



Tarun Galagali grew up in Cupertino, California and immigrated to the United States with his parents when he was four years old. He is currently a student at Harvard Business School. Last year, he co-founded a nonprofit -- [Pass the Torch](https://www.pass-the-torch.org/) (<https://www.pass-the-torch.org/>) -- that is focused on helping current high school students find deeper well-being and clarity in their lives.

Two years ago, at an event organized by a high school student group that I supervised, I gave a speech about toxic masculinity to a small audience in a library. My mother and my girlfriend were both in the audience, and as I finished, I looked up at the two of them and smiled.

Later that night, I shared the piece with a few more friends over email.

I gave a speech that followed the form of a letter to my younger-self, written by an imaginary older brother. I moved to this country when I was 5 years old, and I didn't know it until I eventually read *Harry Potter*, but I always wanted a character like Sirius Black in my life. Someone who could shepherd me through the world of adulthood. And so I created this character -- an imaginary, omniscient older brother -- who could reflect back to me on what he learnt. The character that you'll soon meet speaks of experiences -- some real, some imagined, some mine and some others.

As I process the ways in which COVID-19 impacts families who feel unsafe at home, I feel it's important to publish the speech. The reality is that home is not a place of peace for everyone. For many, violence that stems from men, at home and elsewhere, remains a day-to-day reality. There are many reasons for this, but toxic strains of masculinity have been the silent enabler.

I believe our generation of men, and the ones that follow, have the power to change course. We do not need to accept the baggage that we were born with. We can introspect, with clarity and compassion, so that future generations don't have to trip over wreckage. Because, then, and only then, will we begin the healing.

My Dearest Younger Brother,

Welcome to America. Before your first day of elementary school, I want to tell you things about this new life, as it relates to growing up as a man. You also may not understand much of this letter right now, but I thought I'd write out everything so that when you read it at the right time, it makes sense. And I hope it makes more and more sense every year.

First things first... you're going to your first day of school, and you'll learn a bunch of new things, and make all kinds of new friends. That's pretty exciting. There's a kid in your class who will befriend you quickly. At recess, he'll ask you and the other Indian kid in your class to go to the water fountain and spit on girls. Don't follow him. He's going to get you in trouble. And it won't be worth it.

A couple years later, you'll find your place at recess on the basketball court. It'll be you, a bunch of other boys, and this girl named Fiona. She'll be better than most of the other guys on the court, but she'll be the only one with a pigtail. Other guys (and girls) will call her a tomboy, and she'll start identifying as just that. You don't need to say or do anything special, but just make sure she knows she's cool just the way she is.

When you go to India over the summer, you'll hear your extended family talk about how smart your dad is. He works at NASA and does things on the computer you have at your home that you don't understand. He may like to read more than he likes to talk, but don't take his silence for his absence. He lives his whole life for you. And I know it can be scary, but don't take his temper for anything other than fear. He has a much softer side, one that you'll get to see if you're patient. One day, you will both break into joy thinking about how hard it was to hold that softness. Oh, how sweet that day will be.

What about mom? Let's talk about her. Your mom may strike you as primarily warm and compassionate given her role at home, but don't underestimate the intellectual or creative labor of taking care of a child. She's putting in more structure into your upbringing than even the best product manager could into a launch. She has a PhD in emotional intelligence from the hardest sort of EQ graduate school: the contours of a complex Indian joint family. One day, you will get the chance to be on political campaigns, where you'll have to navigate complex emotional environments where different people want different things. When you find that these challenging spaces come naturally to you, you'll know where you got this from.

In fourth grade, you'll hear the word "sex." It's an activity that boys and girls engage in when they grow up, apparently. Your friend Mark will tell you he's been thinking about it with Peggy. He'll make a comment about seeing Peggy naked and you won't be sure what to say. You'll go home and look it up on your dad's computer. And it won't be pleasant to get caught for this. It's okay, you're not a bad kid for being curious about what someone said. Sex is something that people are afraid of talking about -- across culture and context. But you and I can talk about it. We will talk about it. There's no shame.

Speaking of which, in sixth grade, a friend of yours will tell you about a word called masturbation. It turns out, all these years, when you've touched *your* body and found a place of pleasure, you aren't the only one. I know you've been convinced there was something secretly wrong with you, but this is a beautiful day because you aren't unusual. Even if you have to hide it from your parents, you don't need to hide it from yourself. It's natural to be private about some of these activities, but don't confuse privacy with shame.

Fast forward, eighth grade, you'll spurt up a few inches and join a crowd of bigger kids. Some of whom use words that alarm you. For starters, your friend Steve will use the word "gay" and "faggot" to describe others, particularly men that exude any sort of weakness. You may be immune from this, at first, because you have the gift of height and you enjoy traditionally masculine things like sports and hip-hop.

But don't let those things get in the way of the truth. These slurs are based in fear -- a fear, specifically, of homosexuality. And repeating these bad words out loud hurts classmates of yours, some of whom may find attraction in people of their own gender. Do you remember how scary it felt to keep a secret to yourself that you felt ashamed of? Imagine, for a moment, how they feel. Tell Steve how you see things, and if he doesn't get it, move forward; don't base your self-esteem in ideas that are so baseless and hurtful to others. It's an awful foundation for self-worth.

Your masculinity at 17 will begin to feel healthy, just like the rest of your life. You'll have a few awesome female best friends who make you feel more in touch with your emotional sides. But don't get complacent. Don't let that feeling of "I'm an emotionally expressive man" prevent you from fully seeing the many ways in which women aren't treated the same as men. Patriarchy, as you'll soon start to see, is everywhere. It's there on your trips to India when the women serve the men first and are always the last to eat. It's there in your Java class, when the 30 person room has 27 guys and 3 girls. It's there everywhere.

At 18, you'll head to college. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that just because you're at a prestigious institution, that the morals or social norms have caught up. Don't let yourself think that just because you were "woke" at 17, that you don't need to question things anymore. Question everything, even and especially your own behavior. The people you begin to look up to at-first, in a rather strange revision, will

tease men that are outwardly emotional. They will create rating systems to evaluate attractive women, and they will pursue women in ways that make them feel uncomfortable. They are following the paths of broken men before them. Stay clear. And be the respectful and empathetic kid you grew up as.

My brother, even after you graduate from college, you'll feel the culmination of these false truths appear in insidious ways. But keep your eyes open. And just remember these false truths were written by men who did not have the courage to introspect. But lucky for you, there are plenty of men who do have that courage. Learn from them, befriend them. And lucky for you, you will be coming of age during the #MeToo movement when women speak their truth, from a place of deep courage. Listen to them. Learn from them. And be inspired.

Because in your own small way, when you have a chance to rewrite some of the broken rules of being a man, you'll use their inspiration to start the real work that comes from looking within. You'll let the pain you feel become a source of deep activism and creativity. You'll start bands with your friends, and have conversations about what it means to assume accountability. You'll speak the lessons you've absorbed with conviction to the next generation. And when you get a chance to take a more public stand, you won't shy away.

This is the work that legends are made of. And you are one of those legends. A loveable, little legend for now.

So go back to recess, and let yourself laugh. Let yourself feel calm, knowing that I've got your back through it all. And remember to follow through on your jumpshot. You start doing that now, and before you know it, you'll hit the three pointers when they count.

With love,

Your Dearest Older Brother.

P.S. And if it ever feels hard, just know... that means, you're doing it right. The poem below is from an Roman archbishop from the 17th century, who apparently agrees with me.

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The Cure Begins

Francois Fenelon
1651-1715

I feel this to be important:
As light increases,
We see ourselves,
to be worse than we thought.
We are amazed
at our former blindness,
As we see issuing forth,
from the depths of our heart,
a whole swarm
of shameful feelings,
Like filthy reptiles
crawling from a hidden cave.

We never would have believed,
that we had harboured such things,
And we stand aghast,
as we watch them gradually appear.
But we must neither be
amazed or disheartened.
We are not worse,
than we were;
On the contrary,
We are better.
But while our faults diminish,
The light by which we see them
Waxes brighter,
And we are filled with horror.
Bear in mind,
For your comfort,
That we only perceive our malady
When the cure begins.