.

PS: How did they communicate that to you?

RA: Well, you know, in middle school, I can't remember a lot of--I don't think I'd started really fighting with my parents yet, but I think there was sort of an unspoken understanding that, "Don't bother bringing those kinds of things up, because you can't. You're not allowed to." I am the eldest child, so there really wasn't anybody to break ground for me. I think every once in a while, I'd say something like, "Well, Lisa gets to--" Lisa was my good friend growing up and she lived across the street from me, and my mom and dad would say, "Well, Lisa is not our daughter, and Lisa is not part of our family, but you are and we don't do things that way, so forget it. You're not wearing a halter top, so don't talk about that anymore." [Laughter]

PS: So did these escalate?

RA: By high school I think they did, somewhat. You know, again, I was a pretty--I wasn't a wild kid at all, but I think my mouth got me in trouble more than my action ever did, so I would fight with my parents about being able to do things, or about being able to make decisions for myself, more on principle than anything else, and I'd end up getting in trouble, then I still wouldn't get to do what I wanted to do.

High school was a time when I fought with my parents quite a bit. I think those were years when I went through a lot of growing pains. I think a lot of it just had to do with what adolescents go through, but part of it probably was sort of a culture clash. I was still a good student, so there wasn't really tension over that. I remember at one point I wanted to try out for the dance line. That was kind of a very popular thing to do in my high school. My parents were like, "Absolutely not. You're not going to wear those outfits that

they wear. Nice girls don't do that kind of thing." I don't even know if it was "Nice girls don't do that kind of thing" but "Nice Indian girls don't do that kind of thing. So you should concentrate on your studies and concentrate on becoming a doctor."

PS: So they had it all mapped out for you.

RA: Yes, they had it mapped out for me. And I was complicit. I was willing to go along with that plan, sort of, at that point.

PS: Would this be a good time to talk about the transformative trip you had when you were in high school?

RA: Yes. The kind of stuff I'm talking about is kind of a backdrop to that trip. I think ninth and tenth grades were even more of an escalation of what I had been going through in middle school. I think my world was really small at that point. Maybe that's the best way to put it. So it was hard for me to see anything being more important than being popular at Apple Valley High School. When we went to India my junior year, I think when I left, all I was thinking about was, "Oh, I'm going to miss out on all this great stuff at school. I'm going to miss the Snowfest Dance," or what, I don't even know what. "I'm going to be apart from my friends for six whole weeks. I'm just going to die. How can I possibly go?" I don't know, that's probably an exaggeration.

But I think going there and being--that's the trip that I recall as being the trip where I felt kind of like I came home, you know, to see so many people around me that looked like me, and whose families were like my family, and to have a connection to them, and to not feel out of place. I think I had gotten so used to feeling different and alone, feeling different, that I just thought that was the normal way to feel. When I was in India, it was such a relief not to feel like that. I think when I came back, I came back with the perspective that Apple Valley is just one small little dot on the globe, and there is this whole world out there that's filled with lots of things, so things like fitting in and being popular at Apple Valley High School don't need to be quite as important as they used to be, when this is just going to be another two years of my life, and then who knows. So it was kind of transformative, I think, in that sense. I think it was kind of a trip that made me happy to be different.

PS: So did it change how the rest of your school went?

RA: I think so. I don't know that other people would notice a change, really, but I think I felt a lot more comfortable about who I was.

PS: Did it change the tension between you and your parents?

RA: No, not really. [Laughter]

PS: They just had to suffer through that. [Laughter]

RA: It was an unpleasant time for all of us, probably more so for them. I don't even know what we would fight about, but I'd find something. They'd look at me funny and I'd have a breakdown or something, you know.

PS: I think that was part of a raging hormone thing. My teenagers do it. I'm familiar with that. So were you ever involved with the SILC [School of Indian Language and Culture] school?

RA: No. I don't think SILC had opened up. If it opened up at all while I was a kid, it was later in my growing-up years. I wish it had been something available to me when I was in grade school or middle school.

PS: How about the friendships that your parents had? Did they have connection, an ongoing connection, with other Indians in the community?

RA: Yes, they have had wonderful friendships, and I think that's been a real blessing for both me and my brother, because I think in some ways my parents' friends have been our extended family. Not even in some ways; they have been our extended family.

When I was young, before my brother was born, and probably even after that, for quite some time, my parents were really pretty active socially. They always talk about how they would go to these big music parties that would start pretty late at night, and they'd just put me in the room where all the coats were, and I was such a good kid, or good baby, that I would just fall asleep there. I can remember some of that.

But when we moved to Apple Valley and after my brother was born, I think gradually their socializing kind of became a little bit less, and over the years, they've kind of developed a real core group of friends, who they're still very close to, and so those are the people that I grew up with, just maybe, I don't know, at any given time, between like three and six families. Most of those families have kids, but all of them are younger than me, some are not that much younger--well, actually, that's not true. One of our close family friends, they had two girls, one was my age and one was just a year younger, so we were pretty close growing up. We'd have slumber parties and that type of thing, but then I think once we hit college age, we kind of drifted apart, and the girls later moved away.

So, anyway, the kids that I've kind of grown up around the most, the Indian kids I've grown up around the most, were younger than me, so they were more like younger brothers and sisters, or younger cousins. But most of our family socializing was done with other Indians, and I think that was kind of critical, too.

PS: So your parents didn't have white friends that they got together with, other couples or other families?

RA: Not really. Maybe occasionally, like they would go to the neighborhood New Year's party, or my dad had friends from work. He was close to friends from work, and I think they were friendly with the neighbors, and occasionally would socialize with them, but they wouldn't really go out of their way, and the majority of their social activity was with other Indians, and still is, I think.

PS: Did your mom work outside the home?

RA: No. She was a nursery school teacher until we moved to Apple Valley. She was my nursery school teacher, until we moved to Apple Valley. But other than that, no.

PS: And your dad worked at what kind of job?

RA: My dad was a lawyer for Blue Cross, and he was there until he retired in 1990.

PS: Were your parents involved in the religious community here in town?

RA: Sort of. You know, the Hindu Mandir and the Sikh Gurudwara kind of came up--I don't know when they were built, but they weren't there during my early years, so our religious upbringing was a little bit less formal, I guess. My dad is a follower of Guru Nanak, and the Sikhs and other Guru Nanak followers would have get-togethers at people's homes, where they would sing religious songs and pray, and I can remember going to those, and my dad still goes.

The Indian culture, like religion and culture are so intertwined that we certainly--like, we went to all the Diwali functions and that kind of stuff, but I don't know that I really thought of that as being religious at the time.

Both my brother and I were confirmed in my mom's religion. She's Zoroastrian. There's no Zoroastrian temple here or formal Zoroastrian association, but we have a small group of friends who are also Zoroastrian, so we would celebrate the big occasions with them. But again, I don't know that those were really as much religiously focused as culturally focused, but we attended one another's--in the Zoroastrian religion, the confirmation ceremony is called a "Navjote," and we attended the navjotes of some of our friends who had it done here, and they attended mine and my brother's. We both had ours done here.

But since the Hindu temples were built, I wouldn't say my parents have been really active. I mean, they go once in a while. Usually if like some friend is sponsoring, then they'll go, but otherwise, not really. They pretty much worship individually.

PS: So when somebody asks you right now what religion you are, what do you respond?

RA: I say I'm Zoroastrian. Then, depending on how chatty I feel or how close the person is, I might go on to say, well, I do consider myself Zoroastrian, but my brother and I were brought up kind of in both faiths, so I think in all honesty, I have to say that I am raised as a Zoroastrian and I consider myself a Zoroastrian, but I also consider myself a Hindu.

PS: So they don't present any particular conflict for you?

RA: They don't for me, and I think that has to do with how my parents have viewed religion and how they have presented it to us. They both, being of different religions, that's something they had to reconcile. I think it can be a big deal for Hindus to marry outside their religion, but it's really a big deal for Zoroastrians to marry outside the religion. It's a very exclusive religion, in terms of not allowing people to convert, and if you marry outside the religion, orthodox Zoroastrians will not recognize your children as being Zoroastrians as well. So they really did have to do some soul-searching about religion and what it meant to them, and they have conveyed to my brother and me their conclusion that, put simply, there's just one God and people may call God different things, but what's important is that you have faith and believe in God and then the rest matters, but is secondary.

So I see the two religions complementing one another, and since I haven't really been exposed to much institutionalized religion, with neither of them having a temple, a Zoroastrian temple or a Hindu temple, to go to, it's been easy for me to reconcile like what each religion teaches. They seem pretty fundamentally similar to each other.

PS: So, going back to high school, did you date?

RA: No.

PS: Even though you wanted to.

RA: It's kind of funny, because I wanted to, but I was pretty shy also, especially when it came to boys. [Laughter] So even if I had gotten the thumbs-up and the "go for it" from my parents, I don't know that I actually would have. I don't know that anybody would have asked me, and I don't know that I would have known what to do if they did.

PS: Most young girls don't.

RA: Yes. So, I didn't, no.

PS: Well, that takes care of that question. So, you finished high school.

RA: Yes.

PS: When you went to high school, what kind of future were you envisioning for yourself, in terms of what were you going to do after high school?

RA: I knew I would be going to college. That was never a question. In terms of where, I don't know that I was as sophisticated about thinking about colleges as kids now seem to be, but I kind of had these vague ideas. One was that, "Oh, I'm going to go to Harvard," because I'd heard about Harvard and Harvard was a good school, or Yale. The other was, "Well, I'm going to go to the U., because that's where everybody goes." So, I don't know that I'd really, up 'til the time that I had to start making applications and that kind of thing, given it that much thought. And when I did, when that time did come, the main focus was, "I'm going to be going to medical school, so I need to go to a school that's going to prepare me well and where the school has a high success rate for getting people into medical school," and I ended up going to Carleton College in Northfield, pretty much for those reasons.

One thing that I hadn't really considered as having to be a factor was the cost, so when it came to deciding where to go, my parents ultimately said, "Well, you can't go anywhere you want. You're going to have to go probably somewhere in the state." I think at that point--it's hard for me to remember if I--I'd always been pretty attached to my family, so I think even if they hadn't said that, I may have been too scared to move too far away from home.

So, Carleton worked out fine. It had the reputation that I wanted and it had a good science program, and a good success rate for getting people into medical school. I think, at that point, that's really all I was thinking about, or all I was aware of, in terms of looking at colleges. I hadn't really given much thought to anything else, so that's where I ended up going.

PS: You lived on campus?

RA: Yes. Lived on campus.

PS: Tell me more about what college was like. Was it a diverse campus? Did you fit in? Did you not fit in? How was class?

RA: Compared to what I was used to, it was very diverse. I loved it. I just thought Carleton was this paradise that I'd landed in. I think shortly after getting there, I forgot about all the reasons that I had wanted to go, and just really appreciated it for being this place that was very unlike any--it was very unlike Apple Valley. I hadn't really thought that I disliked Apple Valley. I still don't think I disliked it, but Carleton people came from

all over, geographically. Now, having lived elsewhere and had a few more experiences, I can see that it was diverse, given where it was, but it certainly wasn't the most diverse place you could be in. But for Northfield, Minnesota, it wasn't bad.

When I first got there, I was told that I had a peer counselor, and I didn't know what a peer counselor was. I learned that the peer counseling program at Carleton was a program whereby upperclassmen who were people of color were assigned to freshmen students of color. I think it was kind of a mentorship program, to ease freshmen through their first year of college. Initially, I was really not thrilled by that idea of having been singled out because I was not white.

PS: You didn't appreciate having a mentor very much.

RA: Yes. I think I received a letter during the summer that I was going to have this person, and I didn't like that idea. But when I got to Carleton, I think I felt so overwhelmed by being in this new place, and everything was just so much different than what I was used to, that I was appreciative of anybody who showed me any attention and was nice to me. Suddenly, I didn't really care about being singled out that way, after all.

I think Carleton, in a pretty short time--actually, there was another piece to this, too. I had a work contract at Carleton, a work-study program, and my job assignment was to work in what was then called the Office of Third World Affairs, which is now, I think, the Office of Multicultural Affairs. I got pretty familiar with the office, and the peer counseling program was run through that office. It was a place where the office itself was in the bottom floor of this building, and it was a place where a lot of the students of color would come through on a daily basis and stop and hang for a while, and chat with one another. Again, I think, coming to this school that was--well, it wasn't that far away, but it felt like it was very far away from home, and feeling very overwhelmed, the Office of Third World Affairs quickly started to feel sort of like a safe haven, and I really liked that.

I guess what I'm trying to get at is that Carleton was another step in my coming to appreciate being different and being a person of color. I think it's a place where I was well on my way, I was very comfortable being Indian, but I think Carleton may have been the first place where I started to see myself as not just being Indian, but being a person of color, and having a bond to African Americans, other Asian Americans, Latinos, and seeing a bigger community there. I think that was something that was fostered by the person who was the director of the office at that time, that need to kind of form bonds and form coalitions between the different groups, rather than trying to self-segregate.

PS: Who was your mentor?

RA: The peer counselor?

PS: Yes.

RA: His name was Mansoor Hussein, and he was Pakistani. He definitely had grown up in the States for part of the time, but he may have been born in Pakistan. Mansoor ended up being just a great friend, because he was, I think, a year or two older than me and he was a chemistry major, and he was just a whiz in chemistry. I didn't really need him as a peer counselor, eventually, because I had made enough other friends who I would talk about race issues with, and who were more comfortable, I think, talking about those issues than Mansoor actually was, but Mansoor was a great resource when I needed help on my chemistry homework, so he and I became pretty good friends.

PS: So you zoomed right through academically, and had a great time, and went on to medical school. Is that how it turned out?

RA: Well, no, no, that's not how it turned out. [Laughter] I did enjoy Carleton a lot. I had a good time there, and I made a lot of very good friends, and I feel like the academic experience was wonderful. I ended up being a history major, and that was the source of some tension between my parents and me, also, at least initially, because they were really worried about, you know, they sent their daughter to this expensive private college because she was going to be a doctor, and now why is she talking about history? So I had to convince them that I could major in history and still go to medical school, and that that might even be a bonus, in terms of making me appear well-rounded.

So, I still took all the science classes, and they were hard for me. The science classes were much harder than what I was used to, so I really had to work in them. For that matter, I mean, Carleton was just a very academically challenging place to be. I grew a lot, but I couldn't get by like I had in high school and always, in grade school and middle school and high school, doing things at the last minute and kind of relying on my reputation with teachers. "She's a good student, give her an A," kind of thing. I wasn't being cut any slack in college, and people that were classmates of mine were coming from schools from all over the country, many of them from prep schools, and they'd been prepared, in some ways, much better than I had been.

So, it definitely was not easy. I think, overall, my performance there academically was good. It wasn't as good as it had been in high school, but it was still pretty good, but I had to work for it, and that was, I think, part of growing and learning to fight for achievement rather than just getting it. I did complete all the pre-med requirements, and I started to feel more and more anxious about having to go to med school.

Looking back, I think I just felt really confused and very pressured, because I had been told all this time that this is what I want to do, and I think I had somewhat believed it

myself, but I enjoyed the history classes and English classes and other things so much more, and I enjoyed talking about issues and people and that kind of thing so much more than I enjoyed dissection, and I was really worried that I was missing out on something. So, I think probably sometime in my junior year I started making rumblings about maybe I need to take some time off after college, and that was not going over very well at all.

So, ultimately, I think what I had agreed to do was to take the MCATs and then see how my scores were, and then decide what to do. So, the summer between my junior and senior year, I was living at home and my parents paid for me to take this prep course, the Kaplan course, to prepare me for taking the MCATs, and neither my heart nor my mind was really in it. I would go to these classes and daydream the whole time and doodle and leave early. As the time grew closer and closer, I just thought, "What am I going to do? I've wasted my parents' money. I'm not at all prepared for this. I don't know what I'm going to do." Then to make matters worse, I had procrastinated turning in the registration form for the test, and I had procrastinated so long that I had missed the initial deadline and now had to pay a late fee in order to register. I didn't have any money, so I think I had borrowed some from a friend, in order not to have to tell my parents about this, and again procrastinated until the very last minute, and sent it in, and thought, "Okay, well, now it's done. I'm just going to take the test and get it over with."

Well, I got back to campus, and there was a letter waiting for me from the MCAT people saying, "Sorry, you missed the deadline, the very last deadline, and you'll have to wait 'til next year to take it." So at this point, I didn't know what to do, because I couldn't fake taking the test and I had to tell my parents. I still remember the day I told them. My mom was surprisingly supportive. I mean, I was just despondent. It was very rare for me, I think, to admit that I was in the wrong with them, or to apologize for anything, so I think they were a little bit taken aback by that, but it was just horrible timing. I felt like I had really, really disappointed them, and, on top of that, my dad's father had just died, so he was already feeling really bad.

I remember they came down to see me at Carleton, and my dad didn't say anything to me. He just maybe said two words to me the whole time, which was very unlike him. I think eventually we talked about it would be good for me to take some time off and decide. I don't think I ever said, "I'm not going." I think I just said, "I want to do something else for a while. I'm burnt out, and I don't want to go to medical school now. I can't bear the thought of being in labs for the next four years, and I just want to do something else for a while."

So, I think there wasn't really a whole lot to say after that, and I don't recall there being much more discussion about it. But the problem was that, by this time, it was my senior year and I really hadn't given any thought to ever being anything besides a doctor.

To make a long story short, graduation came and went, and I needed to find a job, and so

I started applying, just sort of randomly, and ultimately got hired by a small ad agency in Minneapolis that I thought was just going to be my dream job. The people just seemed really creative and wonderful and they were willing to give me all kinds of responsibility and experiences. To cut to the chase, I ended up hating it and left after about nine months. The company went from having twelve people, when I started, to, at the end, just being me, the two partners, the bookkeeper, and the receptionist, so the morale was not very good, they were not in very good shape financially, and it was not really a job that was going to take me anywhere.

So, in the meantime, I had taken, just as a diversion, a class at the university, in freelance magazine-writing. My professor had put me in touch with some local magazines and I did a little bit of writing for them. I left my job in maybe June, and I'd already started interviewing at American Express prior to leaving, and I had a series of interviews there, and I think I ultimately started working there in September or August, as an analyst.

I was in a department that was doing technical writing for different divisions in the company, mainly in their consumer banking division, and the focus was on making sure that all the procedures in this area were in regulatory compliance. So I started doing that. I really enjoyed my job there. It's a very good company to work for. I stayed there for four and a half years. I got promoted a couple of times, which encouraged me to stay longer, and I worked with a great group of people. I think I was an analyst for two years, and then a manager for two years, a little over two years, and I think in my second year I started getting kind of antsy, and I wanted to see some faster progress. I wanted to climb faster.

I had actually been hired there to be part of a program in which they pay for your MBA, pay for you to go to business school, and at the same time, you're getting exposure in different areas of the company. But in order to be part of that program, you had to have two years of work experience, and when I came to the company, I only had one, so the plan was that I would work in this area that they found for me for a year and then I would enter the program. Well, after the first year, I didn't really think that I wanted to get an MBA, but I was starting to think about getting a law degree. I think, initially, I thought I'd get a law degree, but use it in the corporate setting.

So, I took the LSATs, and I think around the time that I would have started applying to law schools, after taking the LSATs, is when I got promoted, and I just wasn't ready to leave yet. I enjoyed working there. So I worked there for another couple of years, and then one day, literally, one day, woke up and thought, "What am I doing here? This is never anything that I intended to do with my life. It's a great company, great job, I really like it, but this isn't what I want my life to be about."

So, I decided that I had to make a change, and getting a law degree seemed to be one way to make that transition. I wanted to work in the public sector, and I wanted to work on

issues that I cared about, so I thought, "I know. I'll go to law school." [Tape recorder turned off.]

PS: So you woke up and you went to law school.

RA: So I woke up and I went to law school.

PS: Where did you go, and what was that like for you?

RA: I went to Georgetown [University], so I moved to Washington, D.C. That's the first time that I had ever lived out of state, or more than a couple of hours away from my parents, actually, more than forty-five minutes away from my parents. So that was huge for me. By the time I started, I was twenty-five. I had decided, when I was applying, I could have gone to one of the local schools and continued working, but I really wanted to make a change in my life. When I left, I don't think I was ruling out coming back here, but I was kind of thinking, "I don't think I'm going to come back here to live. I think I want to live somewhere else."

I was thinking that I didn't want to practice law in the traditional sense. I wanted to learn about how laws are made and how you change them, and then I wanted to use that knowledge to work on issues that I cared about. So I was looking at schools, and Georgetown seemed like an ideal place to be, because it was in Washington, D.C., it was a nationally recognized school. I wanted to be in an urban setting, because I'd never been to school in that kind of a setting before. So, anyway, those are all the reasons—and I wanted a diverse school. Georgetown's really, really diverse. Those were the main reasons that I chose that school, and then I moved out there. Packed up all my stuff.

My brother was starting his second year of college at Yale in New Haven, Connecticut, and so we rode out together, drove up together, in my car with a U-haul. I had been out there briefly during the summer to find a place to live, and had found a house where some other people were living, a couple of lawyers. None of them were law students; they were all professional people. So I was very excited. It was a whole new phase in my life. My brother stayed for about a week and then left, and school started. I was like, "Wow, here I am. This is really, really far away from home. I miss my family." But I eventually--I was going to say "quickly," but I think "eventually" is more appropriate--grew to really, really like D.C., and to like law school.

The first year was hard. It wasn't what I had anticipated. People were--well, I don't know what people were, but the atmosphere was far more--it wasn't like college. I guess I had expected it to be like Carleton, where people were there for the sake of learning, and where people would have these great discussions about the law and stuff like that. Instead, people wanted to know what was going to be on the bar exam, and what was going to be on the final, and how were they going to get the highest grade, and that type

of thing. So, that was a little bit of a shock. And D.C. itself was far more fast-paced than Minneapolis and what I was used to. But I think, probably by the end of my first year, I had started to make some really good friends there and had begun to enjoy living there. Then the second and third year, I really, really liked it a lot.

But also, I think living there kind of made me appreciate things about the Twin Cities that I hadn't appreciated before, and made me think that maybe this is some place I'd want to come back to. I think probably one of the primary reasons I wanted to come back was that I wanted to be with my family. I missed them. But I think if it had just been that, maybe it would have been harder to make the decision. I saw the Minneapolis area, the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, as being some place where it was kind of on the brink of change, and I thought maybe I can be part of--well, I don't know if I thought I could be part of, but I thought there was a chance that the Twin Cities area would deal with its increasing diversity and its growth in a more ultimately positive and constructive way than some place like, say, Detroit, or even, for that matter, D.C. So I thought it might be kind of an exciting place to come back to, but I think that part of that was just rationalization for wanting to come back and be near my family.

The other thing about--well, there were lots of things about D.C. and Georgetown that I really liked, and one of them was that there was a large Indian student population there, and so that was really the first time--I had a few friends in college who were Indian. I had a lot of friends in college who were people of color, but few that were Indian, and none that were really, really close. But at Georgetown, for the first time, I think I felt like I was part of a community, and I really liked that, and I liked having other Indian girlfriends to hang out with and talk about the Indian guys with, and that kind of thing. I liked having peers who had had experiences similar to mine. I think, prior to that, I had been around Indians who were either uncles and aunties, or were like younger little brothers and sisters, or cousins, or were from India, were graduate students. So this was the first time that I was around a large group of people who had grown up here in this country, but were of Indian origin.

PS: So, they were like you.

RA: They were like me, and I liked that. It was an experience that was important for me to have, because at the same time that I was realizing like, "Wow, this is so great to finally be around people who understand what I'm talking about, or who I can share these memories with. Did your parents do this and did your parents do that, and did you feel like this around your friends?" at the same time I realized that there's no one way to be Indian, and just because somebody is Indian doesn't mean that I'm automatically going to have a bond with them. That lesson probably came later on.

PS: But initially it was just exciting to be around them.

RA: Yes.

PS: Did you all speak English to each other?

RA: Yes, pretty much, except maybe once in a while we'd try to like--yes, I would say we probably spoke English to each other most of the time. I mean, we might throw in Hindi words here and there, but, for the most part, spoke English to each other.

PS: How did your parents feel about you going to law school?

RA: They were excited. Once I had started working at American Express and getting settled in my career, they really let go a lot, or seemed to have a lot more comfort in just letting me live my life. I think they liked what I was doing, and they liked that I had found a good job and was doing well, and was moving up, and I think they sort of started relinquishing the parent role a little bit.

So, by the time I made the decision to go to law school, I think they were a little bit concerned, because they were thinking, "Why change a good thing? You're in a good spot. You're doing well and making good money. Why do you want to go off to school and why do you want to go so far away?" But they didn't really give me any kind of hard time about it. I don't know if they really understood it either, but it was not something that they were really going to complain about. In our family, higher education has always been something that's valued, so they couldn't really say, "No, don't go and get that advanced degree."

PS: Especially when your dad's a lawyer.

RA: Yes, right. [Laughter]

PS: "Don't be a lawyer." [Laughter]

RA: I think they may have had some concern about why did I choose a big school like that, where not only is it far away, but I'm going to be going way into debt to go there. So I think they were a little bit concerned about that.

PS: So did you pay for law school yourself?

RA: Yes, I paid for law school. Well, actually, the government paid for it, but now I'm paying the government, so it all comes out. So that was probably their biggest concern, and they were worried about me being so far away, and how I'd live, and, "Who will take care of you? Who will keep an eye on you?" But I think those concerns faded pretty quickly while I was there. I would talk to them. I think we talked every week, on the weekend. They'd call me on Sunday, I think, usually, so I looked forward to those calls.

PS: Was it helpful to have your brother out there on the East Coast, too?

RA: Kind of. Actually, I wouldn't say "kind of." It definitely was. I could look forward to seeing him, especially that first year. He came down for Thanksgiving, and we drove back home together over Christmas. I think we may have made a couple of driving trips together, actually. But besides the convenience factor, it was nice to know he was there. We didn't talk that much. He was really busy with school, and so was I, but it was just kind of a comfort knowing he was there.

My dad came out with me, he drove back with me after winter break, my first year. But after that, neither of them came to D.C., until I graduated, and then they both came out. That was really fun, because my brother and I graduated the same year, he from undergrad and me from law school. So they came out. What did we do? Did we rent a car? Yes. They flew in to D.C., we rented a car, and drove up to New Haven for his graduation, and then drove back down.

I think when we were driving back down, maybe, we stopped to visit some old friends of theirs who had moved from Minneapolis when I was really little, but I still remember them. I think they used to babysit for me, the Simlotes, and that was really nice. We stayed in D.C., I think it was another week, until my graduation, and my brother eventually came down, and then we had my graduation, they flew home, and my brother and I drove back to Minneapolis together.

PS: So did you move back to Minneapolis immediately after finishing law school?

RA: Pretty much, yes. Right. I came back to Minneapolis within a couple of weeks of graduating, and started the bar review course here, and I had been back every summer to work here. The summer between my second and third year, that's usually when people work in the place that they're hoping to get an offer from, and start working permanently. So, I had worked for the attorney general's office that summer, half the summer, and half the summer for a law firm, and then had chosen to go to the attorney general's office when I came back. So, at the time that I came back, I knew that's where I was going to be, and I knew what date I would be starting and all of that kind of stuff, so I spent the summer studying for the bar exam, I took it, and then I think I may have had not very much time off, a few weeks, until I started working.

My plan was--and I think it was finalized by the time I started work, or at least shortly thereafter, I wanted to go to India. A lot of people travel after they take the bar exam. I had wanted to do something, and I decided what I wanted to do was go to India. I can't remember if, because of the weather, or this just fit in with my mom's schedule, or what the deal was, but, for whatever reason, I decided to go in December, and so I worked for a few months before going. I went with my mom, but then I met up with two of my

friends from law school who were in India at the same time. We had planned to be there at the same time, and then we traveled for, not a long time. I was only there for three weeks, so I think I was with my friends for about ten days, and the rest of the time with my family. That was a great trip.

PS: So at this point, you work at the attorney general's office?

RA: Yes.

PS: Are you working on the tobacco suit?

RA: I'm not. Too bad. I was thinking, "If only I had been working on that case, maybe I could write a book about it." You know, a book like that person who wrote A Civil Action.

PS: Yes. It's going to be pretty historical. Significant.

You're not married?

RA: I'm not married.

PS: Is that by choice or design?

RA: Well, kind of. I've been seeing the same person for the last three years.

[Tape interruption]

PS: So, you're seeing someone.

RA: I'm seeing someone. I've been seeing someone for three years. You asked me if I was single by choice, and, I guess, in effect, yes. Partially, anyway. You know, part of having grown up here and part of having my parents having been a love marriage, I never was comfortable with the idea of an arranged marriage. My parents really only asked me about it once that I can remember. So I don't know if they ever had ideas about it, or were thinking that that's what they'd do, or just thought they would let things fall where they may. But unlike a lot of my friends, my Indian friends, I've never felt the pressure to get married that they have. I might be wrong about this, but just judging by my friends' experience, I've come to believe that's more the norm than my family. So in a way, I feel kind of odd, like, "Why didn't they put some pressure? Why didn't they emphasize the importance of that to me?" But when I was in college, their focus really was on, "Well, she should go to medical school and get settled and have a good career, and then the rest will fall into place." Then I didn't go to medical school. I was working, and then I decided to go to law school. I really think the only pressure that I have felt to get married

from them has been since I've been with Michael. They like him a lot, and they'd like to see us end up together.

PS: Is he Indian?

RA: He's not.

PS: And is that an issue for them at all, or was it at any point?

RA: No. It hasn't been for them at all. I think it's probably been more of an issue for me than it has been for them, surprisingly. [Laughter] I was worried that it would be. Michael's really the first person that I've introduced to them as a love interest, the first male person that I've ever just come right out and said, "I'm dating this person," to them. I was really scared about doing that. I didn't know what kind of reaction I would get. I think they were a little bit reserved at first, and maybe weren't quite sure how to handle that, but not for very long. They've told me many times that they just want me to be happy and they couldn't ask for somebody in their daughter's life better than Michael, so it hasn't been an issue for them.

PS: What kind of future do you envision? When you think about, "What's my life going to look like in five years, or ten years?" what do you see?

RA: Well, I don't know. I guess I feel like things are kind of up in the air right now, for me. But in terms of what I'd like, I'd like to be a little bit more settled in some ways. I think I want to think about that a little more.

I guess, career-wise, I'd like to be doing something where I feel like I'm making more of an impact than I am right now. I'd like to feel more--I don't know what the right word is--energized by what I'm doing, and inspired. I'd like some inspiration in my job. I enjoy my work right now sometimes, but it's very stressful. So I figure either I want to be in a job that's less stressful, or if I'm going to have the same level of stress, then I want more inspiration.

In terms of where I'll be, I sometimes think I'd like to be somewhere else, other than the Twin Cities. I often think San Francisco seems like an ideal place to me, but I still can't really bear the thought of moving away from my family, so maybe they'd have to come with me. I don't know. I'd like to feel like I'm more rooted, I think, wherever I am. If it's here, I'd like to be more rooted.

PS: What does "rooted" look like?

RA: I think rooted means being more involved in a community, the community, communities, doing more, being more vested, I think, in the place that I'm living. I guess

this goes along with being rooted; I'd like to be less transient. I feel like I'm still kind of in flux, and I don't want to stop moving, but I want to feel like I'm on a path a little more than I do right now.

PS: Like there's some predictable direction where you're heading, is that what you mean?

RA: Yes, I think so. I guess those are the kinds of the things that I feel like I'm sort of more or less in control of, but ideally, I'd like to be somewhere where my family and friends are all together in the same place and everybody's happy and healthy, and if I could have those things, I couldn't really ask for much more. Those are probably the most important things to me.

PS: So your future doesn't have the traditional things like a white picket fence on a house and a husband and the kids and the suburban life or anything like that. It's more about community.

RA: Yes, I guess I'd be lying, Polly, if I said I don't want to--I'd like to be married. I'd like to have a family. One of the hardest things about this part of my life, after coming back from law school, is having left that community of friends that I felt really close to, and that's been kind of hard. Although I do have good friends here, but they're more spread out, and it's less cohesive and people are kind of more involved in their own lives, raising families and that kind of thing.

I love being so close to my parents, but especially with my dad's health, I sometimes worry about what it'll be like if anything happens to my parents. [Advani cries.] So I guess I just--I'm sorry. I think when I was in India the last time, I spent a lot of time looking at people and wondering what my life would have been like if I'd been raised here, or raised in India, and I imagine that it's probably a case of "the grass is always greener," and I'm probably not recognizing all of the things that I wouldn't have and how much those things that I've become accustomed to mean to me. But there were times when I felt like I would trade everything about my life into being in an environment like that, where it's the norm to have people, to have your family around you all the time, to be part of something bigger. I've felt kind of cheated that I haven't had that. I mean, I have, but it hasn't been as easy as it would have been there. I don't feel like the culture we live in here, or that I live in here, is really conducive to that. I feel like you're always fighting against building your career and getting everything done in time, and privacy, people's privacy and all those kinds of things, and the spirit of individualism and all that kind of stuff, you have to fight against that in order to have that kind of being part of the whole feeling. I'm sure there are people who succeed at reconciling the two, but I'm still working on it.

So, when I talk about what I'd like to have, I guess I haven't figured out how I can have all of that here, but that is what I want. I'd like to be married. I'd like us to have a family.

I'd like our two respective families to be close. I'd like to keep in good, close contact with my friends. I wish my really close friends from law school, I wish they could be here, or I wish we could live somewhere where they are, so that we could share our lives. So I guess I have a lot of things that I would wish for, but I haven't quite figured out how they could be possible. I wish my brother would be back here.

PS: Is he likely to return at some point?

RA: I don't think he'll ever come back to the Twin Cities. Frankly, I think he's kind of afraid to come back here. Well, maybe "afraid" isn't the right word. He's lived away from Minnesota for so long, and I think he sees it as a very small-town kind of place. He's bored with that. I think, in some ways, it's easier for him not to have to be part of the day-to-day family stuff, not to have to worry about my parents. He's a lot younger than I am, too. I don't think I was all that different at the age of twenty-five. I think he wants to focus on his life, and he doesn't really want to have to think about anything else right now. So, maybe. Maybe at some point he'll want to come back, but he doesn't like the cold weather, either. Not that I do. His interests, so far, career-wise, have been in finance, and I think he sees his best career opportunities as being on one of the coasts or in a bigger city. Although he really likes Costa Rica right now, and so I don't know. If things worked out for him, maybe he would stay there. I don't know.

PS: Is he working there?

RA: Yes. He had gone down there as part of some program, but then he started consulting on the side, and the program ended, and he's still consulting and living down there. He says it's a beautiful place. He loves the culture, he loves the weather, and I think he would stay if he could be assured of making a living down there.

PS: Have you ever considered living in India? Do you think you could? You've talked about longing for that sense of community. Do you think that you could acquire the written skills to cope in another language, or just go there and live and be an English-speaking person?

RA: I've thought about that a lot, after the last trip, and I think I could do it. I do think I could do it. I think the biggest challenge would be dealing with--and I felt this even a little bit then--dealing with not fitting the prototype of what somebody of my gender and my age should be.

PS: So even now, young women in India aren't lawyers?

RA: I don't think it would be a problem that I'm a lawyer. I think it would be a problem that I'm not married and I don't have a family. Maybe I'm just imagining that. I didn't experience it directly during the last trip, because I think I look a little bit younger than I

am, and I think because I had just finished school, people assumed that I was a little bit younger, but I think most of my cousins who are older, just a little bit older than me, and even my cousins younger than me, have been married and have started families. I either have to not care about what people thought and get over that, or I guess I'd have to fit in. [Laughter] Get a husband quick.

PS: Adopt a seven-year-old. [Laughter]

RA: Yes, right. But I think as far as my enjoying being in India and working there, I think I could do that, and I think I could pick up the language skills. In fact, when I came back from India, I had this burning desire to like find Hindi classes somewhere because I was annoyed that I couldn't communicate with the ease that I wanted to communicate. My parents kind of chuckled a little bit about it, but some of their friends were just like, "You want to do what? You're going to take lessons? Why don't you just speak it? You know, speak it with us. We'll teach you." But maybe I've just been a student too long. I feel like I'd need that structure and I'd need somebody to teach me proper grammar so I'd understand what I was doing. The truth is, I would just be embarrassed. I hate speaking around people who speak it all the time, because I feel like they're going to laugh at my accent, or they're going to laugh at the stupid things I say in my accent. But I think I could learn it.

PS: So that might be a long-term thing out there in the future.

RA: Yes.

PS: Do you ever watch Indian movies?

RA: I do. I used to love Indian movies. When I was growing up, every other Saturday, practically, my family would go to the U[niversity of Minnesota] to watch the movies that they used to show on campus. Then once they stopped showing those regularly and people started renting, I saw them less frequently, because my parents wouldn't rent them. Typically, they'd watch them at other people's houses, and sometimes if I was with them I would watch, too. But I haven't seen one in a long time. I think the last one that I saw was maybe, probably not a year ago, but a few months ago, when I went out to eat with my parents and I went over to one of their friends' house. So I'm not up on all the actors and actresses and movie gossip, and that used to be one of my favorite things when we would go to India. I would just devour those movie magazines and I wanted to know everything about all the actors and actresses, and what they were doing. When I would watch the movies, I would fantasize about being the actress or that kind of thing. But now when people talk about what the latest movies are and the songs, I'm completely out of touch. I feel old.

PS: Or just busy.

RA: Oh, yes. Maybe that.

PS: We've been doing so well with these philosophical questions, I have one more. I'd like you to speak to both sides of this question. Are there any aspects of being the first U.S.-born generation which you find especially difficult? On the other side, any particular advantages or benefits of being first generation?

RA: Yes, I think the hardest thing, or at least one of the hardest things, about being first-generation Indian, or, I guess, anything, is that there's no one to model myself after. I've struggled with that a lot. Sometimes I've looked to other women of color for clues as to how to function and fit in, but it's not quite the same. I have certain bonds or similarities with an African American woman, but it's not quite the same as being a South Asian woman who was brought up here, who was born here. Our histories are different, and how society perceives us is different. So I feel like that's hard. I feel like I'm making it up as I go along, what it means to be a first U.S.-born Indian person.

I guess that's probably one of the best things, too, is that I get to be, without giving myself too much importance, one of the pioneers. I get to sort of set the tone, and people don't have a lot of preconceived notions about what I will be like and who I will be. Of course they have some, but I think, in some ways, people are more willing to accept whatever I deliver, without saying, "Well, that doesn't fit the mold," or, "That doesn't fit the image." I think from a contribution standpoint, I have a chance to contribute to what it will be like for others who come after me.

PS: Have you created any conscious mentoring relationships with other young Indian girls?

RA: No, I don't think I've done anything consciously or in a very directed manner. I do know at the celebration of India's Independence Day, I spoke briefly about some of my experiences as a second-generation person, and, afterwards, there were a few people who approached me, and a few moms who brought their daughters over and said, "Oh, my daughter wanted to meet you. When you were talking, she was saying, 'That's exactly what happens to me. I know what that's like.'" And that made me feel so good. I would like to find more opportunities, and I would like to, in a more directed manner, be able to serve that role. But I can't say that I've done a very good job of seeking it out or doing anything about it as yet.

I think when I was growing up, anytime my parents saw an Indian person, or somebody who even looked like they might be Indian, there was an automatic nod or hello, or sometimes even a, "Where are you from?" and I think I kind of carried that through my life, in terms of when I see someone who's Indian or who appears to be Indian, I do feel a connection of sorts, or I want to acknowledge that person and I want to let them know

that—I can't exactly put it in words—that I recognize our common bond.

PS: Have you gotten involved with any of the activities of the local Indian community?

RA: A little bit. This last Diwali function, I was one of the emcees for that. That was very fun. There's a newly formed Twin Cities Indian Bar Association, and I'm a member of that.

PS: Twin Cities Bar Association that's specifically for Indians?

RA: Yes. I think it just started within the last year, and we've had maybe two or three meetings. The first meeting that I went to, there were only, I think, four or five of us altogether, so it was kind of a small meeting, but it was very nice. It was the closest I've come to feeling like I did when I was in D.C. Then after that, I've been to a couple of meetings where there were more people and some Indian law students, and that was kind of nice, also. Those are the things I can think of.

I do feel like that's an area, when I was talking about wanting to feel more rooted, I'd like to be more rooted in the Indian community here, and I'd like to figure out ways to become more involved, and to actually act on them. I'd like to have the time and the energy to do it. So I'm looking forward to doing more of that in the future.

PS: After you get that less stressful work environment.

RA: Yes, right. Exactly. [Laughter]

PS: Is there anything else that I haven't asked you about yet that you think would be important to add to this?

RA: I don't think so. I feel like I've just babbled on and on. Maybe if I look at the transcript I'll think of something.

PS: Then a final question. If somebody asked you to describe yourself, said, "Who are you, anyway?" what do you say?

RA: I say I am an Indian woman.

PS: Thank you very much for your time tonight. I appreciate it.

RA: Thank you, Polly. It was fun.