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SUBROTO BAGCHI

Chairman
Odisha Skill Development Authority

Father Antony Uvari, Teachers, Staff, and my dear Graduating Students

My congratulations to you for a job well done, particularly in a time of great uncertainty and difficulty for everyone in the world. Each one of us, whether or not infected by the Coronavirus, have been directly impacted by it. The pandemic has shaken institutions and individuals in ways that none of us knew before. Since COVID-19 continues to dominate popular discourse, I am going to stay with it to draw a set of lessons that the pandemic has taught me, in a deeply personal way, about life and living.

I think the central message of the pandemic is this: we must always be prepared to deal with the Black Swan moment. Amongst trumpet swans, a black swan is a rarity, an exception. Economists use that metaphor to describe exceptional discontinuity caused by a sudden, unanticipated event. For most of us, for nearly a century, life has had a stable flow with only the occasional upheaval. One comforting aspect of these occasional upheavals was that they were usually geographically contained—whether it was Ebola in Guinea, the refugee crisis in Myanmar, the nuclear spill in Japan or forest fires in Australia.

The other comforting aspect of most such events was that they had a limited, predictable life span. You could tell by when we would be done with it with some level of confidence. COVID-19 changed all that. It has been a year and half since the initial outbreak in Wuhan and we still do not know how much longer this will last.

Crisis and the Human Brain

The human being is neurologically designed to deal with crisis. We have a sense and response system; it works with the chemical balance of the body to protect us in the face of crisis through the “fight or flight” code which is hardwired in the amygdala of the brain that we all are factory-fitted with in our mother’s womb. Effectively, when the so-called Black Swan moment arrives and a crisis is triggered, the body takes charge. We, as in the conscious mind, do not even know what is happening. An emergency is declared, and we act without fully processing all information. As soon as the crisis is averted, control is returned to the conscious brain, hormones ebb, taut muscles relax, and breathing becomes even. The spike settles down and we enter a long period of stability.

But what if the so-called Black Swan is not an exception? What if it is always around? What if the Black Swan does not disappear as soon as it has shown up? What if along the path of its disappearance you find the arrival route of its twin?

In the aftermath of 9/11, I read a very powerful message somewhere. It said, “We live in times when there is a high probability that a low-probability thing will happen.” COVID-19 is the brand ambassador of that statement.

The low probability of a pandemic is not just about its lethality or global spread, it is about the indeterminate span of time the crisis is going to be around.

As humans, we are designed to deal with moments of crisis. But we are not designed for prolonged periods of crisis. In prolonged periods of crisis, the body does not take complete charge. It falters. Hence, the mind must take complete charge. Today, I want to discuss a few “mind things” with you.



Gratitude as a practice

First and foremost, we must learn not to take anything for granted.

For my entire life, I had believed that if I had the money and the fitness of my body, I could travel to almost anywhere in the world. Whenever I wished. Have money, will travel. Or for that matter, have money, will *anything*. I had always thought that money got you to the movies, to the mall, to the gym, to the restaurant of your choice. During the last year and a half, we have all realised that money is not the only currency in life.

You may have money in the bank, but it may not buy you anything. Worse, the ventilator in an ICU does not actually care how much money you have in the bank.

There are many things beyond money that determine our everyday freedom and we usually take them for granted. The difficulty in taking things for granted is this: when you no longer have them, you experience total helplessness. You feel deeply frustrated. Your ability to deal with the new reality is hampered because your mind is a spoiled child.

Talking about taking things for granted, my mind goes back to the initial months of the lockdown. As some of you may know, I was the chief spokesperson of the Government at that time and my prime responsibility was to address the citizens of the State through television channels every day. In preparation for this I had to go in and out of the house at least half a dozen times daily. It was a very hot summer and thanks to the lockdown, there was hardly ever a soul in sight. While driving through the empty roads, everyday I would spot a barely-clad man, struggling to pull his cycle-trolley laden with vegetables that he was hauling from the wholesale markets to wherever his locality was. During the lockdown, the main vegetable market was closed to consumers. They could only buy things from the shops in their own vicinity and that too during fixed time windows.

It is people like him who hauled the vegetables from the wholesale market to the neighbourhood sellers. While people stayed homebound for months, this man was slogging every day in the scorching sun of summer to pick up the food people would eat in the comfort of their homes.

Then I would see the sanitation workers of the Municipality. They were out there, braving the virus, sifting through the City's garbage, because garbage knows no lockdown. Wherever there are people, they generate garbage. People can stay home but not with their garbage. Someone must then clear it for them, keep it moving. The sanitation workers had to be there, virus or not.

Then one day, I was returning from a briefing, while the sun outside my air-conditioned car was merciless. Ahead of me, I saw a gas deliveryman who was dropping off gas cylinders at people's homes. What happens to him if he gets infected by them? What happens to them if he does not show up?

I stopped the car, got out, and walked over to him. I thanked him for his work. He looked at me and said, "But Sir, I am doing my duty."

And it was not just the trolley man, the sanitation worker, the gas delivery person. The loader, the truck driver, the ambulance crew, the nurses, doctors, paramedics, the call centre personnel, the police, the folks at the Municipality. They were all out there while we were in the safety of our homes and probably discontented about our petty inconveniences.



But we must realise that it was not just during the lockdown that these workers mattered. Our essential workers form the lifeline, not just the supply chain, that allows us to get up from our bed and live our lives every day. These are the folks who put water in the tap, make breakfast appear on the table, run the commuter systems, and keep the city's hundreds of other amenities working for us to lead our "normal" lives of work, recreation, education, health, and everything else.

But they remain invisible to us.

We must feel deeply grateful to these people who helped us to survive the pandemic over and above making sure that we are buoyed up in the normal times.

According to Dr Robert Emmons, professor of psychology at UC Davis, the feeling of gratitude involves two stages:

First comes the acknowledgment of goodness in one's life. In a state of gratitude, we say yes to life. We affirm that all in all, life is good and has elements that make it worth living. The acknowledgment that we have received something gratifies us, both by its presence and by the effort the giver put in choosing it. Second, gratitude is recognising that some of the source of this goodness lies outside the self.

One can be grateful to other people, to animals, and to the world, but not to oneself. At this stage, we recognize the goodness in our lives and who to thank for it, that is, who made sacrifices so that we could be happy? Gratitude can be both a trait (disposition) and a state (of being).

If we practice gratitude in daily life it can become a character trait and a personal strength. Philosophers like Cicero and Seneca held gratitude as a foundational virtue for any civilisation.

The Trap and Folly of Entitlement

One opposite of being grateful is taking things for granted. Sometimes we take things for granted to such a degree that we believe the world *owes* us those things. Or we are lucky enough to have certain privileges, and we make the mistake of thinking that we are owed these privileges. This is entitlement. Now let me talk to you about the nature of entitlement and what it does to us.

During the Pandemic, many people reached out to me for things that concerned them or affected them. The list ranged from getting a night curfew pass to a private room in a hospital to moving across state borders or getting supplies under shutdown.

One day, an individual who had just retired from a senior position called me. He was angry and frustrated because he was not getting special treatment in a COVID-19 facility where his elderly father had been admitted. In normal times, he could be in and out of the place, he could get hourly updates, he could ask the hospital for this thing and that. He could pull rank.

But now, all he knew was that his father was in there, along with hundreds of others. The hospital, running tight on staff, resources and supplies, had to deal with each patient's needs based on a system of triage. The doctors and nurses were risking their own lives, day in and day out, working in sweltering heat of uncomfortable PPE they had never donned before, not having basic conveniences themselves, working 18 hours a day, not able to go home because they had to be in quarantine. And, in the middle of all that, here was the gentleman who wanted special attention for his father. It was not happening. It was not possible. He ranted and fumed and told me he would take the system to task. He said he would sue everyone.





I sympathized with his sense of helplessness but not his anger. I reasoned with him as much as I could.

The next day, his father died.

The man was disconsolate. He was devastated. Then another reality hit him. Very hard. Because his father had died COVID-19 positive, he could not get the body back. The system would now take the body, wrapped and chemically contained, to the crematorium where relatives, in small numbers, could come but would have to stay at a distance and pay their last respects.

Now, the devastated gentleman had one last request for me. Could I possibly speak to someone, use my influence, to have the hearse stop at his house on the way to the crematorium, just for a few minutes please?

Of course I could not do that: it was unsafe and unreasonable. He was asking the system to make an exception for him that would violate published, public health protocol in the middle of a raging pandemic. This man was so caught up in his grief and in his belief of what the world owed him, that he was not considering how his demands would put everyone around him at risk.

In times of great crisis, we experience entitlement breakdown.

When entitlements are lost, it creates massive internal collapse.

Yet, it is so easy to get entitled. From one entitlement to another, soon it becomes an alternate reality until we wake up to the finality of loss.

Every day, we must receive everything with gratitude, we must count our blessings, we must be grateful so that we do not land on hard ground when our privileges vanish.

Every privilege is ephemeral; we cannot use it as a platform for life.

Living Well With Less

Acknowledging our privileges and practicing gratitude for what we have helps us to live with less in times of distress.

The pandemic was a huge lesson for us on the idea of less. We ate less, we travelled less, we dressed up far less, we spent less, we did less of everything, more than ever before. The hairdresser was closed, so we grew our hair long or cut it by ourselves. The restaurants were closed, so we ordered takeout or cooked. We could not travel and so we stayed at home for weeks and months. In the end, we are all quite fine where we stand today.

We have not become less in the process. Living with less, and doing less, was not as painful as it seemed in the beginning.

Less need not always be painful, restricting. It can be liberating if we get the mindset right. Every culture teaches that you are born with nothing and you take nothing with you when you die. But we have grown to seek comfort in more, we have learnt that there is joy in acquisition.

Humankind has never had it so good in its entire history. The affordability for anyone who is middle-class and above has shot up in the last three decades. We have more than we need. And our wants are running ahead of our needs. Consumption has driven the idea of happiness.



We speak about responsible consumer behavior. About the connection between what we wear and what we eat and what we do to the problem of global warming, and carbon footprint. At the core is the need to exercise restraint. It is all about my ability to ask myself, how much is enough? But perhaps more importantly, how much less could I do with?

There is always more to give up than we think it possible. COVID-19 will eventually go away; we will survive it. But unless we take personal responsibility to exercise restraint in the way we consume earth resources, we will not survive the rising ocean levels, not the depleting ozone layer, not the unusual shift of seasons, not the collapse of the beehives.

Making do with less during the lockdown has been made possible because of two things: first, that we were flexible to adapt and second, that we embraced new ways to live, learn and work.

In the beginning, I told you about how the Black Swan is here to stay, how it will bring its twin along, how there is high probability that a low probability thing may happen. That is the flipside of globalisation.

If you and I were living in dispersed, unconnected villages, we would not feel the tremor when the earth shifts a continent afar. But we live in a borderless, porous world where people and goods and services can move effortlessly. Now there is no going back. Countries will remain connected, urbanisation is here to stay, which means that uncertainty anywhere can rapidly snowball into uncertainty everywhere.

We are no longer insular. Take the certainty of uncertainty as a given. Your ability to survive will depend on how adaptable you are.

The pandemic made us look at technology in a whole new perspective. It brought the classroom home and in an even bigger way, it has brought work home which was the ultimate prophecy and desire of thinkers and futurologists like Marshall McLuhan, Peter Drucker, Alvin Toffler, and John Naisbitt. These were the people who shaped a lot of thinking in the second part of the last century. Until recently, the concept that you could work from anywhere remained a fringe idea. That has permanently changed. This will hugely impact many things like urban sprawl and the nature of commute. But it will also ask us to learn afresh the idea of collaboration and the importance of assuming personal responsibility for our deliverables when we work in a virtually connected, contactless world.

Prioritizing Your True Loves

When the pandemic hit us, the infection rate, the numbers of hospitalisation and the death count started their infernal, exponential growth. The graphs mimicked the strike posture of a cobra. All of us were told to shut our doors and stay home. We were not used to it. Yet we learnt to live. What started as an ordeal, became a routine, and could even be a way of life. Despite the intrusion of social media and our binge watching of OTT serials, we started realising that we have more time on hand than we ever did.



When our former life's many activities were stripped away for such a long time, it helped most people to contemplate a fundamental question: what is truly important to me?

Many friends or a few good friends?

Hanging out or hanging in?

Eat all you can in a restaurant or make a salad all by myself?

Listening to music with my headphones always on or playing a song for my grandparents?

Running out the door every morning with a mindlessly packed brown bag, or sitting around the table and taking a little time to discuss the taste of the food with the family?

Many people I know used the pandemic's clampdown as a time for uncluttering their minds in which every need, every desire, every want, used to clamour, feed me, feed me, feed me.

In the silence of the mind, imposed by the restraint on our mobility, people began to ask, what is truly important to me?

Which joys are truly joyful?

Which priority is a true priority?

What is noise, what is signal?

Which love is my true love?

These existential questions helped us to cut through the non-essentials and made many of us to take major professional and personal decisions.

Even as we move on and reclaim some of the lost ground, we must not lose the ability to unclutter, the ability to have clarity on what is the True North in our lives?

That clarity emerges only if we underscore the fact that this life is a limited journey.

It can end.

It can end abruptly.

I do not have unlimited time and ability to honour the truly important things in my life. I must single them out, hold them higher than the mass of thoughts, emotions, desires, and distractions that have so far drowned them mercilessly.

Love does not like getting crowded. It wants to be held high, to be honoured, spoken to, felt, to be nurtured, it wants us to come closer still and it wants to stay close. In a world that is so fleeting, so fragile, so temporal, we must have urgency about and commitment to things we truly love, things that truly matter.

Brain Cells as a Microcosm of Humankind

Many years ago, I came across an extremely bright lady named Tara Thiagarajan. While earning her PhD in neuroscience at Stanford, she performed a ground-breaking experiment with brain cells taken from rodents—human brain cells operate pretty much the same way as rodent brain cells.

Brain cells have tentacles and between the tentacles of one cell, and that of another is a tiny empty space called the synaptic space. Every single thought we generate in the brain is nothing but an electric charge in one cell that is transmitted to another cell via the synaptic space. The billions of brain cells are constantly humming with the activity of giving and receiving signals to and from each other. That communal activity leads to everything we do internally within the body and externally with the world around us. Each brain cell is an independent entity yet, together, they form an amazingly interconnected, massively complex network of networks.

As her experiment, Tara took each brain cell and cut off its tentacles until it was reduced to just the core. Then she went away for a few weeks, leaving them in a petri dish in the lab. When she returned, she was amazed. The brain cells had regrown their tentacles and were humming with activity, communicating with each other with gusto.

And what are we, but systems operated by clusters of brain cells? We are designed to co-exist, we are designed to give and take, we are designed to constantly communicate with each other.

The external world we create is a mirror of what we are within our bodies. Tara went on to use her experiment to explain many new concepts in economic theory, urban design and micro-entrepreneurship. Every day of the lockdown, I remembered Tara and her petri dish experiment. The pandemic is the single most significant phenomenon in the last one hundred years that underscores the importance of our interconnectedness, our interdependency. It is not an optional thing. It is us. We are designed and, built this way.

Keeping Perspective on Your Pain

The pandemic has caused each one of us some pain. The degree may differ, but everyone has experienced pain. No one I know had an easy time.

Many of us have been deeply scarred, particularly those who lost their loved ones. Those who lost their jobs. Those millions who became refugees in their own land. It will take a long time for many individuals to come to terms with the pain, the suffering, the residual sense of isolation and anxiety they have gone through and what they continue to deal with. In that context, I want to recall a deeply personal moment of truth I had as a young parent many years ago. I have written about it in my book Go Kiss the World, but I want to narrate it one more time.

It was 1982. Our daughter Neha, just a few months old, had a bout of bronchiolitis and she had to be rushed to the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences in Delhi. Her tiny body was struggling to breathe. The doctors gave her medicines and put her in an oxygen tent. As she finally began to breathe normally again, her tiny lungs no longer in distress, she fell asleep. All I could do was to sit there and keep watching. But I was distraught. I wanted to breathe for her, something you can never do for someone else. In my helplessness, I felt all the doctors and all the nurses should be



hovering over my little child. After a few hours passed, I realised that in the very same room, there was another child who was on dialysis. In my heightened anxiety, I had not even noticed him. There was no one keeping a vigil. Later, I asked the duty nurse about the boy. She told me that he would never recover and that all the hospital could do was to keep him on dialysis.

What about his parents, I asked the nurse?

She replied, "Well, in the beginning they used to sit here but then they are daily wage earners and each day that they come and sit here is a day without income for them. Now they come only occasionally."

I was stunned at my self-centredness, my heightened, excessive anxiety for my own child. She was okay, she would be okay, everything possible was being done, yet I was anxious and here was a child who would never be okay, and his parents had to decide between lost wages and a lost child!

It is then that I realised that our ability to deal with pain is directly proportional to our ability to see pain elsewhere.

As the lockdown happened and even as I was worrying for my own loss of entitlement, my freedom, there was always a roof over my head. My water supply was ample. Electricity was consistent. Sanitation worked. Groceries and medicine were home-delivered. The phone and the internet worked.

In all this, my lot was far better than that of the millions who were displaced, without food and shelter, walking across the country. Some were so exhausted that they fell asleep on railway tracks and got run over by trains.

My state and my so-called sacrifices were light years away from that of a frail young village girl named Jyoti Kumari who had decided to evacuate her ailing father, a migrant worker, on a bicycle from Gurugram in Haryana all the way to Darbhanga in Bihar, sometimes pedalling, sometimes hitchhiking over 1200 kilometres! In my state of Odisha alone, a million workers returned to their villages in Shramik Express trains, in overcrowded buses, tractor trailers, and unsafe dinghy boats over the seas, sometimes walking or cycling for days and weeks at a stretch. India has 45 million migrant workers who were in a state of distress, reminiscent of the refugee crisis of 1947 and the scenes of famine depicted in Satyajit Ray's movie Ashani Sanket.

At every point of personal inconvenience or difficulty we may have to deal with in life, we need to look at the millions of fellow humans in distress, not just in India but the world over. We must remember that while our inconveniences may even be overwhelming at times, there are people out there who have to choose between risking infection to earn a day's wage, or starving—death on either side. This is not to say that our personal pain does not matter. It does. But while we acknowledge our own pain, we must look beyond ourselves and acknowledge each other's pain. We must recognize our privileges. We must never fall into the trap of feeling entitled to those privileges.

My dear friends, today is a very special day in your life. From here, many of you would go on to pursue a few more years of education, some may opt to take up a job right away or perhaps start a business. This means, you are now on your definitive leg towards the world of work. As people leave college, they get focused on getting a job. Soon, they get the job. Some like what they get, some do not. Irrespective, after an initial period of euphoria and adjustments, most people begin to look at work as a source of income and external approval. Then a time comes when many begin to tire, the "Monday morning blues" begin to get real, vacations become more desirable than work. Unfortunately, quite a number of young people begin to dislike the idea of work per se. The pandemic has made us to realize that work is not just the job, nor the money, nor the external validation. Work brings organization to life. It is a source of focus and fulfilment and help us in ways that we do not readily recognize. As you move on to higher studies and eventually work, you need to always look at work beyond its narrow definition and perspective. Work, contemplated well, done well, is a big source of wellness.

As you graduate today, I bless you with all my might, I give you all the love my heart can hold, I invoke the strength of my prayers to make you feel hope, give hope, build hope for humanity.

I wish you resilience over success.

I wish you contentment over satisfaction.

I wish you empathy over ambition and, finally, the power to make sense when everything is seemingly falling apart.

Go, Kiss the World.

