

Fighting Fear with Love: A Family's Battle during the Pandemic

by Zeel Patel

The streets outside were eerily silent, except for the occasional echo of an ambulance siren cutting through the thick stillness. Inside our flat in Ahmedabad, my family—my parents, younger brother, and grandfather—sat together, worried about my father, who was the maintenance in-charge for Shilp Builders. As part of a large extended family, we were used to supporting one another through life's ups and downs. However, the COVID-19 pandemic tested our strength like never before.

I am Zeel Patel, someone who never had an interest in books or literature. Reading was never my cup of tea, and writing felt like a tedious task rather than an outlet for creativity or self-expression. However, everything changed in 2020. The fear, uncertainty, and emotional turmoil of that year led me to discover a new way to cope—writing. What started as a desperate attempt to process my emotions transformed into a lifelong habit, helping me find clarity, strength, and a deeper connection with myself. Through my family's struggle during the COVID-19 pandemic, I discovered not only the power of love and unity in overcoming adversity but also an unexpected refuge in writing. What began as a way to process my emotions during a time of fear and uncertainty transformed into a lifelong appreciation for self-expression. This experience changed my perspective on literature, showing me that words have the power to heal, to bring clarity, and to strengthen the human spirit.

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic swept across India like a storm, leaving devastation in its wake. People were dying in large numbers, hospitals were overflowing, and fear permeated every household. The government imposed a strict lockdown, confining people to their homes. Only essential workers were allowed outside, and even they had to carry special passes. In our family, the responsibility of stepping outside fell on my father. As the main maintenance supervisor in charge, his work required him to be present on site, and this put him at constant risk of exposure.

We did everything we could to protect him. My mother prepared nutritious meals designed to boost his immunity, and we insisted that he wear personal protective equipment whenever he left the house. When he returned home each day, we sanitized everything he brought with him, quarantined him in a separate room, and made him bathe immediately. Despite our precautions, we lived in constant fear. The virus felt like an invisible enemy, and every passing day felt like a battle for survival.

Our worst fears materialized when my father began showing symptoms of COVID-19. He had a high fever, persistent cough, and cold—all telltale signs of the virus.

"Papa, you don't look well," I said hesitantly, noticing the sweat glistening on his forehead.

"It's just exhaustion, beta," he replied weakly. "I'll be fine after some rest."

But his cough worsened, and soon, we couldn't ignore it any longer. We immediately called the COVID helpline for a test, but when the testing team arrived, our neighbors began avoiding us as if we carried the plague. It was heartbreaking to see the stigma surrounding the illness, but we focused on my father. When his test results came back negative, we were relieved, but his condition continued to worsen. Hospitals were overwhelmed, and finding a bed for treatment seemed impossible. Medicine and oxygen supplies were being sold at exorbitant prices, and people were dying faster than help could arrive.

At the time, we were unsure of my father's exact illness. He exhibited all the major symptoms of COVID-19—high fever, severe cough, body aches, and weakness—so naturally, we feared the worst. Despite multiple tests coming back negative, his condition remained serious, and he required medical attention. Due to the overwhelming situation in hospitals and the lack of available resources, we never received a definitive diagnosis. However, seeing many people in the hospital with similar symptoms made us realize how fragile life was during that period. This uncertainty added to our anxiety.

During those days, I felt trapped in my emotions. Worry for my father consumed me, and I didn't know how to cope. One day, as I sat in my room staring at the ceiling, I picked up a notebook lying on my desk and began to write.

"What are you doing?" my younger brother asked, peeking over my shoulder.

"Just... writing," I mumbled, unsure why I was even doing it.

At first, it was just random sentences about how I felt—fearful, helpless, angry at the situation. But soon, writing became a daily ritual. I poured my emotions onto the pages, writing about my family, my fears, and my hope for my father's recovery. Writing in my diary became my safe space—a place where I could untangle my thoughts and express what I couldn't say out loud. It gave me clarity and a sense of control during a time when everything else felt uncertain. I began to see writing not as a task but as a way to connect with myself and process the emotions I struggled to understand.

Eventually, we had no choice but to take my father to the civil hospital in Ahmedabad. The hospital was a scene of chaos and despair. Rows of patients filled every available bed, some struggling for breath, others lying motionless. The air smelled of antiseptic, and the muffled cries of patients mixed with the hurried footsteps of overworked nurses. My father witnessed the fragility of life up

close, and it broke his heart to see people struggling for survival with no family by their side. Before he was taken in for tests, I managed to speak to him.

"Papa, I'm scared," I whispered over the phone.

"Don't be, beta," he said softly. "I have to be strong for you all. And you have to be strong for me." His words stayed with me.

I went home and immediately wrote them down in my diary. Seeing them on paper made them feel real, like a promise. I vowed to stay strong, just as he wanted.

After several days in the hospital, we received the news we had been praying for: my father's COVID-19 PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) test came back negative, and his health had begun to improve. It felt like a miracle. When he finally returned home, we welcomed him with open arms, overwhelmed with relief and gratitude. Though his body was weak, his spirit was stronger than ever.

"You wrote all about this, didn't you?" he asked me one evening, noticing the notebook in my hands.

I hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah... It helped me not be so scared."

"Good," he said with a tired smile. "Words have power, Zeel. Don't ever stop writing."

This journey taught me that no challenge is insurmountable with the love and support of family, and that writing can transform pain into strength. What started as a simple way to cope during a crisis became an essential part of my life, helping me understand myself and appreciate the resilience within me. Today, my diary has become my companion, and I carry forward the lessons of courage and self-expression. I now see literature and writing not as chores, but as tools for healing and growth. Every story, whether written or lived, holds the power to inspire, to bring clarity, and to remind us that even in the darkest times, our words can be a source of light.