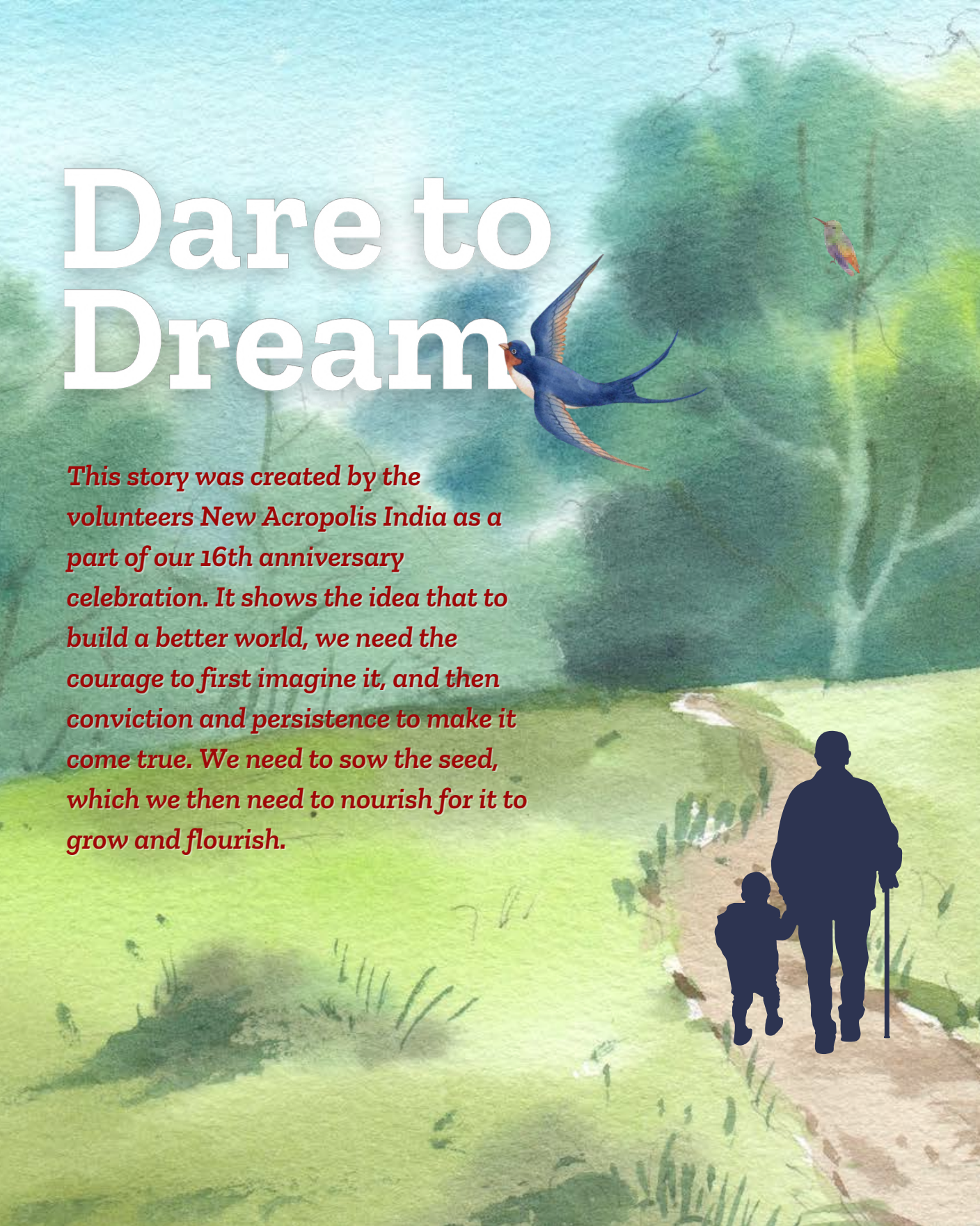



Dare to Dream



This story was created by the volunteers New Acropolis India as a part of our 16th anniversary celebration. It shows the idea that to build a better world, we need the courage to first imagine it, and then conviction and persistence to make it come true. We need to sow the seed, which we then need to nourish for it to grow and flourish.



It was a special summer vacation at my grandparents'. We'd visited them after a long time for grandpa's 65th birthday. The celebration began light-heartedly, with soft music, sharing of old stories and traditional food. Suddenly, voices rose, and the conversation turned into a heated, recurrent argument I knew well. Father started blaming Grandpa, for his nomadic way of life and limited family commitment while expanding the business. Father stormed out of the room and grandma followed him.

Of course, Grandpa realized the impact of his past choices. He realized how he had missed out on dad's early childhood in their once-flourishing village at the edge of a lush and abundant forest. But as the family was maturing, he had felt responsible to provide for them. Because the opportunities in the region had been declining due to drought and rising migration he had to constantly travel for his work.

Though we were doing well financially, the family fell apart. Grandpa confided to me that his dream was to create an eco-

system around the forest to generate income for local communities and re-establish harmony and solidarity in the family.

While he was saying those words, I can clearly recall seeing grandpa light up from the intensity and fervour of his quest. He asserted that it wasn't too late to make it happen. I observed him closely for the first time. He had the physical markers of his age; his skin was thinner, drier, with wrinkles all over, and his hair was wizened and grey. But he was not defining his life by his age and limitations. He had a strong sense of integrity rather than despair or new phase of life which he felt still held tremendous potential for selfless action and service to humanity.

That night, from my window, I saw Grandpa heading out in the dark with a small lantern, so I decided to follow him. To my surprise, he stopped at a barren clearing in the forest and, affirming his dreams loudly, he planted a seed that he had in his hand; it was for him, the symbol of a new beginning.



Over the last few days of my vacation, I saw Grandpa go out every day to sow seeds. Day after day, new challenges appeared. He wasn't the young man he used to be, and his frail physique had difficulty resisting the harsh sun. The family started to comment and joke about his new fantasy, but I was secretly proud of him. Before leaving for the city, grandpa gave me the tightest hug and assured me that nothing would deter his commitment.

A microcosmic world had already made the land their home; mosses, ferns, mushrooms, flowers, worms, insects, butterflies, small animals and birds, all bound together in an interconnected web, which was dependent on every living thing within that ecosystem fulfilling their small but critical role! Grandpa excitedly invited me to come soon, as the rains would start and make the forest greener.

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That summer onwards, my phone calls to grandpa became more frequent. He had been tirelessly persistent for 2 years now and the stories of his young forest were becoming more interesting with every passing week.

He knew the condition of each and every plant and sapling and told me that some of the plants had now grown over 5 feet tall.

The rains came on time, but they brought with them torrential storms. Without the forest to protect them the land was ravaged by landslide and floods, and we heard worrying stories on the news daily about severe destruction and power outages; Our grandparents were uncontactable. As soon as the situation normalized, we rushed to meet them. The devastation was massive. They had lost their farm and most of their possessions. But Grandpa was most heartbroken about losing the forest that he had nurtured like a loving mother.





That day, for a moment, I saw a broken man. Perhaps his dream was not meant to be.

We spent that night in the community hall together. I still have a distinct memory of the leaking roof and the grief of my grandpa's life falling apart. But these emotions could not incapacitate grandpa for long. The strength of his inner spark and conviction held him together. His dream was not limited to himself but it was an expression of love for his community and for many generations to come.

This altruistic joy was enough for him to stay true to his dream. The next morning, he went straight to the forest land, erected a small tent, and started clearing the wreckage, readying to plant a new forest all over again.

Coming back to normalcy was difficult for everyone in the village.

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Taking advantage of this, a sly businessman approached the villagers. He convinced them to sell off their lands in exchange for money and jobs. He spread rumours that Grandpa's dreams and traditional ways of working would come in the way of their growth, and the development of the village. Some villagers were doubtful of Grandpa's intentions, others would just make fun of his dream. The businessman on the other hand, promised to build a mall which would foster economic growth and attract people from neighbouring villages, which would lead to prosperity for everyone. Since the crops were mostly destroyed, the villagers saw this as a good opportunity to move on, and they spoke up against Grandpa.

I remember very well; Grandpa had to defend the land and the forest in front of the city council, where all the villagers were invited. Bent with age, supported by his walking stick, Grandpa made his way to the meeting. He spoke in a calm but firm tone; and that day, as he shared his vision, he became an example of 'A Man who Dares to Dream.'

The audience could feel that he was motivated not by any self-serving idea but by the love of the collective;



He explained how he wanted to foster employment opportunities through rural tourism, streamline local businesses and revive the regional art form of traditional wood carving, a skill that even some seniors could still master. From a deep silence, murmurs and then enthusiastic voices started to emerge from the audience. Grandpa continued to explain that for him and for their village this forest had been like a mother.

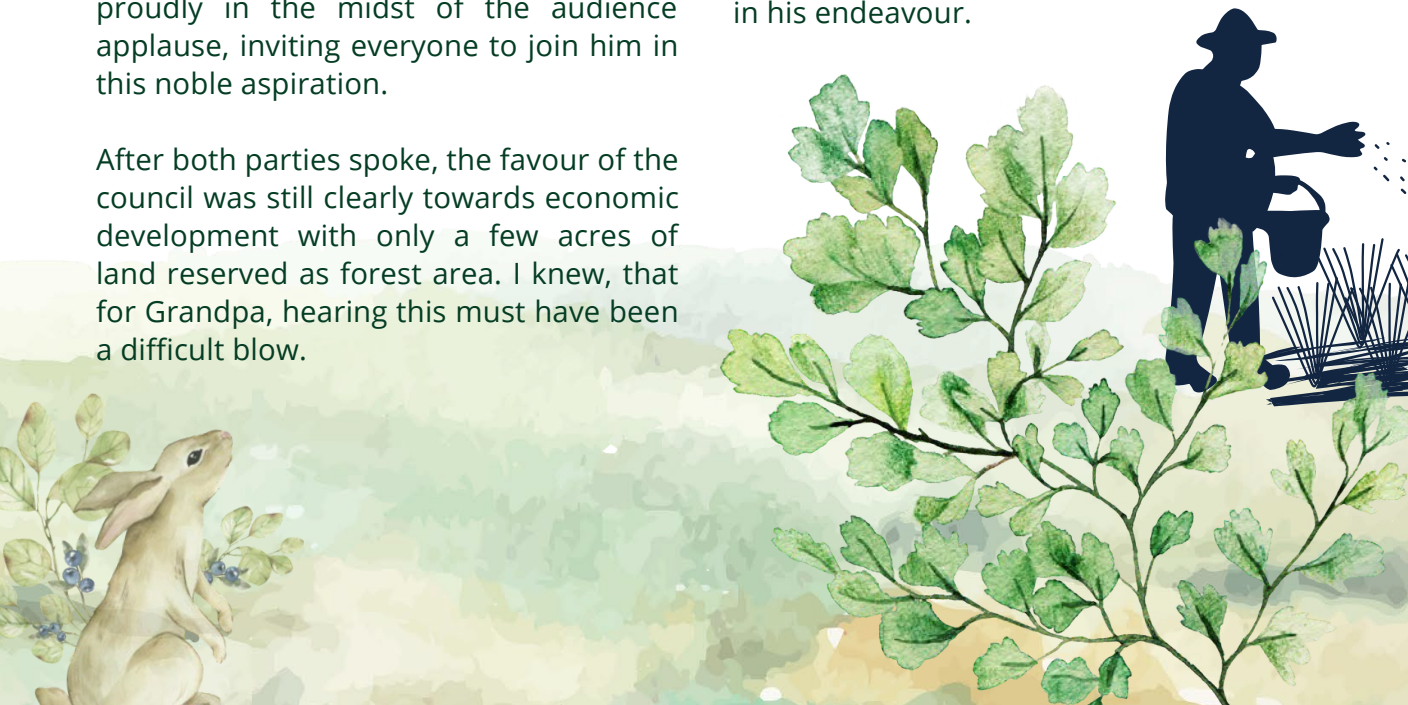
It had nurtured them through all their years, offering economic sustainability and natural wealth. He urged everyone to remember that with some effort, they would find their rightful place in the web of nature: rather than trying to be its master, and stripping it of its richness for their own personal and short-lived material gains, Man must take on the responsibility of protecting and nurturing nature as its custodian, recognizing that he is an integral part of the Web of Life. That's when I saw Father suddenly stand proudly in the midst of the audience applause, inviting everyone to join him in this noble aspiration.

After both parties spoke, the favour of the council was still clearly towards economic development with only a few acres of land reserved as forest area. I knew, that for Grandpa, hearing this must have been a difficult blow.

Yet, despite the council's decision, Grandpa went to the piece of land allocated to replant the forest and continued the work. Father would give him company, and I begged to come too. The spirit of victory, with which he approached every challenge, and the undying hope and patience that he demonstrated – had started to attract some of the other villagers. The way he stood for his dream was infectious. It reminded everyone of the harmony and love that existed in the village.

Over a span of years, grandpa had seen his dream germinate from seeds to trees, from a barren land to a full-fledged forest. The villagers realized that while doing so, he had overcome numerous inner battles and it inspired them to find courage, strength and hope within themselves.

It wasn't without fear and insecurities that slowly the villagers joined Grandpa in his endeavour.



But Grandpa welcomed them warmly, and knowing the cycle of life and his frail health, he openly shared with them his challenges, experiences, learnings and solutions. It didn't take long for other seniors to bring back some knowledge and skills. It was beautiful to see the collective rise again by supporting each other in a shared vision. Grandpa had laid the foundation and direction for the village, despite knowing that he would not live to see the fruits. But by walking the path, he showed us the way and today, there are hundreds of us following his footsteps and carrying forward the dream as our own.

Though grandpa is no longer with us, the fact that father and grandma were able to make peace with his choices during his life, is a source of solace for me. I visit my village every year with my children and walk through the now dense and verdant forest telling them the stories of my memories. The village too has thrived as the forest gently and reciprocally exerted a positive influence on the climate, the water table, and the soil.

Through Grandpa's journey, I and perhaps many others in our village learnt valuable life lessons: Don't allow regret to paralyze you, find a goal to keep you moving. Instead of avoiding challenges, welcome them for they make you stronger and more capable of forging ahead.

It's not important how many times you fall, it's important that you learn, rise and try again. And most importantly, to walk the path, you must become the path, and when you do that, you light up the way for others to follow.

Today 15 years later, I see how the village has prospered and modernized as crops are grown for both consumption and profit. It is known as the village that nurtured and revived the lush and abundant forest that grows alongside it, a forest that has become a living symbol for successive generations, of the reminder of man's role as an integral part of the interdependent web of Life. △△△

