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- Education (<https://femasiamagazine.com/category/empowerment/education/>)
- Inspiration (<https://femasiamagazine.com/category/empowerment/inspiration/>)
- Fictional Arts (<https://femasiamagazine.com/category/fictionalarts/>)
- Cinema (<https://femasiamagazine.com/category/fictionalarts/cinema/>)
- Literature (<https://femasiamagazine.com/category/fictionalarts/literature/>)
- Music (<https://femasiamagazine.com/category/fictionalarts/music/>)
- Painting (<https://femasiamagazine.com/category/fictionalarts/painting/>)
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- Beauty (<https://femasiamagazine.com/category/mindbody/beauty/>)
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Sofia And Inocencio Monteiro: A Couple For All Seasons

Anjali Monteiro (<https://femasiamagazine.com/author/anjali-monteiro/>) • 25 January 2021



December 28, 2020, was the 68th wedding anniversary of my beloved parents, Sofia and Inocencio. My earliest memories of my parents are of my father's warm motherly embrace and my mother's great love for reading. In many ways, they defied gender stereotypes. Daddy was the more gentle, artistic and soft-spoken one, who rarely if ever scolded us. He had only to say that he was disappointed with our behaviour and we would be distraught for having hurt him. Mummy was more assertive, intellectually inclined and mercurial. They were generous, empathetic and warm, both to us as children and to many others who came their way. Very different from each other, their lives entwined and created a beautiful space where all who entered felt loved, unconditionally accepted and understood. This unconditional acceptance, I realise, is very rare, bound as most of us are in our iron chest of norms, beliefs and prejudices. The imagination and the generosity of spirit to accept difference, to be non-judgmental while at the same time holding on to one's beliefs and values is truly exceptional, and this is perhaps the most important lesson that I imbibed from my parents.

While Daddy was in the services, as an engineer in the Army, we shifted home many times, from Pune to Jammu, then back to Pune, then Goa and on to Delhi and Lucknow. For us as children, it was a great opportunity to interact with new spaces and cultures, to meet new people and make friends, even while it did mean that one had to adjust to new schools and start all over again with friendships. It did make us flexible and open to new experiences. In hindsight, I realise that all these frequent moves must have been hard on my mother, who bore the brunt of discarding, sorting and packing every few years. Perhaps this is what developed in her a meticulous sense of organisation, which strangely co-existed with an absent-mindedness and absorption in the world of books. This great love for the reading she passed on to all of us, along with a love for music that both of them shared. With Mummy's beautiful voice and Daddy's magical guitar, they were the life and soul of many a party. From Portuguese to Spanish and from Konkani to English, they had a marvellous repertoire of songs that we as a family continue to sing, remembering them fondly every time we do so.

They were such a romantic couple, who unabashedly expressed their love for each other; music and dance were one of the ways they shared this romance with others. As their children, we witnessed their love and concern for each other in the many little ways that they were there for each other, in how they shared their feelings and created a charmed circle of love and compassion, within which all of us as children felt secure and loved. Perhaps as children and young adults, we took this for granted, but now, I realise how rare and precious this space of caring was, and how it inspired us to strive to create similar spaces of comfort within our own relationships (not that we were always successful!).

In 1974, they shifted to Goa after Daddy retired from the army and set up home in Porvorim. It was during this period that they got involved in the Marriage Encounter movement (an initiative started in the 1960s by some Catholic clergy to improve communication between couples and to strengthen marriages), which became an opportunity for them to work on their own relationship and to reach out to other couples. For many years, as long as their health permitted, Mummy and Daddy were actively involved with the ME movement, organizing weekend retreats, and counselling couples in need of support. In many wonderful ways, they continued to contribute to the community around them over the years, through counselling, sex education workshops for school children, participation in ME and other community events, and just being there as a source of support for neighbours and friends, cutting across social class. This was very evident at Daddy's funeral when the church was filled with grieving members of the community, from all walks of life.

The test of a relationship is in bad times. As Parkinson's disease took over Daddy's life, it was indeed stressful for Mummy to cope with its side effects, from incontinence to the inability to express oneself. Coupled with this was her own ill health- fractures from a fall, a recurrence of her breast cancer in the form of uterine cancer 12 years after the initial surgery. It was then that I realised both the deep love she had for Daddy as well as her immense resilience. The ability to be cheerful, communicative and caring and to carry on with every-day life when living with a spouse with a terminal illness is indeed a tough call. There were times when one could see that it was really hard on her, and on Daddy, who could see his faculties slipping away as the disease took its toll. After he passed away in November 2004, she was somewhat low in spirits. My sister Priti coaxed her to

write her memoirs and the task of looking back at her eighty-five plus years of life, with a view to sharing it with her children and grandchildren gave her a mission and purpose. She would spend hours sitting on the verandah of her house, writing in her no-nonsense longhand script, looking back at her life in an unsentimental yet empathetic way. Her memoirs were released just a few days before she passed away, of metastatic lung cancer, in February 2007.

Though they are no more physically with us, Mummy and Daddy live on through their legacy of love and compassion, through so many who were fortunate to know them, to learn from their inspiring example and whose lives they touched in so many different ways.

Postscript: Their ashes lie in the earth in our garden in Goa, along with those of my beloved sister who passed away in 2011, nurturing the soil and plants. When my time comes to leave, I would like to join them there...

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