



*Six decades
of failures*

CHANDAN LAHIRI

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Dedicated to all the people who have touched my life.
And to those whose life I have touched (for better or for worse).

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This book is autobiographical in nature and are the personal opinions of the Author. It does not purport to depict the general beliefs of any group of people or cultures of faiths. The book is a compendium of thoughts of the Author and are compiled as such. It does not attempt to praise or cast aspersion of any particular belief, but tries to raise questions that the Author has had in his own mind taking examples from his own life. References to people and places are real and taken from a historical perspective as experienced and/or perceived by the Author.

Maximum Retail Price inclusive of all taxes:

₹ 300

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Published by:

Chandan Lahiri for Whispering Wishes Enterprises

Printed at:

Matlock Island

I-1710 Chittaranjan Park

New Delhi 110019

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Prologue

There is a continuing debate I have with my younger daughter, the more articulate and argumentative of the two, about significant dates in our lives and their respective anniversaries. In fact, I had this discussion yet again a few days ago when I told her that I was going to celebrate my sixtieth birthday, while she insisted that I was incorrectly considering myself a year older than what I actually was. My contention is that there is a significant difference between birth days and birth anniversaries. The day we are born is obviously our first birthday. A year later, when we end up witnessing 365 sunrises (or 366 in some cases), we celebrate our first birth anniversary. Suffice it to say that she did not or could not or would not see things my way and accept the logic I was presenting.

As far as I am concerned, I just celebrated my sixtieth birthday and according to current criteria, should immediately be considered a Senior Citizen, get a certificate issued, and I can end up availing the many benefits that come along with getting admitted into this community of geriatric people. Not that anyone is listening to me, or that I am in a hurry to declare myself as such, but the fact remains that I have seen 337,843 sunsets which translates to sixty years. I missed seeing a sunset on

the day I was born since my first wail after being expelled from within the womb of my mother was a few minutes before eight in the evening, and the sun had long since found its way south of the horizon and darkness had set in all around. But you know what I mean!

Whatever the result of the discussion, it is a landmark date. Either I consider my birthday this year to be my sixtieth, or accept that I have just started my sixtieth year of existence on this planet, in this lifetime, this year is significant.

With the significant changes that have enveloped the country and the world over the last almost two years, and people being confined to their homes, the devil that has made residence in the deep recesses of my mind, started having a field day. "It is not enough revelling in the significance of this year," the Devil told me. "Look back at the six decades and reflect on whether it has been a life well lived."

Hmmm. That got me thinking. Anew. I have considered this topic a few times over the years, but then I thought I had a good few years ahead of me to start reflecting on the past. But now I am sixty and whether I accept it or not, I do not have another sixty good years ahead of me. Maybe a decade more. At best two. That should be quite enough. No more than about a third of my living years left, with more than two thirds already in the past.

What has been my life been like? Was it well lived? Were there more successes than failures? Would people look back and feel good about having known me? Or quietly whisper to themselves,

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"Good riddance to bad rubbish." Can I look back at my own life, without being prejudiced by what people might be thinking about me, and go on to the next realm with a smile on my face, with the confidence and realisation of a life well lived? If I were to live it all over again, what changes, if any, would I consider? What will be my epitaph? I guess by the end of this book, I will have arrived at my epitaph. No, do not skip to the end of the book now to see what it is!!! Wait for it. See if it is even remotely similar to what you think it should be, given what you read in these pages.

Over the six decades of my life, there have been distinct phases that one has travelled. It started off with my childhood, from the time I was born, and I suspect for the next couple of decades when my identity was largely restricted to being my parents' first born. The next phase, a much shorter one, was when I stepped out into the big bad world and started by walking on my own without the protection of a concerned mother watching out for the times I stumbled. The next phase is when I got married. This phase continues to this day. Then one day I went from being a boy to a man, when I became a father. All of 28 years old (or was it 29?!!!!) The family was completed four years later when our second child was born and God was in His Heaven and all was well with the world.

The next phase, and I am definitely not calling it the final phase, continues to this day with the welcoming of two wonderful sons into the family when the daughters got married and truly completed the family. What about grandchildren you might ask.

Well, my family is complete. It is now the turn of the children to complete theirs. Though the very thought of having the next generation jumping around on my lap, squealing with laughter as I tickle them, propping them up on my shoulders as I drop them off to school (much like my father did for my children), are all things to look forward to. But that phase is a bonus in my mind and I am no one to present my children with making the choice between my happiness and their readiness to become parents. Completely their call.

That, in brief, were the various phases of my six decades of breathing. Obviously, there are major overlaps in the time between two phases. Sometimes phases run parallel to each other as surely as the Sun rises in the East.

The title of this book is not a conclusion, far from it. However, every life one lives, every decision one makes, every turn in the path of life, comes with multiple choices. We take decisions, make choices based on our best understanding and interpretation of the situation at the time. Only sometime in the future, when we sit back and reflect, can we actually judge the ramifications of the choices we made and the decisions we took. Were they the right ones or did they result in unintended consequences? Hindsight is 20/20 and at the completion of this sixth decade of my life, it is time for me to reflect too. Were they six decades of failures? Or were they six decades of triumph? Or more likely, a combination of the two?

This is not a book where one celebrates the triumphs. It is

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neither a book where I end up playing the martyr, the victim. I have had many, many experiences, faced many situations, done things, made choices, had regrets, and often patted myself on the back. Every situation has had its share of consequences. Some good, some not so much. This book is more like a book of memories, a delving into the past, dusting away those moments that have left a mark on my psyche, made me the person I am. Whether for better or for worse, who am I to say? We are not always good, and neither are we always bad. We might think we are always right, but often the future proves otherwise. We are born innocent souls. We are the result of and a culmination of the many choices we make in our lives, an amalgamation of everything that we do and have done to us. There is no definitive book written on how to live life, all books that pretend to have the answers, merely deal in innuendo. They talk about best case scenarios. However, they fail to mention the unique circumstances that each decision is taken under the shadow of. We all do the best we can and hope for the best results. When things turn out the way we want them to, we celebrate the good judgement. If things go South despite our best intentions, we either turn ourselves into victims or try and find scapegoats to blame.

This book is more about memories. It is autobiographical. It tries to bring to light my thoughts and struggles, my joys and triumphs, my tears and dejection. All of which every person goes through in life. Every person is unique and each person deals with the stimulus they receive in their own unique way. Parenting plays a

part, as do peer groups. Schools form the foundation of how we shape our thoughts. Teachers help us think for ourselves. It is the amalgamation of all our experiences that ultimately form the bedrock of how we react, how our personalities develop, how we react to situations we find ourselves in. Some of us turn out to be diligent followers of norms and rules. Others learn to question and to demand answers. From the inane in the younger years to the more serious in later years.

Do I have regrets? I would be lying if I said I do not. Recognising the frailties of human existence makes us ... well, human.

How did my life turn out? I leave it you to decide.

Chapter 1: The early years

Physically for me, my first phase started on the 17th of April, 1962. At 1955 hours. However, I guess the actual phase started some months prior to this date when some tiny creatures made a mad dash through my mother's tubes, competing against each other to find out who was the fastest, for one to finally win the race when it embedded itself into another microscopic growth that was attached to the wall of my mother's uterus. Many people over the years might have looked at me incredulously and asked themselves with utter surprise, "So this one won the race?!!"

Be that as it may, nothing could have changed the results of that race and I happened to take my first breath after refusing to make my grand entry for almost a couple of days. Born a chubby nearly ten pounder, I can now imagine what my mother would have had to undergo for so many months, particular in her third trimester, carrying this monstrosity in her belly, precariously positioned at a place where gravity and physiology were in a constant battle about the best posture. Cesarean births were virtually unknown in those days, and certainly a rarity in the Army Hospital where I decided to make my presence felt. By

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the way, this was the hospital where the vaccine for malaria was discovered. Subsequently, this hospital turned into a police training facility while the hospital itself moved to another facility a few kilometres away, to where it is now ... the Command Hospital. This was in Calcutta, by the way. And yes, I was born to Bengali parents, though I turned out to be a bit of a turncoat to my people.

There is a myth that the cesarean method of delivery originated from the time Julius Caesar was delivered surgically. This is a myth, though there are innumerable examples of cesarean births in history and mythology. It was only carried out when the mother was either dead or dying. It was under Caesar that Roman law decreed that mothers who were dead were dying would have the birth of the child surgically performed. It is certainly not named after Caesar and his birth. That is one myth that can be put to rest.

Anyway.

As you might expect, my memories of the first few years are entirely non-existent, except for some stories that I have heard from sundry people. Visiting hours were over by the time I was born and my father, along with a friend of his, I believe scaled the walls, snuck in to the ward where I was cuddled with my mother, to get a look at his first born.

I suspect all the love and affection was showered on me in those first few years. I must have loved it at most times. I sometimes wonder though, how an infant feels whilst being constantly cuddled and being interminably cootchie-cootchie-coo-ed in a language that s/he has no idea about. The only language the

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child in the womb is aware of and is conversant with is the sound of the blood flowing through the mother's veins and the muddled and muted sounds of the watery bed that is home. This sudden invasion of privacy in a bright and loud world can be quite a shock I imagine. And then comes school and the child is almost always the centre of attention and invariably has to either repeat the alphabet every time someone comes home for a visit, or recite Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, or whichever other rhyme has been learned at school that week.

I think my schooling started while in Calcutta. Sometimes it was my mother, sometimes her younger sister who would drop me off to school. I never did like school. Or rather, I did not like being around strangers, which everyone was. My introvert nature was in full bloom from a very young age.

I remember my aunt making tiffin for me. Sometimes there was a hard boiled egg in the box. One morning I was witness to my lunch being packed by my mother, who I saw had boiled the egg and was in the process of peeling away the shell. I threw a fit. That was not the way my aunt made my egg, it had to be a whole one, not like the one my mother was making, throwing away parts of it. Come what may, I could not be convinced any other way. It must have got settled in some form since I did go to school that day.

Since my father was in the Army, every few months he got posted from one city to the next and we too moved. Which meant that I had to change schools. By the time I let my guard down, and

The early years

allowed my introvert nature to take a rest to make some friends, it was time to move again and start the process all over again. I often joke that in my twelve years of school, I had studied in eighteen schools. I am certain that is the correct number, but it certainly feels like it.

We were in Delhi. I got admission in St Columba's, one of the premiere schools in the country. A lovely school with a beautiful campus, football field, swimming pool, the works. I learned swimming here. My father was there one day watching me carefully, taking notes on whether I could save myself from drowning or not. He then took it a step further. Not only was he was an Army man, and a Gorkha, but a Commando. He had just come back from the United States after being trained as a jungle warfare specialist. He had just started the Commando Wing for the Indian Army. One of the activities that all the participants in the Commando Course had to complete was a jump into water from a high wire. There was no high wire at St Columba's, but there certainly was a high diving board. He made me climb up the stairs and walk the plank. The surface of the water looked like a thousand feet below my trembling toes. I stood at the edge of the board, frozen. I just could not get myself to take that one step that would send me in freefall for a meeting with the water many feet below. I just stood there. By this time a line was forming behind me. First there were whispers, then the words became louder and then boys were actually goading me on to make the jump. I would not do that. Suddenly I was floating through the air. My

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brief life flashed by in slow motion and after what seemed like an eternity I came to a sudden and very wet stop ... on my back. One of the boys had pushed me off the board.

Even though I have continued to swim since then, I have never ever stepped on a diving board again. Do I need to get over this fear from way back when? Maybe. But then many decades have passed since that afternoon I have done fairly well for myself while not jumping from heights into thin air. Thank you very much, I can do without diving off a high board.

And then I was thrown out of St Columba's. We had gone on summer vacation to Calcutta and when I came back to join the school, it had already commenced its semester and the authorities took it to be a major infringement of the rules and would not take me back. I went ahead and walked through the doors of St Mary's. By the time I had even started making friends here, we moved to another city. And then another. It was one school after the next. New friends, new teachers, new adjustments, mostly in small towns.

I do not have many memories of my early school days. Till about Class V or VI. I remember participating in a lot of sports though. Particularly football. After all my father was a national level football player, had represented India multiple times, and had narrowly missed out from being selected for the 1960 Rome Olympics despite some thoughts that he should have been the Captain of the team. Football was in my blood and I quite liked kicking the ball around.

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The fact that I suffered from myopia from a very young age did not help. As is often the case, I had started having difficulty seeing what was written on the blackboard in school. Consequently, my life was becoming more and more difficult. I suspect there was a sort of denial at home who might have thought that I was shirking studies and making up stories. By the time I got my first pair of glasses, the power was minus 2.5. I was virtually blind till I got my glasses. The eyes progressively got worse over the years, till the power stabilised around minus 8. These were the days when technology had not developed enough and one had to contend with glass lenses. These were brittle and tended to crack quite often. My love for sports did not help and I guess I cracked more lenses than my parents could afford to replace.

Throughout history kids wearing spectacles have been the butt of jokes and ridicule. I was no different. It was in Mhow where I was studying in Rajeshwar Vidyalaya where my name was prefixed with the term “kandil”. I still don't know what the term means, but it was made amply clear that it had something to do with me and my glasses.

Today I have 20/20 vision. Not just figuratively, but literally. I bade farewell to prescription glasses after I had a cataract surgery.

I grew. Fast. I was playing and I was swimming. In two years I had grown more than fifteen inches. Every second month I outgrew my clothes, particularly shoes. Money was tight but somehow my parents found a way to clothe their growing boy.

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Whatever I discarded was handed over to my younger brother. Poor chap, I do not think he ever got to wear new clothes.

I was intelligent and I was good in studies. But I did play truant often. Sports being the main attraction. To be fair, my father always encouraged us to play sports. God forbid if he ever found us at home past 1600 hours. That was the time to play and we better went out. Not that we ever complained.

But the schools we were enrolled in were not the best. They mostly catered to the average student from the city they were located in. Of course, we could not go to some fancy school, they were just too expensive. That is when, after my Class VI examinations, I was pushed into another phase of my life, a phase that was to have a lasting impact for the rest of my life.

Chapter 2: *A rebel is born*

My parents decided that I needed a more regulated form of education. The fact that the family moved from one city to the next every few months was not helping. But I suspect that my rebellious nature had taken a shape and form that seemed to be outside the bounds of something that my parents could handle or control. They thought that I needed to be placed in an environment where discipline was the norm, under pain of punishment.

It was decided that I was to be carted off to Calcutta, to be admitted to a school run by Hindu missionaries, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalaya, Narendrapur, located on the outskirts of Calcutta. It was supposed to be one of the best schools in West Bengal and invariably a large number of students would find their names in the top-10 of the merit list in the State Board examinations. It was almost unthinkable that any student would not pass out in the First Division with an aggregate score above 60%. This was in the grand old days when a student would get a 60% plus score, sweets would be distributed in the entire neighbourhood. Quite unlike the current day when even a score of 95% forces a pall of gloom to settle in the household since

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those kind of marks are not good enough for admission into any halfway decent college.

I was packed off to boarding school, my maternal grandfather was my local guardian and after a tearful farewell I bade goodbye to my parents who had come to settle me in. I am sure that my mother shed more than a few tears at see me walk away. She has always had a soft corner for me, and I think I am her favourite between her two sons, (though she will probably never admit it, as it should be). I was her little child, her first born, and she had never been away from me. This was going to be hard for her.

I found myself in a small(ish) room, sharing it with three others, with no fans, leave alone the basic necessities today's kids come to think of as a necessity - air conditioning. Each of us four in the room had a wooden bed, and an cupboard for our belongings. Each hostel was two stories high with about a hundred kids living in each block. And there were multiple blocks. I was in Class VII, still in the junior section. It would be a year later that I would move to another part of the campus that was the senior section. Me the introvert, again found myself in the company of strangers. As did every one else. A common apprehension bound us together and soon friendships were formed.

From the outset it was a culture shock. This was a Hindu missionary school, run by the monks of the Ramakrishna Mission Society. Something that was started years ago by Swami Vivekananda. Most of the children were from Calcutta, many from other parts of West Bengal, and the language of conversation

was largely Bengali. I had come from a much more cosmopolitan environment, having grown up in Army Cantonments. We spoke in English amongst our friends, as also at home, and making the transition to speaking in Bengali was a mite difficult. As habit dictated, often I would switch over to speaking in English, much to the derision for the participants of such conversation. I would often be termed an “intellectual”. Not in English but in its much more derisive Bengali vernacular - *aantel*.

There was a common dining room in each hostel block where we used to go for our meals. The first meal of the day, one that I invariably missed due to oversleeping, was the morning tea. On the few days that I did manage to pry my eyes open and find myself in line waiting to get my share, it was a glass of tea and a couple of biscuits that we used to call dog biscuits. That was not the brand name of the biscuits we were served, but they tasted barely good enough to be served to dogs. There was another version that often found itself on the table and was slightly more palatable. We called these cat biscuits. And this was the same fare twice a day, for the morning cuppa and in the evening between lunch and dinner. Sometimes there was puffed rice and we used to take ladles full of it, dunk it in the tea and consume that. It filled up our stomach.

Fortunately the Mission not believe in vegetarianism. That to me would have been a disaster. We were served mutton once (sometimes twice) a week. One day was reserved for vegetarian food. All all other days we were served fish. Tilapiya it was.

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For lunch and dinner. Every day. I still have not gotten over my revulsion for tilapiya.

We were all supposed to be self-sufficient and self-reliant. This was a good thing that happened to me and it still lives with me today. We had to wash our own dishes, mugs, plates and glasses. A chain of taps were present just outside the dining hall with dabs of detergent powder. Each of us would pick up our utensils, clean them up before we entered the hall, had our meal, cleaned the dishes again. Some of the kids would cut corners in this cleaning process and would either not use the detergent, or not use enough water to clean the utensil. But these were few and far between, since invariably there was some saffron clad gentleman standing close by looking out particularly for these kind of shirkers.

This habit did inculcate in me the sense of self help and not the dependence on the hired help. Another habit I developed there was being able to thrive in hot and humid Calcutta without the benefit and assorted comforts of a fan. Even today, many decades later, I am quite happy without a fan. Am I uncomfortable in an air conditioned room? Of course not. The cool comfort of the air wafting through the vents of an air conditioner when the temperatures outside could fry an egg is not something that I will even cock a snook at. But if the air conditioner is not present, or the fan is not as effective, I do not despair either.

There were great playgrounds at Narendrapur and I thoroughly enjoyed those hours on the field. I ended up playing a lot of football

while there. I also participated in the finals of a tournament, as a goalkeeper, and was given a trophy by one of the eminent footballers of the time, who was also playing for the country in those days. If I remember right, it was Subhash Bhowmick.

Those were the days of bell bottom trousers and dog collared shirts. No, there were no bells at the bottom of our trousers and neither were there dog collars around our neck. These were the fashion of the day. Ah those simple days of childhood.

But, all was not hunky dory at Narendrapur. First, it was a Hindu missionary school and came with all the bells and whistles a missionary school is expected to be come with. Often I was tasked with picking flowers that were to adorn the altar of Sri Ramakrishna prior to the morning prayers. Often I would miss out on this chore thanks to my habit of over sleeping, much to the chagrin of the resident monk warden. Then we had to wear our dhotis and sit in prayer, singing some *bhajan* or the other. Twice a day. Once in the morning that I invariably missed and was severely punished for, and the second in the evening, right after the evening tea and dog biscuit session.

Then there were teams that were formed who were tasked to keep the prayer room clean. These were fun times for the few times that I did get called on to perform this duty. There were about four or five to a team and the room was cleaned, broomed, water poured on the floor, wiped, scrubbed and cleaned to a fault. The wet floor was a particular favourite as I remember and we used to convert it into a kind of skating rink and gleefully and

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loudly entertain ourselves for a couple of hours.

Every Sunday used to be room cleaning day. And it was a competition between the occupants of various rooms. The floors were scrubbed, the cupboards were dusted, the bedsheets were turned over, the sundry items below the mattresses taken out. The weight of the body lying on the mattress used to “iron” out the clothes that were kept under the mattress! And not just the rooms, even the corridors had to be cleaned. The warden would then come over, walk the corridor and declare one room the winner. What did that mean? We got two extra dog biscuits.

We were children, not even in our teens. Puberty was knocking at the door and things were happening with our bodies. What used to be limp and flaccid, started coming to life in all its hardness. Questions arose for which there were no answers. The tingling feeling in the loins was exciting and subconsciously we all knew was a prohibited territory for discussion. But children being children are prone to finding things out for themselves. No one had the answer individually, yet collectively we thought we knew it all. Size started to matter. The feelings of touch, the sensation of the unknown coming to life from the nether regions, the sensory bliss that ensued when we experimented our collective hardness, was a feeling that was out of this world.

“Impoos” blossomed. The closest I can come to explaining what an “impoo” is, is the relationship between two people yet coming to terms with their own sexuality. Some came together and formed bonds that were apparent to others in the group.

Loyalty was maintained and the lines were not crossed. Some of the kids were “freelancers”, single and ready to mingle. Others were more forthright and forthcoming to advances made by all and sundry. Yet others were the dominants, who would claim loyalty with multiple individuals and would get very upset if they got to know of any indiscretions. We were ten, eleven, twelve years old.

There were some teachers who jumped into the party too. There was one particular one I remember, the English teacher, who was the warden in one of the hostels. Being an English teacher, I had a particular affinity towards him since I could converse with him in English. Forget for a moment that he was *dhoti* clad English teacher. I had won a prize in a recitation competition and was awarded a book as a prize. I do not remember the name of the book but there were some interesting bits in the book that were saucy. I took the book and walked over to the warden’s room to point out the passages, hoping he would understand how inappropriate a gift is was to a growing boy.

I saw a glint in his eye and he asked me to come to his room later in the evening, after dinner. I recounted this conversation to some of my friends who then told me of his penchant for “closeness” with the kids. Suffice it to say, I did not go to his room that evening, and my relationship with him took on a colder turn.

We were not allowed any radios since, we were told, “girls sing on radio”. This was supposed to exert a negative influence on our budding character. We were an all-boys school and there was

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nothing ever to be done that remotely had anything to do with the opposite gender. Even films. Every few months there was a film night. The authorities could not find a film ... in Bengali ... that had only male characters. Finally after much deliberation I am sure, they decided that the film *Kabuliwallah* was appropriate. It was a wonderful film, but kind of became boring after the seventeenth or eighteenth screening. This was the only film ever screened during my four year stay at Narendrapur.

My rebellious nature was blossoming. And fast. I must have done something or the other and I was called into the warden's room one evening. A different guy, not the English teacher. Obviously I did not believe that whatever I had done deserved being called into the warden's room ... and I kind of knew what that entailed. The warden thought otherwise. He picked up a feather duster with a cane handle and promptly started raining blows on me. Of course it hurt, but I was not going to give him the satisfaction of knowing that. I stood as still as I possibly could and I think also continued to make eye contact with him. This enraged him even more and the blows became more frequent and the time taken for the cane to descend from the top of the swinging arm to the time it made contact with some part of my anatomy reduced substantially. Which resulted in his anger just rising exponentially. Finally he screamed, "I will continue to beat you till you cry." The challenge had been thrown and I had no intention of backing down. The blows continued, the welts formed, the challenge continued. I was not one to back down,

particularly when I knew that whatever gruesome crime I might have committed did not merit the kind of punishment I was being subjected to. After what seemed like an eternity, the final crack of the cane resulted in it breaking into two. There wasn't a spare one in the room and the deadlock was broken. I had won this challenge.

I was now a full blown rebel.

I also did not quite adjust to the fundamentalism that everyone was being subjected to. Remember, my thoughts have changed over the years and I understand that being in an environment that was centred around a certain definite ideology and philosophy, they were well within their rights to propagate what they felt was the way to go. In those days however, this did not work for me. I was a person who wanted to make his own decision as far as everything was concerned, particular the practice of faith. We were in a school that was run by the Ramakrishna Mission and they had their philosophy. It was their school and every person within the confines of that environment had to follow their strictures. The alternative was to part ways, a decision that I could not take since it was well above my pay grade.

We were told about God, the superiority of individuals who had been put on pedestals by their followers. We were told to obey and respect. I don't think we were ever given the opportunity of discussion or debate about the things we were being taught. I agree that given the environment I was in, I should have probably followed what was being taught about faith and religion. But then

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I had questions that were not being answered. Would the earth open up and swallow me whole if there was any iota of disrespect on my part? Would there be bolts of lightning that would rain from the sky, aimed directly for the top of my head? Would I contract some terrible disease? Would I drop dead? I had to find some answers. If no one was willing to give me answers, I had to find the answers by myself. And find out for myself the consequences of questioning, something which was frowned upon.

I mentioned earlier about the teams that were formed to clean the worship rooms. One afternoon I found myself to be alone in the room. The others had gone out to run some errand or the other, maybe to fill up the buckets, or to pluck flowers, I do not remember exactly. I found myself sitting at the bottom of the altar which was really a series of semi circular step-like structure, at the top of which was a photograph of Sri Ramakrishna. The very person after who not only the school but the entire movement was founded. He was the supreme being and our every act and deed was directed towards him. He was the embodiment of God, the repository of Truth. I stared at the photograph for some time, not knowing exactly what is it that I wanted to do.

In Hinduism there is a lot of regard as to how we enter places of worship and conduct ourselves once inside. There are definite protocols in place. Remove your shoes before entering a place of worship, for instance. Never sit with your feet facing the altar. Those did not put too much pressure on me, and I followed them. However, what if I were to break those very rules? Would the

roof cave in? I had to find out.

Almost in slow motion I stood up. I waited for what seemed like forever, then gingerly lifted my right leg, reached forward with it and touched the lowest step of the multi layered altar structure. I felt a shock at what I was doing, but that feeling passed quickly enough. The second attempt was not as circumspect. The foot landed firmly on the next higher step. I was on a roll. The leg lifted itself up from the floor and now I was standing on one of the steps of the altar, with both feet. And then the second. Soon enough I was at the top step. I halted, questioning myself. But I was too far gone and had to find out whether my head would explode or not. I lifted my right foot and planted it on the photograph of Sri Ramakrishna itself. This lasted a few seconds. I looked around. At the walls. At the roof. At the sky that I could see through the window. I felt my head. No fluid was oozing out of my nostrils.

Hmmm. Nothing. A much more forgiving person than what I probably had been led to believe. Point proven, I stepped back down, satisfied that nothing major would happen if I disobeyed the set rules. Did I disrespect a person, an entity who was way more knowledgeable than me? Certainly. I should not have done anything like that to anyone, let alone someone who was held in such high regard by so many people. But he was just another person, with human frailties. Like I have said many times since that day, even Gods need to crap. Of course we need to respect the wisdom displayed by some people, but we also need to recognise them as humans. Certainly better humans than most

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of us, but they too have their own issues.

It was the result of this activity that I indulged in that day which has stayed with me to this day. I do not wish to idolise anyone, certainly not put individuals on pedestals, but I am certainly not averse to absorbing any wisdom that I might be able to absorb from them.

I have become quite against organised religion. I firmly believe that no religion is significantly different from each other. At their very essence each of them want a better future, a happier humanity, a brighter environment. What distinguishes one religion from the other is the path they wish to follow to reach that utopian destination. In the process, people get immersed in the ritual and forget the goal. The fights over religion, the lack of tolerance, the enmity between different faiths, all emerge from the *practice* of the faith rather than the teachings. I would love to see a future where children are taught about all religions, study every religious book and scripture, and then make a choice about how to mould their own faith and their own practice. Why should we compartmentalise ourselves within concrete thoughts, and proclaim that ours is the best and everyone else is walking the wrong path. The practice of faith is like reaching a destination. We might walk or take the bus. We might drive or take a ride with someone else going in the same direction. The goal is to reach the destination and the vehicle we use to reach that destination is merely that, a vehicle, a means to an end. Unfortunately, the vehicle itself has become the bedrock of religion, while the

destination of an utopian nirvana has been relegated behind the mists of lunacy.

I am sure that I was born with an aversion to organised religion, but that afternoon when I planted my foot on the photograph of Sri Ramakrishna gave me a reason to become allergic to the practice of faith, whichever religion it might be.

But this has led me to a lot of heartache when people are confronted with this side of my personality. Saying or doing anything against the established religious structure is sacrilege. There are enough examples from history where people displaying my kind of attitude were publicly flogged or killed. I have a problem with the concept of the Creator God, particularly when the Creator God keeps changing names across different faiths. If most religions believe in the Creator God, there must be a single entity who holds the strings and makes things go round. The way we look at that person, what we call him, how to pray, are things that have been created by people like you and me. No religion has survived without political patronage. According to me, spirituality is a personal conversation with “God”, while religion is crowd control.

I will delve into this side of my personality in another chapter.

Chapter 3: Readers are leaders

Ever since I can remember I have liked reading. Of course, I was born at a time when there were few other distractions in the form of television or radio, certainly there was no internet, no smart phones, no social media. We went out to play every evening, scraped our knees climbing trees, shared a bottle of water among friends, indeed drank from the nearest tap without the fear of contracting some debilitating disease. Heat, cold and rain were just another reason to celebrate our life under different circumstances. Quite unlike the current trend when children do not know the sheer joy of turning a page, the musty smell of an old book, folding the top corner edge before shutting it closed, to remember where we left off. Ah, the joys of yesteryears.

Anyway. As I was saying I was an inveterate reader. My mother tells me that there were always a couple of things on my bed, at all times. One, a book. And two, a football. It must have been children's books in the younger days, that evolved into Nick Carter and James Hadley Chase as I grew older. I was never much of a Hindi reader. Had I been, I am sure *Manohar Kahaniyan* would have found itself in my reading list. When I was in school and then certainly in college, Erich von Daniken became a favourite and

it was fascinating to read about alien visitors from outer space. Not too many children of today might have heard about Erich von Daniken, but I suggest his books, if for nothing else, than to expand our thoughts, to evolve a questioning mind. You do not necessarily need to agree with his hypothesis, but his books will certainly provide food for thought. Some of the books he wrote are *Chariots of the Gods?*, *Return to the Stars*, *Gods from Outer Space*, *The Gold of the Gods*, *The Return of the Gods: Evidence of Extraterrestrial Visitations*, *The Gods Never Left Us*.

Frankly, I have not read all his books, but I have read quite a few of them. Over the years I too have crossed over to the dark side and now get my extra terrestrial information from the Discovery Channel!

Growing up, cowboys were heroes. Jim Green is someone I wanted to grow up to be. Riding on Nigger, his wonderful black horse, Jim Green, or Sudden as he was more popularly known, was a person many people of my vintage have grown up idolising. Along with the *Sudden* series, there were the many Louis L'Amour books about the cowboy life. And Zane Grey. Unfortunately these books are now out of print and despite some efforts on my part to collect these books which are a reminder of the world of fantasy my childhood was enveloped in, I cannot find them.

I was also a voracious reader of The Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, Enid Blyton, Agatha Christie. I loved the exploits of The Five Find Outers. I always wanted to have a parakeet sitting on my shoulder, much like the leader of the Five Find Outers ... Fatty.

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And those were the days when one could utter the word Fatty and not be accused of body shaming!

The mystery solving capabilities of Hercule Poirot fascinated me. I loved the entire James Hadley Chase series of books, and not necessarily just for the “click bait” cover photos. And how can I forget Harold Robbins and his wonderful books. *Carpetbaggers*, *The Dream Merchants*, and *A Stone for Danny Fisher*, were particular favourites. I somehow never quite cottoned on to the Mills & Boon series of books. Maybe a bit too feminine for my taste. When I grew up I did get into Danielle Steele for a bit, but Alistair McLean found a new and voracious fan. I loved to read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Heidi*. *Alice in Wonderland* and *Cinderella*.

In school we were taught about ancient cultures and civilisations from around the world. The Carthaginians, Helen of Troy, Homer’s *Odyssey* and the *Illiad*, the Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Romans, Alexander the Great, the Ottoman empire, Chinggis Khan and his Mongol hordes, Kublai Khan, the Ming dynasty of China, Marco Polo, Vasco da Gama, Fa Hien, Huen Tsang, Ibn Batuta, Christopher Columbus and the discovery of America, were all favourites of mine.

I learned about the ancient Indian myths ... the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayan*, and other wonderful stories from India’s past through the wonderfully put together comic books by *Amar Chitra Katha*.

Can someone who has grown up in the 1960s and 1970s deny the exploits of Robin Hood and his band of Merry Men and the

impact it had in their lives? Little John and Friar Tuck. Will Scarlet. Of course Maid Marian.

It might be King Arthur and his Excalibur that we looked up to, but the love story of Sir Lancelot and Queen Guinevere made the eyes go moist.

Remember Commando Comics? An awesome series set in the background and valour of the soldiers, sailors and airmen of the Second World War.

Archie, Veronica, Betty, Jughead? That was a wonderful series of comic books. I never quite understood Alfred E Newman, it was a little too intellectual for me. But then, why me worry?

For a brief period I got into literature. Wordsworth and Tennyson. Shakespeare and Keats. The classical English writers. I would have loved to read Mark Twain, something I have not yet done. I read Rudyard Kipling and was fascinated by Jim Corbett.

In recent years, over the past decade or so, my interests have veered towards spirituality. This really took a vicious turn when I took refuge in the Buddha in the early 2000s. I read all I could about the Buddha and his teachings, read a translation of the Quoran, went through the Jataka tales, was fascinated by the possibility that Jesus died in India and could well have been a Buddhist, who were the Essenes and the Nazarenes, the enigmatic John the Baptist, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Had it not been for the Christian Church, maybe there would have been many more gospels in addition to the ones that are prescribed. The Gospel of Mary Magdalene and the Gospel of St Thomas,

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for instance.

Did Jesus in his four year ministry preach Christianity, or is Christianity as we know it today Paulinism? What happened during Jesus' lost years? When he was resurrected, did he really rise to Heaven, or did he travel East to the geography where he had spent many years before? Would Christianity still be the same had it not been for Constantine the Great, revered by many as the first Christian Emperor?

In an attempt to turn Jesus into the Son of God, his parents never got to enjoy the joys of marital bliss. Mary would forever remain a Virgin. The Christian doctrine's foundation is based on the concept of the Immaculate Conception and the Resurrection. If these two could be proven to be myth and reality was found to be something quite different, the Christian faith will be forced to its knees. Hence, no one with the Church hierarchy allows discussion on these topics and anyone doing so is considered heretical, guilty of blasphemy.

The point I am getting at is not whether Jesus died in India or not. (His alleged tomb is in Srinagar and I have had the good fortune of visiting it). I have little doubt that Lord Rama was an actual king and a good one at that. My problem is with elevating him to God-status just because he did what a good and benevolent king was supposed to do. There is a lot to learn from his life. As from Lord Krishna and the many others. However, when we expand our vision, open our eyes, absorb more information, our knowledge increases and we can then sift through the clutter to get to the

core. It is when we read, across various points of view, can we arrive at our own interpretation of what might have been. Without knowledge we are just repeating what someone else has told us to be true. As they themselves have been taught. Through time, facts become myth and the truth disappears in the mists of time.

A book that is my personal favourite, one that I have read a zillion times, one that has immersed itself into my very soul, is Colleen McCullough's *The Thorn Birds*. I had seen the television series when I was in Dhaka, much before I had read the book. Though the television series was very well produced, it was nowhere close to the images that screened within my mind whenever I read the book. I seem to have a particular affinity to the story and to the characters.

I once paddled down 2,000 km of the Ganges in a canoe I had christened *Thornbird*. Recently I have started a company that I named *Matlock Island*. The thread that holds the book together, is the relationship between Father Ralph de Bricassart and Meghann Cleary. Very poignant, very soft, very romantic, very appealing, very forbidden. I wonder why the book tugs at my heart. Maybe it is the incorrigible romantic in me.

I am now reading the Upanishads. This in order to find some connection with a religion that is one of the oldest in the world, with a very rich heritage. One that has prospered for thousands of years and has had no examples of violence or persecution. It has unified a region under a common culture, despite being ravaged by marauders and conquerors and colonialists. It is making very

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interesting reading and does not read so much as religious diktat but more as a way of life, which is what Hinduism purports to be. Sure, it is being sabotaged in recent times by vested interests, but for a culture that has survived for so long and has thrived despite immense adversity, I doubt whether another blip in its history will be able to make even a dent in the long term scheme of things.

It is said that those who forget history are condemned to repeat it. Unfortunately, we fall prey to this malaise quite often. It was on July 18, 1925 that a particular book first hit the shelves. It was not a very popular publication, yet quite clearly stated a world view. Know the name of the book? It was *Mein Kampf*. Of course you know who wrote it? Yes, it was Adolf Hitler and detailed his world view. It was quite easy to predict what his plans for Germany were, if only we had cared to read the words written in the book.

The other book, and it is HUGE, that will hopefully allow us to see an impending doom thanks to the megalomania and narcissism of a single person, is the wonderful articulated and well researched *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. What went wrong with a system that was supposed to last a thousand years? Why did it fail so miserably? Why did the Third Reich not last more than just a few years, almost all of them in armed conflict? There are lessons to be learned from this excellent book. For people from all across the world. Over the past few years the world has seen a rise in right wing fundamentalism. There is an increasing tendency among some leaders and their followers to strictly and narrowly identify themselves with particular groups

of people. Ethnicity is getting fragmented. Nationalism is taking over patriotism. Fascism is rearing its ugly head once again, like it did in the 1930s and '40s. It is time to go back and study the history of the times, to understand what can go wrong. And more importantly, to prevent a country, a region, a community of people to suffer for decades after. Germany and Germans are still paying for Hitler's misdeeds and it will take them a couple of generations more to overcome it. Yet, there are the holocaust deniers. Yet, we see the rise of white supremacy, much like the Aryan supremacy Hitler propounded. In many corners of the world, communities of people, often the majority of the population, are coming together because they are feeling persecuted. There is increasing polarisation, the clear demarcation of "us" versus "them" and the need for ethnic and demographic cleansing. Not necessarily through genocide (though that does exist), but by an ever louder demand to banish those who "do not belong" from the country the majority is trying to appropriate to win back the glories of the past.

Oh, we need to read. We need to educate ourselves. We need to find common ground. This is the only place more than seven billion humans call home. Humans, mind you, not people divided by race, religion, gender, vocation, caste, creed, or economic position in life. There is no Planet B. This is it and we need to learn to live in harmony, ideally in a world without borders, without strife, without hate, without war.

Thanks to the worldwide web, the world has become a very

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small place and information from around the world is just a click of a button away. There is so much information out there that it is actually mind boggling. We need to find a way to sift through the chaff to find credible sources. That is not always easy due to the perceptual bias most of us suffer from. And the algorithms the websites use to present us with information do not help. There are enough people putting out information from all sides of a particular story. Was 9/11 an inside job? Going through the internet once might tend to marvel at how a Government as powerful and under public scrutiny as the United States could go ahead and create a 9/11 catastrophe. On the other hand, there are many documents to show how the Al Qaeda was responsible. The debate continues about who killed JFK. Did Saddam Hussain have weapons of mass destruction? The reason behind the invasion of Iraq. You might be sitting on either side of the fence. But that is not enough, according to me. One needs to undertake deep study and research, without prejudice, to get all the information as we possibly can and then arrive at an opinion on either side of the debate.

It is very easy to not delve into research and go by what the majority opinion is. That is the unfortunate reality that has plagued humanity for the last many thousands of years. It is not easy to present a contrary point of view that is at divergence with the accepted belief. Even a logical discussion turns into an acrimonious argument.

The easy way out is to stop reading and continue to tow the

party line. Much more peaceful. I have tried that, but it does not seem to work. I find it impossible to keep my mouth shut when people voice obvious “I have been told so” or “that is how it has always been” line of thinking. Without any logic to back up their beliefs. Whether political, or religious, or historical, or mythological, or anything else.

I understand that history is written by the winners. Imagine what world history would have been had Hitler come out on the winning side of the Second World War? In my mind Hitler was disgusted with the political system of the day, did something about it, won an election, surrounded himself with sycophants, and everything went South from there on. But did he have the best interests of Germany in mind? I am sure he did. I do not think any leader of any country starts off by wanting to run the country to the ground. Hitler went wrong in many things he did. He thought a Corporal could become the Commander in Chief, responsible for the destiny of an entire country. He never listened to any contrary opinion, surrounded himself with yes-men, and the from then on it was doomsday for Hitler personally, the Third Reich in particular and unfortunately the German people. Unless we read about Hitler, about his rise and ultimate fall, we will continue to be clouded by facts that are put forth by people who have no idea of history. And fall prey to the machinations of other leaders who believe they are smarter than Hitler.

Chinggiz Khan was a tyrant. He ruled the largest kingdom in history. A majority of the human population can source their

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genes back to that one man. He is vilified all over the world, but in Mongolia he is revered as a God. He did many good things in his life, and many terrible things. Unless we read about him and how he brought the disparate Mongol tribes together to create the greatest empire ever, we will continue to sit on one side of the fence or the other, depending on what we have been told to believe. Or we will remain completely oblivious to what went on. “How does it bother me or affect me now?” people might say. By the way, Kublai Khan, one of the greatest Chinese emperors was Chinggiz Khan’s grandson.

We need to read. We need to expand our knowledge base. Without knowledge we cannot hope to gain wisdom. Also, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. The skewed algorithms of the internet provides us with knowledge from one side of the spectrum. We need to consciously search out other sides of the argument. Only then we will have a balanced view of things and be able to arrive at more cogent opinion that is not covered in either falsities or innuendos or are just mirroring the thoughts of the winners as history has been written and re-written.

Before even my children had learned to walk, I started collecting books for them. Children’s books primarily, but also children’s encyclopedias, and entire series titled *A Child’s First Library of Learning*, and lots of others. I even have the complete edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. I had and still have many story books. Unfortunately, both the kids never developed an appetite for reading and now it is too late for them to pry their eyes away

from a five inch screen of a smart phone to start flipping pages in books. There was one book though that numerous attempts had been made on ... *The Princess Diaries*. It remains unfinished to this day! They will never realise the wonders that lie buried within the covers of a book, the world of fantasies that present themselves when we read about the exploits of the various protagonists who are the central figures, the joys of discovery, the satisfaction of time well spent learning about things we had no idea about.

When I say that readers are leaders, that statement may not quite be true in the current context. We see leaders from around the world who would be shamed when confronted by a fifth grader. Their mistaken belief in their own grandeur leads the populace to disregard knowledge and start believing in juju and superstition. Even history is denied or distorted to fit the conversation and agenda. We need to be very careful of such “leaders”. When we read we gather knowledge. With knowledge we may not become leaders of nations today, but we will not end up acting like sheep either. We were born with a brain that was meant to be utilised ... for knowledge and not just for power. But then, an uneducated and illiterate audience forms the chunk of the voter base and there are very few leaders in history who have bucked the trend and ensured an education for the populace.

I continue to be a reader. Like I said, currently I am reading the Upanishads. I have a shelves full of books, many of which I have not got around to reading yet. Not many, but a few. I did

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try going electronic a few years ago and bought myself a Kindle. However, I missed the joy of turning the page and the Kindle lies in obscurity in my drawer. Having said that, I understand why things like Kindle are gaining in popularity. Publishing electronic books are much easier and cheaper to do. Printing books costs a whole lot of money, there is a minimum number that have to be printed, and if it does not sell as well as you expect, you are saddled with inventory. Electronic books are much easier logistically. And the Kindle device (and similar) is certainly a boon in reaching books far beyond libraries and book stores. Print editions have only so far a reach, limited to the number of copies printed. An electronic version is available to people worldwide, to as many people as are willing to read it.

In fact I have the print edition of about a thousand copies of a book I wrote a couple of years ago gathering dust. The Kindle edition is doing much better, thank you very much.

People of my vintage are more likely to look for a physical book, one without batteries. But the world is moving on and if digital books are the future, so be it. The purpose is to read, the device is just the medium. Much like the difference between religion and spirituality.

Please go ahead and read. Find a topic that interests you and find as much information on that topic as you can. Expand your knowledge. Read books. Scour the internet. Watch channels like History, Discovery and National Geographic. Believe me, you will be a leader one day. A leader to yourself as a better person

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today than you were yesterday. A leader to your peer group who turn to you for information. Do not worry if they call you Mr Know It All. They say it with respect. Some day you might even become a leader of an entire country. Maybe, and probably better still, an advisor to the leader of a country who realises that your knowledge will provide him or her with advice that they could not come up for themselves. If for nothing else, but to use those brain cells that you were born with.

Chapter 4: The curse of knowledge

There is something inherently negative about intelligence arising out of excessive knowledge, and the people who possess this quality. Oftentimes, it is a very lonely place to be in, a solitary existence. When one is surrounded by mediocrity and rank amateurism, when common sense becomes extremely uncommon, when logical thinking seems to be a relic from the past, one can become very frustrated. “Why don’t they see the fallacy in their thoughts?” is something you ask yourself. When you seem to be the only one capable of supporting your argument with information, while the other person insists that the Earth is flat, is the time you realise that all this information, this plethora of knowledge gathered through study and research was a completely wasted effort in futility. It is true what someone once said, “It is better to remain a fool than to speak and remove all doubts.” This simple formula is unfortunately lost on many people, who insist that they speak, despite the fact that they do not have any logic, substantial or otherwise, to back up their statements.

I find people who are devoid of carrying on a logical conversation based on facts (I know this word can be debated) to be extremely at peace with themselves. They do not seem to have any demons

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in their minds, questioning the stupidity they see all around them. I do not have any problem with arguments, as long as the arguments are constructive, based on sound logic and not confrontational with the sole purpose of proving a point. We can argue till the cows come home whether we have been visited by aliens, whether there are remnants of extraterrestrials and alien spacecraft in Roswell, whether UFOs are really unidentified flying objects or are they the chariots of the Gods. There can be many sides to these arguments. But to be shut down with a statement that our scriptures say so, or that our teachers say so, or the priest said so, or my leader says so, leaves no room for the further enhancement of knowledge, for all who are participating in this discussion. A discussion that is doomed to failure, often after being led through the acrimonious path of name calling.

There are so many things that we have no clue about. Particularly in theological countries like India that are rooted in religious mythology, we find it very easy to apportion facts to something someone wrote many thousand years ago. I often ask people to imagine themselves to be in one of the densest jungles of the world, where for generations they have had no outside contact. Civilisation, in whatever form, is something that exists only within their limited community and the outside world is non-existent. Imagine one day you are strolling around outside your hut and you hear a loud noise coming from the sky. You look up to see what we now know to be a helicopter descending in your field in a showery dust cloud, all through a deafening sound of

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the rotor blades. Remember, the loudest sound you have heard so far is the squeal of the wild boar you killed for dinner, or the waterfall nearby as it falls hundreds of feet to the river below. You have never seen a helicopter and never heard such sounds. Then, some strange people emerge from within, wearing face masks, night vision goggles, wearing strange clothes, carrying strange weapons. Just imagine.

Now imagine that a few months have passed by, the children have grown up and you are relating the happenings of that tumultuous day when everything changed. This was the day the Gods descended from the Heaven in a strange and alien ship. They stayed for some time, and then again got into their spaceship and elevated themselves back to the Heaven, where they came from.

Try telling yourself this story describing the things that you witnessed that day. How you describe it depends largely on the memories you have of your experiences. The words and symbols you use to describe the event does not and cannot go beyond what is already there in your consciousness.

In walks the village shaman and then couches the event in some mythological canvas, telling people of the visions he had of the impending visit from the Gods. Without any knowledge of what had happened, without any explanation, this seems a plausible explanation. The shaman rises in stature and the gifts in his donation box start to multiply. The story is repeated down the generations and yet another God-story is born.

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There is a life beyond the confines of the metaphorical wells we like to live in. If we live in a well long enough, the world can seem like a very big and scary place. It is better to live in relative obscurity, with the limited knowledge that is doled out by the masters of my fate. It is a much happier space to be when we abdicate our individual responsibilities to the leaders of the community. Better to be a sheep following the one ahead, who is following the one in front of it. The one unfortunate sheep who wants to tread off the beaten track invariably in coloured black and finds itself in the dinner pot.

Two things need to change in how we lead our lives. Both of which are constructs of the people in power. A way of controlling the community they rule over. The first is the (mindless) dependence on organised religion. And the second is the method and form of education, including the curriculum that makes up such education. I firmly believe that every child should be taught about all religions, all faiths, including the ones that slowly petered out. Only later in life, when the child has grown up sufficiently, can s/he take a call on the practice that s/he wants to follow, without being encumbered by and forced into specific compartments. One does not need to be a Christian, or a Hindu, or a Jew, or a Muslim, or anything else. There is something good to be filtered from every religion. What is important is to become a good human being and the plan to pursue that goal should be left to the individual. Religion cannot be and should not be State sponsored, and certainly not hereditary.

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History is written by the winners. The books we read, the education we receive, all depend on which side of which fence we find ourselves in. One man's freedom fighter is another man's terrorist. Let us look back at our own freedom struggle. We called it our freedom struggle, but for the ruling Government at the time it was a mutiny, a rebellion, something that had to be crushed. And it was. In our schools we read about Bhagat Singh and Chandrasekhar Azad and Khudiram Bose and Lala Lajpat Rai and the many others who raised their voices for freedom, and were punished according to the current laws of the land. Had we continued to be under British rule, these individuals would still be called terrorists. Maybe in British history books about India, they still are. Now that we have been independent for some time, all these people have become freedom fighters in our eyes, people we should be proud of, someone we should strive to become.

The laws of sedition that the British wrote when ruling India, are still in the statutes and protests against the Government are still frowned upon; many people are arrested and thrown in jail. Protests are an intrinsic part of any community, when people raise their voices and question their leaders. How these people are dealt with, what they are called and referred to as, only history can be the judge.

Let us get slightly controversial. There is a strife continuing in Jammu & Kashmir for almost four decades now. The Indian standpoint is that the region is an integral part of the country and all calls for independence will be crushed, not tolerated at all. On

the other side of the strife are the people who are fighting for the freedom of the territory. Who is right? In my mind, both. Each side is fighting for a cause they believe in. One for maintaining its territorial integrity, the other for independence and freedom.

Let us for argument's sake assume for a moment that sometime in the future, Jammu & Kashmir does secede and becomes an independent country. And one of today's "terrorists" becomes the President. Will we not lay out the red carpet and hail him or her as the Head of State? There are enough examples from history where this has been the case. Gen Musharraf being a case in point. He was singularly responsible for the Kargil misadventure in 1999, then went on to overthrow a democratically elected Government in Pakistan, and came to India as Head of State. The very Indian soldiers who fought against the war that Gen Musharraf waged against India, had to salute him and pay their respects, as a Head of State demands.

The problem is we cannot disassociate ourselves from the narrow walls we find ourselves in. We have a definite opinion, based on patriotism where our territorial integrity is concerned. Or even terrorism within our soil. We need to, have to, indeed should do all in our power to keep our national flag flying high and proud. This is governed by nationalism and not by logic. If we were asked to put forth our opinions about some other conflict happening somewhere else in the world, we might have well articulated responses about what is going on there and what could be a possible solution. Were the Hutus right or were the Tutsis?

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Was the cauldron of truth held aloft by the Serbs or the Croats? What do you think about Idi Amin? Or Pol Pot? Or North Korea's supreme leaders over the last three generations? Was Saddam Hussain the person he is made out to be? Muammar Gaddafi? Assad of Syria? Erdogan? Duterte? Aung San Suu Kyi? What are your thoughts about the kamikaze pilots of Japan? Closer home, is the Hindutva brigade in India justified in protecting the rights of Hindus by raising a voice against the appeasement they have seen of other communities at what they believe, against their own community?

Many will not have an opinion because they will not know what the topic is all about. Forget having an opinion, they do not know how to find the geographical regions that Hutus or Tutsis inhabit, with two hands and a flashlight. Yet, they are so content. They have no conflict in their mind. There is nothing in there to spin the web. I feel they are more at peace compared to the comparatively more well-read who seem to be burdened under the frivolity they see around them.

There a lot of people I know who are faith oriented. They visit temples and listen to sermons from their respective gurus. There are many things they end up liking and believing in just because the guru said so. But they have no clue as to the significance of a particular teaching that was just handed down. They have learned it by rote and all is good with the world.

Have you heard about the story about the monkeys and the bananas? It was a sociological experiment to see the impact of

what is called cultural training.

Ten monkeys were placed in a cage. At the top of the cage a bunch of bananas were placed, with a ladder leading up to it. The monkeys had not been fed for some time and were hungry. They spot the bananas and one begins to climb the ladder. As he does, an electric shock keeps him from ascending further while simultaneously the other monkeys are sprayed with water. The monkey on the ladder scrambles off and all the hungry monkeys quieten down.

The temptation of the bananas grows and another monkey begins to climb the ladder. It too is met with a shock and the other monkeys get sprayed. This goes on for a while with different monkeys trying to get to the bananas and soon enough the monkeys learn not to go up the ladder.

One monkey is removed and a new one is introduced to the group. Spotting the bananas, he heads towards the ladder. The other monkeys, knowing his intention, cut him off and beat him to a pulp. A second monkey is replaced with a new one. This new monkey heads towards the ladder and, again, the other monkeys cut him off and beat him – including by the monkey who had never been up the ladder.

Finally all the monkeys are replaced and none of the original monkeys are left. Despite none of them ever experiencing the electric shock or having being sprayed with water, they had all learned not to climb up the ladder.

This is how we often behave, without any first hand information

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or knowledge about the reason behind any particular rule or process or SOP. We are expected to follow what is handed down by “experienced” predecessors.

You cannot save a fish from drowning by placing it on a tree branch.

There was an article I once wrote about my personal prayer chant. What do I chant when I sit down in prayer. People were horrified when I told them what it was. And I will tell you what it is:

Twinkle twinkle little star

How I wonder what you are

Up above the world so high

Like a diamond in the sky.

I do not see anything wrong with these four lines being my prayer chant. If I am to believe every Creator God based religion, God and his Heaven is up in the sky somewhere, while Hell is somewhere deep in the bowels of the Earth. So, if I consider my God to be like a twinkling star, living up above the world, shining like the proverbial diamond, what is wrong in it? Why do I have to chant something someone wrote ages ago, in a language I do not understand, possibly in a context that does not exist. We should be free and able to find our own ways of worship, design our own prayers. We need to find what works for us, not necessarily for the other person. Conversely, if something works for you, it does not necessarily mean it should work for everyone else. A single brush cannot be used to paint an entire canvas. Faith is a very personal thing. Sure, we find solace when everyone sits together

for a common good, but each individual within that group has his or her own reasons to pray and one size cannot fit all.

One might get the impression from the title of this chapter is I consider myself as sitting on some elevated pedestal, looking down on others, arrogant to the point to believe that I am more intelligent than everyone else. That might be the impression being formed, but it is far from the truth. I do not wish to impose my opinions on others. Similarly, I do not wish others to impose their opinions on me.

Sure, I am open to debate and am also ready to change my views and opinions based on facts and logic. I abhor alternate facts. I detest it when the only logic people can provide is that “this is the way it has always been.” If we were to follow what has always been, there would never be any progress in this world. There would not be any new product launches proudly proclaiming, “New and improved.” Nope, we have to dust away the cobwebs in our mind, stop repeating what we have been taught down the generations, find the answers for ourselves, with information we receive from people who are more knowledgeable than us. Thanks to the internet, there are enough such people. We just need to sift the wheat from the chaff and get to the kernel that will provide us more credible knowledge.

Frankly, I have a problem with mediocrity and the “humility” that you might have noticed that possesses me will not prevent me from admitting that. I have been a follower and I have had people follow me. I have no problem with people making mistakes, even

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many mistakes, as long as the mistake is not repeated. If one repeats a mistake, then one has not learned from it. Only when we make mistakes can we learn and become better individuals. Unfortunately, I find people repeating the same mistakes over and over again, without any interest in learning from them.

Intelligence is not just about cramming your head with information about inane subjects. It is not about being a know-it-all. It is also about learning from experiences and becoming a more evolved individual. Information received from books, television, magazines, the internet, or through sheer observation.

“Observation”, you ask. Read the absolutely fascinating book by Desmond Morris - *Manwatching*. You will start looking at people in a whole different light.

Chapter 5:

The wild side of me

I spent four terrible and traumatic years at the Ramakrishna Mission at Narendrapur. It has little to do with the school itself, which is a wonderful one. It had more to do with whether it was a soil where I could grow and bear fruit, or turn into a weed. Obviously I did not fit in the environment I found myself in. Till today, the school commands a lot of respect from parents and students, but it was just not for me.

Much later in life I learned that my father went through a moment of indecision while deciding whether or not Narendrapur was the way to go for me. A friend of the family and a senior of my father's in the Army was a Trustee at one of the best schools in Delhi and a seat for me at that school was available if desired. It was a premiere school not only in Delhi but in India. Good tuition, good sports, good future prospects, a great alumni.

However, it was decided that I would be sent to Narendrapur for a couple of reasons. First, this Delhi school would have been far more expensive compared to Narendrapur and that could definitely have been a singular reason for the choice made. Money was tight and the luxury of an expensive education was not something that was an option. The second reason was that

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the school had a “reputation”. The children came from rich, well-to-do families, people alleged drug use and not always in whispered voices, the lifestyles of the students suggested expenses beyond our means. And the overall lifestyle of the children studying in there was far too open for my father’s liking. He came from a small village in erstwhile East Pakistan, grew up in Mymensingh, was quite conservative in his views, and his father (my grandfather) was closely associated with the Ramakrishna Mission. Discussions were carried out within the family (I was obviously not part of them) and despite some contrary opinions from some members, finally my father decided that Ramakrishna Mission would be my next destination.

One fine afternoon, when I was just about twelve years old, I was packed off to a boarding school that turned out to be, over the next four years, the foundation of the person I evolved into. These were possibly the most trying four years of my life, particularly when one is trying to make sense of growing up, the question of whether boarding school was a banishment from family life, in a culture that was completely alien to the one I had found myself in so far.

The wild side of me flourished. The rebel was becoming more articulate. I now found myself outside of the discipline of my parents who were not known to spare the rod. Not that the rod was spared at school, particularly not for me, but the relationship one has with one’s parents and with one’s teachers are quite different. One can be a lot more overtly rebellious with people

who are not family.

This reached a head one day when I was suspended from school and sent home. This was also the time I learned to smoke, though that was not the reason I was suspended. The world shattered for my parents and all kinds of favours were called, to ensure that I was not rusticated, just suspended. In reverence to my paternal grandfather who was still associated with the Mission as a visiting faculty, I was allowed to continue in school, though not as a resident student. I studied from home for the few months prior to the Class X Board examinations, appeared for my examination, and much joy ensued when it was revealed that I had passed out in the First Division.

Finally, Narendrapur was behind me and I found myself in the more familiar environment of a Christian convent school at St Paul's in Kota, Rajasthan. A polar opposite to the place I had found myself in for the past four years. New friends were made, many of them from across the country, a melting pot of cultures, some even who had stayed and studied overseas.

I excelled in studies, and almost always found myself at the top of the class. Then sports found me. I played all sports ... football, cricket, and volleyball. I participated in gymnastics. I held the discuss throw record for many years. I was the second best in the shot put. I suffered a stress fracture of the lower leg when I fell off my bicycle during a sprint race. I tried basketball but just could not figure out the game. I could have been good at it given my general physique and that I was over six feet tall. The

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two other athletic events I could not figure out were the hammer throw and the javelin throw.

I was part of the school team that won the District cricket championship. I was selected for the Rajasthan State Junior football team.

The friends I made in the two years I studied at St Paul's School, Kota continue to this day. Life was good.

But studies did suffer substantially due to the new found freedom that I found and the sports and games I was involved in. Moreover, towards the end of my two years my father got posted out of Kota to Delhi and I was left to stay with family friends. Discipline went out of the window and by the time the results were out, I found that it was in the middle 50%. Not something that my parents were proud of. It took a few weeks for my father to carry out a conversation with me.

It was still those days when admission to college was much easier than it is today. Even me with a 55 odd per cent could hope for admission in some college under Delhi University. I took my bicycle and pedalled all around the city submitting my admission forms. I soon found that I needed more than a mediocre Class XII result to get admitted. Despite applying under the sports quota. I hit a few cricket balls and kicked a few footballs in multiple colleges, hoping they would see the spark of a future national level player. Finally, Deshbandhu College seemed to see merit in that cover drive, or was it the set piece which resulted in a goal? Nevertheless, I was about to become a graduate over the next

three years. A Bachelor of Commerce. With Honours I might add.

The school uniform had disappeared and I was almost an adult. I was exposed to College politics. Deshbandhu College was one of the more notorious ones and rowdy elements were rampant. I never got into politics but did not mind the benefits that came by associating myself with this crowd. Whenever there was a new film that was released, we would stand outside the college, stop the next bus plying on the route, rid it of its passengers and head to the cinema hall a couple of kilometres away. I doubt if I ever paid for my ticket when viewing any film in this fashion.

I was after all a student who had been admitted under the sports quota. I did not play any cricket or football at college, but I did end up representing the college in badminton.

What was most exciting was that the college was a mixed gender one. This was the first time so far that there were girls in class. However, by this time I was wary of opening up a conversation with a girl given that I was never exposed to them socially. I was shy and being an introvert did not help. However, there were two girls in class who I and my two other friends became close with. I do not know what happened to the girls in subsequent years, but the two boys who became my friends, remain friends to this day.

There was another college that was supposed to be our arch enemy. Frequent fights broke out between students of the two colleges. Life was certainly exciting. Rarely was the classroom graced with my presence.

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After three years of study, the results were declared. I was studying (probably too strong a word) to gain an Honours degree. Which was a three year programme. But the result had offered me a Pass degree since I had flunked in the Income Tax paper. I could take the paper once again next year to get my Honours degree ... if I passed. But I decided that this was it and accepted the Pass degree. My only regret was that I could have got that same degree by studying for two years and in my mind I had spent an extra year in college to no avail.

I had to turn my life around. This decision was made possible not only through serious thinking on my part, but it was helped along by the “talks” I had with the father, who had been utterly disappointed so far as far as my academic achievements, or lack of them, were concerned. He had been disappointed in me for a few years now and there did not seem to be anything that would make me see the benefits of changing my way. Not till now.

He got posted to Dhaka, Bangladesh as the Military Advisor to the Indian High Commission and I tagged along. There was an MBA programme being run by Dhaka University that was affiliated to Florida University and had been set up with help from the Ford Foundation. Fortunately, my father was now deputed to the Indian Foreign Service and some strings were pulled to get me admitted to the Institute of Business Administration.

I got down to studying seriously. By the time I passed out I was in the top percentile of my class and earned myself an MBA in Marketing.

I took up golf, which to me so far was a rich man's sport. I got quite good at it and ended up representing the Bangladesh team that visited India to participate in an international tournament ... and won! No, not the main tournament, but I had the best score among members of the Bangladesh team.

I had all the opportunity to screw this phase of my life too and I tried my best to do so. In my last couple of semesters I moved to a hostel since my father had yet again been posted out, and was back in India, back in the Army. I was alone and over the past couple of years had ended up making friends. I carried a diplomatic passport and life was more privileged. I made friends, attended sundry parties, and my sheepish temperament towards members of the fairer sex had diminished substantially. Fortunately, by the time things could really go South, the MBA programme ended, I had managed to do quite well and I was back in India ready to step into another phase of my life.

My paternal grandmother had been ill for many years and was staying with her eldest son in Calcutta at the time. One time she started sinking and everyone realised that her time was coming to an end. All her sons and her surviving daughter stood by her side. I was there too. She passed away peacefully one afternoon with her loved ones standing around her bed. The rituals were completed and the letters were printed to inform everyone of her demise and to invite them to participate in the final ceremonies that were to be held a couple of weeks later.

I told my parents that I had to go back to Dhaka and they

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agreed. They also handed me over all the letters that were to be distributed to all our friends in Dhaka. Little did they know that my plans were very different and my journey would not be towards the East to Dhaka, but to the West towards Lucknow where the love of my life was now living in. There was some suspicion among some people about my plans and not everyone believed I was headed for Dhaka. Fortunately, my father believed in my lies and I was on my way to Lucknow. The letters in my bag never reached their intended recipients, much to the consternation of everyone, particularly my parents. I do not quite remember the excuses I had made up, but somehow everyone (almost) was convinced that it was an oversight on my part.

This is the first time I am making this story public. No one knows about this except my wife and her mother. All the other people who were party to this escapade have since moved on. In hindsight I was stupid and this event should never have happened. But love does cloud one's judgement in more ways than one, and does not always point us in directions that are correct.

This phase of my life, from the time I moved on from Ramakrishna Mission gave birth to my wild side. The rebel in me had started questioning everything. I was walking a path that had a very sharp edge and it would have quite easy to fall on either one or the other side of acceptable behaviour. Fortunately, despite my lashing out at my environment, I did not find myself smoking weed or indulging in any other form of drug. It was quite easy to have succumbed to this temptation since a lot of the people I knew

were experimenting. What I told myself was that I did not want to smoke due to the fear that I might start enjoying it. I knew it was highly addictive and did not want to fall into that trap. I continue to give myself this excuse today, though I have had my share of puffs. I did continue to smoke cigarettes though. And drink.

Being from the Army, my father always had some bottles of intoxicating beverages at home. Like a good bartender I used to take a sip or two and then top the bottle off with water to maintain the level. This did not carry on for very long though. Do not get me wrong, I still enjoy my rum.

Is this really the wild side of me? Or is it a phase that everyone goes through in those formative years. I agree, not every person in the same and that all situations are different. But isn't rebellion in the psyche of every person? I remember something I had once read. "When I was 18 my parents did not know anything. Then I turned 21 and I was surprised how much they had learned in the last three years." Every generation is different. Where we go wrong as parents is in wanting the children to live in a memory that used to be our own childhood. And children find themselves in a whole new world, very different from the examples their parents provide. "We used to walk an hour to get to school" does not have resonance when there is public transport for most, and individual vehicles for others. Another one is, "We studied under street lights." For someone whose existence is not burdened by the lack of electricity, something that is available at the flick of a switch, this example does not make any sense.

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Every generation moves on. Every generation lives at a point in time that is very different from the earlier one. These are questions I have no answers for, but I will look at my own journey into parenting in another chapter.

Suffice it to say, that every child is a rebel. Some deal with the stimuli they receive that make them conform to societal norms much easier. And there are others who increasingly find themselves in an ever expanding sideline. No answers available, ostracised by near and dear ones, relegated into the community of “trouble makers”. It is incumbent on all of us to realise that people are different and it is particularly in the growing up years that we need to try and not only listened to with a sympathetic ear, but offer constructive solutions that are more in tune with the times that the children are growing up in. Unfortunately, therapy is a four letter word in India. When children are found to be behaving in a manner that is not acceptable to parents, they are taken to a priest for some form of divine intervention and as impending punishment they are told, “We will send you to boarding school.”

In India priests are supposed to be the therapists, but instead of offering practical solutions or even carrying on a conversation with the kid, they offer *havans* as a solution. This is extremely unfortunate and the stigma associated with therapists, psychologists, counsellors and psychiatrists need to be immediately removed. Children are facing some demons in their minds in the process of growing up and need to be heard and handled sympathetically and empathetically. Not with the

fear of being sent away to boarding school as punishment for non conformity.

I did not want to put this incident in this book, but I will just to illustrate how the words from parents can have long lasting effects in the minds of their children. More than once, at least twice that I can remember, I was told by my father, "I wish you were not born." I am sure he did not mean it, and it might have been expressed during a time of extreme frustration. But the fact that I remember those few words, many decades later, means that it left an indelible mark in my mind. If parents express regret about your birth, there can be nothing more traumatising. Words matter and just a statement that we say a lot of things in anger that we do not really mean, is not justification enough for uttering those words. I think as the senior persons in the discussion, elders should maintain a greater sense of balance on what they say and what tone they use when they say it.

I am jumping pages here. More on that in a later chapter.

Chapter 6: Tied in knots

In India, individuals do not marry each other, families do. And the entire wedding ceremony is not restricted to a few hours of one day, the ceremonies and celebrations go on forever. Fortunately, I come from a family that does not need to call friends over since we can fill up a large hall all within the ranks of our own substantial progeny. My grandfather had eight children, and a few more who passed away in infancy. We can easily have more than a couple of hundred people from within the extended family in attendance. Not counting my grandfather's siblings and their progeny, who are still in touch and close to the family. We probably would need to hire a whole stadium to fill in all the members of the family, no outside guests! Whenever there is a wedding in the family, everyone and their uncles and aunts, cousins and siblings, children and grandchildren have to be customarily invited. It is customary and the host does not even give a second thought about the ever expanding guest list. Per chance if someone gets missed out from getting invited, all hell can break loose, the otherwise strong bond between members of the family is questioned, relationships that stood the test of time become tenuous. No one can be left out, that would be

sacrilegious resulting in the host being banished forevermore into the annals of history, all memory wiped away of their existence.

Well, there was a wedding in the family. One of my cousin sisters was getting married in 1978 in Calcutta. Everyone was in attendance and lo and behold, from within this teeming hundreds, I found the love of my life.

Before I continue, let me try and explain the complexities of an Indian family.

My father had a younger sister who was married to one of four brothers. The eldest of the four brothers, not the one who was married to my aunt, was very close to our family ever since his brother married into our family. This brother had two daughters and a son. The elder daughter was soon married and gave birth to a daughter. Unfortunately, she became a widow and she with her daughter came to live with her parents. The father was the same person who was the eldest brother of one of his siblings that my father's sister had married. Confused yet? Don't be, it is quite simple really.

Both families - theirs and ours - were very close. I hear stories of my father carrying the very young child on his shoulders, playing with her and even cleaning her up when she threw up at yet another family function. Suffice it to say that my father and his family saw this little girl from the time she was born and had watched her grow up.

Back to the wedding I was attending. There were a lot of people, among them a lot of my cousins, some who I had not ever met.

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That little girl who used to play with my father was there too, all of about ten years old. I had just finished my stint at Ramakrishna Mission and had come from Kota to attend the wedding. Our eyes met, I guess sparks flew (she was ten!!!) and a bond was established. Given that I was still cocooned in embarrassment at the prospect of speaking to girls, even if they were around ten years old, did not help. Somehow things evolved over the next few days and we found ourselves sitting next to each other, teaming up while playing sundry board games, trying to outdo each other during the impromptu singling sessions.

I even ended up visiting their house over the next few days. Her mother had remarried by this time and even though the father might have been apprehensive about this strange and lanky boy coming over to visit his adopted daughter, the mother was far more welcoming since she knew who I was. As it turns out she did not know I really was, but since she knew which family I came from, she had no issues with my visitations. In fact I think she was quite excited.

In a jiffy we found ourselves to be kindred souls. I doubt if anything specific was said to bind us together, we just kind of went with the flow and found ourselves looking at a long term future together. Remember, I was in my teens while she had yet to reach puberty. Surely this was little more than a fling, a crush, a few moments spent joyously together. To individuals of the opposite sex, finding something interesting and exciting about each other. But it was not to just a passing crush, it lived

well beyond that.

The wedding was over and I went back to Kota, finished my school uniform days and followed my father to Dhaka. Those were the days of rotary dial telephones and the postal service. We did not have the luxury the current bunch of kids have in the form of the mobile phone and all the instant gratificational advantages that come with it. And since I was across international borders, the phone too was not an option. I had to depend on the postal service. That was not easy too. I had to write the letter, go over to the High Commission to hand it over, where it would be sent out in a diplomatic bag, from where it would fly across to India where the Indian postal service would take over. And the same process was repeated for the other way around. Completing the loop could take a month or more. This was a long distant relationship in every sense of the term and I guess that is the reason it did not peter off.

There were occasions when one would end up visiting Calcutta. Like the golf tournament I was a part of. These visits were few and far between though. Till such time my father got posted out of Dhaka and I found residence in the International Hostel. Often, I would take a bus to Jessore, a rickety journey of a few hours, take a rickshaw to the border at Benapole, conduct Customs formalities, walk across the border to Bongaon, and take a train to Calcutta. My maternal grandfather continued to live in Calcutta and that is where I used to stay. During the days and often well into the evenings, it used to be those stolen moments with the

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love of my life. Her maternal uncle was the same age as me and we became very good friends. Her grandparents, who were technically my uncle and aunt, seemed to like me too and there were no (serious) objections to my visits to their house. After all I was my father's son and came from a family who they knew better than me. I was family. I doubt if our relationship could have thrived and prospered had I not belonged to the family I did!

To complete my MBA programme I had to complete an external internship. I chose Hindustan Thompson Associates (HTA) in Calcutta. I always wanted to get into advertising and HTA was the largest agency in the country. Moreover, it was in Calcutta. Three months of the internship were over soon, I finally got my degree and thankfully HTA offered me employment at a princely salary of Rs 1,000 and a designation of Management Trainee. Life was good. I was employed, I was earning and I was in Calcutta, in the city where lived someone I had dreams of living the rest of my life with. This was 1986.

Post the festival of Holi that year, I contracted pneumonia and was admitted to the Command Hospital in Calcutta. It was a chore to ensure that my hopefully would-be wife's visit to the hospital did not coincide with the visits of my mother, both of who would visit frequently. I was quite close to my mother though and one day broached the subject that there was someone in my life I was getting seriously close to. I asked whether she would like to meet her. Graciously she agreed. I think she loved me enough not to object, despite the many times she had clobbered me in

the earlier years. They met and I guess liked each other. Again, what I guess helped was that the family was known and I was not planning on hitching up with a complete stranger.

Mother must have spoken to my father and one day after I was discharged from hospital, he and I went for a walk. We invariably took walks when he had something important to discuss with me ... or more accurately tell me. This time he wanted to know what was in my mind, what my plans were as far as marriage was concerned, if it was in the affirmative, if I had any thoughts on the possible dates, etc. I had just started working and I told him, yes I wanted to get married, and no not immediately, at least a year had to go by. He was ok with that.

The girl's family was informed, the respective parents met and the marriage was finalised for December 1987. I was to get married to someone who technically was my niece! I had referred to my soon-to-be mother-in-law as an elder sister. And my soon-to-be mother-in-law would refer to my parents as uncle and aunt. It became all very complicated and I think my soon-to-be father-in-law found it to be so too, though he went along to the party. Thanks to this union, entire generational relationships had to be rewritten and reworked. In the end, after a few hiccups, everything worked out. And there were no in-laws from either side ... we both came from the same family! I would not go so far as to call it an incestuous relationship, but it was not far from it either.

Now all we had to do is to wait for a few months for the bells to chime. My wife of almost 35 years now is Indrani, and Piku to

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everyone who knows and loves her. In the many letters I wrote to her, from Kota, from Delhi, from Dhaka, I called her Princess, because that is who she was to me. But to make her my Queen I had to wait a few more moons. I had a job to do at HTA. I was not even a confirmed employee and was still on probation.

The foundation for almost everything I know about advertising was laid at HTA. Their training programme was absolutely top class and even today, after I have left the industry for more than twenty years, what I learned at HTA still holds me in good stead. But we had a boss who was a sadist. I think he was a *fauji* kid too! He could not digest his lunch without sacking someone. Everyone knew that not everyone who walked in to work that morning would remain till the end of the day. My time came soon enough. And frightfully, just a few weeks prior to my wedding. I was out of a job and I had a wedding to attend ... mine. Life was not good.

Things took a serious turn, though was handled brilliantly by some friends I had at HTA. My father-in-law was being cautious and carried out a clandestine operation to find out a bit more about his future son-in-law. He called up HTA. I had already been relieved of my duties there, my access card had been taken away (we did not have access cards then), and fortunately my father-in-law introduced himself as my future father-in-law to the Receptionist. Without batting an eyelid, but certainly with a couple of missed heartbeats, she transferred the call to another close friend of mine who I shared my family name with, and he saved the day by making all the right noises. My father-in-law

ended the conversation, none the wiser about my current state of employment, gratified that I had a job in one of the more reputed companies in India and was not a pimp at some brothel. I would not have been surprised if I found that he had developed that impression about me!

I confided in my father about my lack of a job. I had to. He blew his top. He gave me a week to find another job. I knew that to be true and I went about like a headless chicken trying to land something. Finally after a few day's work, I was offered the job of a Product Manager in the Marketing Department of an FMCG company in Calcutta. The appointment letter was handed over and all was good with the world once again. Just a few days after I was married, I was offered a job at another advertising agency, which is the one I ended up joining. But, I did not get back to the FMCG company telling them of this development and I suspect they kept waiting in the lobby on my supposed day of joining, with garlands and lamps to welcome me into their fold. They must have looked quite foolish after a while and I regret that I had kept them in the dark. This is one decision that I regret to this day.

Response was the agency I joined and it was awesome. The boss, Ram Ray was a former HTA man, had worked all over the country and in America, had started a few branches in the US for JWT, HTA's parent company, and was the only non-American to be sitting on the Board of JWT. When he was superseded to head HTA in India, he quit and started Response. Soon it became the talk of the town and one of the best agencies to work in. I

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had walked in during the formative years and over the next three years learned a whole lot from my time there. I regard Ram Ray as my mentor and I give thanks to him every day for everything that I learned from him. He was a maverick and I found someone who was not averse to bend the line that signified boundaries. His strength of character, his command of the English language, his clear understanding of communications and advertising, his phenomenal memory and the way he stood his ground for what he believed was good for the brand, has stood me in very good stead over the years.

I remember with fondness my time at Response. I made some very good friends there, some who have gone on to become some serious names in India. Rohit Ohri comes to mind. Suhel Seth is another. Suhel's brother Swapan and Anurag Hira were my colleagues in HTA. Rituparno Ghosh used to be my copywriter and we spent a lot of time together developing some extremely good campaigns for Boroline, our flagship client. Rituparno had not yet entirely come out of the closet, yet the signs were there for everyone to see and he made no bones to hide where his choices lay. We even got into a bit of an altercation during one of our multi-day field trips to Assam and the Dooars when we were developing a campaign for Goodricke Tea, another client.

Many years later I had the opportunity of being an Assistant Director in Rituparno's film *Antarmahal* starring Abhishek Bachchan, Jackie Shroff, Rupa Ganguly and Soha Ali Khan, among others. By this time Rituparno was globally famous, had

come out of the closet with a vengeance, had won a clutch of national awards and was a close family friend of Bollywood's first family, the Bachchans. Rituparno was an integral part of Abhishek and Aishwarya's wedding. I am told he designed the jewellery that Aishwarya wore on her special day. During the course of the making of this film, Rituparno offered me a job in his production house, at a fairly decent salary. The only proviso was that I would have to get into a physical relationship with him, not necessarily romantic. He had taken off from where he had left off in the Dooars. Somehow that did not seem to work for me and I came back to Delhi from Calcutta where the film was being shot. I continued to be in touch with Rituparno off and on over the years till he finally passed away a few years ago.

Anyway.

I joined Response about a month after we were married. Ah, there was another incident just prior. And my father was the central figure in that too. I now had a job and he was happy about that. However, I was living in the maternal grandparents' house at the time. My father insisted that I find myself an independent house where I would move in with my soon-to-be wife. There was no way he was going to allow me to become a burden to my grandparents. Not that they thought of me as a burden, but I understood what my father meant and agreed with him entirely.

I spent the next couple of days driving around the city trying to find a place that would become the home to a newly wed couple. I found one. A typically constructed Kolkata home, red cemented

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floor, (I think) with green walls, a couple of bedrooms, next to a pond full of weeds and water hyacinth, trees all around. A little dark and dingy, but it could be called home.

A couple of days later, a future colleague at Response, who was to become a good friend in later years, told me that he was moving out of his current house and he could speak to the landlord to see if I could move in. This house was in a good part of town, Jodhpur Park. I went over for a cup of tea to Sid's house, and despite its single bedroom, it was a corner plot, lots of sunshine, on the first floor, with a small balcony too, and way better than the one I was about to finalise in a place called Kasba. This was the one I settled on and this is the house we moved into after our marriage.

If I remember right, the rent was Rs 600, a quarter of my salary. It might be unthinkable for people of today's generation to imagine such an existence. A salary of Rs 2,400, rent of Rs 600, a family to maintain, and I also had got myself a Yezdi motorcycle gifted by my father, which soon made way for a Bullet. Yet, life was comfortable. We ate well. We partied. We drank. Response was a vibrant company and every so often we would get together at someone's house or the other. It was always BYOB (bring your own booze) and we pooled in for the food. Life was really good.

But before getting back to work and settling down to married life, there was a honeymoon to complete. I always thought myself to be different, and unlike today, honeymoon in our times were not in Maldives. Father had just got himself his first car, a Maruti 800,

that had to be transported to Shillong where he was now posted as the Director General of Assam Rifles. I decided that we would drive from Calcutta to Shillong over however many days it took. It was a wonderful drive. We stopped over at multiple places, Darjeeling and Sikkim among them. Finally we reached Shillong and Piku was exposed to the grandeur of the Armed Forces for the first time. A reception was hosted, there was an Army band in attendance, people were dressed in all their finery and it was a gala affair. Overwhelmed, she fell sick and ran a fever for the next few days. Finally, honeymoon ticked off in the check box, it was back to Calcutta, a new home and a new job.

Another reason why Response became a phase of my life with very happy memories was because we were blessed with our first born while there. In fact, Pooja as we call her, was born in the same nursing home and delivered by the same doctor who was instrumental in bringing her mother into this world.

Ram trusted me enough to burden me with responsibilities I thought I was not capable of handling. Response was one of the first organisations, leave alone agencies, that invested in computers. And not just any computer, we had two Apple Macs. Digital Response was born, at least a decade or so prior to other companies realising the benefits of computers and desktop publishing as it was known in those days. I was offered to start, set-up and run Digital Response. For some reason I did not take up that offer and continued to be an Account Executive in the mainline advertising business. Digital Response was started a

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few months later by two other people under Ram's guidance and was called WYSIWYG. Not too many people, if any, understood the significance of the name. The Ram explained how computers were going to revolutionise the advertising industry. WYSIWYG stood for What You See Is What You Get. Yes, Ram was way ahead of his time.

Life was full of little surprises and adventures. We were developing a campaign for a food export company and had to photograph some of their products, jumbo prawns among them. The shoot went off quite well, and at the end of the day I found myself lugging about ten kilos of lobsters home, each what seemed like a couple of feet long. Piku had led a largely academic life and kitchen skills were not her forte. I had of course never ever entered the kitchen except to make some toast and omelettes. However, she did manage to cook the prawns which turned out to be quite delicious.

Another time the two of us yearned to have *gajar ka halwa*. The milk and carrots were bought, the *gajar* was grated, the wok warmed. For the next hour or so we just could not get the combination of milk and carrot to be in the right proportion. Either it got too milky and runny, or there was too much carrot. And then we found that we had forgotten to add sugar. After about a couple of hours, it was ready to serve and we consumed it with relish. I doubt if it was anywhere close to what could have passed off as *gajar ka halwa*, but to us it was like the Gods themselves had helped us prepare a delicious dish.

I was entrusted with shopping duties. I was given a list and headed off to the grocery to pick up the stuff. As I went down the list, I reach an item and confidently asked for it. “How much,” asked the shopkeeper. “One kilo,” I said. He looked at me quizzically for a few moments and wondered if he had heard me right. I proclaimed, “Yes,” and proceeded to show him my written list, so studiously drawn up by my wife. Sure enough it said one kilo. The shopkeeper told me to go back home and recheck. I asked him why. He said he was sure that the quantity was supposed to be 100 grams and not 1,000 grams. I was shopping for poppy seeds, a delicacy among Bengalis. And it is frightfully expensive. Way more than a few months of my salary, Which is why the tete-a-tete with the shopkeeper. I think I bought 50 grams of it.

Shopping for fish was no fun for me either. I don't know one fish from the other ... still. I love to eat them though. One day I bought a kilo of fish and proudly went back home where Piku pointed out that not only were there multiple varieties of fish in the ensemble, but much of it was rotten. I never shopped for fish again.

Piku was a studious person. Always striving to be at the top of her class, which she invariably was. And then she got married while still completing her graduation ... she was in the second year of her B.Sc (Chemistry programme when we got married. The new found joys of marriage and everything that went along with it resulted in her not passing the medical entrance examination that she had so badly wanted to clear. It kind of broke her mentally.

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Then she joined a Nutritionists programme, but that too fizzled out since her heart was not in it. Meanwhile, some of her classmates, way inferior to her in studies, got into medical college. This was shattering news and though she did not blame getting married for the turn her life took, I think in hindsight she would have preferred to delay the wedding by a few years so that she could become a doctor. I have only myself to blame for this.

Life continued merrily on. Response was doing well and I was learning a lot. One day I found myself questioning whether there was more ahead of me, and whether it was time to move on. A friend of mine had joined another agency, right across the road to Response, and asked me whether I would like to join the Lintas fraternity. Of course I would. Lintas and HTA were constantly competing with each other as to which one was the better agency, the larger agency. This was certainly an offer I could not pass up. I asked Ram for a meeting and he took me out to lunch. I told him about the offer and asked him whether I had his blessings. Of course I had his blessings. He wished me all the best for my future and a month later I turned my motorcycle to the right to get to Lintas House instead of to the left to Tivoli Court where Response was located.

The year was 1991.

And not only did I move across the road from one job to the next, we moved house too. And lo and behold, it was the house next to the one we were already staying at. Lintas had offered me a house and all we had to do was carry our belongings next

door. It was still a single bedroom house, not overlooking the road as was our previous one, but it was slightly better constructed. The earlier house was infested with termites, this one seemed clean and clear of such infestation.

Oh there was so much to learn at Lintas. Very different from my learnings at HTA. I learned strategy and tactics here, while HTA was all about execution and learning the tricks of the trade of the various departments that make an agency. I remember I spent a couple of weeks in the mail room learning how to staple two sheets together, how to fold a letter, how to insert it into an envelope, how to affix stamps and where. I could operate a darkroom, process negatives (you do not know what that is), make prints. I learned how to assemble an artwork. I saw the masters of spray painting and scraperboard drawing at work. I was learning so much and I was being paid to do so.

At Lintas it was about strategy and tactics, about building brands that would stand the test of time. Lintas was a much larger canvas, with offices across the country and I had an opportunity to learn from the best, starting with Alyque Padamsee. There was virtually no one in the advertising industry who was anything to talk about, who had not walked the halls of either HTA or Lintas, often both. I was now walking in the shadow of the masters.

There was this wonderful opportunity to travel the country for the launch of a paint brand for a multinational company that was our client. Over a couple of months I travelled with my team all over India. Executing this event logistically was a nightmare and more

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than a few drops of tears were shed during the journey, along with bucketloads of sweat. I had also miscalculated the budget that was creating havoc back in the agency. I was bravely meeting expenses with a brand new credit card that I had acquired and things were not pretty. But I learned a whole lot during this journey.

One major incident I remember during this event occurred in Bombay. We were moving from city to city. We would reach a city, set up the event, wrap it up, and move to the next one. We were in Bombay and the event went off quite well. Everyone was tired and we drifted off for some shut eye before catching a train to Chennai for the next event. By the time our eyes opened, we were frightfully late. To add to our miseries, it was pelting cats and dogs. We barely had time to rush to the station to catch our train. We managed to reach the station with our gazillion pieces of luggage just to see the train pulling away. Ouch.

We still had to reach Chennai the next day. We reached the bus station and took a bus. It was supposed to go all the way to Chennai, but at Bangalore they said, this is it and they would not be going any further. With some difficulty we found and hired a taxi to drive us to Chennai, to reach the venue and find the guests waiting in the hall, the client and the agency big wigs wondering what to do next. We set up the event in a fraction of the time that we would normally take and managed to salvage what could have been a very messy situation. We could have lost the client, and almost did.

I had a lot of answering to do. I was not commended for saving

the situation by taking initiatives to reach the venue in the time required, but was reprimanded for oversleeping, for missing the train, for spending money on taxis that I was not authorised to spend. I was dejected, devastated and angry. I almost put in my papers that day. I had already been without a job (almost) when I got married and another such situation, this time with a baby in the house, was not something that was advisable. Pride was swallowed, money was never reimbursed and I continued working in Lintas. It took me a few years to pay off the credit card debts and my tryst with credit cards continued later. But that is another story.

A couple of years later and it was time for my father to retire and settle down. My younger brother had by now moved to the United States where he was completing his MBA programme at the University of Florida, Gainesville. And there was no more reason for me to stay in Calcutta, since the attraction of meeting Indrani till then had disappeared since I was married to her and would be with her all the time, whichever city it was.

I applied for a transfer to Lintas, Delhi which was approved and one day after packing up all our belongings in multiple tea chests and loading them into a truck, we bade farewell to Calcutta to start a new life in Delhi.

Lintas Delhi was similar to Lintas Calcutta. Both were very cosmopolitan in nature since there was a lot of campus recruitment at the junior levels and a lot of cross fertilisation from across Branches in the middle and higher levels. I continued to

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excel at my job and one day considered myself having grown enough to head my own agency. I was still barely at the middle management level at Lintas. It might have been at the back of my mind, but a chance conversation with a friend from Calcutta brought it out in the open. He was being funded by a corporate group from Calcutta to start an advertising agency and he wanted me to head the Delhi Branch. He himself would be stationed in Bombay which would be the Head Office. I was offered the designation of Vice President and a starting salary of Rs 40,000 plus some perks. This was awesome. For someone who was earning a salary of Rs 3,600 when his first child was born, to be offered almost ten times as much, within a few years, boosted my ego no end. I accepted and from the advertising business, made the switch to the business of advertising.

Unfortunately, things went sour between my friend and the funders and the agency was shut down almost overnight. Suddenly, I did not have a job and as the senior most person in Delhi, all the staff was looking at me for directions. I did not know what to do. For myself and for all these other people who were looking at me for directions. My father had passed on the year before having succumbed to cancer, and there was no one I could take advice from. It was one of the loneliest couple of days in my life.

I ended up making a decision that was to live with me for the next many years. I told the staff that I would start an agency, which I did. One person took up the offer of becoming my partner, while

the others were happy to be employed once again, with a raise in salary I might add. I always had a soft corner for King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. XCalibur Communications was born.

The company was formed and it operated out of our house in Delhi. My loving dog Kaiser became the mascot. I had about Rs 3,000 in the Bank, had offered more than a dozen people a job, was going to rack up a significant salary bill and I had no clients.

I will talk about this journey in a later chapter.

Life was not all hunky dory from this time on. Money was always tight, even though the agency kept doing relatively well financially; for a while. And when the bottom fell apart, Piku stepped right up and started teaching. She started teaching in a School and taking private tuitions at home. She was very good in the Sciences and in Maths and slowly her reputation grew in the colony. She was teaching Science and Maths to students of Classes IX and X. And brought the bread home and ensured there was always food on the table and no one went hungry. And she continues teaching to this day and a lot of kids from the colony have been tutored by her over the years.

Since my job life went from one dejection to the other, she managed to keep the home and hearth alive and well, without complaining. Well, not too often anyway. I guess she saw the frustration I was going through and I could not deny the hole I had shoved all of us into by agreeing to quit Lintas and jumping into an uncertain future. I do not have regrets about the choice

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I made, except that folks at home had to bear the effects of it.

One good thing that happened was that father had bought some property and had build a house. We would always have a roof over our heads, unlike the more unfortunate who had rent to pay, without any regular source of income. Mother was getting her pension and Piku was earning. And there was always food on the table.

Nothing I tried seemed to be working. I was always an introvert and became more so. The number of students Piku was tutoring expanded. She was having a tough time. She would go to school in the morning, come back around three in the afternoon, barely have time to freshen up and finish lunch before the students walked in at five. The tuitions would continue till past nine. To be repeated every day. Day after day after day. It was taking a toll on everyone.

Piku held the family together like only she could. I have confessed to a few people that she should have left me many years ago, way before things started going South. She did not deserve the many things that I put her through. Yet, she stayed, she persevered and has not got the recognition she so rightfully deserves. I like an ass, have never said it to her in so many words. Maybe she will realise what she means to me after reading these words. She is the best thing that could have happened to a bum like me.

Oh, did I mention? Our second born joined the family just about the time I was planning on quitting Lintas. She had a sorry childhood and I regret not being able to give her all the joys that she deserved, certainly all the benefits her elder sister enjoyed.

Chapter 7: Learning parenting

The worst people to bring up kids are their parents. I sincerely believe in this. And before I give you my reasons, I will tell who I believe are better candidates ... the grandparents. Ok, let me elucidate. Grandparents dote on their grandchildren. They have been through the process before. Additionally, their primary focus is on being the kids' friends, without any major expectation about they will grow up to be Einsteins. Quite unlike parents who have a far more vested interest in the upbringing of their children and consider it a personal failure if the kid does not perform on stage by the time s/he is four years old. I do not think I have ever met a parent whose child did not come first in class.

Frankly, the book will never be written on how to bring up children. Sure, there are and will be in the future, many books written on the subject. But most of that general advice goes out of the window when faced with a real situation. Every parent is different, as is every child. Every situation is different. Every circumstance is unique. It is foolish to club a parent-child relationship in a single pot and hope to come out with excellent results each time. It will not happen. Each child needs to be

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treated uniquely, since each child is unique. Even siblings have very independent personalities and cannot be painted with the same brush, governed under the same rules.

“Look at your brother/sister. Why can’t you be more like him/her” is something that we might have overheard in many families. We might even have uttered these words ourselves as parents. Or heard them from our parents. I remember the film *3 Idiots* and a particular scene from that. One of the characters announces to his parents that he does not wish to finish his Engineering degree and wants to drop out. The father is aghast and uses all the logic within his power to try and convince his son about how wrong this decision is. Finally, the father plays his trump card, “What will Mr Kapoor think?” Mr Kapoor is the next door neighbour. The son looks at his father and says, “I do not care what Mr Kapoor thinks. I care about what you think. It was you who carried me on his shoulders, not Mr Kapoor.”

We all suffer from this malaise. We like to belong to a community, to a society that we are a part of. We are concerned about what people will say about the decisions we make. It is not unusual to distribute sweets in the entire locality when there is some good news in the family. We feed hundreds of people at the drop of a hat. Births, weddings, other functions like the sacred thread ceremony, even funerals. In fact there are some communities in India where the funeral rites cannot be performed unless the entire village has first been fed. If we go to a religious site like Haridwar, we will be accosted by sundry people asking

us to sponsor the meal of a group of *sadhus*. If we are there for to perform the last rites of a loved one, we will be told that the departed soul will not find peace unless at least a hundred *sadhus* are fed. We are in constant need of validation by others, whether of our own volition, or through the pressure of culture and ritual. This, to my mind, is criminal.

We should never ever compare two people, particularly children. By doing so, we show our own inadequacies in not knowing how to deal with a particular problem. Why should one child play football when the interest lies in learning to play the violin? Just because one sibling likes a particular activity, does not mean that every other child should like that too. Matters get complicated when the reason for discussion and debate rests on an activity that is not quite the norm. Imagine a child growing up in India and asked what s/he wants to be when s/he grows up and answers, "I want to study butterflies." Or the life and times of the komodo dragon. First, the possibility of learning pursuing such activities may not be possible since there are no institutions following this curriculum. Second, the parent will exclaim, "If you do that what will you eat? Who will give you a job? Who will get married to you. Listen, let that be a hobby. Get into Engineering or Medical college. At least take the Civil Services examination."

These conversations happen in virtually every household. Except possibly the deprived class who do not have the luxury of dreams. Let us confine ourselves to the more privileged. People like us. People who have had the luxury of an English language

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education, for want of a better analogy.

I am often guilty of sounding preachy when talking of things I am passionate about, and I going to consciously try and refrain from sermonising. I will stick to my own learnings as a parent.

The two most important and happiest days of my life were July 20, 1990 and March 28, 1994, the two days when my bundles of joy transformed me from just a man and a husband to a father. From the time I was a kid, I had wanted daughters and it gave me immense joy for that dream to have come true. In fact, when I was still in school I had decided on the names of my two daughters ... Meenakshi and Sagarika. When the time came to name them after they were born, these two names did crop up, but lost out to Priyanka and Pallavi, or Pooja and Piya as we call them lovingly.

It was late in the evening one day when Piku started having her labour pains. The nursing home was close by and she was promptly admitted. She continued with her effort at giving birth for the next many hours. The doctors kept trying for a normal delivery, but finally decided to carry out a Cesarean section. I requested to be in the Operation Theatre and she graciously and thankfully agreed. I was there when the first incision was made. In a few moments I could see a blob of black peeking out from within what I guessed to be the stomach region. The blob of black turned out to be hair. Pooja had a head full of hair. The doctor then inserted his palm into the womb and I guess gave the head a bit of a flick. The entire head popped out while the rest of the body

still remained inside. In seconds, Pooja emerged, the umbilical cord was cut, the first cries were heard as the nurse carried her to a nearby table to clean her up.

I did not know what to do. I was pacing the room, going from the table where Piku was lying anaesthetised, to the table where my new born was lying. This happened a few times. The rest of the family was parked outside the OT and after a quick look at the wall clock I stepped out to announce the birth of our first born. It was 35 minutes past five in the evening. The celebrations followed and the torrential rain reminded many of the time when Lord Krishna was born. It often rains pretty heavily on the day of *Janmashtami*, and surprisingly, it often rains on Pooja's birthday.

It was quite a chore bringing up Pooja. She had major issues in taking medicines, and it would be a few years before she was potty trained. Days would go by without her expelling anything, while the quantity of food consumed remained normal. We were worried and there were multiple visits to the doctor. Once she suggested a suppository. Wanting to try anything to rid her innards of all the muck, the suppository was administered and we sat on two sides of her as she was planted on her potty. After what seemed an eternity, we heard a loud plop. Elated, Pooja was lifted from the potty for us to realise that she had shed the suppository, while the product that should have been shed remained firmly inside.

Another visit to the doctor ensued. She put on her gloves, shoved a finger in and physically took out whatever she could

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reach resting inside Pooja's colon. This continued for a few years more and days would go by before the flush had to be flushed, to remove excreta the size of which would put a new born to shame.

As she learned to crawl and then walk, all the items that were displayed in assorted shelves in our house kept getting placed on higher and higher shelves. She would just take a hold of whatever she could, look at it for a couple of seconds, get entirely bored, and throw it down on the floor. Soon, we had the shelves, but nothing on them.

We moved to Delhi when she was just a couple of years old. Of course, all our stuff had moved with us. Whenever she entered the room we were staying in, she would exclaim, "Jodhpur Park." She recognised the bedsheets, pillows and sundry other things from the time we were staying at Jodhpur Park in Calcutta, and our room in Delhi was christened Jodhpur Park.

A couple of years later, in the afternoon of March 28, 1994, Piku's water broke. The nursing home was a few clicks away and I put everyone in the car and rushed there. Mother stayed back home since she wanted to carry on some prayers. There was no question of an attempt at a natural birth, since the first was a Cesarean birth. I admitted Piku, while my father stood guard. Pooja was left with a colleague of mine who lived next door to the nursing home. I was rushing all around since I wanted to be in the Operation Theatre to witness this birth as I had done for Pooja. I drove back home to bring my mother. By the time we came back to the nursing home and had not even entered the

room, when we heard the cries of a new born and I knew I had missed the window and Piya was born and resting peacefully, cuddled in the arms of her mother. I came to know that her time of birth was 1:34 pm the afternoon.

By this time my father had fallen sick and despite being told by his surgeon that this was one of the earliest detection of esophageal cancer he had seen, and a subsequent successful surgery, his condition continued to deteriorate. The marriage of my younger brother had been arranged a few months ago and was to be performed later. But looking at the deteriorating condition of my father, the date was advanced and the ceremony performed on Sep 16, 1994.

Unfortunately, the children did not get the childhood they deserved during this time. Not that they have ever complained or brought this issue up, but they certainly deserved better. And for me, life was starting to take a turn for the worse from which I have never quite recovered.

Pooja at least got to experience the hey days of my father's last months in the Army in all its glory. She spent many months of her childhood in the Aurangzeb Road house we used to stay in. Big green manicured lawns, a helpful and doting staff that was always around, a large house. There are photographs and videos of Pooja growing up. Unfortunately Piya was deprived of all this. She was born when my father was ill and she was barely a year and a half old when gloom descended on the family once my father passed away. It was a period of adjustment for everyone

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and this little child possibly did not understand what was going on. Pooja being older, she was almost six years old at this time, has some memories of my father, but those too are becoming shrouded in mist over time.

As I write this, we just celebrated 25 years of his passing. How time flies. Another four years when I myself will reach the age when my father passed away. In an earlier chapter I was guessing how many more moons I was to witness on Earth. Would it be a decade? Or two? With the current crisis of COVID-19 that has gripped India, maybe it will be weeks or months and not years. Only time will tell. By the way, I was 34 when I lost my father.

I remember a conversation I had many years ago with Piya. She was a senior in school by this time and was indulging in all the pranks that children at this age were prone to indulge in. She told me something quite interesting. She said, "There is no fun in being your child. I look at my friends and the excitement in their faces when we decide to bunk school to see a movie." What she meant was that she missed out on the joys of her parents finding out about her playing truant from school. We always knew that she was planning to do something naughty. And both kids had the confidence in us to tell us their proposed naughtiness.

Both Piku and I have been very liberal with the children. We have always tried to be friends and not typical parents. And I think the children grew up with the confidence of indulging in things with the full knowledge and support of their parents. But I can see where Piya was coming from. I know that I did not want

my parents to know the many things I had done as a rebellious teenager and the process of keeping them in the dark came with its corresponding excitement. What followed once my father found out about my misdemeanours was another story though.

In the same vein, I had another conversation with a friend of mine. We were discussing this very subject on the merits of demerits of being friends with our children. What he told me opened my eyes. He said, “Your children will have many friends, but they have only a single set of parents.” This is so true. However close we are to our children, they will always manage to find friends. It will be very difficult to replace parents.

So, should parents be parents to their children, or should they be more like friends? Increasingly, this choice is taken away from parents, with children having a mind of their own from a younger and younger age. If I were to live my life as a parent all over again, I would be a friend to my children all over again. Sure, as the elder one in the relationship, one can bring examples from one’s own life, on from what one has seen and experienced in the past. Parents are essentially guides and mentors.

Another reality I have witnessed among parents, is the pressure children face to perform, particularly in studies. I have the education to point a finger at, since it is all about marks and much less about knowledge. This is particularly true for the first born. Parents bring up their first born with the firm belief that s/he will or should grow up to rival Albert Einstein or Madame Curie. Worst case scenario, they can become someone as Vivekananda

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or Rabindranath Tagore. Rarely do we hear parents say, “S/he is our child. Let them be children. If they excel in whatever field they choose, so be it. Why should I dictate what vocation they should choose?” Realisation seems to dawn by the time the second child is born and enters school. Expectations are remodelled and become more realistic.

I feel sad looking at children today, including my own. Any parent who has packed their bags for school should be ashamed at the weight we put on the shoulders of infants. If it were up to me, no child would carry anything but their tiffin and beverage to school. It is the job of the teachers to ensure a transfer of knowledge and the development of wisdom. Multiple books and copies for classwork and notebooks for homework, and this sheer emphasis on rote learning is turning children into clones. All that a child works for through the K-12 years, is to get enough marks to be able to gain admission in a good college. And that too so that job opportunities open up a little easier. There is very little emphasis on learning. The Indian education system does not lay any emphasis on research. Whether it is to answer the curiosity of a child when s/he asks, “Why is the sky blue?” to a young adult wanting to study the sounds of the universe.

There are so many examples of children who have studied a particular stream in school, then got an engineering degree, proudly displayed their MBA diploma on the walls, to end up working in an FMCG company peddling soap. What was the use of the twenty odd years of study? People would call it “education”

but were these twenty years spent in education or rote learning? According to me this is a sheer waste of latent talent that is displayed by the many children who leave Indian shores to make a name for themselves in foreign lands.

The unfortunate reality of the job market is that most people with college degrees are unemployable. Those who do get employed have to be retrained, made to forget whatever bad ideas they might have picked up in school and college, and tutored on what the job requires. Why cannot there be more emphasis on vocational training in India? Why can't we train children to be plumbers, or electricians, or welders, or vehicle mechanics, or yoga masters, or cooks, or disaster management? Or even a farmer? There is so much scope for alternative farming, organic farming, vertical farming, hydroponic farming, etc. Why does the goal of every child need to become an engineer or a doctor and then get an MBA degree? We all want our children to become managers of people, we want them to be wearing a shirt and tie, commanding and supervising their subordinates. That is where "success" lies. We need to remember that without the foot soldier, no army can win anything. A General can just swing his baton, the real work is done by the foot soldier.

India is a land of entrepreneurs. The majority of the population is self employed. Whether they are a vegetable vendor going from house to house selling groceries, or a cobbler, or a key maker, or a mechanic, or the person selling *chana kulcha* from his bicycle. Even the hired help, the gardener, the driver, they

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are all self employed. Why cannot we take this up as a source of employment and train children in these various vocational fields so that they can earn an honest living? Once we do that, the status of such people will be elevated in status and we the more privileged will start looking at them more as equals and not as the hired help.

I have had these discussions with my children. How much they have picked up I do not know, but I know for a fact that their empathy with the less privileged is far higher than some of their friends. But yes, Pooja does have an MBA degree and Piya has just enrolled in one. Pooja works in American Express and Piya has put in her papers at HCL prior to joining her MBA programme.

And they are married too. The younger one got married before the elder one and that too gave rise to some conversation among people. Marriage is usually hierarchical with the ceremony being performed based on the age of the child. That was never a question for any of us in the family. What made matters even more interesting by providing topics of conversation among our “well-wishers” was that Piya was marrying outside her fold. India is still governed by caste and class. Technically she should have married a Bengali Brahmin boy, certainly someone who was not of her own *gotra*. She fell in love with Anubhav, a baniya. Sacrilege, as some opined. Not to our faces though since they knew where we stood on this debate. But we could sense the surprise rooted in their psyche.

Pooja was a player. Well, she was a complete introvert in all

her twelve odd years in school. Not too many people had heard her speak, she remained confined in her own silence. Then she went to college and the floodgates opened. Boyfriends happened one after the other. She was seriously inclined towards films and wanted to become a star (not an actress). She walked the ramp, she participated in shows, competed in events, even got a role in a film. All this while she was doing quite well in school and then at her work.

We as parents were always concerned about her deep and intense desire to get into films, knowing the pitfalls and heartaches that came with it. It is not a very forgiving industry and there are literally thousands waiting in line to get one of the dozen or so leading roles in the films made each year. Yet, she persevered and to her credit did whatever she did through her own efforts and tenacity.

Marriage for Pooja was a very distant prospect. She was never opposed to it, but she did not want to get rushed into it either. The years went by and I think the realisation dawned that films were not to be. She was introduced to the son of a common friend, sparks flew, and she agreed to take things further and get married. Sudeep joined our family as the second son. The elder son-in-law, but the son who walked in after Anubhav. And Sudeep turned out to be a Bengali Brahmin. Not what people expected out of Pooja, but things have a definite way of working themselves out.

We are so lucky to have both Anubhav and Sudeep in our family

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and in our lives. Both are excellent human beings and anyone would be proud to have them as their son. I am sorry that my father could not meet them. He would have liked them. My father spent the last few months of his life knowing that Piya was born. It was unfortunate that he did not get to meet my brother's children either. C'est la vie, and there is nothing we can do about it.

Both Pooja and Piya have grown up to be wonderful individuals. Pooja is the sensitive one, while Piya is the more opinionated.

My regret is that in the formative years I was not around as a "regular" father. I was gallivanting around the country trying my hand in a variety of adventure sports, money was always at a premium, I did not have a job like most father's did and I guess both of them would have had a pretty hard time answering the question, "What does your father do?" "Nothing" would not have been acceptable answer, yet that was largely the truth. This is one regret that I carry from my life and as far as my children are concerned. It could not have been easy for them.

Now they are married and are busy setting up their own homes. Will it be nice to have grandchildren? Sure it would. But who am I to ask them to expand their family? It is their lives and they will decide if and when they want to have children. In fact, both Piya and Anubhav are pretty clear that they will adopt a child. Once they have one of their own. They will adopt a girl child if they have a boy. Or a boy if they have a girl. Very very commendable and something that I wholeheartedly support and appreciate.

An adoption is also a rebellion of sorts, since many people

insist on their own “flesh and blood” to become art of the family. Questions are raised on the pedigree of the adopted child and blame is placed on the unknown parents whenever something does not work out as desired. “Do you know whose blood runs it its veins,” is a statement many couples who want to adopt have been faced with from their parents. It is true that many infants who are put up for adoption come from very unfortunate circumstances. Some could be a result of rape. Others could have been born in a brothel. Yet others, could have been born to couples who were not married and could not be married. There are others whose parents have had unfortunate deaths. The genes of the parents can raise questions, but then that is where the debate of nature versus nurture raises it head. That is a whole different topic of discussion and I do not have an answer to it, and therefore goes beyond the scope of this book.

I hear of many parents and grandparents and other sundry well wishers lay on the guilt trip on children. “I am old and might die soon. I want to see my grandchild before I die.” I do not like these people. If you want a child, go ahead and have one of your own, why insist that someone else have one? There is more to life than having children and each couple has to decide when the time is ripe to have children. No one else has the right to insist.

The other unfortunate reality is the need for a male child. It is reducing (I think and hope) among the more educated class, but the feeling still exists. It is the male child that carries the family name forward. Girls are born to be wedded off into another family.

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Consequently, the insistence in many families for a male progeny, despite the many advances that girls have made. There is still a long way to go before this unfortunate feeling is eradicated from our minds, maybe a few more generations, but it needs to go. And the sooner the better. There are many cases of female foeticide in India, particularly in villages that are still steeped in age old customs and prejudices. A conscious and concerted effort needs to be carried out by one and all to make sure this is relegated to the annals of history as soon as possible. The Government cannot do it, because they will be questioning the beliefs of people who will ultimately vote for them. It is up to each of us, individually and collectively, to show the path of why this is a bad idea. One can only hope that the want of a male child and its associated reasons disappears entirely.

Suffice it to say, that the best thing that happened to me are my children, first two, and now four. My heart beats for them and it pains me to see them sad. I have had a lot to do with the sadness in their eyes, and I hope they can someday see the hole I found myself in. Maybe this book will open their eyes just a little bit for them to take a dive into the soul of their father, to understand where he came from and where he stands. I have looked for validation from my father all my life, despite my rebellion towards him. Now I hope my children will understand me and find the love in their heart to proclaim, "My daddy strongest."

Chapter 8: Into the wild

I had just entered Ramakrishna Mission and was spending my last few days of “freedom” at my maternal grandparents house in Calcutta before entering the boarding school where I would be incarcerated for the next four years. There was a long and narrow balcony on the first floor of our house and I was standing there, paper and pencil in hand. I was drawing out the design on a suit that I would be wearing when I went on my bicycle journey throughout India! I was barely twelve years old and the thought of a motorised transport had not entered my mind at the time.

I designed a kind of dungaree, with multiple pockets in which to put the various items I thought I would need during this adventure. We did not have fancy bicycles in those days, my journey was conceptualised on a regular, run-of-the-mill bicycle. Panniers were unknown to me, it would just be a couple of bags to hold my belongings. I would ride off one day and travel across the country.

Many years later, in the winter of 2002 this dream came true. The “bi” of the bicycle got replaced with a “motor” of a motorcycle. Actually three motorcycles. Three of us who had not known each before, got together and headed out on a journey all over India. We did not stay in hotels, we did not enter restaurants. We ate in

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dhabas and stayed the night in them. It was a wonderful journey, a realisation of the dream of a child who was yet to enter his teens. A dream that took thirty years to come to fruition. The entire trip cost us around Rs 50,000, fuel, food and stay. Unthinkable today, and possibly unthinkable then. Yet, we did it and completed our journey. We travelled across all the States of India, except in the seven sisters of the Northeast.

Let me step back a bit.

I was tired of a 9-to-5 job. I was working in Delhi and would head off to Rishikesh almost every weekend to participate in whitewater rafting. I would leave office Friday evening, drive over the five or six hours it took to reach Rishikesh, raft over the weekend, drive back Sunday night and be back in office Monday morning. I was getting tired of the routine.

On millennium night I was sitting on the banks of the Ganges, listening to the waves, looking up at the sky, watching the distant glow of the headlights of a passing car on the road high above the river, and came to a decision. I would quit my job. And I did. And OutThere Adventurers was born.

I had always enjoyed the outdoors. My father was in the Army. He was an infantryman, a Gorkha, the one who set up the Commando Wing, a Green Beret, and the Commandant of the Counter Insurgency & Jungle Warfare School, among many other things that he was famous for. I had had occasions to accompany him and the troops when they were participating in some training exercise. I loved the dirt, the muck, the leeches,

the wading through chest deep waters. I loved every minute that I spent in the folds of Nature. Of course I knew that my father had a keen eye out for me, lest I got hurt and he had to answer to my mother.

Adventure was in the blood and it was running thick. I had spent more than two decades building brands while in advertising and I thought that I could dovetail this knowledge with my passion for adventure. Something no one else was doing. No brand and certainly no agency. The stuff that filled the space between my ears held a unique combination of resources that was hard to find, particularly twenty years ago ... the knowledge of advertising and communication, and the passion for adventure.

I designed multiple projects for multiple clients, but things were not developing as fast as I would have liked. And in the process I was missing out on adventure itself. I found myself stuck behind a desk, involved in the process of development. I needed to go out. Wasn't that the reason I had quit my job?

Email was a new thing in those days. It was primarily Hotmail. Gmail had just about been launched and one needed an invitation from someone to get an email address. Fortunately, I had a friend who parted with one of the five invitations that a person was allowed and I got myself an email address that I continue to use today as my primary one. Anyway. Emails happened, I reached out to friends, and told anyone who would listen about a hair-brained concept I was developing. A ride all over India, lasting however long it would take. I was excited and I hoped

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there would be some others who would be excited too.

By the way, I did not have a motorcycle at this time and did not know its front end from its rear end.

After a few days, a couple of people responded and we had a team of three, only one of who had a motorcycle. A friend who was working in an NGO supported the journey by funding us Rs 50,000, which is what we had between the three of us for the entire journey. We had no idea what we would do once the money ran out while we were still in the middle of nowhere.

The journey commenced in Delhi early one morning (or rather late in the night) and what an adventure it turned out to be. We almost never took the highways, it was almost always State roads. We met some incredible people, saw some beautiful sights, was held up by naxals, were told we might be shot at, the entire range of awesome experiences were packed into those few weeks.

I had hired a bike from a common friend and it was in a pretty sorry state. Often it used to leak from places where it had no business to leak from. But it took me from one place to the next, one day after another, till one evening we rolled back into Delhi to finish our journey. A press meet was organised and we were hailed as heroes. I was addicted to endurance riding.

Unfortunately, we did not have the funds to invest in a camera and I do not have any photograph remembrances of that journey.

In July of 2003, ten people, again none who knew each other, but had a common bike mechanic, yapping over *chai* while our respective bikes were being tended to, decided to go to Ladakh.

A place we had all heard of but did not know of anyone who had motorbiked there. This was much before the trip to Ladakh became a part of the bucket list of person who considered himself or herself a motorbiker. One midnight we headed off from Delhi. We had no maps, were not packing enough to face the cold of Ladakh, a cold we had no idea about the intensity of, just a knowledge that we were headed on a road that was supposed to be one of the most challenging the world.

Till Manali it was fine, there were roads, there were towns, there were people. Once we started climbing the mountain, a little after Manali, things changed in a heartbeat. We were driving on dirt roads, the very concept of a road disappeared in the swirling dust thrown up by our tyres. We climbed up to Rohtang Pass, which at around 13,000 feet was once the highest road in the world. We crossed over and made our descent into Keylong where we stayed the night at Nalwa Guest House. To this day I will always find a room at Nalwa Guest House anytime I pass by. The owners have become good friends over the years.

Soon, it was time to head into really higher reaches. We started climbing from Darcha. We crossed the Army cantonment at Patseo. And then we were faced with the road heading to the imposing Baralacha La. We were already above 15,000 feet and Baralacha La was just a few hundred feet higher. That did not bother us. The views all around of the snow capped mountains was imposing and inspiring. It was summer and the snows were melting. All we had was a semblance of a dirt road ahead of us.

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The melting snow had formed a stream and the stream found the easiest way down the mountain to reach the Shyok river below. That easy way down was exactly the track that we were supposed to be riding on. The water was cold, the wind chill was playing havoc, the bikes were increasingly uncomfortable in the rare atmosphere. We were having problems breathing, and so were the bikes. We slowly and carefully climbed up the mountain to finally stand at Baralacha La. A beautiful place. I remember one of the members also ended up leaving his excreted remains behind one of the boulders at Baralacha La.

It was pretty much downhill from here on out till we reached Leh which lay at 11,500 feet. What a ride it had been so far and we now considered ourselves biking pros.

One day we headed out to Tso Moriri, a beautiful lake and is a protected Wetland. This was when we were on our way back after having spent a few wonderful days in and around Leh. We had managed to pick up a map of the region and were peering at it trying to figure out a direct and shorter way to get to the Morey Plains and then back towards Delhi instead of going back all the way to Leh and retracing our tracks back on the route we had taken on the way up. It was just about 40 km and we decided to cross country it. After all 40 km was not much and should not take more than a couple of hours.

We had a lazy breakfast and by the time we headed out, it was much later than we had originally planned. We were lost almost the entire time, there were no roads and our only source

of navigation was a vague knowledge that we should continue to head east if we were to hit the Morey Plains. We had one member giving up and breaking out in tears. Giving up was not an option since the bike still had to be ridden and no one was willing to carry a pillion rider. After about nine hours, a team of very fatigued people, almost on the verge of giving up, saw some movement about five or six kilometres out in the distance. Even from a distance, we knew that the speck that was moving raising a barely visible cloud of dust behind it could not have anything other than a vehicle. We headed in that direction and soon enough hit the Morey Plains.

And, in those days there was no GPS, and no smart phones.

One thing that I had noticed during the journey were signposts proclaiming the direction of some of the world's highest roads. I could see the names of at least four of the world's highest roads - Khardung La, Tanglang La, Chang La, and Wari La. I tucked this information in my head and started ruminating on it on the ride back to Delhi.

Two months later I found myself on my motorcycle again. Again headed to Ladakh, but this time solo and with a specific purpose. I wanted to ride across the highest roads in the world in the shortest possible time. I started my attempt from in front of the Leh Police Station and a couple of hours later I was standing at Khardung La, then the highest road in the world. As I was filling in my log book, the pen fell down. I was at more than 18,000 feet above sea level, it was past two in the morning, the wind was blowing,

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and it was cold. It was so cold that I could not pick the pen up. I just could not curl my fingers to wrap them around the pen to be able to lift it. I let it stay there as a testimonial of my visit and headed towards Chang La, the third highest road in the world.

Chang La is en route Pangong Tso and I have crossed Chang La many times since that time. This time it was for a purpose and I enjoyed my visit to the Pass and spent a few minutes at the temple that is constructed there. Turning around it was time to hit the next pass. I took a rain check on Wari La and headed towards Tanglang La. Wari La lies somewhere between Chang La and Tanglang La, but is a few kilometres off the route. Wari La was then the fourth highest road in the world, and I decided to concentrate on the top three highest roads in the world and gave Wari La a miss. Tanglang La was next, which I reached in soon enough. There was still daylight left and I thought I would head to Keylong for the night. It would be another three or four hours of riding and I could sleep in the comfort of a bed. Little did I know what was to happen next.

I had a cup of tea at Bharatpur before climbing up to Baralacha La. It was after sunset by this time and the *dhaba* owners advised me to stay back and ride again the next morning. I wanted to go on. The climb to Baralacha La was uneventful, but it was taking a toll on the bike. I could tell from the strange noises that had started emanating from its innards. After crossing Baralacha La, and on the way down towards Keylong, the bike gave up and decided it had had enough. I thought it had just heated up in the rarefied

air during the climb to Baralacha La it had just accomplished. I sat down, had a smoke, and gave it another shot. It sputtered, started and shut down again.

I tried a few times but nothing was happening. I spoke to it nicely, but it was not listening. I was more than 16,000 feet above sea level, it was dark, there was no moon, and even in the best of times one is lucky to see a passing vehicle and never at night. I was not carrying a tent, but fortunately had a very good sleeping bag. I had a last smoke, looked all around me to cement to memory all that surrounded me. Satisfied I crawled into my sleeping bag that I had laid on the side of the road and went to sleep. I had no idea if I would wake up the next morning and whether someone passing by would find my frozen body. Sleeping out in the open, at that altitude, was never an option, but I did not have any other choice than to walk the next hundred or so clicks to Keylong. That was not happening.

I decided to chance it. In my substantial sleeping bag I was warm, I was cozy and I slept like a log. Little things like the possibility of an impending death during the night was not going to deprive me of my sleep.

The next morning I was surprised that I actually woke up and I was grateful for this small mercy bestowed on me. I still had the problem of my motorcycle though. I did not know whether it would start or not. Gingerly I gave it a shot and it did. There was still something wrong with it and it was still behaving erratically and sounding funny. Somehow I reached Keylong where the

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mechanic identified the problem as a busted rectifier. Rectifier replaced I was on my way home to lay claim to the world record of riding across three of the world's highest roads in 24 hours. I was a world record holder.

A year later some friends of mine who had heard about my exploits of the previous year, decided to up the ante and set yet another record ... this time as a group. Fortunately this time there was some funding, the bikes were sponsored, as was a support team. We added Marsimik La to the route this time and I ended up with my second world record in endurance motorcycling. That of having ridden through four of the world's highest roads in 24 hours. Again, Wari La was given a miss and the four passes that made the record were Marsimik La, Khardung La, Tanglang La and Chang La.

Marsimik La was unknown to everyone! It was an entirely dirt road, right next to the border with China and no one that I talked to had heard of it. Various people were approached, first to find out its name and then to get a permission from the Army to be able to go there. It took me a good part of six months to complete the formalities. Once our feat became public, Marsimik La was in the news and there were multiple biker groups heading out to try and better the record set by us. In a few weeks, the District Collector of Leh, who is the person responsible for handing out Inner Line Permits, was handing out permits to visit Marsimik La. Life was good. More and more people were getting to know me and about OutThere Adventurers.

In 2006 I had a major motorcycle accident. I was riding around Rajasthan and had a rather unfortunate and violent encounter with a cow. I broke my collar bone, and my knee was shattered. I was helped off the road by some bystanders and after lying there, waiting for the pain to subside, I found myself in a taxi headed for the Government Hospital some kilometres away at Jhunjhunun. I was holding on to my leg for dear life, almost in a foetal position. The pain was intense. The doctor came in and said that he had to straighten it. I was not going to let him do that. I lost that argument, when he along with about four or five ward boys, literally pulled my leg straight. I could not only feel but I could hear the bones crunching as the angle at the back of my knee went from about thirty degrees to 180. It became straight, that is. My screams could have woken the dead, and maybe even did. A plaster cast was applied and I spent the night in the trauma ward that full of people with quite serious injuries.

The next day I found an ambulance to come to Delhi, was operated on the next day, nuts and bolts were placed in my knee to hold the cement that was placed inside to stabilise what was left of my God given knee. The doctor said that when he cut me open, the shattered remnants of what used to be bone fell on the operation table in a million tiny pieces. He fixed me up as best as he could.

I was in bed for a few months, walking with a walker after that for longer and it took me almost a year to recover and walk without assistance, but with a significant limp. My motorcycling

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days were over. I held on to the bike though for a few more years before giving it to a friend of mine who still has it.

In a couple of years I went back to Ladakh. In a car though. While still in bed, I had made a list of three things that I would do once I recovered:

1. Go back to Ladakh,
2. Ride a bike again, and
3. Meet my teacher in Mcleodganj.

I was back in Ladakh and that was one thing that I could strike off the list. I did ride a bike again, but just around the block. I got my confidence back, but since I could not fold my knee, I would never be able to ride a bike on the roads again. In the short span of a few years, I had had my share of motorbiking. Anyway, two things were checked off from my wish list. And then one day I visited my teacher. All the three goals that I had set for myself had been reached. Hallelujah.

In 2013 I was back on a bike once again, on the way to Ladakh. Three of us were planning on riding our bikes to the highest altitude ever ... above 21,000 feet. This was an attempt at a Guinness World Record. Unfortunately, a very bad and unseasonal storm hit the region and we were stuck in Keylong for nearly ten days. This was supposed to have been the worst storm in years. There had been avalanches and landslides and people had died. The expedition had to be aborted. The mountains are not going anywhere, and maybe some day in the future we will make this attempt.

I had been taking people to Ladakh every year, in what was my personal pilgrimage. I would go to the Thiksey monastery and pay homage to the Maitreyi Buddha. Friends who heard about my journey wanted me to take them and I would. This meant that I could make the pilgrimage, friends would get to see Ladakh, and I would not have to pay for it. Good going all around. I did this for a few years in what turned out to be my annual pilgrimage. I have not gone back to Ladakh for a few years now and that is the next item on my bucket list ... GO BACK TO LADAKH.

During my trips to Ladakh, I would carry out extensive medical guidance on high altitude travel for the people who accompanied me. Which is what this road trip was, a high altitude journey. From the plains to above 16,000 feet to Leh at 11,500 feet. High Altitude Illness hits fast and hits hard. People die if they are not careful.

I expanded this interest in high altitude first aid to learn more about wilderness survival. After months of study, I was ready. I started OTA Survival School, dedicated and focussed on training people in wilderness survival. This was the first such facility in India. Even today there are none, except a few adventure outfits who are building in survival training as part of their overall offering. I wrote a comprehensive book on wilderness survival that was extremely well received all over the world with more than 400,000 downloads (it was a Kindle edition). Unfortunately, it did not receive too much traction in India.

Every citizen needs to learn and be equipped with what is taught within this curriculum. I have trained children in schools and have

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individuals participate in the multi-day, on-location, simulated survival Courses I run. I am now in the process of turning the survival course into an online one, so that more people can learn the basics before heading out into the wilderness for a hands-on Course. I hope I can launch this initiative soon.

I was born wild and I did not ever find myself in chains. I did what I wanted to do. I went out into the wild to pursue my passion for adventure. I can quite imagine the tension that these trips put on the family when not only was I incommunicado for days, but I was in geographies that are challenging and anything could have happened at any time. I do not have the answer on whether I was justified in putting them through such anxiety. All I know is that I do not want to live a “What if” life. We will all die one day, what we do till that day should define us.

Am I selfish? Maybe I am. But I am the one who has to breathe for me, no one can do that for me. I have to live my life, I cannot live someone else’s And that is a truth I have come to terms with. Now, it is up to others to make peace with this decision of mine.

Chapter 9:

Jinxed, rich or famous?

Who does not want to be rich and famous? I do too. Much like everyone else with even a semblance of ambition. I may have been a shirker in school, but I was quite good in studies, And intelligent, even if I may say so myself. It was during my MBA programme that I turned my academic life around and scored a CGPA that was considered respectable.

I joined HTA and over the next few years learned about the art and science of advertising. Again, I was quite good at my job and steadily progressed up the hierarchical ladder. I was learning so much. I have always told my children to look at their job as a place of learning and not necessarily a place where one is forced to just follow KRAs (Key Result Areas), with the hope of a decent increment come assessment time. A job, particularly in the lower rungs, is a place where we are paid to learn. Unlike school and college where we end up paying to learn. At a job we learn from what we do, from what are peers are doing, from what our seniors do when faced with circumstances that were not a part of orientation. Yes, I was learning and I was a sponge.

One day I decided that I had learned enough and it was time to

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spread my wings and fly higher into unknown territory. I accepted an offer to head a start-up agency in Delhi. A couple of years went by when all was good, we had a clutch of very good national clients, a bunch of people who were dedicated professionals, the money was good and finally I was in charge of running an outfit, setting policies, budgeting, spending, etc. I was in the business of advertising.

The bottom fell out for no fault of the agency, but because of a fall-out between the person heading it and the person who was funding it. Overnight the doors were shut and the entire staff, and me, were out of a job. XCalibur Communications was born. Now was the time I could really spread my wings since I had no one to answer to except myself. And we did quite well for a few years. A decent client roster, a good staff, professionals who were as dedicated to be a part of this new venture as I possibly was. We gained some multinational clients and were doing pretty well. We moved out from my house from where we had started the company, to a rented place. There were more than a dozen people employed. And we were busy.

There was one major decision that I took that turned out to be a huge mistake. So far we had remained primarily a creative agency. Then it was decided to venture into releasing the advertising we were designing in newspapers. (Those were the days when newspapers were the primary medium for advertising.) The commission that the newspapers would give the agency was 15%, but that was for those agencies who were registered

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with the Indian Newspaper Society. For all others it was 10% ... at best. Usually, non registered agencies were squeezed even further and the average lay somewhere around 5%. This was also quite a bit of money in absolute terms and the money thus earned was more than welcome. All we had to do, in addition to what we were doing already, was to type out a release order and send the advertising creatives to the newspaper.

Unfortunately, a couple of clients defaulted on their payments and we were left holding the baby. The contract was between the newspaper and us, the agency. The client whose advertisement was released in the newspaper, was not part of the discussion. It was up to us to pay the newspaper and then to recover the amount from the client as best as we could. Mostly that was impossible, since the default was due to the fact that the company itself was not doing well, and not because of any malafide intentions. Needless to say, we could not recover the amount and under fear of legal proceedings had to beg and borrow to make the payments to the newspapers.

This was also the time when I started paying salaries and meeting other expenses through the liberal use of my multiple credit cards. I got into the proverbial trap and the payments were being juggled between the multiple cards that I possessed. Payments to creditors were getting delayed, some cheques we had issued had bounced due to lack of funds, and we were staring down multiple court cases and even the possibility of time in solitary confinement, certainly jail time.

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Those few months and my adventures with credit cards, ensured that my credit rating burrowed into a deep dark hole. I was never able to get another card, let alone a loan for anything that I wanted to purchase, even as a co-borrower. I remember after my father passed away, my mother wanted to buy a vehicle. She was a housewife with just a pension to show, so she wanted me to be the co-borrower. As soon as the Bank saw my name on the form, the loan was immediately rejected. It is only a couple of years ago, almost twenty years later, that I managed to get a credit card again, and American Express one, no less.

My elder daughter was working in American Express at the time and it was no thanks to her that I got an AmEx card!

These were tough times. My partner and I had different views on how to address the situation we found ourselves in. One day we sat down with a sheet detailing all our debts and payables. There were hardly any collectibles. We split the debts in half and went our separate ways. I was now responsible for paying upwards of Rs 30 lakh to various people. This was in the late 1990s and Rs 30 lakh meant a lot of money.

When we split I retained the computers and machines that were part of the agency and I was working 40 hours a day doing freelance work ... designing, printing, etc. I could cost a print job in my sleep, even though I did not come from print school. I could use the computer to design anything the client wanted, and I had not been to design school. No one had taught me how to use Photoshop or PageMaker (as InDesign used to be called

then). Yet, I excelled.

I have to thank my younger brother who was in the United States at the time, working in the IT sector, finding his feet in the world. He stepped forward and sent me some funds when things seemed to be getting quite messy. I had people at my home screaming and shouting, even threatening physical violence. There was one day I remember, it was my birthday actually, when I was accosted at home by a person who I owed money to and he was getting very aggressive. My mother took off her four gold bangles, which she had worn for the more than three decades of her marriage, and handed it over to the person. He turned around and said, "This will not cover what is due to me." Somehow things settled down and he left, still angry but prepared to fight another day.

Over the next couple of years, I was freelancing like a man possessed. I had joined The Times of India, followed by another advertising agency. I was going to office in the morning, freelancing in the evening and working through the night. I did not see any of the money that was being generated, since it went off in payments to creditors, the moment it hit the Bank. I called myself a traffic police, directing the money to where it needed to go.

Thankfully and I am quite proud to say this, I paid off each and every person, every paisa that was owed. Except for one person who I thought was a very close friend. He knew what I was going through. Yet, without even talking to me, he sent me a Notice

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through his lawyer. I did not appreciate this gesture and told him to take a hike. He never did press charges and I did not pay him.

Anyway, my debts were paid off and I was here with a clean slate. I was not rich, not by a long shot, but I was certainly famous among my creditors.

Now to the jinxed bit. My tryst with “jixism” started the moment I quit Lintas. Somehow, something would always go wrong in every company I found myself. Except for Times of India. It was too big for the jinx in my armour to affect it! The advertising agency I joined after quitting Lintas closed down without any effort on my part. The advertising agency I started grew exponentially before crashing and burning leaving me with a ton of debt. The advertising agency I joined after Times of India also closed down because of financial mismanagement and losing some clients who had been with the agency for decades.

I started OutThere Adventurers with the hope that I would be able to dovetail my knowledge of brand building and my love for adventure to develop some events and expeditions within this space. Not a single brand was using adventure sports as a brand position, though some were flirting with it as visual appeal. Somehow I was not able to convince organisations about this benefit that could accrue, of occupying a vacant space in the communications positioning for their respective brands.

I then met with my accident and had to put endurance adventures on the back burner. Yet another incident that I could safely put in the jinx folder.

I had been telling people about the perils of high altitude illness when they accompanied me to Ladakh. This expanded in scope and I started OTA Survival School, the first and only organisation in India dedicated and focussed on imparting wilderness survival training in India. I had some very positive feedback from all kinds of sources, the Army being one of them, since the curriculum I covered was not being covered by anyone else. I had some traction from a few schools around the country.

But OTA Survival School did not take off as I had expected. People were just not ready to learn the tricks of survival so that they could take personal responsibility for their own lives and the lives of their loved ones. We Indians are happy to depend on either God or the Government to come to our aid in times of distress. We do not wish to take responsibility. How many people in India know how to administer CPR? How many people die of a heart attack due to the want of someone administering CPR? How many of us know how to administer the Heimlich Manoeuvre? We can save lives with some basic knowledge of wilderness survival, particular survival first aid.

I am still hopeful about OTA Survival School. There are ideas I have that can project it to heights for the greater good of all citizens. The coronavirus pandemic has put a hold on any kind of travel and this initiative has been put to bed for the time being. Once things settle down, I will revisit how to take OTA Survival School forward. I am still surprised at the response I have received so far though.

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Thanks to what I was doing at OTA Survival School, I was offered to produce a series of short films, each film dealing with a specific aspect of wilderness survival, for a start-up television channel that was focussed on travel. I produced 150 five minute films for them and by the end of it they were impressed enough with me to offer me employment to handle their online functions. And, I could continue my activities in OTA Survival School on a revenue sharing basis with them. Unfortunately, there were some issues and the channel shut down in less than a year of its formation. I was back in Delhi and the jinx continued.

I consider myself a serial entrepreneur. Ever since my debts were cleared, I have dabbled in a range of things that I have wanted to do. OutThere Adventurers and OTA Survival School fall in the adventure category. I initiated Dirty Old Boots, an online initiative in the travel space. This has recently morphed into Footloose Planet and I am hopeful for its future. The funds requirement to get this off the ground is quite substantial and I suspect that will be a major roadblock, but there certainly is a future.

My father was in the Army and I have a particular affinity for the Armed Forces. I initiated a project called Chimes of Honour to collate a list of all the soldiers, sailors and airmen who have laid down their lives in times of war with the enemy. This from August 1947 to the present day. After a fair bit of research I arrived at a list of more than 20,000 battle casualties spanning the Army, Navy and Air Force. However, I had to get this validated for correctness and I headed to Army Headquarters, showed them my list, and

offered to collaborate to finalise it. This was the time when there was a lot of talk of putting up the National War Memorial and it was a good time to draw up a list of people who had died in war. I was told that due to reasons of national security, they would not be able to help since I was a civilian. I am at least thankful that the National War Memorial has since been inaugurated, honouring all the battle casualties since Independence. Chimes of Honour was put to rest.

Another project I was extremely hopeful about was rearing angora rabbits to harvest the wool, turn it into various garments and export to high end brands or stores around the world. I had put in a lot of work towards this. I even had the support of some Government organisations who liked the project and were ready to support it. Unfortunately, I was denied funding for it by NABARD since I did not have an NGO under whose banner I would run Angoragaon Farms. Also, when I went to the Commerce Ministry to find details about the import of the original stock of pure bred angora rabbits, they told me that there did not seem to be any provision where the import of rabbits could be allowed. They suggested I import horses instead and start a stud farm.

A couple of years ago I got interested in indoor and soil less farming. I started Greens of Goodness to grow microgreens hydroponically. The first few experiments did not turn out a harvest that looked healthy. But there is a lot of scope in this area and I need to learn more about this to scale it up.

I am also a certified meditation master. Mediation, combined

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with sound therapy. Thetastu is an initiative to offer a programme for people to be able to calm their mind by entraining the brainwave into the Theta state through a combination of sounds and chants. I am not yet ready to scale it up, though I try and practice it myself.

The latest initiative is Matlock Island. About six or seven years ago I had picked up a heat press machine and a friend of mine was to partner with me to market the products. He backed out and the machine was gathering dust. I tried selling it and could not find a buyer. I then decided to operationalise it. One thing led to another and soon I had acquired more machines in this space and I was churning out mugs and plates and coasters and T-shirts. Today I have Matlock Island in place, ready to march boldly forward to offer some unique items in the home decor and gift space. Unfortunately, the pandemic has put a spanner in the works, there are lockdowns in place, people have lost jobs, and there is a lot of uncertainty in the market. Spending on luxury items is way down the priority list when people are trying hard to find a grocery store to get bare essentials delivered at home.

I am hoping the pandemic recedes, the economy jumpstarts, money returns to people's pockets, vacations and travel resumes, the masks are forgotten, and no one dies for the lack of healthcare. It may be a pipe dream to expect this to happen in the next few months, but humanity has been known to fight back and this too shall pass. My only contention is that just when I had started Matlock Island, hoping to decorate people's homes with

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some wonderful items, it was kicked in the gut. The jinx continued.

At this point in time I am neither rich, nor famous, but certainly jinxed. Maybe I am not one who will never be successful in running a business. Maybe I am one who belongs in a company, obeying orders, not formulating policies. But then, I have been a part of a few companies that folded up within months of my joining them.

My brother has been of immense help over the years. From the time he went to the US, found his food at the local Gurdwara in Florida since he did not have any money to buy food, to becoming a Founding Partner at Mindtree Consulting, he has done very well for himself. He has reached out and helped many many people within the family to help them tide over financial troubles. He continues to help me as he considers me eligible to receive unemployment benefits. I will remain eternally grateful to him. And to Purba, his wife, who supported him in such benevolent overtures.

I am an eternal optimist and despite the feeling of being jinxed I will never give up. I will continue to do what I want to do. I may never be rich and I do not think I have it me to be famous, but that should not stop me from pursuing my interests. My dreams will always be bigger than my excuses.

The only thing is that I am running out of time. I cannot do today what I could twenty years ago. But I can fine tune my physical condition with my mental capacity. I shall overcome.

Chapter 10:

The monk in camo (An incorrigible atheist)

It was a November evening in 2004. I was sitting in a rickety old bus, about to make an overnight journey into the hills. With barely enough money for the trip and back, this was not a vacation I was headed for, but a sort of pilgrimage. I was feeling quite down in the dumps for some time and was trying to find some answers with which to confront the demons that had made residence in my head. The internet is a rabbit hole that leads you from one thing to the next and before you know it, you are in a space so far removed from where you started, that it is amazing.

That is what happened. I landed up reading about the Buddha, about Tibetan Buddhism, mediation, enlightenment, nirvana, and found myself on the web page of an organisation that carried out mediation workshops primarily for a Western audience who wanted an introduction to Buddhism. I enrolled and shamelessly told them in the comments section (they wanted to know a bit about who was enrolling) that I was Indian, from the very land where the Buddha and Buddhism was born, and that I had no money to offer. I think the price for the 14-day workshop, including stay and food, was Rs 4,000. Well, in those days I did not have

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Rs 400 to call my own, let alone Rs 4,000. They graciously agreed to waive off the amount and I was on my way to learn about Buddhism.

Born and brought up in India, sure I knew who the Buddha was and what Buddhism was. Well, not what Buddhism was, but that it was a religion followed by many people in India and from around the world. I wanted to know more since what I had read during my brief research was something that talked to me. And here I was on my way to the Tushita Meditation Centre in Dharamkot, near Mcleodganj.

I reached the bus station at Mcleodganj and on inquiry was told that Tushita (literally The Place of Joy) was located at Dharamkot, a few kilometres up the hill, a 10 minute ride in a taxi. Remembering the hole in my pocket, I decided to walk it. Soon enough and slightly winded from the walk, I found myself in the company of a lot of people waiting to register, all of them foreigners, from all continents except Antarctica. I was the only Indian. I felt a little sheepish when I saw people counting the money that was to be handed over as the workshop fees ... I was not prepared or equipped to pay anything. My turn came and I filled out my details, and the wonderful lady at the counter welcomed me and ushered in the next person after bidding me an exuberant "Welcome to Tushita." I was so relieved that I had been spared the embarrassment of having to explain that I wanted to participate in the workshop, stay at Tushita, and consume their food, all for free. The paper she was referring to during the

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registration process already had my predicament listed.

We were ushered in to the meditation hall that had a large statue of Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelukpa sect of Mahayana Buddhism. An imposing figure. There were meditation cushions on the carpet and people found their spots. I went over to the front row, probably for the first time in my life since I had always been a back bencher. I was not prepared to miss out on anything. I was ready. My mind was ready. This felt like I was home.

The ten days of the workshop was listening to some eminent lamas talking about various aspects of Buddhism. There were numerous chanting sessions. And there was guided meditation. All in silence. Well, mostly in silence since it would be very difficult to chant silently. Or ask questions when the time came. The teachings were mostly from the Mahayana tradition, as was to be expected, and I was enjoying every minute of it.

Meals were served just once a day, at lunch. There was tea and cookies in the evening, and that was it. And lunch was consumed in a bowl. The centre was located on a hill top, the surroundings were gorgeous, there was a chill in the air, there were multiple temples and retreat huts, it was gorgeous.

Within a few days I was hooked. Here was a form of faith that told you to take personal responsibility. Unlike many other religions that asked you to abdicate your responsibility to an external force, a God, a Greater Being, the Creator. Buddha's teachings were simple enough and were encapsulated in The Noble Truths. Very simple for anyone to understand.

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The First Noble Truth: *Dukkha* or suffering that is incapable of satisfying, though painful, is an innate characteristic of existence in the realm of *samsara*.

The Second Noble Truth: *Samudaya* is the origin of this *dukkha*, which arises with craving, desire or attachment.

The Third Noble Truth: *Nirodha* or the cessation of this *dukkha* can be attained by the renouncement or letting go of this desire or attachment.

The Fourth Noble Truth: *Magga* or the Noble Eightfold Path leads to renouncement of desire resulting in the cessation of *dukkha*.

The Noble Eightfold Path then provides the way for this suffering to end:

1. Right view
2. Right intention
3. Right speech
4. Right conduct
5. Right livelihood
6. Right effort
7. Right mindfulness
8. Right samadhi

It is quite beyond the scope of this book to go into details, but believe me, it makes for very interesting study. It is similar to the time when we are sick. First, we need to accept the fact that we are sick. Second, we head to a doctor for him to diagnose the cause of our illness. Third, the doctor tells us that there is

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a way our illness can be addressed. And fourth, he hands us a prescription. This is pretty much the way I interpret the Four Noble Truths.

I am a very impetuous person and this time was no different. Within four or five days of attending the workshop I knew that Buddhism was what I was seeking. I spoke to a couple of organisers about my immediate intentions and they got back to me in a few hours. They gave me the name of a senior lama who was the head of the Tibetan Library and lived a few kilometres away. I was told that he was expecting me the next day.

Fortunately, this walk was mostly downhill and I reached in good time. I had taken a bunch of offerings for the Geshe as is the custom, including a kata scarf. I had been told that he spoke nothing but Tibetan and our conversation would be interpreted by Ruth Sonam, an English lady who had been with the Geshe for decades.

I was ready. I was about to take refuge in The Three Jewels ... the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. As a lay person. I was not yet ready to wear the maroon robes of a Buddhist monk. Not yet, anyway.

After pleasantries were exchanged, the ritual began. After about half an hour of the Geshe chanting various mantras, me having to repeat many of them, he made me kneel, he clapped his hands and lo and behold, I was a Buddhist. I had a Buddhist name too ... Sonam Palden, which I was told means The Glorious One with Merit.

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I do not remember if I walked back to Tushita or skipped all the way. My heart was filled with joy, I felt the weight on my shoulder to be much reduced, there was peace and tranquility in my very being. It felt good. It felt right. It felt real. I was home.

Geshe Sonam Rinchen La was now officially my root guru. After I met with my accident, I reached out to him to tell him about it. Ruth later told me that he conducted a special prayer for me at the main temple in Mcleodganj and lit a lamp to the Buddha in my name. I was very moved.

Once I had recovered and was able, I made the trip back to Mcleodganj to meet my Geshe. The moment I walked into the room, I spontaneously burst into tears in his presence. He hugged me, held on for a while till I had calmed down. We broke bread together, bread that he had baked, and had a cup of tea.

Despite the language barrier that Ruth so beautifully helped tide us over, Geshe Sonam Rinchen La was the quintessential Buddhist monk. Loving and compassionate. It seemed we had known each other forever.

Unfortunately, he passed away a few years ago to cancer.

I have continued my Buddhist practice in my own way over the years and whenever I am feeling off colour, or the demons in the mind come visiting, or depression is knocking on the door, I chant. And peace cocoons me. The talisman that Geshe Sonam had given me at the time of my taking refuge, still sits in my wallet. He had asked me to chant the mantra to Tara, but I prefer chanting the more popular Om Mani Padme Hum.

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If there is one thing I would give up anything for, is an opportunity to sit at the feet of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso. There is something about him that draws people from all over the world. I have seen him from pretty close quarters a couple of times (about a hundred feet away!) when I happened to be in the same city as he was. There have been times I have missed seeing him because the dates did not quite converge. I have seen him on television, I have seen him on the internet. I have heard him speak and I have seen people burst into spontaneous tears at his mere presence. As I sometimes have when gazing at his serene and smiling face, at times when I sought his guidance and blessings to tide me over some issues that I was dealing with. He is an imposing person and I would give anything to be in the same room with him as his humble servant. I guess there are a few million people around the world with a similar wish! If and when I do decide to become a Buddhist monk, I would like him to ordain me. To me, that will be the same as attaining nirvana.

I did find Buddhism, or rather Buddhism found me. It is said that when the student is ready, the teacher appears. I had found my teacher in Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. I am yet to get through kindergarten, but the process has started and maybe in a few more lifetimes I would have passed high school!

I was not always like this though. I am an incorrigible atheist. Always was. Remember my story from Narendrapur? Detest may be too harsh a word, but not too far from the truth when I talk

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of organised religion. I do not have any problem with spirituality though, my problem is with rituals. I have mentioned this before. Spirituality is a conversation with God while religion is crowd control. It is when we get stuck in a ritual that we forget our purpose of prayer. Buddhism is very different. It does not believe in the Creator God, for instance, and that is what I think which drew me to it, like a moth to a flame. It is largely about karma, of taking responsibility for our own thoughts, deeds and actions.

Look at history. All religions preach peace, yet more killings have been carried out in the name of religion than all the territorial wars combined. And pretty much every religion is guilty of this. Except possibly Hinduism which has always been inclusive and forgiving. There is no ritual through which someone can convert to Hinduism. You can live your life as a Hindu if you wish to though. Hinduism is quite different from the interpretations put forth by some of its proponents.

There was a famous Hindi film that was released when I was a young man. Two sons and their widowed mother were living a life in poverty, trying desperately to make ends meet. The elder brother sacrifices his education to ensure that his younger sibling gets one. The mother conscientiously visits a temple every morning from where the two brothers go their separate ways. The mother always offers *prasad* to both children. The younger child accepts it gladly, while the elder one who is an atheist and resists. The younger brother tells his older sibling, "What's the problem? Mother is offering you *prasad*. You accept it as a sweet.

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Problem solved.” That works for me.

I participate in all the many rituals my mother regularly performs at home. But, I do not like to visit temples. Sometimes the family goes out for a drive and we end up visiting St Paul’s Cathedral, the Hanuman Mandir and the Bangla Sahib Gurudwara, one after the other. All three places are very close to each other. Had there been a mosque nearby, I suspect we would visit that too. There are two places of worship that call me often. One is the *dargah* of Salim Chisti in Fatehpur Sikri near Agra, and the second is the shrine of the sufi saint Moinuddin Chisti at Ajmer Sharif. I end up having very moving experiences every time I visit these two places of worship. Though I have never tied the customary red thread to ask for favours of the saints. I do not believe God can be bribed. Which is what these rituals really are. One is supposed to make a wish, tie a thread and then come back to untie the thread once the wish has been fulfilled. That does not work for me.

The crowds at places of worship grows during specific times and for specific reasons. A child’s impending examination is one such time. The kid is carted off to the temple, wishes are made for a good result, more than the regular amount of money finds its way into the donation box, the plate with the offerings of flowers, incense, sweets, etc are larger. Sometimes promises are made of even larger donations and prayers if the examination results are better than expected.

Same when parents are trying to arrange marriage for their

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daughter. Remember, we are still a patriarchal society. The temple visit ritual is quite different for boys and girls getting into marriage. The boys' ones are far more low key and muted. It is the girl child who is supposed to be a "burden" and parents do all they can to ensure that she is married into a family where she will be loved and cherished like they love and cherish her themselves.

Almost every hospital has a chapel where the family of anyone who is ill can be found praying for a miracle. The doctor is the embodiment of God in such situations, a fact that is lost on many people. Look at the current coronavirus crisis the world is facing. Everyone knows that it is science and vaccines and other therapeutics that will help us tide over the crisis. Yet, there are many who believe that it is not science but faith that will work. It is funny, and scary, how superstition can take hold of a person, even so called educated ones.

Ever since the Buddha became my teacher I have been studying his teachings. I took refuge in the Mahayana tradition, but I find myself questioning some of their approach towards Buddhism. One particular custom I do not like at all. A monk ordained today holds precedence over a nun of many decades. And the nun needs to sit and walk behind the newly ordained monk. There is no way one can become the Dalai Lama in female form. More disturbingly, one cannot attain enlightenment in female form. Male chauvinism rules. I guess it must be similar in the other sects of Buddhism too but I have not studied this aspect as much.

I think the Hinayana form of Buddhism has retained Buddha's

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teachings in its pristine original form, relying on meditation and ultimate enlightenment, or nirvana. Not so much the Mahayana form which says that even if one attains nirvana which results in breaking the cycle of birth-death-rebirth, the enlightened person will continue to choose to be reborn till such time as all sentient beings are not enlightened. A very noble sentiment, but I doubt that was what the Buddha taught.

The Mahayana tradition considers Siddhartha Gautama to be a bodhisattva, one in a long line of Buddhas who were born before him, and are sure to come after. Each of us have the essence of a bodhisattva and can attain Buddhahood.

I would much rather keep things a lot simpler and concentrate on my individual nirvana, through meditation. In fact I had written to a monastery in Thailand wondering if I could visit them and live like a lay monk for a few months. There was a very warm welcome from them and just might make the trip some day. It is a forest monastery and all that you have to do is sit under a tree in the forest and meditate. Lovely.

I do not like being compartmentalised into any particular form. Why should we confine ourselves to a single form of worship? I like to call myself “unaffiliated” despite my leaning towards Buddhism. Buddhism talked to me when I was vulnerable. If I undertake a deeper study of some of the other forms of faith, I am sure I will find dollops of goodness in them too. I would like to find what works for me, not what any particular one tells me will work for me, in the manner that it dictates. I need my elbow

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room, to be free to practice as I see fit.

When I was born my paternal grandfather got my horoscope drawn up. I think my mother still has a copy, I'm not sure, but one thing written in that horoscope is that I will one day renounce the world and become a monk. I like the idea of becoming a monk. As long as I get to choose what it entails. Whether I walk off into the sunset, or remain at home as a monk is my choice. Should I continue to wear jeans and cargos, or don a monk's robe is my choice. Should I shave my head, or grow a beard, or give up meat and become a vegetarian, it will ultimately be my choice. I do not have any reason to "belong".

I am into adventure sports. I am happy in nature. The pattern of fabric that is most associated with becoming one with Nature is camouflage, colloquially termed camo. For the moment I look at myself as the monk in camo, though I do not have any "robes" to qualify me as such. Maybe I will design a set of robes in camo and wear them permanently. Till, then it is in my mind. But I do need some kind of garment to believe that I have made the transition from a lay person to a monk. Maybe the robe will be in camo, maybe it will be something different. The design needs to be season agnostic, I do not want to shed bucket loads of sweat in the summer and freeze in winters. Soon, very soon!

All monks need an ashram. I will require to set up one too. But given my love for nature and adventure, this will be an ashram nestled in the hills, a place where everyone is invited, and everything is free. Accommodation will be in tents, there will

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be a Free Store where barter will be the norm. People can pass on their skills to the others members of the commune. Money is not encouraged. When people come, they are expected to bring in rations. Campfire talks revolve around any and every topic that anyone wants to discuss. The ashram will grow its own vegetables, have its own dairy, a flock of free range chickens, and even a petting zoo. The meditation areas will overlook the mountains ahead and the valley below.

I wonder if this sounds too much like the 1960s. The difference will be that there will be no psychotropic drugs allowed. And the music will not be heavy metal or hard rock. I do see country music caressing the wind though.

However, even if I am a monk, I will continue to be an incorrigible atheist. At least that is what people will know me as. Not as the believer and follower of any particular faith. The only faith that really matters in humanity, and that is good enough for me. As long as I can meditate in peace, I will be at peace. Which I can do in the middle of a crowded stadium, by the way.

Chapter 11: Death with dignity

Some years ago I wrote a book of essays - *Conversations with Myself*. One of the essays in it deals with the day when I find myself suffering from a terminal illness. I have always wanted to be vertical when my final day of existence arrives, and not horizontal. I have seen enough people who have spent the last few years of their lives lying in bed, entirely dependent on others for everything - food, urination, medication, the changing of clothes. Bed sores are a distinct reality. It is really sad to look at such people, devoid of any dignity. When we look back at their younger years and compare it with their current state, there is no comparison. Hushed conversations take place in various corners of the house where the elders try to explain to the children what is going on. All in all a pretty pathetic existence. More so, when the body has given up, but the mind remains active.

That is what is happening with the current medical intervention for older people. There is enough knowledge and medication to ensure that one does not die. Throughout our lives we live a cocooned life, pumping ourselves with medications, ensuring that we do not fall sick. All our organs are tickety-boo and there is

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nothing major wrong with us. And then we get old and the muscles start to give up. We cannot do all the things that we could earlier. Even a visit to the washroom becomes a chore, till a day when it becomes virtually impossible and we find ourselves peeing in a bottle, wearing diapers, the caregivers cleaning up our mess.

It is in this context that I am penning this chapter, borrowing heavily from what I had written some years ago in the aforementioned book. This chapter is not about the past six decades, but a penning of desires for the future, when I find myself in a physically debilitating condition. I wonder if it will be considered a continuation of the failures that have occurred over the past six decades, or an acceptance of a person whose dying wishes need to be respected, even if they not in conformity of our own.

For the most part, all of us live a life full of hope. The hope of a better future. The hope of seeing children grow up. The hope of finding the right loving partner. The hope of a good job that allows us to live the life that we seek. And quite often these hopes get fulfilled. End of life ... or death ... is far away in the distant future and though we are aware of it, we tend to relegate it to distant memory, not to be discussed, not to be talked about, not to be a topic that should concern us in our daily pursuit of happiness.

But when we dig a little deeper, we find that this process of denying the existence of the possibility of death is really based on our fear of it. There is a certain infinite finality about death that is eminently scary. This fear is similar to our fear of ghosts, or haunted houses, for instance. We do not know what is on the

other side of the door, and therefore do not venture through it, frightened of the possibilities that might lie on the other side.

It is also this fear that makes many of us over-medicate ourselves. We do not like falling sick. We try and cut a future disease right at its inception so that it has absolutely no chance of rearing its ugly head at a future date. And the pharmaceutical industry in cahoots with the medical fraternity are only feeding that fear. Sure, a lot of improvements have happened over the past hundred years and more in the healthcare front. Life spans have increased, people live a longer and healthier life, the average age of geriatrics is increasing with each passing generation.

But look at how the medical organisation feeds our fear. For the first few weeks and months of a child's life, indeed up to almost two years of age, there are just so many vaccinations to prevent future disease, almost all names denoted by scary acronyms - HepB, DTaP, Hib, PCV, IPV, RV, Influenza, MMR, Varicella, HepA, etc. All to prevent the possibility of contracting diseases that can strike in the future, diseases like hepatitis, influenza, measles, mumps, rubella, diphtheria, whooping cough, tetanus, meningitis, polio, etc. Many of these diseases kill and probably a vaccine is a good idea. But increasingly there are indications that some of these may not be so good for us after all. The MMR vaccinations is being linked to increased cases of autism, for instance.

But if it increases our lifespan by a few decades, it might be a good thing, warts and all.

As we grow older and step into middle age and beyond, the

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industry snares us again with lifelong medications to control things like hypertension, high cholesterol, diabetes, etc. Again, there are increasing number of studies that are disputing the good effected by these medicines and the probability that they may not be so good for us after all. In fact, many even go on to suggest that some of these medical interventions are the biggest scams perpetrated on the human community, for the sake of profits.

I am not even going into the merits of over-medicating ourselves to prevent illness. This conversation is not about illness ... or death, though the title might certainly suggest that. My contention is that a good life is not necessarily defined by a physically healthy life. To me, a good life is defined by a mentally active life. A good life is a psychological state and should not be confused with the physical well being or otherwise of the person. When one equates a good life with a healthy life, it necessarily divides our years into two distinct phases - the one when we are physically healthy and the other when we are not. And majority wisdom states that when we lose the ability to be physically healthy, we lose the opportunity at a good life. Hogwash.

This conundrum becomes much more pronounced in case a person is suffering from a terminal illness. Take cancer, for instance. Or a kidney failure. Or AIDS. In terminal cases, often the doctors (and the patients) realise that time is short, the end of life is near. Chances of recovery are either very low or negligible. It is at this stage of a person's life, dignity *has* to take centre stage. It is the quality of life that should become much more important

than the remaining length of it.

But doctors cannot give up, are trained not to give up, there is always something that they can do to treat the disease, conventional or experimental. They continue to try and extend the end of life, regardless of the consequences to the quality of life. There is a common saying, "Operation was successful, but the patient died." It is not about the quality of the surgery that is important, but the quality of life and should take precedence.

An uncle of mine died recently, at a ripe old age, when he was in his nineties. His descent into illness was quite rapid and thankfully he did not suffer in the last week or so he was in hospital. Almost till the last hour he was conscious and coherent. Well into his nineties, he used to have his nightly quota of a couple of drinks and was a constant smoker. Smoking was impossible in hospital, yet about the only conversation he had with his relatives or the nursing staff was to be given the opportunity to have one smoke. He died with that one wish in his heart and lips, a last wish that was not fulfilled.

I am sure that the doctors knew he was sinking. The family was hoping against hope that he would recover and come back home, but I suspect they too realised that it was a losing battle he was fighting. If I were him, my only regret in those last few conscious hours would be at not being able to take that last puff of that last cigarette.

Doctors, of course, will not allow that. And neither will well-meaning members of the family. This denial of the wishes of the

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dying is what I am questioning.

Through this conversation I wish to put on record my wishes if and when I end with some kind of terminal illness.

- I categorically state that I do not want my end of life to be extended through medical intervention.
- When diagnosed with a terminal illness, I should only be provided palliative care and treatment, if that.
- In case of stuff like cancer, I do not wish to be administered chemotherapy or radiotherapy or anything else with the intent of 'curing' the disease.
- When friends come over, if I am able, I should be able to share a cool one with them.
- Medical intervention should only be to alleviate the immediate suffering, pain, incontinence, fever, etc.
- They should try and ensure that my mental faculties are not disturbed due to medications.
- I do not care if the dosage of morphine is ten times the recommended dosage, as long as it puts me in a painless state.
- If I want to take a walk in those last days and hours, I should be allowed to do so.
- I should be free to have a smoke if I so desire ... it is not going to kill me any faster!
- If possible, my last memory should be of the mountains that I love so much.

I want my last days to be as lucid as possible, maybe

medications can help in that. I do not want a muddled mind thanks to all the medications that would otherwise have been administered to rid any terminal illness. I have had a good life, a happy life, a largely productive life, and I need to be conscious with these memories as I embark on the final journey.

Particularly in terminal cases, often an effort at medical intervention is to delay death as much as possible, while everyone realises that it is inevitable. And due to the kind of interventions required in such cases, a lot of money is spent in the process. This is not required in my case.

I ardently request all my possible caregivers, to please keep these wishes of mine in mind, if and when such a day arises. Kindly do not deny me a death with dignity.

I understand and realise that it will be extremely difficult for caregivers to accede to my wishes when doctors tell them about possible interventions. Given my physical and mental condition at the time, I doubt if I will be able to raise any serious objections or put forth my points of view. Am I layering a guilt trip on people who love me and want to provide some kind of relief in the hope that the problem tides over? Maybe I am. But I believe that while I am still in my senses ... now ... I am relieving them of any such remorse. Let us all sit around my bed and talk of the good old days. It is irrelevant whether I can respond coherently or not, but death is a celebration of a life lived, not a moment of sorrow because of an impending cessation of life.

Let us see if my wishes are paid heed to or not.

Chapter 12: The final epitaph

A few months ago we celebrated Dussehra at home. A few friends and relations came over and we spent some quality time together. Once the worship was over, it was time for some festivities and celebrations. Generally to have a good time. We were about twenty of us, all family. There were attempts made at different kinds of participatory games, some successful, other not so much.

Then one of my brothers-in-law started another game. He would select two people from among the crowd and one would have to sing a song that encapsulated the personality of the other person. Then the roles would be reversed. This turned out to be quite a good game and everyone was enjoying.

I am not known to be very vocal in gatherings and was quietly sitting in one corner watching the revelry. My brother-in-law noticed this and called out my name. He did not choose to pair me with anyone and left it open for anyone to volunteer a song that fit my personality. The room fell silent for a minute or so. No one quite knew which song to choose, since I suspect all of them believed that whatever song was chosen would not be congratulatory in nature towards me.

After a pregnant silence, Piya got up and volunteered. She screamed out the lyrics from the song *Meri Marzi* from the 1995 Govinda starrer *Gambler*. Literally translated it means, “It’s my choice/wish”. It is quite a long song, and quite difficult to translate due to the nuances the vernacular elicits so beautifully. But the essence of the lyrics is the complete indifference to anyone else, relying completely on one’s own personal wish, choice and desires. Whether the choice is right or wrong is immaterial. My life, my rules. That is the essence.

The moment people heard the song, everyone burst out laughing knowing how appropriate it was in my situation. I was the person who more often than not cocked a snook at what the rest of society called “normal”. I was one who never really bothered about what people thought, or their reactions to my choices and actions. I live my life. I do not interfere in other people’s lives telling them how they should lead theirs. I expect the same courtesy.

There is a phrase I often use. “What goes of my father?” If someone likes me or dislikes me, it should not colour the way I lead my life. Often we are way too concerned about public backlash. At the very least we do not want people pointing fingers at us. We intrinsically like to be liked, loved, to be someone who conforms, does not rock the boat. That has never been who and what I am. I have lived my life by my rules. It has always been my choice and I accept responsibility for all my actions, choices and decisions. I have no one to either thank or to blame for the way I led my life or how it turned out. Sure, it has affected a lot

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of people, my parents, my wife and my children, the people most closely involved in my life. They have been a pillar of strength to me, particularly so in times when things went sour. And they continue to be so. Fortunately for my father, he passed away just before things took a turn for the worse and I am glad that he did not get to face the worst of times that the rest of the family ended up facing.

I have lived a full life. I have always maintained that we have one life to live and we need to make the most of it. We only die once, yet we forget to live the million moments prior to that ultimate moment of truth. We are constantly trying to delay death and in the process we forget to live.

Sure it affects people around me who cannot quite understand my way of thinking. "Why can't you live a normal life like every one else?" I am often asked. Well, what is normal? What is normal to me is abnormal to others. And vice versa. Others have no right to ask me to live a life of their choice, if they are unwilling to experience the life I lead due to my choice. Live in the jungle with me, sleep under the stars, swim in the river, cook a meal on the campfire. Enjoy the wonders of a star spangled sky. Watch the moon as it courses its way slowly across the night sky. Listen to the crickets as you doze off to sleep. Live my life. Only then do you get the right to comment on mine and only after that will I agree to experience the one you are living and want me to pursue.

Life is not about trying to change the other person, it is about accepting the other person and his beliefs, even if it does not

coincide with our own.

I have a life to live and I choose to live it within (and sometimes outside) the boundaries I set for myself, with the consequences that come with it. If things do not work out the way they are supposed to, I do not turn around and look for scapegoats to blame. I take full responsibility for all my choices. I wish others did so too.

Everyone knows this side of mine. Most do not quite agree with it, but they know. They are concerned, and they have every right to be. The problem with people is that they cannot understand why a life outside the norm can be so enticing. We go to school and read about people who have changed our lives. Revolutionaries and freedom fighters. We salute them and tell our children stories about their bravery and sacrifices. But hand on heart, how many of us would like a Bhagat Singh to be born in our house. As long as he is born to the neighbours, we will find something to be proud of. But God forbid our child should want to walk in his footsteps.

I am reminded of a joke that did the rounds of social media some time ago. It was about Columbus and whether he would have discovered America if he had a Bengali wife. I am translating the possible conversation he had with his wife, with his wife doing most of the talking.

“Where are you going? With whom are you going? How are you going? What are you searching for? When will you be back? How much time will it take? Can’t you find it here? What will happen if you don’t look for it? Why does it always have to be you? Isn’t

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there anyone else? What will I do all alone here? You will be with friends, correct? You will drink every day, isn't it?"

Frustrated Columbus exclaims, "Forget it, I'm not going anywhere."

No, we do not want adventurers and seafarers and revolutionaries and activists in our own family. God forbid if such sentiments arise in our children, we try and squash them with all the resources that we can muster. In some cases it does not even have to go so far. A girl child wanting to study or to be employed, someone wanting to marry outside the "*biradari*". The husband wanting to stay at his in-laws. There are distinct "laws" that have been laid down, and they must be followed. If not, all hell breaks lose. In some communities in India, the feeling of dishonour results in the father and/or brother killing the daughter. How cruel can people get?

This is quite sad and does not allow many a talent from flourishing. Sure, life can be and will be tough when you walk off the beaten path. But you cannot plant your own footsteps on the sands of time by walking on someone else's footsteps. You have to step into the unknown if you have any intention of making a name for yourself. Sadly, many endeavours will end up in failure, without reaching their logical conclusion, or what was being sought. Failure comes with the territory, all we can do is to get on our feet, dust ourselves off and start the journey all over again. There is no guarantee of success, there are more chances of failure, but when you look back at your life on your

The final epitaph

dying day, there will be a smile in your face, a twinkle in your eye, a throbbing in your heart that others will not understand. You will revel in your past, contended that it was one that was worth living.

I remember Hunter S Thompson's famous quote. "Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming "Wow! What a ride!""

For me, it has been one hell of a ride so far. And it is this quote that I would like on my headstone. A final epitaph. Which summarises the life I have lived.

Epilogue

So that was a brief recap about the six decades of my life. But that is the past. It is water under the bridge. All we can do is to look back and reminisce, look back and learn. We need to make a conscious effort to correct what we believe are our mistakes, and strengthen what made us stronger. The past is a cancelled cheque, while the future is a promissory note. It is the here and now, the present, that is cash in hand. We need to live every moment in the present, consciously.

People of my vintage often say that all we have are memories since the future is short and uncertain. We are well past the use-by date and creating new memories is a fool's errand. I disagree vehemently. The past might be in our heads, but the future is in our hands. And nothing stops us from creating new memories. It might be a cliché, but age really is just a number. If we look at people from around the world, there are many examples of people who otherwise would be considered prime candidates for admission into assisted care facilities, having performed wonders. They have rowed across oceans, they have climbed mountains, they have walked across deserts. Ray Croc started McDonald's when he was 52 years old. Richard Branson, now 71, continues to enjoy extreme sports.

Despite losing his sight in his early twenties, Miles Hilton-Barber quality of life and level of success was radically transformed at the age of 50, not through sight restoration, but through changing his attitude to his blindness. Ever since he turned 50, Miles set numerous world records undertaking extreme endurance events across all seven continents, in the fields of mountaineering, desert and polar ultra-marathons, power-boat racing, scuba-diving, motor-racing, and long distance, aerobic and supersonic flying. As he repeats in his speeches, “I am blind as a bat, but I am a happy bat.”

Sure, the number of such people are low, since most people succumb to the pressures of their own minds and to the advice of their loved ones, and put their feet up, even when they have years of an active life left in them.

If one were to climb Mt Everest, it would not be advisable to ask for advice from someone who has not climbed Mt Everest. As of February 2021, only 5,788 different people have reached the summit of Mt Everest. Including the blind, and double amputees. None of *these* people will tell you not to make the attempt, and will go out of their way to provide valuable advice. The rest of the seven billion people on this planet will tell you about all the things that can go wrong, hypoxia, hypothermia, frostbite, death! Who would you rather listen to? Depends on how your own head is screwed on, isn't it?

An even lesser number have sailed around the world or rowed across the Atlantic. Aleksander Doba was a Polish kayaker known

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primarily for his long voyages crossing oceans. In 2010 and again in 2013 he kayaked across the Atlantic Ocean westward under his own power. The two voyages were the longest open-water kayak voyages ever made. He was named 2015 Adventurer of the Year by National Geographic. In 2017 he completed an eastward kayaking trip across the Atlantic when he was 71 years old. He died while climbing Kilimanjaro, aged 74. If you wanted to make an ocean crossing in a kayak, it would be advisable to ask someone like Aleksander Doba for guidance. With everyone else, you will only beat your head against a brick wall trying to explain to them the joys and the glories of completing, even attempting, such an adventure, while listening to the many reasons detailing the futility of such endeavours. This will only lead to frustration and you will not be any closer to any useful information or guidance.

I am no one to pass judgement on how people choose to live their lives. If I want to embark on all kinds of adventures, does not mean that is the only way to go and I am not casting aspersions on those who choose to put their feet up and are happy to lead a relatively sedentary life in the company of their near and dear ones. Far from it.

My question is that many people do not choose to question. Many are walking the line, "It has always been so", "After all, I have lived my life", "Why put myself or my family through pain, anguish and anxiety", or a multitude of the other reasons ... or excuses to not cease the moment. Why does a certain specific

birthday have to be the day when you start preparing for the afterlife? By the way, in India, Government servants retire on the last day of their birth month!

And why just older people? I urge even young adults to step into the unknown, find a hobby, discover an interest, learn to play an instrument, discover the secrets of the Universe. Life should not be confined to what in Hindi is termed, *roti, kapda, makaan* (food, clothes, home). It is not all about a 9-to-5 job. Sure children are important and a lot of time and effort needs to be invested in their future. But that does not mean that we need to start sacrificing holidays, or not go to a movie, or save money by not going on a dinner date with the entire family. Children are often told by their parents, “There will be enough time to enjoy when you grow up. Study now.” And they never really grow up. They do grow old, but that, to me, is a very different existence.

How many of us gradually slip into a state of ennui, without even realising it? Regardless of how old we are. There is a whole world out there waiting to be experienced. Most do not have the luxury of quitting their jobs, to pack their bags and head off into the sunset to pursue their dreams.

But why does it have to an either/or situation. It is possible to take some me-time out of the 86,400 seconds of every day. If we are sleeping for eight hours a day that many people suggest we do, we have already slept away a third of our lives. If we take an average of a life extending 80 years, we have been sleeping for almost 27 years! If we can make do with six hours sleep instead

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of eight, we would have found AN EXTRA SEVEN YEARS to do what we want to do.

It is quite easy to find time to do the things that we want to do. What prevents us is fear, the lack of excitement, ennui as I mentioned earlier, a need to get into a pattern of life, since that is the way it should be, that is the way it always has been. No, it does not have to be this way. Make mistakes, revel in failure, learn from your actions, go forth with confidence into a world full of possibilities. Look at the horizon that encompasses an ocean of opportunities.

Remember one thing. We spend about 25 odd years of our early life in getting an education. We retire when we are in our mid-50s. If we live to be eighty, that leaves thirty years of our life, the LONGEST period of our existence!!! What do you want to do in these thirty odd years? My limited suggestion is not to waste it. And do not waste the first fifty odd years either. Life is about gathering experiences and making memories. Life is much more than sacrificing your wants, needs, dreams and desires. Unfortunately many people make peace with this and do not consider their life one of compromise or sacrifice.

I have had my share of experiences in my six decades of existence. All of them have created memories. Thanks to many of these experiences, some say I have turned a philosopher! There is something to learn from each and every experience. Nothing can be termed a failure, only actions that did not go as you planned. We need to learn from our choices and move

on confidently towards yet another unknown future, with the confidence and fearlessness to walk into uncertainty. It is only then that we will create a better life for ourselves, and maybe, just maybe become a beacon for those who hear about us.

I still have the Atlantic Ocean to cross in a boat. I have some of the world's longest rivers waiting for me to launch my watercraft and splash my paddle in them. I am still learning about wilderness survival and someday in the future I want to see myself embedded with some tribe that is still living the way their ancestors did. There is so much they can teach me.

I am a student still looking for his teacher who will explain to me the mysteries of the Universe. I am ready, I am just waiting for the teacher to appear. And hopefully one day, when I have spent some time with the teacher, and I really become ready, the teacher will disappear.

As I speed towards the departure lounge of life, I find myself with a to-do that is longer than my arm. There are so many things I still want to do, to accomplish, to experience. I do not know how many more years I have, and how many of them will find me with the physical strength to do what I want to. I am sure I will maintain my mental strength for some more time to come. On that final day, I want to have my boots on, a rucksack on my back, looking out at the mountains that I love so much, tasting the salt as the sweat courses down my cheeks. Maybe I will finally wear my robes and head off with a begging bowl and live the rest of my life as a travelling mendicant, the monk in camo.

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Have you prepared your bucket list of life yet? What are the 25 things you want to accomplish before you die? Think about it. Jot them down. Maybe even modify them as time goes on. Remove some, replace them with others. What is important is to have that list. Keep looking at it and you will always have a purpose in life. A purpose beyond what you are expected to do as far as home and family and children and job are concerned.

I hope you have liked going through these pages. Though this has been a story of my life, I hope I have been able to provide some nuggets of information, some topics of conversation that can start around dinner tables on whether what I have stated makes sense or not. It is not about right and wrong, but about each person finding a reason to live their lives in the manner they choose. I have only provided examples from my own life. It is anecdotal evidence with a sample size of ONE. It does not purport to be a self-help book telling people how to live their lives. I have stumbled enough times to realise that I am no one to sermonise. I just urge you to open your minds to possibilities. Success or failure be damned.

I'll see you when I'll see you.





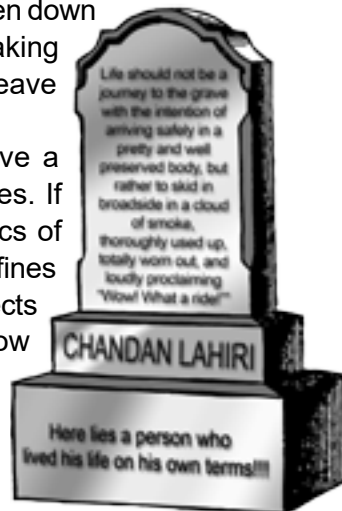
This is the story of my life. I am no celebrity, even though a lot of people are to their kith and kin (Am I? I wonder). I am not someone who people will or should look up to or maybe even emulate.

This book is about looking back at my life, remembering the choices I have made, and their ramifications. Have these years been full of failures, or have they been foundations on which the pillar of success was or could have been built. Was the pillar finally built?

Is this book an autobiography? Is it just a rambling of a person who is remembering the milestone moments of his life? Is it a series of confessions? Is it a way to pen down my life's journey in anticipation of taking that final flight to the other world? I leave it to you to decide.

All I can hope for is that you have a good time going through these pages. If I can manage to provide some topics of conversations, going beyond the confines of just my own life, about various aspects that one might be confronted with, how to conduct oneself, it would all have been worth it.

Give me your feedback. Drop me a line at chandan.lahiri@gmail.com.



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