



Courage: How much is your PhD worth?

I first met Amir (*not his real name*) in my office about six years ago when he told me that he wanted to do his PhD under my supervision. While I do not remember much what we discussed, I do remember being a little annoyed by his presence. Overdressed and smelling of strong cologne, Amir looked more like a rich man's spoiled son than someone committed to the long haul of a PhD endeavor.

Amir was indeed rich. He comes from an upper middle-class family, but this pales in comparison to his parents-in-law's much higher socioeconomic standing. Amir was married to the daughter of a very rich and influential man from his country.

Amir's troubles started about a year into his studies when his father-in-law wanted to stop Amir from continuing his PhD in Malaysia.

"I was recently married to his daughter," Amir explained to me, "so perhaps he wanted me to spend more time with his daughter rather than being away from her in Malaysia—but what really shocked me was the great lengths he would go into stopping my studies."

Pressured by her father, Amir's wife not only later divorced Amir but also tarnished his image by spreading false rumors about him. Amir's own business in his country was high-handedly shut down by his father-in-law. Amir suddenly found himself with rapidly depleting funds.

"My own parents would not even give me any money because my father said there has never been a divorce in our family history," Amir disclosed to me. "My father wanted me to return home to save my marriage. He too wanted me to stop my studies."

Abandoned by his own parents and with no money other than his modest monthly scholarship he gets from my research funds, Amir had to take on part-time and odd jobs to help pay for his living expenses and university fees. He also had to make large changes in how he lived in Malaysia. He had to move from his large apartment to renting a simple room, from driving a car to riding an old motorbike, and from affluent to simple living. Amir now looked more simple and much less like a rich man's son.

But Amir's problems would soon exacerbate. His father-in-law may have exerted his influence to have Amir's embassy in Malaysia summoned him three times to the embassy and each time to make subtle threats to make Amir return home. Lawyers, acting like thugs, were even dispatched to Malaysia to threaten Amir with abduction if Amir did not comply with his father-in-law's wishes.

Whether these threats were real or mere scare tactics, Amir took no chances and had to seek protection from the Malaysian police. Only then did their threats rescind - but only for as long as his father-in-law to change tactics, one of which was to have the embassy write a letter to my university, incredulously requesting that my university terminate Amir's studies. This request did not work of course, as Amir had done nothing wrong in the university or in Malaysia.

Well, if Amir is reluctant to return home, his father-in-law may have thought, might as well make the boy's decision permanent.

Amir was blacklisted in his country's immigration records. This meant Amir was barred from entering his country. This carried serious consequences especially when Amir learned sometime later of the tragic deaths of his two brothers. Being blacklisted meant Amir could not attend their funerals back home in the usual manner.

Amir's story, however, has a light at the end of a very dark tunnel. Despite the difficulties he faced from his PhD research, not helped by the immense pressure from his father-in-law, Amir did complete his PhD and will graduate at the end of this year. Amir has also managed to overturn his country's blacklist of him through a legal court battle at his country. To top it off, Amir has met someone else, a new love of his life. He has already met her parents, and he tells me he would soon ask for their daughter's hand.

Pursuing a PhD degree in any university is hard. PhD students often work at the

knowledge frontier, between the known and unknown. Consequently, measurement difficulties, perplexing results, limited resources and time, and unexpected equipment failures are only some of the common challenges faced by PhD students. Moreover, doing a PhD requires immense discipline, concentration, determination, and sacrifices. No one comes out the same after a PhD experience.

But for Amir, his PhD experience has not only deepen and widen his knowledge and technical skills, it has also forged him in fire, making him more resilient, independent, and determined in the face of severe adversity.

In all my years of being a research supervisor, I thought I had seen them all: the many types of stress and problems faced by postgraduate students, that is, until I met Amir. Despite my initial impression of him, I quickly found Amir intelligent, independent, and tenacious. He would surmount unexpected research problems and difficulties exemplary well and would push through with his research until completion with diligence, resilience, and enthusiasm.

I did ask Amir if getting his PhD was worth all his troubles.

“If my father-in-law had tried to persuade me to quit my studies without resorting to insults, rumors, and threats , I could have ceded to him,” Amir explained, “but the more he resorted to heavy-handed tactics, the more determined I was to finish my studies.”

The last time I met Amir, he thanked me for my support and patience during his troubles, but I think I should also thank him for showing me something I thought I would never learn from my students: courage.