



Every cook, from a celebrity chef to a humble homemaker, relies on a few essential ingredients. Safely nestled within their ‘masala dubbah’ (spice box) are powders and pods which though small in quantity, are potent in taste. It is on the foundation of these vital ingredients that the cook exercises her culinary skill, preparing dishes that have the potential to either tantalize the taste buds or poison the palate.

Every cook worth her salt knows that some ingredients are absolutely necessary in most dishes, yet always cause tears (like chopped onions). Certain ingredients are the backbone of every recipe, yet may lead to a rise in blood pressure (like salt). Other ingredients assist the food to cook, yet cause heartburn when used in excess (like oil). Many ingredients give the food an incredible ‘zing’, but if added with a heavy hand, render the food almost inedible (like chilies).

Often, the difference between an ordinary dish and the masterpiece of a maestro is as simple as ensuring that every ingredient is added in the correct quantity and at the correct time. Also, the cook has to remain vigilant, continuously monitoring the progress of the dish, as turning a blind eye for just a moment can result in the pot boiling over, leaving the stove an absolute mess.

Finally, when all these steps are taken and all the dangers safely navigated, the final product is not a mere dish – it’s a work of art that satisfies on every level – taste, nutrition and appearance.

Interestingly enough, a child is exactly like a dish while the parents are the chefs. The parents have to instill the correct qualities and values (ingredients) within the child, while ensuring that the child is exposed to stimuli that are not only appropriate but are also in the correct proportions and at the ideal times. Certain ingredients are necessary for the child, but are harmful in excess. Different parents follow different recipes, while some parents don’t follow any recipe at all, simply hoping for the best!

In an age where fusion cuisine was all the rage, my mother’s recipe for raising her children was unique for being old-fashioned and traditional. The food elsewhere may have been gourmet

or artisanal, but even if it managed to do more than just look good and lack taste, there comes a point when a person craves 'home food'. Be it biryani, or just plain old chicken with roti, there's something in home food that satisfies and satiates like no other food can. When it came to my upbringing, this is the recipe that my mother used – the failsafe, tried-and-tested Islamic recipe for a 'home girl'.

I write this many years later, in retrospect and appreciation of my mother's efforts. As a young girl, there were the occasional moments when I resented my mother's approach to upbringing as it felt like a prison cell with me the convict behind bars. Today, I realize that due to my own shortsightedness and ignorance, I had failed to comprehend her wisdom and understanding. Now, as a mother myself, trying to raise my own children in an environment which is increasingly dangerous by the day, I fully understand the wisdom in my mother's approach and really wish that every child could have been fortunate enough to have received the upbringing that I 'enjoyed'.

As a small child, I would often 'read' salaah with my mother (to be honest, I seldom read more than one rakaat and my qiblah continuously changed!). However, when I turned seven, my mother sat me down and stressed the importance of salaah to me. She then began to make me read all my salaah on time – including Fajr. Be it summer or winter, a holiday or a school day – there was absolutely no difference as every day was a salaah day and there was never a break from salaah.

I have countless cousins and friends who aren't in the habit of performing their five daily salaah. A few of them eventually changed their lives and began performing salaah, but now they have five years, ten years or even more of qadha salaah to perform. Had it not been for my mother's concern, I would very possibly have been in the same boat.

Many of the girls in our family, from as early as childhood, were encouraged to pursue a career. The idea of independence in the event of a failed marriage, the perceived prestige of the professional life, the concept of financial equality between husband and wife – these were some of the factors that made a career appealing to these girls. My mother, on her part, stood her ground and followed her recipe – I was sent to a girls' madrasah down the road. There I learnt basic masaa-il, tajweed, seerah, tafseer of some short surahs, the various sunnah du'aas and other similar subjects. During our final year, we were instructed to remain at home for two days of the madrasah week so that we could focus on learning essential domestic skills under the supervision of our mothers. I graduated from this madrasah when I was sixteen.

The outcome? Well, I certainly didn't master advanced arithmetic, physics, or any of those subjects, but despite my 'ignorance' in these sciences, I never once suffered an inferiority complex or felt deficient in any way. In fact, I was glad that I hadn't wasted a few years learning irrelevant information that benefited barely anyone after graduation anyway. But this is only part of the outcome – listen to the other part.

There is one occasion when EVERYBODY gets together and that's a funeral. I was at a funeral, after I graduated, and we were all seated together, reciting the Quraan Majeed. At some point, I happened to glance at one of my distant relatives, who was supposedly 'setting the standard' for young girls in the family (she had a Phd in marine biology) and saw something strange – she was holding the Quraan Majeed upside down! I looked at her for a few moments longer, and then realized that her lips weren't moving, and she wasn't turning the pages either. Only then did I realize that the rumours were true – despite her advanced education, she was absolutely unable to read the Quraan Majeed! I did not look down at her in a condescending manner, rather I pitied her.

From birth, her parents had envisaged a certain future for her and had accordingly plotted the course her career would follow, from the best private school to the most exclusive university. Sadly, that 'career plan' did not include a madrasah or even the basic Deeni education.

Comparatively, I didn't have a diploma, but I was adequately equipped with the basic knowledge and vital values of Deen. To me, that was way more important than going 'mental' trying to memorize the elemental chart.

After graduating from madrasah, we could now turn our full focus to the home phase of my upbringing. I would join my mother in the kitchen and assist her with whatever she was doing. I say this purely out of gratitude to Allah Ta'ala – by the time I was seventeen, I could prepare any meal in any recipe book from scratch, unassisted. Whether steakhouse-style rump with mushroom sauce, Chinese chow-mein, Italian style pizza, Thai noodle-soup, Mexican fajitas and burritos, African samp and beans or Indian cuisine, I was equally proficient at preparing them all. My efforts in baking and dessert-making were similarly successful as I learnt the ins and outs of 'soft-ball', 'hard-crack' and everything else in between.

Seeing the talent that Allah Ta'ala had given me, my father encouraged me to take orders and sell my baking, cooking and desserts, especially as I had some free time. As soon as the word

went out, the meal orders and cake requests came flooding in. The money that accumulated was considerable, and on my father's encouragement, I happily donated half of it in charity, hoping to assist the less fortunate.

Considering this empowering ingredient of my upbringing, I am immeasurably thankful to my mother and ever indebted to her. The 'cherry on the top' is that if the need ever arises (may it never happen – aameen!), I will be capable of supporting myself, my husband and my children, all from the comfort of my kitchen!

I know of a girl who got married a few years back. When faced with the dilemma of feeding her husband his first post-marital meal, she was at a total loss. Hailing from a campus background, she had never 'graduated' beyond frying eggs and 'cooking' pre-cooked baked beans. Since her recipe arsenal only boasted these two weapons, she figured she'd 'fire' one for lunch and the other for supper. Hoping to make his omelet 'eggstraordinary', she chopped a potato into the egg, whipped the mixture with a fork and poured it into the pan. Obviously, the egg was cooked in no time while the potato remained raw.

Thankfully, her husband was patient. He ate the egg and jokingly remarked that they could recycle the potato by adding it to the beans later. Not all stories have a happy ending though. Sometimes, a man returns home in a state of exhaustion at the end of a long day, expecting comfort and a warm welcome from his wife. Naturally, ambushing him with an unappetizing pot will do little to lift his spirits.

One of the biggest challenges today is that of finding children's clothing that is decent and not plastered with pictures and logos. As I had been sent for sewing lessons, I easily overcame this challenge by sewing some of my children's clothing myself, designing the garments to fit the measurements and specifications of hayaa (shame and modesty). Occasionally, I also sewed clothing for myself that was not only exactly as I wanted, but also cost me a fraction of the department store price.

Both my parents were very particular regarding ta'leem in the home. We would all sit together and recite the Quraan Majeed, read Fazaail-e-Aa'maal and conclude by making du'aa. We would also eat together, seated on the floor around the dastarkhaan (eating mat). Being a close-knit family, we had a pleasant, cheerful atmosphere in the home.

In our home, none of us children were given cell phones or were allowed to use the computer and phone unsupervised. For us, this was the bitterest pill to swallow. ALL our friends and ALL our cousins, down to even the six year olds, had their own phones. Without phones, we would stick out like sore thumbs in the midst of these tech-savvy teens and toddlers!

We grieved and groaned, campaigned and complained and begged and beseeched – but to no avail. Whereas my father tended to be the more indulgent parent, in this case, we found even him unyielding and resolute as rock.

Seeing the disappointment and dismay on our faces, my father tried to console us saying, “Trust me, you may not appreciate my decision now, but a time will come when you will make du‘aa for me and be grateful that you were never entrusted with a phone.”

By Allah, my father’s words were true! I too refuse to allow my children the ‘privilege’ of a cell phone. In my generation alone, when the smart phone first stole the scene, almost every one of my cousins and friends were swept off their feet by some Facebook boyfriend and slipped into sins through WhatsApp and other phone-related features. Even if their parents didn’t allow the TV into the home, they could lie in bed and watch movies on their phones with earphones, none the wiser to what they were up to. The extent of the damage done to both Deen and dunya through misuse of the phone is astronomical. Pornography and haraam relationships, as serious as they are, are just the tip of the iceberg – an iceberg that can easily sink our imaan.

Finally, I make du‘aa for my mother every day, after every salaah, asking Allah Ta‘ala to reward her for the perfect and pristine recipe she followed in raising me. I state this without any exaggeration – the irreplaceable ingredients of an Islamic upbringing were the most valuable assets that she left me, as they were pillars that supported me in good stead throughout my life, the turbulent times and the prosperous periods.