SPEECH FOR MOTHERS DAY. EVENT

*By Rajeshwari Victor*

Good Morning everyone! It is very heartwarming to see so many mothers here – all under one roof, Each of you has come here because you care for your child and you want to be a better mother. You have already made choices and done things for your child that no one else could have. And I do not believe that I will be able to tell you more on that.

What I will do today is to share my journey. It’s a journey of me becoming a mother- beyond just the title. It is a journey that made me understand that first I have to grow up in order to help my own child to grow up.

It is also a journey that revealed to me that we are born out of the choices we make in front of us. In my case, it happened around mid life. It was said in my introduction that I am the author of a book titled MY LIFE MY CHOICE. I believe that we are all authors of our own lives and we are scripting it constantly, whether we are aware of it or not. This talk is about what were the choices that I made around my mid life and why. The book is titled MY LIFE MY CHOICE and was published by MACMILLAN in 2010 and released by Dr Shashi Tharoor in Delhi. The story of my book writing has a lot to do with why I am here today.

It all started in 2007. I had been married for 10 years and I had a lovely son who was five years old. I was one of those typical corporate marketing professionals- who works eight to eight, travels 15 days a month and is mentally preoccupied with her work life rather than with home and child. I used to come home and realize that Rishi , my son, had not done his homework. I would get so impatient with him that I would force him to finish three pages in ten minutes! Without being sensitive to his hand fingers development at such a tender age or even whether he knew HOW to do the homework stuff. This went on for around two years. Until one fine day, it all changed.

I went for the school PTA meeting. They were discussing the results of the Olympiad exams for children in Science and Math. Rishi had always been a bright child and would have liked to participate. And would have even won a prize or two. But I had not even been aware that such a thing existed. I was so preoccupied with my business targets and my becoming the next business Head that it not even occurred to me that Rishi would also have other activities beyond just normal school academics. Continuing with the thought, I rewound the clock to check when was the last time I sat with him patiently on his home work to teach him various ways of doing a problem and enjoying it while doing so. It was a shocking revelation to me that I probably never approached it from his point of view- it was always that I wanted him to complete it so I could get on with my life. Moving forward, I realised , that if this continued, I would miss being my child’s mother in a true sense. I maybe his biological parent but we all know that doesn’t mean much. We have to earn that status where our child looks upto us, feels for us, considers us his best friend, trusts us with all his problems and shares his life with us. And I was far away from all this.

Working mothers stories are always difficult to narrate. In our attempt to glorify their career achievements, we tend to ignore a mother’s accomplishments. Or vice versa. Their career progress if often probably at the expense of the little joys of putting an infant to sleep, or helping a child to learn a new poem. They have to continously tell themselves, and to the whole world, that it is okay to pursue a career when you have children at home. Emotionally it can be draining but the final compensation comes from your child when he/she looks at your proudly and says “Well done Amma”!

I was at a juncture where I had to make one of most important choices in my life. Between becoming a Managing Director or a CEO at 40 years or being there for my son full time – to enable him become a better child, better teenager and a more wholesome adult. It was a difficult choice. Moreso because, thanks to my father , who is an ardent believer of education, I went to a premier B School like IIM Ahmedabad, and nurtured career aspirations for a long time. Hence the decision was not easy for me. I replayed in my mind my work achievements and could vividly visualize what the future could hold for me in terms of corporate glory. Apart from a sense of accomplishment of building an organization, there was also the power, lifestyle, glamour, International travel—all associated with it. I would have to give that all up along with my corporate career. After all I had worked very hard to get where I was and it seemed a bit unfair that I should be facing a choice like this. But as I slowly realized, I was using the fact that my son was too young to be able to make a case for himself on why he needs my time. And I was lapping it up to serve my purpose. Fortunately, my conscience tugged at me at the right time and without having any plans for the future, I just decided to take a break from my career break. I decided I will figure out life as it came but the need of the hour was spending time with my son. I could always become a CEO at 50 but my son’s childhood was not going to wait. He would grow up and be gone. And I would have missed the most precious part of my life of being with him when he needed me the most. So I quit my corporate job. It was a moment of awakening in me.

Some times we surprise ourselves in life, It is defining moments such as these that show to us who we are..By choosing the path that require us to re define ourselves in order to carve out a better person of ourselves and to benefit others in the process. And I told myself- if I cannot do this for my son, who else can I ever do it for?

My middle class parents, who had always been proud of my career graph were quite taken aback . They did not understand why would I want to quit a high profile glamorous career, when they, as grand parents, could take care of Rishi. But I was clear – I believed I wanted a full time motherhood experience and that grand parents should be just that – and not made to play the role of parents once again.

Life post that was not easy. There were several more choices to follow. The second hard choice I had to make was putting together the set of social circle. Being in corporate life, has it own share of disadvantages,. Apart from the gruelling work timings. one’s social environment also pretty much becomes office people. With the result that, when I took a break I felt absolutely alone. And this was a very scary thought for a person like me. For the sake of my son having a friends circle, I realized that this is one area I had to work actively on. It was also tough as I had always been in men dominated work space and hence had very few women friends. Anyway, with the list that I had, I actually went about making a list of women acquaintances who I wanted to take to the next level of deeper friendships. I had regular lunch meetings / home visits to work on this and in the next six months, I was happy to find I had at least 3-4 women friends who I could call up anytime of the day or night and ask for advice. Or even share a meal or just chat.

The third important choice that confronted me was what to do with myself from a professional angle. Having worked in corporate for 15 years, I felt terrible to throw it all away. Yet how could I bring about that balance of home and still maintain that feeling of contributing ness? It was at this juncture that the idea of book was born. I must confess that I am an author by accident and the book was born out of a desire to find out how do people go about making that career choice around mid life, keeping in mind the stake holders in their lives around that time.

I was sure that this issue of career and home balancing was felt by many. I had listened to Ms Indra Nooyi, Global CEO of Pepsico several times during my corporate career and she highlights this very well. According to her “ If there is one role that she would redo, if she were to relive her life again, it is that of a mother of her two daughters. She confesses that she has definitely not been the best mother and that she constantly fights guilt everyday.” So it was a real issue but has no books or benchmarks. You HAVE to find your own answers to this question. I decided to take this head on and hence contacted 15 such people across India who had switched careers in order to start a new life. I was curious to know their journey and how they went about it.

One such journey was that of Ms Srividya Viswanathan, an IIM Bangalore alumnus who moved from a corporate career to starting a home for the old, after she gave birth to twins.- Literally a second home coming for her. This inspired me. She had all along had a corporate career but had to give it up for the sake of her children. She somewhere understood the value of compromise in a long term parenting role.

However, I was against the word ‘ compromise’.To me life is a series of choices and therefore there is a difference between choice and compromise. I saw hope that if you are willing to make changes in yourself- both physical life style and mental make up, I could arrive at something where I can still spend time with my son substantially. But what was that thing?

Teaching it was, so it turned out. I met the Dean of Anna University Dindivanam, who shifted to academics after 22 yrs of stint in Railways, during the course of my book. He told me about how academics helps you stay mentally stimulated , yet allows you time for home. I also understood that my natural strengths lay in academics..and that I had always enjoyed training and communication with my team, even while at corporate. So I enrolled in taking classes at IIT and at Chennai Business School and based on the encouraging feedback that I got, decided to pursue academics full time.

Teaching brought along with the fourth set of choices- the lifestyle. In India , the pay component in academics is only a small fraction of what the corporate offers. So it was clear to me that I had to rework my living style, holiday and shopping habits. Of course it helped that I come from a middle class back ground and hence my ability to adjust to a new environment was not very difficult.

The other choice in teaching was the work environment itself. Corporate world is a social world. You always work in teams and are surrounded by people. In contrast, the academic world is a more lonely place to be in. You are mostly with your books and your computer. It took me a while to get used to this.

However, despite all of this, today, I am a Professor and Head of Department at Chennai Business School. I also teach in places like IIT, IIMs, Great Lakes etc. I feel that my second career is borne more out of my natural strengths, keeping in mind my individual need to spend more time at home. I feel more anchored and rooted.

So what has changed personally? A lot I must say. Rishi is the centre of my life now- I plan my class timings based on his school timings. I am able to partake in his school activities much more and am able to plan for this inputs much more methodically. I have a goal for his future, based on understanding his talents and strengths- this could not have happened without my changing careers- since as I had no clue about his school performance. I plan for his sports activities and church classes. I am well networked with his teachers and with mothers of his friends. In effect, our lives overlap quite a bit.

To sum up, my mid life choice were the important four- the first was that of giving up a corporate career that did not work from my sons’ point of view. The second was the choice of putting together a social system in place that was absolutely different from what I had during my work life. The third choice was about ‘MORE for LESS”- that is I got more time with my son in exchange for giving up a glamorous life style and the fourth choice was the work environment in teaching versus corporate. I am proud of the choices I made and I thank my close family members who stood by me through all this.

In this day of technology and ambition, it is very easy to justify time away from your child. And no one would even ask you why. You may also not feel guilty about it. But I believe, in the end it is about making the right choices. In my case, while for the outside world, it may look like I have moved away from corporate to academics, the real shift is that have learnt to be a mother to my child. And that is significant for me as a person.

When I look back at my life when I am 65 or 70 years, motherhood role is one role that I do not want to do a shoddy job of. Even today, my brother who has been in the US for around 25 years, calls up my mother every Saturday and talks for one hour on the phone about anything and everything. She feels very happy about this. She has obviously got something fantastically right about being a mother. And I hope, I get that too , by making the mid life choice of becoming a Mother for Rishi!

As Mother Teresa said, in the end , life is all about how much LOVE you were able to put into the work that you did on EARTH. We are all fortunate here to be able to do that for our child.

A very Happy Womens day ! And wishing you all Mothers the very best for your journey!

Thanks once again for the opportunity.