

I...

Dare to live,

Dare to love,

Dare to give,

Dare to be,

Passionate with all of me.

—*Gabriella van Rij*

With All My Might

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Third edition has been edited for clarity. No major additions were made.

Born Muslim, raised Catholic...

From an orphanage to a diplomatic family...

From humble meals to three course dinners with silver cutlery...

Born in Pakistan, raised in Europe...

Every day having to defend myself at the school yard:

“Is that blond, tall, gorgeous-looking woman picking you up really your mother?”

Most of us have been spoonfed or pressured into conforming by the people closest to us. Adversity is born from our struggles to conform. You can overcome both, become free of constraints, and become proud of your diversity and uniqueness.

This book talks about conformity, adversity, and diversity.

Stay true to who you are!

Be **YOU** and
PLEASE don't apologize
for being you!

With All My Might

Gabriella van Rij

A Very Special Dedication

I would like to dedicate my first book to my daughter Alexandra.

From the moment you were conceived, I looked forward to meeting you. I loved every moment of being pregnant with you; it has been one amazing ride.

You were an adored baby and child, but I have especially come to admire and respect the adult that you have grown into.

You are loyal and very caring. Once you let someone into your world, then the floodgates open to the love and laughter that is within you.

I consider you my friend and my confidante, and I thank you for being in my life as my family, my friend, and my confidante; I never take that for granted, not for an instant!

Your Mama

Special Acknowledgements

I also want to dedicate this book to six very special women without whom my existence and development into who I am today would not be. These six women each shaped me in some way, and they each cared about my fate.

To **Reshan**, my birthmother, who gave me life and sustenance in the first few days of my life and who had the perspicacity to put me in a Catholic orphanage. Thank you for the love I have always felt from those first ten days. They have made all the difference.

To **Helen**, who cared enough for an orphan to plough through the typically overwhelming red tape and papers to get me out of the country and into the arms of awaiting adoptive parents. I have come a very long way to be able to thank you for caring for that toddler. I had to overcome a lot of obstacles, but today I can truly thank you!

To **Maaike**, my aunt who travelled all the way to Pakistan with her husband to pick up her future niece. That in itself deserves a moment of reflection: to make a trip around the globe in 1966 was very impressive. She cannot read this anymore; so I direct my thanks to her two daughters for having such a marvellous mother who was willing to pick me up as if I was only next door!

To *Marijke*, my adoptive mother, I thank you for wanting to take a stranger into your family. You waded through all the red tape and never gave up. Over the last 40 years, I have watched with amazement your incredible passion for certain things. Thank you for wanting to help an orphan, wanting to help me...

We finally grew towards each other; I am grateful for those last few years where we had a deep understanding of the loving person that we each are in our own right. Thank you for giving me a home, *Moeke*.¹

To *Mans*, my aunt on my mother's side, who radiates humour, laughter, and love from her entire being. Thank you for the love you gave me as a child. You told me the straight truth, and you mediated many times between my mother and me, which must have been hard for you. Thank you for caring all those years and never forgetting my existence or letting the relationship slip away. You always knew when I was alone and in dire need of a friendly word or a nudge. You are sorely missed...

To her four children, I cannot tell you in words how much your mother has meant to me. She has and will always be a very bright light in my life.

¹ *Moeke* is an old-fashioned Dutch word for mother.

To **Hans**, my aunt, who was so kind and gentle with me over the years. She always had a place for me in her home. Although she had six children of her own, she always had time to listen and give advice and an encouraging word.



Many people have crossed my path throughout my travels, and I would like to thank some of them personally for the difference they have made in my life, whether or not I am still in contact with them. The list is too long, so I have put these dedications and acknowledgments at the end of the book.

I have experienced many situations involving racism, but these next three incidents left me flabbergasted.

The first one was when I was a very young child and my parents had parties. The older friends would sometimes ask why I had not cleaned myself properly. I remember my father standing next to me when an old lady asked this in French. I looked perplexed and turned to my dad for help; he shooed me out of the room. The older generation just did not know. Why would brown be dirty when everyone on this earth tries to be tanned in summer? What a warped notion this colour thing is!

Think about it, though. Often, being light-coloured is perceived as being superior to darker shades. In many cultures—for example, Japanese or Thai, just to name two—people stay in the shade with umbrellas all summer long to keep their light complexion. It seems they want to distinguish themselves from the working class, who are tanned from working outside during the summer months.



The second shocking experience with racism was when I was flying back from Tokyo to Brussels. As you know, Mark, I have a Dutch passport. European airports have two lines at arrival, one for EU passport holders and the second for foreigners. It was extremely busy at Zaventem¹¹ that day,

¹¹ Zaventem is the airport in Brussels, Belgium.

as several international flights from all over the world had arrived at the same time. Security personnel were guiding the passengers to the right line-ups. One of them came up to me, and without asking to see my passport, told me I was in the wrong line. I politely told him I had an EU passport. He told me it did not matter and I should go to the other line. This repeated itself several times. In the foreign line-up they were checking passports and they sent me straight back to the EU line. Finally, after going back and forth for 30 minutes, I saw a tall, foreign-looking man in the EU line. I positioned myself so close to him that he looked down and asked if I was okay. I told him in French that I was curious if he could pass that line-up, as I was having such trouble, and I told him kindly that his skin colour was many shades darker than mine. He burst into laughter and told me to stick with him. I thanked him and told him he would not be able to pass, but that it would be fun seeing it all unfold. He said, with a lot of determination in his voice, "We will see about that, won't we?" He was a handsome, well-dressed black man, obviously a businessman.

Finally, our turn came and the man showed his passport, but I could not see very well as the counter was too high for me. Exactly as I had predicted, they looked at him with disdain and told him to go to the line for foreigners. In a very dry tone he pointed out that his passport was French and that he was a French citizen and a member of the EU. The man behind the counter could not care less and continued to speak to the man

in a denigrating way. My man stayed polite, which I admired. (I could have learned a thing or two there.) He asked to speak to the supervisor and did not budge.

The supervisor arrived looking dishevelled and rubbing his large stomach (very rude behaviour) and asked what the trouble was. The man, my ally by this time, answered in a dignified manner that he was a colonel of the French army and showed his army credentials. Oh la la, what immense fun for me! I jumped up and down with such joy, such relief that this dignified man stood his ground. He turned towards me and said, "This young lady is travelling with me and she is (he glanced at my passport) a Dutch national. You better not give her any trouble either." It goes without saying that I passed in seconds. I profusely thanked the man, who asked if this happened a lot to me. I told him I was used to it, especially at that airport. He said he was ashamed that people would treat others like that and told me to stand up for who I was. I agreed. And I always did so after that!

It is a crippling feeling to be attacked for something you cannot change at all: the colour of your skin.

I think it is different if you are a petite, five-foot-tall woman instead of an imposing man with high-ranking army credentials. But he was right! No matter what other human beings do to each other, we need to stand up for who we are and defend our rights. Our values and beliefs are important, and no one

should make us crawl and feel inferior because of our race or colour. I did not realize at the time that my pride is all I have!



My third experience with racism tops the previous two. The worst racism I have experienced in my life was in Belgium, at the hands of my in-laws. Most people do not know how racist Belgium is. The country is divided into two parts: the French part called Wallonie and the Flemish part called Flanders. In Brussels, people speak both languages. Brussels is a very big city with many communities. My in-laws lived in one of them, Dilbeek. When you drive on the highway around Brussels, just as you pass the exit of Dilbeek, you see a huge banner stretched out over a bridge that literally says, “Waar de flaming thuis is.” This means “Where the Flemish people are at home.”

How well do you know Belgium, Mark?

Mark: I love going there, and I love the beer.

Yes, I agree with the love of beer. And food is fantastic in Belgium, too. The restaurants are terrific, but not all the people are nice.

In Dilbeek, they were often hostile to foreigners, particularly to people with a skin colour other than pale. If someone from the French side fell in love with someone else from the Flemish

About the Author



GABRIELLA VAN RIJ is the author of *With All My Might*, a memoir of her experiences, and *I Can Find My Might*, an empowering children's book that teaches self-acceptance.

A kindness activist and speaker, with guest appearances on shows like Dr. Phil and other news channels, Gabriella works to spread the message that we are all unique and each of us has something to offer others. She is the leading voice of the Kindness movement.

Gabriella has a grown daughter. When Gabriella has time off she meditates, reads, and plays with her tiny Maltese dog, Bella.