



LIVE LIKE A WINNER

PHIL DASS

Foreword

The best way to live life is to take it one day at a time. Life is what happens when you are busy making other plans. Life is this and life is that... There are so many quotes on life and so many motivational books, and you are not to be blamed when you dismiss another one—like this one—with a “Oh no, not another one!”

Trust me, reading opens up the mind, and reading similar things again and again is a kind of evangelization, that will make you a more complete person. I have seen umpteen movies. Most of them are forgettable. But the most inane movie sometimes has a quote or a scene which teaches you something. From here I have learnt that you have to dig deep, dig harder, and tirelessly to find some learnings lessons. Sometimes learning lessons come easily and in an entertaining manner. Like this book. Hopefully.

Most of the things in the book are something you might already know. But when you hear it again, when you contemplate on a familiar thought, chances are that you will see a different dimension. That's all I wish you to do: Make you think. Get a growth mindset. Get a value-added persona.

What is this living wave? How do you live like a winner? Simple, as it is when explained, the ramifications are profound. Live above the living line. Assume for a moment that we can relive this life. You can, no matter how old or how young. You can change your life. In an instant. Or at the speed your thoughts are able to metamorphose into actions. So, read, contemplate, and apply.

The book is to be read and used as described in the first book, so I will not reiterate it here. It is short—to be read in one go. Or you can take your time.

Phil Dass
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Dedicated To Good Friends
Shiv Shankar Devaraj, Mohan Kumar C L
Nirmal Kumar M, Arbind Gupta, Roy Devaiah,
Manjunath Shetty, Prashant S G, Manoharan P,
Naveen Rajashekhar, Shyamsundar,
Girender Nath Singh, Kiran Budaniya,
Satish Reddy, Yoganand S, Late Gopal Krishna S,
Lawrence Ficker, Ravichandran J, Nagaraj
Hebbandi, M R Savant, Swarup S.
And all my OA - Bhadravathi, friends,
all my classmates/friends from School (St
Charles High, Bhadravati),
College (Sir M Visveshwaraiah, Bhadravati &
DVS, Shimoga)
and Manasa Gangotri, Mysuru.

Chapter One

The Living Wave

There was a din, a cacophony of noises from the neighbourhood. A new building was coming up some 700 yards away. There was a huge trench dug up for the foundation, which was already showing up. The noise was the workers busy with their hammer and tongs, working on the concrete and metal necessitated by the groundwork. From elsewhere came some music that played at some venue. There were sounds of traffic and a humdrum that persisted all through, but that slowly faded into the background. And his office, with its large open windows, allowed the din to persist. When I told him later about the noise, Svaha had laughed out aloud. "I prefer to call it the sound of life." I wondered at the thought. But I digress.

"What is the living line?" I asked Svaha, "—or is it the wave?" I was a little apprehensive that he might think I was stupid. I was. But only I knew it. So why tell the world?

He looked at me in an amused manner. Not rewarding at all. He looked away and I kept looking at him, waiting for an answer. Did he smile condescendingly at me?

He spoke, looking back at me, "It's a wave, but you can also depict it as a line from afar."

"It is an imaginary line—?" I asked him seriously. Then I immediately regretted it. It seemed like *déjà vu*, when you state the obvious, knowing fully well that the question was unwarranted.

"In reality it is abstract, in the abstract it is real." He replied, laughing out loud.

Confounding. I found the statement an oxymoron. It was that kind of a feeling that required a thesaurus or a dictionary. I looked at him inquiringly.



"Yes," he said, "it is an imaginary line or a wave. But it is as real as our feelings, or emotions. It is real, and we strive all our lives to live above it. Picture this: if everything above the line is a good feeling—happiness, etc.—then below the line would be sadness and all things negative. We are constantly trying to stay above the line. Most people live on the line, and there are many who are doomed to live below the line. Something like accounts: in black or in the red. In our case, we can use red for below and blue for the above... and the line itself can be grey or black..."

I blubbered, "I cannot follow your thought..."

"Okay," he said, "let me lay it down in a clearer way."

I waited patiently.

"You've heard of the web of lies?"

I nodded my head.

"Yes, it is easy to understand because the premise and the fact is that once you tell a lie, you have to tell more lies to hide the truth. Most of us do. Many escape unhurt or with minimal damage; many others suffer. The web turns into realistic threads or ropes of your own doing that entangle you."

I nodded my head again. It was easy to visualise it. I had been through the experience. I shuddered thinking of it.

"So, you understand that what was done to evade a situation made a difference to that part of life, but it involved you to burrow deeper into a chasm of lies?"

"Indeed, I do," I replied with confidence.

"So, is it difficult to assume there must be a wave, a line that controls our life without us being aware of it?"

"I presume it is a possibility," I replied with as much truth I could muster.

"The imaginary web is to be focused on. What if this web was stretched to form a linear line, a wave, and that is what we are forced to navigate or ride... instead of lies, we have a whole lot of other innumerable factors —"

"—Such as?" I ventured.

"—Such as our genealogy—our genetics—our childhood, education, our family and friends, our emotions, truth, and lies..."

I wondered.

"Of course, the lies entangle us, and we flow on, yet because of other threads... other waves..."



"Yet some do well..."

"Some do well despite their lies, because they are supported by other factors, other elements..."

I was sceptical. "But people already know it—"

"Yes, many know it but refuse to acknowledge it. The line is a living line. Or a wave. It is something that ties down to living as we know it. It is powerful as other elements of life."

"—All the elements are real and have a form!" I exclaimed out of exasperation.

"—This is as real as magnetism, black holes, black matter... not as real as the elements of earth—fire, air..."

I was beginning to comprehend him ever so slightly. "Ah!" was my response.

He continued, "Though it is imaginary, we have to assume it is real. Like a Lakshman Rekha. (This in reference to a line drawn by mythological Lakshman, Lord Ram's brother, forbidding Sita not to step over the line. In general, it refers to any commandment that draws a line between what you can and can't do. Rekha can be a line or a boundary.) But in this case, it does not forbid you to cross it. It, in fact, encourages you to rise above it. In fact, I have termed the line as Ram Rekha."



"Okay," I mumbled while I tried to follow his train of thought. It seemed like it was in a tunnel.

"By the way, there is a place called Ramlekhapur or something similar in the northern part of India. A lot of temples and a river... it is supposed to be the place where Lord Ram is said to have drawn a line on the ground—with his bow or an arrow—to show till where his kingdom extended."

"Interesting, there is actually a place like that?" I asked.

"Indeed." He replied. "But let us talk about this wave..."

I nodded my head.

He was into the topic. "The living wave, as I like to call it, is an omnipresent wave, and this world is filled with billions of them. Just as the planets move about due to gravitation, we too—this wave, our life—is controlled by gravitation that cannot be explained. I am not a physics guy or a scientist, but I dare say that if studies are conducted, we might be able to prove it. But I know one thing for sure—we live a linear life. We count our life in years, and we go from 0 to 100, sometimes less and sometimes more."

He stopped and looked at me questioningly. I understood him slightly—what he was trying to say, but it was confusing. I swayed my head unknowingly.

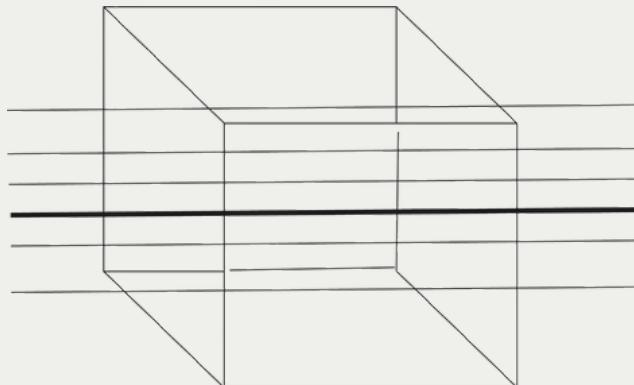


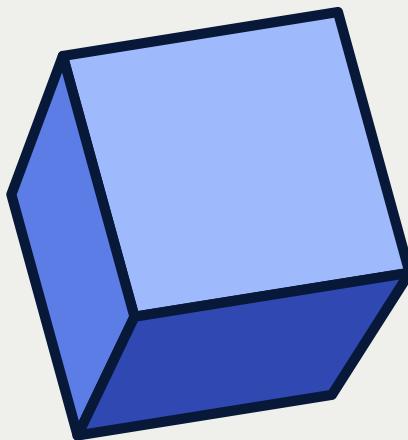
He took it as a confirmation that I was in agreement. "I mean gravitation in the spirit of its actions. Gravitation in the real world is controlled by the polar regions. On the earth itself, we are pulled to the core by about 9.8 meters per second squared. This living wave has a different gravitational force. For want of a simpler word, I am using gravitational—in the loosest sense of the word—but what it attracts is our life, our living."

I was lost again.

He looked at me patiently and then continued. "It has a greater pull on the good things in life and has little swing over those that are beneath the line. So, when you succeed, it is harder for you to maintain it. And when you despair, you go down, and it is easy to stay down. The force helps you by not interfering with this segment of you, your life. Let me show you a diagram."

He showed me a graph. It looked like this.





"The cube is just to give you an idea that the linear life we lead is only because of time. There are a whole lot of other variables at play that mould our lives. Like laziness, procrastination, indiscipline, anger, rudeness, etc., can take us down. The same way, hard work, discipline, planning can make us rise above the line. The thick line is our living line... I refuse to call it the life line, because it can mean something else. Many argue that life is no longer linear. It is not: That is why the living line is enclosed in a three-dimensional box, which allows us to see that there are numerous things at play here. Other than that, it is semantics. Easier to understand."

"So, you mean that we live presumably in a life governed by the routine, the positive and the negative aspects of life playing like a kind of a pendulum?" I asked, wondering whether I was right.

"—Indeed, you are right. On the top side of the line are the positive aspects, and the bottom has the negative. And the force is like gravity, but it is different for different people. And there might be similarities too, but in general, if we assume life by this standard, we can evaluate life and map every life. The good part is, we can help ourselves stay above the living line—"

"How do we do it?" I asked, suddenly very intent on knowing more about this new direction. "Is it possible for us to chart our lives, to be successful... to be happy... always?"

The wise old man looked at me, amused, and smiled. "Possible, yes. It is simple, and yet, complicated."

Damn, I said to myself. There's always a catch somewhere. But I was eager to know more.

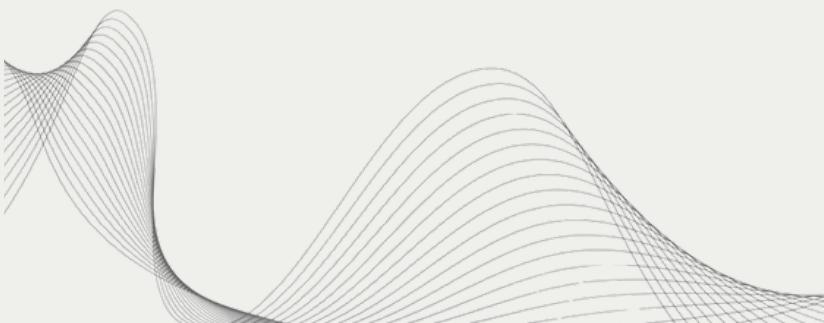
"—Let me be clear. The line is not actually a line... it is more like a wave. Don't think of it just as a single line wave, but as a wave with multidimensional properties. If you were to see a wave with a lot of interconnected lines... from a distance... theoretically... it looks like a line, but get closer, and you will see a million lines acting together, just like the human body is made of atoms, electrons, and protons—"

"That's chaos!"

"It could be. It is for many. There are so many forces working for us to live by the line... the wave. Life is chaotic when it is not controlled. That is why we have to work on ourselves... our words, our actions, our nature, our principles... in general, our lives are chaotic."

I pondered what he said as he got up and went to his table and picked up an A4 paper and handed it to me.

I looked at it. It had a figure of a wave in lines.



"Is this what our lives look like?" I asked him.

"Yes," He replied and continued, "No life is alike, and that is why no wave is alike. But in their reactivity, their reaction to stimuli... they are similar."

I could only ruminate on this rationale.

Then I had to ask him. "How does one live like a winner?"

He contemplated for a while and then said, "Live like a winner. It is there in the statement itself. Like. That is the key word. It does not mean that you have to be a winner to feel like a winner. We don't always win everything. Most of our life is lived on the line. Routine. Ordinary. We are not always competing. We are not winning elections or a football or cricket match all the time. It happens only a few times in life. Some are winners all the time. But they live far above the line... such that... that line becomes the new normal. Like famous film stars like Shah Rukh Khan or an affable prime minister like Narendra Modi. We have an option to live like winners. We can't all be famous or keep winning. The nice part is that we have a commonality with the famous... the rich... we are participants in this life. We live too. Ordinary to some. Always something special to yourself, to someone close to you. Why live it in an ordinary way or like a loser? In life, we are all winners, in one way or the other. So, we have to live like winners. In doing so, we will also be living above the line, we will be riding the wave... Let that become a new normal for us ordinary folks..."



He drifted off with a sigh.

I wondered whether he lived like a winner.

"Do you live like a winner?"

"Of course!" His reply was instantaneous and confident. "Do I appear any other way to you?"

I said no.

"I am lucky I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth. No hassles anywhere. Some heartaches during youth and disillusionment in the middle age. But looking back, I have no regrets. I am getting old, but thankfully I have my senses intact. I live life like that. Every morning, I get up feeling like a winner." He smiled widely and continued, "If you wake up alive in the morning, you are already a winner!!"

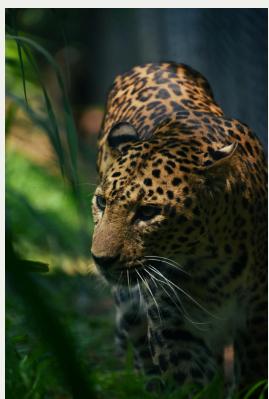
I nodded in agreement. Perhaps it was an oft-repeated phrase. I had read it somewhere. Perhaps a WhatsApp forward... But now I could see some sense in it. How lightly we take life in our childhood and youth! It's only the old who treasure their lives, their health, their words... A pity that by then they have passed their prime and make no impact on society... except politicians and film stars...

I waited for him to continue.



"Accepting yourself, understanding yourself... is the primary route to being a winner. You should be able to understand the basics of what is required of you if you want to achieve your goals. If you know what you are capable of. Of course, some have insane desires but are not capable of achieving them. Some want things that are beyond them and yet will pursue it diligently, with effort, and they get there... That is the first rule, as Socrates or some other philosopher, has said: Know yourself. I can add to it. Know the world. Know your limitations. Know the path to your goal... if you don't know, don't want to know... then you are doomed. The first element for every winner is knowledge. Of life and its unpredictability. I can go on about this factor, but let me talk of virtues that will help one become a winner.

"Gratitude. That's a number one virtue. And it is rightly said that it is the mother of all virtues. To me, it makes sense. Because gratitude makes you kinder, more compassionate, more cheerful, more hopeful, cut some slack for mistakes—in yourself and others—it definitely makes you a better person. It makes you a winner—" He paused for a moment, getting into the topic and slightly animated. "Gratitude helps you break from the shackles of entitlement. From ego. It makes us humble. And recent studies—scientific studies—have shown that humility helps us gain confidence and an ability to tackle our problems with a calmer mind. When you are thankful, you are being humble and grateful.



Imagine waking up alive in the morning and you are thankful. Religion strives because it has a large measure of gratitude sprinkled in people, towards their god or gods. And it works wonders! Gratitude fills you with grace... To many in English, this word says a lot. Anugraha in Kannada is somewhat acceptable. But in Hindi, you have a whole lot of words used... like sundar, which actually is beautiful in English. Then there is krupa and daya, which again translated into English means kindness, which is close. It also means divine favour or kindness. Or Eeshwar Ki Daya in Hindi."

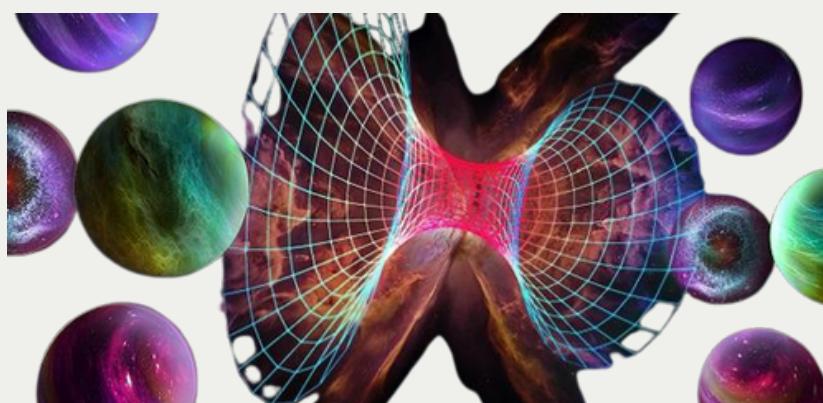
I heard him in fascination. Indeed, grace was a difficult word to translate into other Indian languages. But it embraces and encompasses many feelings... was I right? ... or perhaps it should be...

And while I pondered on grace, he continued. "Yes, gratitude fills us with grace... compassion... I dare say that the most graceful persons in the world are those with gratitude in their hearts. And when you are filled with grace, it gives birth to other virtues—like humility, compassion, kindness, patience, loving... you name it, it covers all—"

"You mean to say, to be a winner, you need only one ingredient? Gratitude—"

"You are right!" he said, "Just like you—"

We were interrupted by a knock on the door. It was one of the managers, and he had come to clear the week's menu. He had to go to the market to buy groceries and other material.



After the help had left, Svaha was busy with his accounts book, and he suddenly looked up and said, "There is another way to prove the existence of the line."

I looked up at him quizzically, as I was perusing a coffee table book on architecture across the globe.

"Huh?" I mumbled, trying to get my bearing. I got him after a while. He was talking about the living wave.

"What is that?" I asked him.

"Have you heard of the Fibonacci Number?"

"Something about the preceding numbers making up the next..."

"Yes, it is a unique number, or pattern, that is visible to the eye. There is a pattern in which lives are formed, the petals of a flower, leaves, rabbits, etc... The Fibonacci number holds true for most of them. The Fibonacci Number itself is simple... They can be calculated mathematically. It is a set of numbers that starts with a zero or one—followed by a one, then by another one (if we are starting from zero), and then by a series of steadily increasing numbers. The sequence follows the rule that each number is equal to the sum of the preceding two numbers. The Fibonacci sequence usually begins with the following 14 integers: 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144, 233 ... (He wrote this in his notebook and showed me). Each number, starting with the third, is as in the prescribed formula. Let's say, the seventh number, 8, and it is preceded by 3 and 5, which add up to 8. This goes up to infinity..."



I stared at him. I had heard of this sequence earlier. It was supposed to be spiral and...

“—It is also known as the golden ratio or the divine proportion. So, our lives are bound to proceed in the same manner as dictated by the ratio...”

I wondered at the way the universe worked.

“The earth formed though a scientific process... or God did, if you want to believe it, but the basic fact is that math was the crucial aspect of all creation. Mathematics, or physics, played a plum role in the make-up of the universe—”

“—So, the various chemicals, gases, the laws of gravitation, etc.—all existed prior to man’s discovery of them?” I asked, and then realised it was very dumb of me.

“You hit the nail on the head. Did you know that based on their atomic weight, some elements of the periodic table—with the knowledge of their name and properties—were understood to exist prior to their discovery... and the last one was found only in...”

He stopped and fiddled around with his mobile phone and then his eyes lit up.

“There... it is the element called Oganesson, discovered in 2002. It is a gas. Oganesson is the heaviest element known to date. Quite a few surprises in its uniqueness. That is the thing. We are given the answers with the question of finding out the how and why. So, it is predictive, but not easy, and sometimes the answers are perplexing...”

It was hard following his line of thought. But there was a spark of light ahead in the tunnel.

It seemed that mathematics played an important role in life. Or numbers. I said so to him.



He nodded his head, "That's why we have a commandeering line that governs us. For example, we have 23 pairs of chromosomes on our DNA. For a few, it can vary, usually by an extra pair, and they might be taller with some gene deficiency... some are born with Down's syndrome... So yes, numbers play an all-pervasive role in our life... and thereby life is nothing but a controlled element that follows the diktat of evolution. We have pairs of most things... like legs, arms, eyes, ears, kidneys... that's numbers too. (but why one heart, liver, pancreas??) We are similar. Evolution over millions of years has created us, perhaps with some trials and errors, a Darwinian methodology perhaps, but here we are—human beings, supreme beings on this earth, and we continue to progress despite so many obstacles—"

He stopped, perhaps to ponder on his words.

"Perhaps," He continued, his voice doubtful, "religion is right in its philosophy that a supreme being is the reason for creation. But that sounds so complicated. It seems like a complicated process... Reminds me of the junkyard tornado fallacy, which was, interestingly, coined by an atheist... Fred Hoyle. He said the probability of life on earth is based on false assumptions—he compared it to a tornado sweeping through a junkyard and creating a Boeing 747. The improbability of that happening is the many theories that abound on the creation and life, and the truth may never be known in our lifetime... or forever. We can very well call it the Jugaad Fallacy... You will see a lot of these contraptions which seem like they have been formed when a tornado swept the garage!!"

(The word Jugaad is a Hindi word for contraption. It can be used as a metaphor too.)

"In other words, we are the jugaad." He went silent after he said it, and I wanted to push his thoughts towards another direction.

I wondered aloud, "So religion... has an upper hand in this regard...?"

"Yes, very much so. Perhaps it does give them the boasting rights, but the truth is we don't know." He replied, as he went on to answer his cell phone, which was buzzing away softly.



Interlude One

The Scorpion and the Frog



This tale features a scorpion and a frog. Some versions feature a scorpion and a turtle. Either way, the story does not change, and the moral remains the same.

A scorpion wants to cross a delta but, as you know, a scorpion cannot swim. It requests a frog by the shore to carry it across. The frog laughs. (And the frog was far away from the scorpion.) "Are you kidding me?" it asks the scorpion, "Everybody knows you sting and kill frogs like me! Why would I carry you?"

The scorpion folds its hands—okay, its pincer or claws—and promises not to sting. "I won't, I won't. I promise I won't."

The frog ponders. The scorpion wrings its fingers. Okay, its pincers.

The scorpion then makes a decisive point. "I won't sting you because if I sting you, you will die, and I will also drown and die! So, why will I sting you???"



This sounded quite logical to the frog, and he agreed to carry the scorpion on his back while he swam across the calm waters.

But the scorpion is a creature of habit. Halfway through, he has an irresistible urge and with his poisonous stinger he stings the frog. The poison works fast, and the nearly dead frog cries out to the scorpion, "Why, why, why?"

The scorpion replies with a wry smile, "What can I do? It's in my nature."

End of the story.

The living wave is very much like nature, encompassing our nature. We do things because we are forced to. Something that keeps us from reaching our goals. Or, alternatively, making it that much easier. Like young hearts fall in love so easily and the old become too cynical. Hormones or life?

Chapter Two

The Grace of Life



I met the man; he was the man with whom I was having the conversation about the living wave, of living like a winner, because I was directed to him by another man, with a dog. The dog's name was Ruby. Why did I tell you that? I don't know.

I was seeking answers on things like Reiki and T'ai Ch'i or San Ch'ing (The Three Pure Ones), and on yoga and Indian religious or spiritual courses for people like myself. And I was told by this man with a dog called Ruby, "You have to meet Svaha."

"Who is he?"

"He is like a guru... a swami but not a swami. He has taken the name himself. It is spelt with V and not a W. He runs an old age home in the outskirts of the city. It is funded by himself and he does quite well. He is very much into yoga and Reiki, and all that self-improvement stuff that people like you are interested in."

Seemed like my kind of guy.

"Svaha? Why Svaha?" I asked him the most irrelevant question. But he answered me seriously.

"I don't know."

Later I found out that *Svāhā* is a Sanskrit term used as a suffix for any or all mantras. Like Amen, or so be it. It can also mean, well said. In Hindu rituals, *Svāhā* is exclaimed by the priest when pouring ghee or an offering to the fire. A strange name, but a name is a name is a name. It did not matter. I asked around about him and got good reviews.

"He's a good man," said one.

"Well-read, knowledgeable and spiritually very strong," said another.

"Quite a philanthropist," said a friend.

"He knows what he is talking about. He knows what he is talking about," said another.

"You should ask him about living above the line," one lady told me. She was a friend's wife and into swamis and maths. The maths refer to an ashram or foundation—in Kannada—and not dogs. She was not into dogs. Small dogs, yes. Big dogs, a big no, no.

So, I decided to meet him, and met up with him many times since, because what he had to say was worth hearing and I thought to myself, why not?

I visited him one fine day at his home and office. It was past Yelahanka on the road to Doddaballapura—the old age home he was in charge of. He was the founder, and the money for the building and land had come from his own pocket. Now he had donations pouring in, and apart from that, he had a family. His elder brother and his (the elder brother's) sons were in charge of a coffee plantation that was spread across 500 acres, and he got a share of the profits. He was married, but his wife preferred to live in the city and they both visited each other on weekends, or whenever they needed to. They had two daughters, both married to NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) who had settled in the US. When I heard this, I wondered whether this was brain drain or body drain?

That was not at all a proper thought. I banished the thought.

He was old, near about seventy I had guessed.

"I am 69 now and should touch 70 by the end of this year," he had told me when I met him the first time.

By the way, he agreed to see me when I volunteered to donate some funds to his foundation. After all, the guy was taking care of more than 50 people—or was it couples? I would know soon enough.

He was old, true, but he looked majestic. He was tall. Six foot or so. He was grey as old men can be, but with a full head of grey hair that fell to his shoulders. His face itself was bearded, grey all over, and flowed magnificently till his chest. It made him look older. But he was sprightly. He had quick steps for someone so old. And he looked healthy. Later I found that he suffered from arthritis. He had to fight off kidney cancer too, at the younger age of 50, which had receded after an operation. And a kidney. Yet, living right, away from the city, eating well, and exercising had kept him fit. What was more fitting was that his mind was sharp and deft. He remembered things very well. He spoke well too. He had a kind of voice that endeared him to you. His enunciation was so well modulated that every word he uttered was crystal clear. Whether he spoke in Kannada, Hindi or English, I found him to be a very good speaker.

"I sometimes take up lecturing for students in a nearby university," he had told me when I praised his vocabulary. He had a master's in Gandhian Studies. I found it suited the man. From what I learnt from the net, Gandhian Studies, or Master of Arts in Gandhian Studies, concerns studies primarily concentrated on research in different aspects of Gandhi's life, work, and thought. No wonder he was involved in social work. He was a Gandhian. I would love to be a Gandhian.

But I am far from that.

He was dressed in a white panché—what you call a dhoti in North India—and a saffron jubba—a kind of long outer shirt which you don't tuck in but let it fall below your waist, with long sleeves. He looked like a picture of an Indian yogi. I told him so.

"This dress makes me look like that? An Indian yogi?" He laughed. "Well, the idea is to present oneself as simple and down-to-earth, and I guess your observation is to the point."

Plus, he also portrayed the salt-of-the-earth kind of image, which I didn't tell him. Because I didn't want it to go to his head. Alternatively, I did not want him to think that I was easily impressionable.

I was.

He had taken up yoga and other known and unknown practices to help him fight his arthritis and keep good health. It was working. I could see that.

When I first met him in his rather comfortable but simple-looking office, he was busy, his eyes pouring over some accounts book. He had a table in front of him, like Indian government offices do, with a green cloth over it and a glass covering. I felt I was in a government office. On the spot above his head hung a framed picture of Gandhiji with a charkha—a spinning wheel used to spin yarn. The picture was 2 x 3 feet, I guessed. On the other walls were murals of the old-age home and its various events; there were some pictures that I couldn't discern. Later, I told myself.

Then the man called Svaha looked up, stretched his right hand out, and shook mine. Then he folded his hands and said, "Namaste... Namaskara..."

I replied and wished him too. Saying both the words meaning the same, in Hindi and in Kannada. The Namaste (or Namaskara) is very Indian in origin and can be used as a hello greeting and for goodbyes also. And when you do it with folded palms, it is actually a symbolic translation of the word. Funnily enough, it is stereotyped as an indelible part of practising yoga.

"Welcome to our humble old age home. It is named after Gandhiji—"

It was called Bapuji Old-Age Home and Ashram. Bapuji was a term Nehru used to call Gandhiji fondly, translating to Father, and considering that he is also known as the father of the nation, Bapuji was quite right. When you say 'Bapuji', it is as good as saying Gandhiji. The name is actually Gandhi—out of respect, we add the 'ji' as it confers humility on the addresser, and the addressed gets respect in the form of seniority, superiority, etc.

"It is an ashram too?" I asked.

"That's just in the name. We don't have any gurus or swamis here. Nor any mendicants or holy interns—but we do have events around them and these are purely visiting and not a permanent feature."

We spoke some more about the home, and he informed me that he had dormitories for the older men and women who were single, some cottages for couples, and some more comfortable apartments for the paying parties.

"Some like the atmosphere here and stay on, while some leave. More people stay on... Right now, we are full with the free section but have a few spots vacant for the paying segment—"

"How much do you charge for the paying segment—?" I was curious. He told me, and it seemed fairly okay.

Then he told me of his past after I asked him about it. "Fairly good student, I opted for an arts degree, and for my post-graduate studies I couldn't get into Social Work and had to do Gandhian Studies. It turned out to be a blessing in disguise. I came to know more about Gandhiji than I knew as a layman—"

"Like—?" I wanted to know too.

"Oh, a lot of things, really. Like, he was on the cover of Time Magazine and nominated as Man of the Year in 1930—a full 17 years before independence. He was a prolific writer and has written over 50,000 published pages—"

I gulped.

He said, "Mahatma Gandhi never won the Nobel but was nominated five times. Five times!"

"Really? Five times is quite high!" I said, and deep in my heart I knew he was above the prize.

"There are many other things... England released a stamp in 1969. And they say that the procession, or the line behind his funeral, stretched to around 10 kms!"

That was astonishing. He was really loved and admired. I said, "Guess I will have to polish up my reading on Gandhiji."

"You do that. You will like what you will find out—" he said, and I nodded in agreement. But before there was a further digression from what I wanted to learn, I asked the question.

"What is the living wave?" I asked him, a little apprehensive that he might think I was stupid. I was. But only I knew it. So why tell the world?

And he told me, and I was close to understanding him and about the living wave. But I was curious to learn more. Know more.

In between our discussion, many intrusions happened. But they were short and quick. And now he was meeting another man, an old man who was a resident of the old age home. The conversation went like this.

"Svahaji, you've to do something." He appeared desolate.

Svaha smiled and said, "Stay calm, Sirji; everything's gonna be fine. I will talk to him. But you have to ignore him. He is just having fun and doesn't mean any harm—"

"But it hurts—"

Svaha smiled again, but with concern in his eyes. "I will talk to him."

He got up from his chair, walked across the table, and laid his arms around him, whispering something to him, and led him to the door.

After the help had left, he turned to me and said, "Daily tamasha (drama) in the old age home. Different people; it takes time for people to adjust... and sometimes, no matter how much time, problems persist—"

I nodded my head, and I could see how people could have problems living with strangers. Especially old people.

"Tell me," I said, taking the discussion to our topic, "How come a name like Svaha?"

He laughed loudly. "It started out as a joke... when I was out of college, I was witnessing an opening ceremony of a college—where I worked later—and they had the burning pyre—holy fire—and the pujaris (priests) were pouring ghee or fruits or something... They were chanting some hymns or slokas and every time they would end with a Svāhā... And then the bug bit me. I used to end some of my statements with a Svāhā, and some people—my friends and students—would use it whenever I said something profound... or stupid... I don't know... and later, some people just started me calling that. I guess the college students are to blame... They used to call me Svāhaji... So later, when I started this Foundation, I decided to relinquish my old name, which is Gopalkrishna by the way, and took on Svaha without a surname or anything—"

"—Quite interesting! But you know and like the meaning?" I asked him.

"I do, I do, and I liked it. It also means that I have the obligation to speak only the truth. Though in daily life, managing this place... so many other tasks, it is difficult to adhere to truthfulness. But I strive..." He drifted off, perhaps thinking of the truth in his words.

We sat in silence for some time, and he spoke at length on the Fibonacci numbers and then on the Junkyard fallacy and how religion had a trump card in this, and then his phone buzzed, and he went to answer it.

He spoke for a couple of minutes and then he said "bye" and put his cell phone down.

"Sorry," he said and smiled. "That was one of the donors, and he has promised to increase his donations next year..."

"That's very good news."

"It is... it is...." He replied, and the smile indicated his happiness. "Once upon a time I struggled with the funds and it was tough to raise money... but now, it just comes naturally. Goes on to show that those days I was living on the periphery of the wave, and now I am riding the wave..."

There it was: the living wave again. I was still sceptical about that.

"So, you were gravitationally pulled towards the line... life, and you managed to wrest yourself away from it and move away... upwards—?" I asked him.

"Gravitationally? Banish the thought. I must have given you the wrong idea. It is like that, but the power of this line is omnipotent and beyond the laws of physics, beyond any worldly laws. It is a divine thing—"

I cut him there.

"—You mean, destiny or divine intervention? And then it is a matter of faith... religion. Tell me, do you believe in this... line... this wave... because you are religious?"

"I am religious. But I believe in the living line for more... practical reasons. And mark my words, the religious have more reasons for being content than those without."

"How so?"

"Any faith... religion—is like a guide map. It is good to have a map... GPS... to lead your way. And in many ways, faith gives you hope, reasons to pray and thank God, when your prayers are answered and... the courage or strength to go on even if they are not. But I am digressing. It is not gravitation that keeps us bound to the ordinary life. It is much more. It is scientific to an extent. It is like dark matter in space. We are forced to live by the line because it is as much luck as it is in our genetics."

"I am still unsure what you mean...?"

He was silent as he pondered, perhaps, on the best way to explain to me, the simpleton.

After a while he resumed.

"The wave is like a magnet of sorts. We are born, and we live in the early years like animals, genetically programmed, and this time, we are the closest to the wave... or on the wave. Our upbringing depends on our

parents' ability to provide for us. Well-nourished or impoverished. That is the beginning of the dent in our genetics and worldly effects on our psychology. Then we grow up, and we know more, realise more. We waver between the waves depending upon our caretakers' ability. Then we are on our own. Depending on how we are educated, how we are brought up, how we assimilate life, we live as per our abilities. The majority of us are doomed to live the ordinary life. On the wave. We are attracted to the wave and we succumb to the attraction. We are thankful for what we have. We are not very adventurous. We live the routine life. Some of us take risks. Some of us dare to dream. But the wave is strong, and we are pushed and pulled to rescind our own desires. The wave is like that. It will always pull you to the level you are supposed to be. The wave is not our enemy. The wave does not wish us not to do well. The wave strives to keep you aligned with reality. The wave is linear and can be affected by your actions and by the actions of others. The wave is not permanent. It is not stapled to any point or points. The wave is something that can be moved upwards or downwards, and that can become your wave... for example, let's say a rich man with many assets and wealth that can give him a high standard of living for at least a few generations. He has pushed his wave of living above the ordinary. But in reality, apart from riches, he might be in emotional distress, or he may have health problems with himself or his loved ones... then his wave will be affected—"

"—Are you saying there are different waves for each factor of life... like health, wealth... etc?"

"On a logical basis, there must be. But then each one assimilates into another, and that is your living wave. Mind you, I do not call it the life wave or life line, as it is done in palm reading. I am very attracted to it... but you know what they say: even a person with no hands has a future. So, the life line may be hocus-pocus, but the living wave isn't."

He was very confident of himself. Though I wondered.

"Is the wave that we live through our own creation or is there another force which controls the wave?" I asked, because I was still not sure of the living wave.

He put down the newspaper which he was skimming and looked at me. "Let me put it this way. You know the sun, moon, the stars and the universe around us, are all pulled towards one another.

The earth's existence, our existence is dependent on these external factors. The flowers, the bees, the birds and animals are in existence of a life that was ignited by the universe. To say it was God—a supreme force—was responsible for this creation is an easy way out. Because, after over a few thousands of sensible years, we are still pondering on creation of the universe. If we leave a supreme force out of the equation, we have to fall back on science and logic. Science proves the origin of life on earth happened millions of years ago. We evolved from fishes and monkeys to become what we are today. We can think and behave rationally. Because of our superior intellect, we came out top of the food chain. But we still procreate in the same manner as our stone age ancestor. We have helpless babies who need to be taken care of during their infancy and childhood. We grow up and live in the same manner. We strive to survive and live. We have common goals. But certain anomalies happen. Sometimes the well-educated flounder while the uneducated can rise to the top; the pretty ones fall by the wayside while the plain-looking go on to scale heights. People attribute it to luck. Sometimes true. Most of the time because of the living wave—”

I cut him abruptly, “—So, you believe in luck?”

“I believe in everything. Miracles happen. There is luck. There is spirituality or religious fervour. There is black magic. There are a lot of things that affect life in different ways. I call it as a part of the wave. Most people end up believing in these things too much for their own good. Sometimes irrational things happen. So, it is with life. Sometimes, people seem to be unaffected by the wave. They are exceptions to the rule. They or their life is not a rule. We are affected by the many things in the universe. We are affected by our own behaviour. We are affected by other people. Sometimes the good you do is of no use against the evil inflicted upon you. Life, supposedly, is not a game. If it is, it is not a short game. It goes on and on. And it is better to know the rules of the game, if you want to play it, play it well, to win. And knowing that you are living in the wave, you are better equipped to ride it out, on top of it, if you understand the wave and its composition.”

He was silent, and I opted to remain silent too. His words required some thinking. I could see some sense in his words. But, composition?

“What do you mean—composition?”

"I will come to that shortly, but tell me, do you understand the concept of the life wave?"

A simple yes or no would have been fine, but I was keen on knowing whether I knew right, and I was also eager to show off.

"I understand that life moves along a line, a wave... and this wave is partly a creation by us and partly by an unnatural force that keeps us ticking along the line... In a way, we can dictate to some extent how we progress through life..."

He smiled widely and said, "You have defined it perfectly well. But simple as it sounds, the difficult part is in following it."

"You said it would be simple?" I countered him.

"Simple, yes, complex too..." He replied.

I knew what he meant. I nodded my head.

And then we decided to change tracks, as we had to discuss his old-age home.



Interlude Two

The Five Monkey Theory



Nothing is more remarkable than an animal story! Ask the kids. That's why the most famous characters from fiction are dogs, cats, mice, and, of course, monkeys. Ask Walt Disney. Which brings us to the tale of five monkeys.

Historians say that there is no proof of such an experiment ever being conducted. But there is a mention of a G.R. Stephenson and Wolfgang Köhler who, presumably (circa 1960), did a study with Rhesus monkeys and came up with the Learned Fear Reasoning or, as it's now commonly known as, The Five Monkey Theory.

It also features a ladder in many versions of the tale.

(But the monkeys can scamper to the top using the cage bars?) The tale itself is very simple.

There are five monkeys in a cage. A bunch of bananas hangs from a rope, much like it would from a plantain tree. And there's a ladder inside with the top reaching to the bananas.

The monkeys are hungry and they look at the bananas beseechingly. One monkey goes for the bananas and hops on the ladder. But before he can ascend, a splash of icy cold water hits all five monkeys. The monkey scampers back to the gang. The water spray stops.

A little time later, a second monkey tries for the bananas with the same results. All five monkeys get drenched with cold, uncomfortable water.

A little time later, when a third monkey tries to go for the bananas, the other four monkeys hold him back. They are afraid of the cold water drenching them again. Nobody goes for the bananas anymore. End of the story? Not quite. One monkey is replaced.

The new monkey is quite naturally attracted to the bananas. But no sooner does he touch the ladder than the other four monkeys attack him and force him back. He tries again after a little time, and he gets the same results. So, he withdraws.

The researcher replaces another new monkey. This monkey goes for the bananas too, and the other four attack him, including the new monkey who was never sprayed with water. The replacement continues until all five of the original monkeys are removed from the cage. Every time a newcomer goes for the bananas, the others attack.

And thus, the new monkeys, who were never hit with cold water, learned not to go towards the bananas. Indoctrination?

The intrinsic part of the story is that we are indoctrinated right from our childhood on many things that have no rational or logical aspects: "Because it's always been done this way."

In life, we do a lot of things because that's the way it was always done.

Wake up.

Chapter Three

The ABC of Life



The ABC of life according to Svaha. Quite interesting and worth remembering, and hence I have put it down as I heard it.

- Logic: Always
- Methodology: matters
- Natural: as you can be if it is good. Change if Necessary
- Optimize: life. Live it to the fullest
- Plan: for long term and short term and be patient. Interchange.
- Quiz: yourself all the time
- Respect: for all
- Silence: the first response
- Think
- Us: not me, I or anything individual
- Victory: in every way
- When, where, what, why, who, how
- After: Thinking Do
- Before: Doing Think
- Contemplate: Before Embarking on Anything
- Demonstrate: with Examples of Why
- Education: Evaluate
- Fight: The Tendency to Opt for the Easy way Out
- Grace: Fill yourself with it
- Heave: Push yourself
- Is: I is it. And the it is not important. It simply is.
- Jealousy: Eliminate
- Knowledge: Accumulate

- X: for x, the unknown
- Yacht: we are boats on the wave...
- Zero: is what you become after death. But what you accomplished lives on.

I read it once and then again. And again. It made some sense, but I could see that it needed some explanation.

I looked up at him and said, "This is interesting, but I need some more thoughts on why you feel that this is apt to follow."

He smiled and replied, "It would be quite simple for some to have their own ABC of life. I advise them to follow their whims. Thoughts. But most important is to practice it—all the things you have to imbibe. So, this is an ABC I have formulated for myself, and it is something to start with. You are welcome to change it wholly or parts of it that do not seem to rhyme with your senses. The important point is that it has made you think."

"Can you explain your thoughts on these?"

He said, "I can and I will."

I held out the paper on which was his ABC of life.

But he laughed out aloud and said, "No worries, I don't need to see it. I remember each one of them. What is the point of having an ABC of your life and not knowing and accepting it fully well?"

I was impressed. Practice what you preach. He was all that and more.

"Let's take A. A is for After." He started off his explanation. "Funny that the first letter should be that which should come later. But I have chosen this word because it is the sum of life—after everything is said and done, kind of—but I specifically want myself, and people who attune with the principles, to think, and after, only after you have given it much thought, you should speak or act. Then you have less chance of regretting."

I saw the wisdom in it.

"The difference between a child and an adult is only one thing: The ability and wisdom to think before we speak or do anything." He added.

I saw the rationality.

"B is for Before. It is actually the same as A, After. And now, why before? To paraphrase the first principle, before you speak or act, think. Think. How simple and truthful, even if I say so!" He burst out laughing.

I smiled. He continued after his laughter stopped. "The key takeaway is to think."

"Every person is better equipped to handle life if they can get the ABCs of life right. True, you will have to keep improvising as you learn more. And trust me, everyone does. The fact of life is that if one is prepared, then one can handle any situation better. Remembering your ABCs could make a mighty difference. So, my advice to you, know the ABCs of life and you are already a winner!"

I could see the wisdom in his words.

He continued, "Evaluate is again to contemplate. To think. Where do you stand? How will it impact you and others? Then comes Fight. I don't mean fight the world; I mean fight against the feeling to choose the easy way out, fight the impulse to make the most obvious choice... there are more things than the eyes can see, the mind can ascertain."

I was thinking hard and was sombre in my thoughts while he stopped for a minute and then resumed again.

"It goes on... There is Planning... you can't reach anywhere without deciding where you want to go. There is a saying that if you don't know where you are headed, you'll end up in a new place... so if you don't plan, you will end up going nowhere. Most people have no plans. They take one day at a time and live precariously. Adventurous, true, but pretty meaningless... So Planning is very important. If you know the where, most of the time, the how will fall into place. P is also for patience. You have to use these two to make your P."

I agreed with him on this. Planning was important. So was patience.

"What about E? You make out as education as well as evaluate.

"Yes, I couldn't decide. But then evaluation is in itself education. But by education, I do not mean school or college... Like Robert Frost once said, true education is the ability to listen to anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence. That is the education you want."

He suddenly jumped to S. "Silence is the answer in most cases. Because we may not know the answers. We think that we know the answers, but we could be wrong. Most of life is lived in assumptions. And that's why we fail."

Interesting.

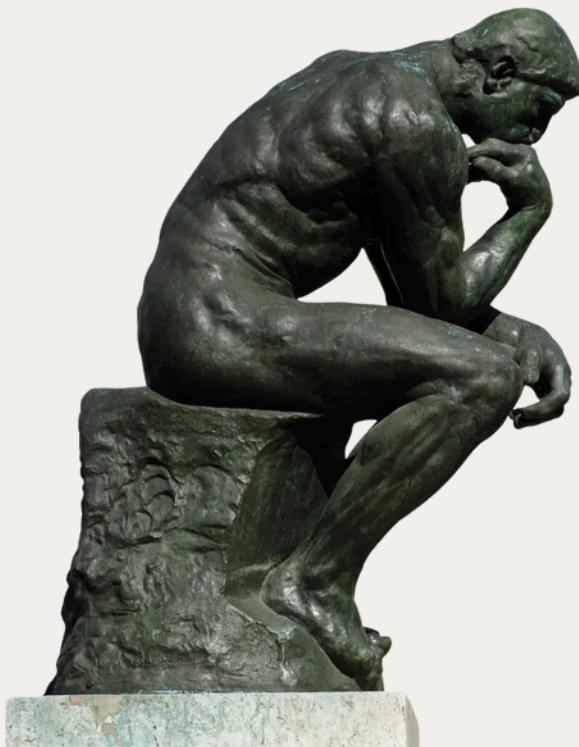
"U stands for Us, as I stands for Is. We all know the team is stronger than the individual. That is why we always have to think of us and ourselves—not I. That is why when we speak of I, it does not represent the individual.

It simply is the is. I for is. Just being. By ourselves, we are inconsequential. In tandem with the universe, with others, we stand powerful."

The thought made me re-evaluate myself, and I felt very small.

"Z is for Zero. Quite coincidental, the Z is the ultimate part—I mean the ending part of our life. In death, we turn out to be zero. Not in our contributions to life, but in that moment, we end up as nothing. Zero, if you will."

One thing did stand out amidst Svaha's ABCs: there was a tilt towards thinking.



Interlude Three

The Common Sense of Birbal



If you are a South Asian, you will have heard of Akbar and Birbal stories. They are as famous as Aesop's Fables, and most of them have a lesson that is hard to ignore. They are funny sometimes, and sometimes very intelligent, and most of the time, entertaining. They are as famous as the Jataka Tales (Buddhist literature), or Panchatantra (Hindu literature), and so it goes on. There are hundreds of them.

One interesting incident is of some ministers who were jealous of Birbal and wanted to pull him down. One of them told the king to ask him an 'impossible-to-answer' question. So, the next time Birbal was in the group, Akbar looked up at the sky and thought aloud. "I wonder how many crows are there in my kingdom?"

Birbal kept quiet, as he presumed it was a rhetorical question.

Akbar looked at him pointedly and repeated the question. "Birbal, can you perchance tell me how many crows are there in my kingdom?"

Birbal looked up seriously and one could see he was calculating.

After some time, he said, "There are five hundred and forty-seven thousand and three hundred and thirty of them, Your Honour."

The king was surprised and amazed that Birbal could look so calm and confident.

"What if there are more?" He asked Birbal.

"Visitors of the families here, probably to see this wonderful kingdom," Birbal replied without flinching.

"And if there are less?" The king persisted.

"Because some are visiting their families outside the kingdom."

The king looked at the other ministers and smiled. "That's Birbal for you. He has an answer for everything."

Another evening, while walking with the king through his garden, some of his ministers decided to pull down Birbal again, as he—Birbal—was not present in the retinue.

"Why do you always favour Birbal and not give us a chance to prove our worthiness?" asked one minister of the king.

Akbar smiled and said, "There's always an opportunity for you guys to show your worth."

The minister said, "Your command is my wish. Tell me, what can I do for you now?"

"I see some commotion outside the walls of this garden. Can you tell me what is happening there?"

The minister said, "I will find out, Your Honour. Just give me a few minutes, and I will be back with the information—" And he went off to the gates. He was back after a few minutes and bowed to the king.

"There is a marriage happening, Your Majesty. That's just the procession of the bridegroom." The minister said, quite confident that the king would be content with this piece of information.

But the king had another question. "Who's the bridegroom?"

The minister went off again and came back with the answer.

But the king had another question. "Whom is he marrying... I mean, the bride?"

Off went another minister and got the answer and told the king.

And then the king said, "There's a wedding happening next to the palace, so he must be someone employed here?"

Another minister went to get the information and was back soon and told the king.

The king was about to pop another question, but then Birbal made his appearance. He did his salutations and looked askance at Akbar, who seemed to be pondering on something.

"Say Birbal, what's the commotion over the wall?" Akbar asked Birbal.

Birbal was quick with the reply—"Oh! that is a wedding... that's probably the bridegroom arriving. He is getting married to the daughter of one of the palace's head guards. He had invited you too, and I thought it was too small an affair to bother you with." He gave names too, and Akbar looked at his other ministers and said, "That, is an answer!"

The other ministers looked at their feet, ashamed.

End of the story.

Moral: be aware and give answers that cover the entire spectrum. Unless you are asked only to answer only the question you are asked.



Chapter Four

The Four Quadrants of Life



Life, he once explained to me, was a journey through four quadrants of a graph. And then he told me.

"It's quite easy to live like a winner. Just like it is easy to lead a healthy life. Do you know that famous quote by Hippocrates? 'If someone wishes for good health, one must first ask oneself if he is ready to do away with the reasons for his illness. Only then is it possible to help him.' The same applies to living like a winner. Do away with all that subtracts your living. Live a healthy life. Eat healthy, live healthy. Think good thoughts. Do good deeds. Everything that makes you a better person. We are tethered by the knowledge we gain. But to be good, one does not require knowledge. One can be ignorant of many things, but we know the value of truth. The value of a good deed."

That was the ultimate wisdom that every man possesses and yet, they choose to live life their own way. I thought deeply on this. So true. "We are the choices we make?" I asked him.

He replied with a twinkle in his eyes. "We are, to a maximum percentage, an afterthought of our choices. We are also influenced by external forces —like parents, schooling, etc. But in the end, we are a product of the choices we make."

"So, it means that we are bound by our whims and fancies, and these in fact control our ability to live like a winner?" I asked him.

He was silent as he pondered on my question. "Have you seen the movie, *Deadpool*?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

"Well, there is a scene where the tin man [Colossus], who is a good guy belonging to the X-Men fraternity, is making a point to Deadpool on why he should be a part of the X-Men. He says: 'you don't have to be a hero all the time. At the most, around 4–5 times in a lifetime.' I am paraphrasing as I don't recall the exact words. But what impressed me was that this applies to real life, ordinary lives. We are lucky in that, most of us. We have to do the right things only a few times and we can be right forever. Of course, we cannot do wrong things either."

I pondered over it. It was true. Almost 80 per cent of our lives is mundane and ordinary. Or alike. It was the balance 20% which made us different. And sometimes, or more often, choices we make in that 20 per cent make us what we are.

He then changed course and spoke about the four quadrants of life.

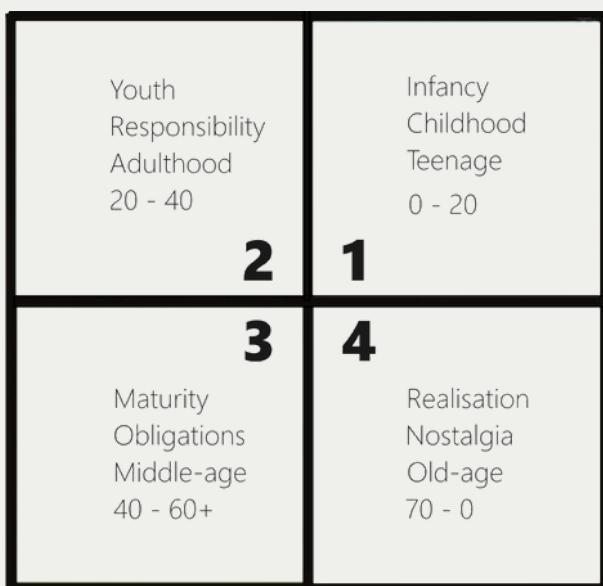
"Life as we know, as all of us know, is broken into different stages. Infancy, childhood, youth, middle-age, old-age, etc. Whatever people may say and adhere to, there is a simple fact of evolution that we are all slaves of. Like infancy—we are practically helpless. Unlike the deer and those that are born on the plains—they are up and about on their feet within hours, so that they can run away from their predators. In youth, we are susceptible to fall into the honey trap, and this goes for females too, but to a lesser extent. The youth have their heads in the air, or their noses in the air—there are exceptions of course, as in nature. They can do anything, get away with anything—it is truly said there is no word such as failure in the lexicon of youth—and they fall in love, they live as if there is no tomorrow, they live in a different world.

Then there is middle-age and old-age, and we mature a little bit. But as I said before, exceptions exist, and many live their youth long after they cease to be, as some middle-aged folks do."

He trailed off. But I got the gist.

Then he handed me a file with papers filed neatly with graphs and notes.
"Have a look at the first paper."

It had some etchings in it. It looked like this -



I looked up at him and he said, "It's not a rule and there will be... there are exceptions, but generally it is accepted by most people."

I asked him what the quadrants had to do with the wave that supposedly controls our lives.

He laughed.

"It is not supposedly. I believe it is as real as me... And that is an interesting question. But unlike the soothsayers and religious saints who can predict one's future, the wave can only give us some clues.

If an infant is from a rich family, you realise he or she will have a comfortable life. If he or she is from an educated family, we know he or she will get a proper education. If he is born into a poor family, he will have a hard life. The wave is real here and pertains to hard economic facts—”

“—But that is conjecture.”

He was silent for a moment and then continued.

“True, it is not 100 per cent true, but it is logical to derive this assumption. And we do and all do. There will be lots of hits and misses, and we realise as we grow up. For example, the first 20–24 years are what defines your future. For many it can be 30 or more. Unfortunately, many do not realise it.”

I thought about it and I saw an analogy. The wave was very much controllable. It was like steering a wheel or a drive.

I said it to Svaha and he was pleased by my thinking.

“Yes indeed. It is very much within our control, very much like driving, sailing, or surfing.”

He used the watery surface because it was an allegory to his wave theory.

“The graph of life is a fact. And we all live the same way. We grow up, work, reproduce, multiply, make homes, make a living, and age... knowing this, living through life makes many people—all people—realise that life has a purpose. To survive, to live, comfortably, and this requires us to follow some norms. Educate ourselves—the best way possible, get employed properly, earn enough to survive and save, form good relationships, have a balance between work and life, between everything that makes up your life. Too much of anything is a bad thing. The greatest pleasure has to have a measure. If people can understand the human genetics and human fallibilities and apply this to living their lives, they would be the winners.”

When put across this way, it really seemed so much easily done.

“Easily said than done?” The words slipped out of my mouth.

“The world agrees with you. That’s why we flounder and flail. Between human genetics and the make-up of our minds, we are irrevocably falling and never landing. Like a cat falling to the ground with buttered toast tied to its back—making it a perpetual revolving machine. We never seem to make the right choices.

Therein lies our gullibility. We believe in something and believe it to be true. And even if it is disproved, we cling on to it because it is our truth.” I was getting lost.

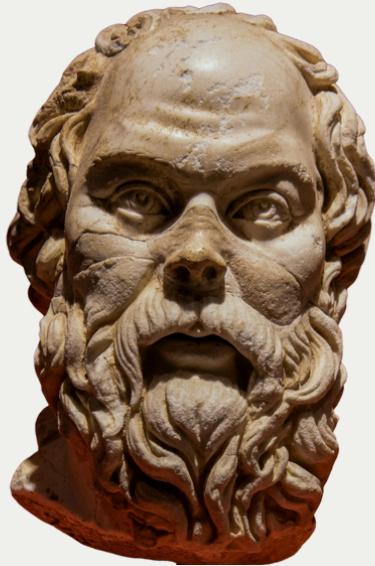
“Seems like you are digressing...” I pointed out gently to him.

“No—I was just ruminating on the reasons why we fail. And the word—digressing—is an apt word to describe our own attitude to life. We digress from our purpose and hence end up tangled in the threads of life.”



Interlude Four

The Wisdom of Socrates



Socrates was one of the wisest men in Greece, and historians have deduced that he must have lived somewhere between 470 BCE and 399 BCE, and may well be called the father of Western philosophy. He never wrote anything, but was supposed to be a great conversationalist. What we know of him comes from his portrayal in written plays—often comical—by Aristophanes, not one of his admirers. Those were Plato (the same one who tutored Aristotle!) and Xenophon who portrayed Socrates as a man of great insight and argumentative skill, among others. He was famous for asking questions. And he questioned everything. It was no surprise then that at the ripe old age of 70 he was tried in court, charged

of impiety and corruption of the youth, and sentenced to death by poison.

So great was his attraction that when he was alive and well over 60, he had many youngsters follow him and listen to him talk. He never took any fees for that, but he took their gifts and he kept peace with his wife, who we are told, was quarrelsome—who of course, had reasons to be disenchanted with her husband who had no sources of income other than his students' gratitude in the form of gifts and cash.

Well, anyway, one day we see him walking along the busy marketplace of the city of Athens. He is arguing vehemently with one of his followers when he sees something and stops midway. His students have seen him behave in this eccentric manner and walk on ahead, knowing that he will soon catch up with them. However, after a few minutes, they notice he is still standing and gazing intently at one of the stores laden with a number of goods. One of the students rushes back to the wise man, wondering whether Socrates has seen something that he would like to buy.

He asks him what he wants, and Socrates throws his hands up in the air and says, "So many things here that I don't need."



Chapter Five

The Sermon at the Mount



I was there for dinner—in the lawn of the office of the old-age home. I had been called for dinner to celebrate his birthday, and I was very pleased he thought it fit to spend his birthday with me.

I told him so, and he replied.

"My actual birthday is tomorrow, but this is a good way to usher it in."

I did not mind. The gesture was kind enough.

We finished dinner and sat in the lawn chairs while the table we had our dinner at was cleared off by workers in the kitchen. The air was cool around us. The sky was clear of clouds, and the stars twinkled gaily as if celebrating the birthday.

"Seems like the stars are here to celebrate your birthday?"

Svaha looked at me and then at the skies, and looked back at me, embarrassed at my compliment. He smiled and kept quiet.

"It's quite a splendid night. Seems like all's well on earth. At least this part," I said and suddenly remembered, "For those in Ukraine and Yemen and Syria... there is the usual pain and strife."

"Yes," Svaha said, "Life is never the same everywhere. In fact, with everyone, life is a roller coaster ride."

"How do you mean?" I asked him quite seriously.

"You know what a wave is?"

I nodded my head and said, "It has its ups and downs?"

"Right, a wave cannot be without its troughs and crests... so it is with life. We cannot have the good without the bad. The troughs have to be met well. That is the ultimate purpose of life. Use the benefit of the crest to overcome the troughs."

"That's interesting..." I said, trying to look beyond the words and picturing the image of my life. My life was boring.

We bid goodbye and I was about to leave when he handed me a sheaf of papers.

"I will also send you the soft copy by mail... This is the presentation I made at a girls' college—Mount Carmel, I think—some months back. It is about life and pointers on how to make a success of it..."

I thanked him and said, "That would be lovely reading. I am sure it will help."

I present his text as he has made it with a few editing changes here and there, but overall, it is Svaha's words, and any discrepancies are entirely mine.

Thank you, Mrs Mehta, for your lovely introduction. I don't know whether I deserve the accolades you heaped on me. I am humbled.

Thank you, Principal, Rev Sister Philomena, who has graciously invited me to speak to you all.

And a very good afternoon to you all.

I see nearly 300 or more girls—or ladies—and I feel very much intimidated. It reminds me of an anecdote. A leading socialite was asked whether he would be willing to speak for half an hour to a thousand ladies of an association. To which he is supposed to have replied,

"I would rather spend a thousand hours in prison."

That is of course hearsay. And perhaps not the right anecdote to start this harmonious talk with you. Or perhaps it is. I will get back on this saddle soon enough.

I have been given the topic of 'Pointers to a happy living.' And that I feel is going a little overboard. But it can be helpful. I wish to give you some pointers that you can adopt to make your life more fulfilling. That is not to say that you will not make your life fulfilling with your other traits. Surely that is logical. But it is a good way to begin if you have some rules to follow—that which has been learned and practised with good results.

So here we are to the first one.

Hearsay.

I started with a risqué anecdote. It could have been in good taste or not, it is left to you. What I wanted you to take in was just the humour. But sometimes it can fall flat. So, the anecdote could have been said at the wrong time or the wrong place. It will lead to a wrong impression—of the teller—that he/she is insensitive or arrogant or a male chauvinist.

In my case, I have to tell you that it was meant to be an icebreaker.

You are on the verge of taking on life, perhaps you will study further or work or marry and raise a family. You are like the brisk sunny morning, like the dew drop on a peepal tree leaf, reflecting the sun's light, gleaming with dreams and ambitions: you hold life in your palms!

And while confusion and choices will make your decisions that much harder, thank your fates that you are not confused like a shark with a splitting earache. Your confusion is justified and they are confusing because they are many—and they all need to be addressed and resolved as best as they can be, before you move ahead.

Hearsay.

All our lives we are moulded by hearsay.

From infancy to childhood. We perceive things by sight and sound and touch and other senses. But none more so than by what we hear.

Courts dismiss hearsay as nothing concrete.

But in real life, it makes for the boon or bane in life.

As infants and children, we have a dime a dozen questions for our elders. What is that? Why is that? And so on. Researchers have concluded that by the age of 10 we have asked a million questions or more. It rapidly declines as we grow older till most of us stop asking questions.

In reality, it is the other way around—we stop growing when we stop asking questions.

We get answers. Sometimes we store it in the recesses of our brain. But the answers in themselves are heard and thereby become hearsay.

Some hearsays are based on fact, logic or reality. Some others are just euphemisms of the teller's understanding of the subject. And not always the reality.

So, you learn from all you hear.

Suddenly you are older and you realise you know much more than your parents, your elders. So many things you heard have been proven wrong in school.

We keep learning from hearsay. Our entire life is based on hearsay. The more we are able to discern the truth from the inconsequential, the better we are helping ourselves live.

So, the first thing, or one of the things to do is to develop the ability to distinguish knowledge, hearsay, between that which can help you lead your life productively.

That's learning in some ways. Or most ways.

If I am not wrong it was Marcus Aurelius, a Roman Emperor who was also a Stoic philosopher, lived in the first century, who is credited with the thought: "Everything you hear is an opinion, not a fact; everything you see is a perspective, not the truth."

So, the first lesson is to reflect on what you hear and what you see. Do not be cynical. Be analytical. There is a context to almost everything. You need to rationalise, think carefully and arrive at a conjecture. But even that could be far from the truth. So...

Which brings me to an important theory: the Cockroach Theory. I bring up the Cockroach Theory because it has a relation to hearsay, and that can lead to perception, and that in turn, leads to our reaction.

You and I are the sum of all the things we hear, see and feel or parts thereof. So, this theory is a reflection of that.

When someone sees a cockroach suddenly, (let us presume it is a woman) she shrieks, jumps and runs away. Another person slinks away avoiding to face the roach. There's a ruckus around and finally one person takes a broom and sweeps away the insect to the doorway from where it flees into the darkness.

The cockroach by itself is harmless. It does not bite, claw or threaten your life in any way. True, it might be dirty and a health deterrent. Our reaction to a roach is, most of the time, blown out of proportion. It may be partly because our brains are wired that way. The assumption is that if there is one, there must be many more. We assume and make a hullabaloo out of it. The impression to the onlooker is that it is a life and death situation. It is not. Most of us suffer from katsaridaphobia, a phobia of cockroaches. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why we are discomfited by the appearance of one.

The theory has many versions; in economics or the corporate world, it refers to the possibility that when one problem is announced, there must be many more.

A famous IT personnel has said that it is the inability of some to not be able to handle a situation with a calm mind.

True, I agree on that. But on a personal level, I think the cockroach theory is relevant to all of us, because it shows how things can be blown out of proportion when there is not much proof of them. Modern news is a testament to that theory. I would say the cockroach theory is the fallacy of the undisclosed, supposedly doomsday predictions, arising from or of, a minuscule and indeterminate validation.

In a way, this is the corollary of 'if there is smoke there has to be a fire somewhere,' and while this can be true some of the time, it is not true all the time. In life, we are faced by the cockroach theory constantly. In the information age where data is the new gold, it can be noxious as well.

The answer to the problem is simple. Don't judge instantly. Don't be judgmental. Give it time. Weigh all the contextual facts. Reserve your decision. You don't always have to react. Your silence. Your noncommittal attitude is a reaction.

Let me give you some time to churn around the thought in your minds.

Let's analyse another factor that plays a role in defining us.

Perception.

Perception is another factor that helps you in what you hear and see and perceive. And what others hear, see and perceive.

Different people see different things even in reality.

Think twice before you act upon it. React calmly if the news is upsetting. The perception will vary.

You most probably heard from your parents... In our days, so and so was something like this... And you end up thinking, "oh no, here we go again!" People wrongly attribute it to a generation gap.

But that is not all true.

The generation gap cannot but be, because your parents' perception is different from yours. It is not the times have changed. Perceptions have. Similarly, you and your colleagues might not see eye-to-eye on certain issues: politics or movies, celebrities or books, etc.

That is because your perception differs.

You are both right in your own way. Because you see it filtered by your own glasses.

Perception is bound to your environment you were exposed to.

Perception is personal.

So, never judge people. If you do, you will have to use a variable scale for every individual, every situation. Because they are all going to be different from one another.

We have so far covered two aspects—hearsay and perception.

Let's move on to the third.

Know yourself.

If you know yourself, truly know who you are, what you are, you can assume correctly, most of the time, how other people will react to you, your words and actions.

The other important aspect is to keep calm.

You look in the mirror almost daily. How many times do you look within yourself?

You look at your face. Your clothes. Yourself as others might look at you and see what they see. If you are smart looking, then your confidence rises. If not, you take steps to rectify those things that do not meet your expectation. If your head of hair does not look presentable, perhaps you need to brush or comb it again. The dress you are wearing does not gel with you. You change it. Or one part is wrinkled and you have to iron it again. Personality begins with your appearance, and every person is entitled to present the best version of themselves.

So, why do we not take as much time and fervour to know ourselves intricately? And then if there are shortcomings or rough edges, why don't we smoothen it or correct it?

Insouciance or indifference? Or just taken for granted? I am therefore I will be. Most people go through life with little knowledge of themselves. The smart people will take time to know themselves so they can handle people and situations to produce the best results. When you know yourself well, you will speak only when you are sure. You are in control most of the time, because you know yourself well. Nobody can know you better than yourself.

So, ask yourself this question. Do I know myself?

You will ascend a superior level when you start reflecting on what makes you tick.

We come to the next point.

Breathe.

You will have heard the most inappropriate thing to tell a person when he or she is upset is 'calm down' which, I too feel, is way too blunt. When you advise another to be calm, you are insinuating that the person is not calm.

As you can discern, there is no stupidity among these.

Of all these people, everyone can do something stupid once in a while.

Even those who are improving.

All stupidity is associated with Lack of Application or LAP.

We are stupid because we do things that are not rational or logical. We sometimes act out according to our instincts. Biological, hormonal or situational... and forget that we have a choice.

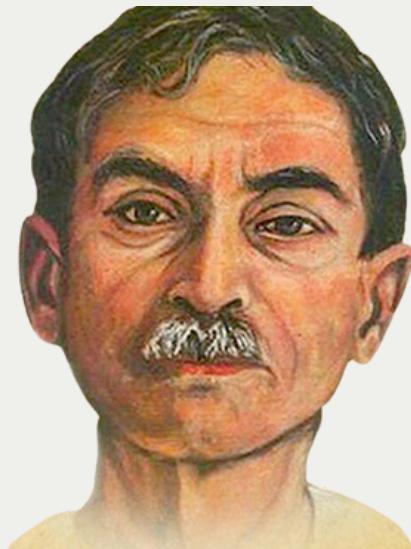
Like it is simple to place our keys to the bike, car or our house at one place so we remember more easily. Stupidity is associated with forgetfulness. Not entirely. Blame it on LAP. Correct yourself. Never trust yourself. Try to make things easier. Place your keys in one place all the time. How difficult is that? Yet, people will do the opposite. LAP.

Acquire the ability to Apply Yourself to an activity—within the realms of possibility—and you will be closer to your goals. You can put yourself in the top position.



Interlude Five

The Sagacity of Premchand



This is a story that pulls at your heart and shows human goodness. In the deep recesses of the human gene, everybody has a streak of goodness that comes alive now and then. So, have patience and extend a long leash—or as they say, cut some slack when you are at the receiving end—to family, friends, and strangers, because in the end, they too are humans.

Panch Parmeshwar by Munshi Premchand is a tale of supposed nepotism in judicial power. Jumman Sheikh and Algu Chaudhary are good childhood friends. Algu is wealthy, and Jumman Sheikh is popular for his knowledge and wisdom. In one instance, Algu Chaudhary is nominated as a judge and is forced to a verdict against his childhood

friend, in support of his aunt. Later, Jumman Sheikh is nominated as a judge in the panchayat (Village Council) and, as fate could have it, he is to deliver a verdict that could affect his former friend, against whom he had a score to settle because he, as a judge in the same panchayat, had made a ruling against him.

Algu Chaudhary naturally is very distraught and is quite sure that Jumman Sheikh would, because of his past judgement against him—which had left Sheikh very hurt and angry with Chaudhary—also be harsh against him.

But, contrary to expectations, as soon as Jumman is appointed as the Sarpanch (judge), he feels a sense of responsibility. He decides that he would not stray even an inch from the truth and justice. After a long discussion and an introspection into the case, Jumman announces the decision in favour of Chaudhary. Chaudhary is surprised but happy.

Just goes on to show, justice prevails over everything else.



Chapter Six

Live Like a Winner!



There were four dormitories with 15 to 20 beds in each of them. Two were for men. The men's dormitories were filled up and, in the women's section, more than 50 per cent was vacant.

"Seems like women are better off?" I asked Svaha.

"It's life. Men are more independent and stay alone and finally have to come here."

The apartment block was a four-storeyed building with about 16 independent studio apartments for couples and singles. This was for the paying section.

"We put even those who are very sick... or when the pandemic struck... We had to move many from the dorms to this block. Even though it is a paid block, there are no hard or fast rules—"

"Where do you stay?"

"There—" he pointed to a house by the gate. It was a two-bedroom villa-kind of a house with a lawn in front, and it was a single-storeyed building. "Nice," I said.

We went to his home and I saw that it was very spacious and the sitting room had a relaxed atmosphere with large French windows and comfortable seats—there was a seven-seater sofa set in pastel colours and with a cloth covering. No leather. Was this for the heat or because he was a vegan? I asked him.

"I am a vegetarian and generally avoid animal products, but I am not a rigid vegan."

"Do you think animals have souls?" I asked him while his housekeeper served us steaming hot filter coffee—from coffee beans from his own plantations.

"Do you?" He asked back, making me ponder.

"I don't know, but humans generally assume—"

"—Yes, the assumption is that we have souls. And animals do not. But I believe that animals have equal rights while on earth and they might have equal rights in heaven too... By that supposition, animals must have souls too."

I guessed that made sense. But I was more intent on whether I had a soul. Or was I soulless?

There was a dining room next to the kitchen, which was quite large with a huge refrigerator. The kitchen was Italian, which was in vogue in the region. Quite luxurious, and I knew that Svaha liked to live well, despite his humble appearance.

"What kind of car do you use?" I asked him because I wanted to confirm my suspicion. He told me that he had a four-wheel-drive wagon. I saw it then. It was an imported vehicle, and I knew from its make that it was British earlier, but the ownership of the company was now Indian.

He really fit the bill to a T.

He was philanthropic and a humble soul, but he liked the trappings of a wealthy man. Or his wife was behind it all.

"It's all for a show. People give you money because you have money. The house, the car... all are an indication that I can look after myself. People don't give to you if you are poor. Nobody trusts a poor man. Really, nothing earns trust like wealth!" He said to me, reading my mind correctly

that this was what I was thinking. He was very astute, or my questions naturally led to that surmise. We were walking back to his office, and he stopped to chat with the gardener. The old age home was sprinkled with greenery, and in some corners, I could see flowers blooming and swaying in the afternoon breeze.

I walked ahead and he caught up with me, and together we went into his office.

"That's the old age home, and you have seen everything... except the cottages behind the dormitories."

"True," I said. "I have seen your old age home, your home... met some of the residents, and I must say that you are doing a wonderful job."

He smiled and replied, "Thank you, but there are so many other people who take care of the home—admin, cooking, healthcare—"

"—You have a clinic here?" I asked with surprise.

"No... we have a weekly visit from the local doctor and local nurse. Everybody gets to see them. Monthly once we have specialists coming in—depends on the needs. Usually, we have a cardiologist or a diabetologist as a regular, but sometimes we get others too—like an oncologist or a neurologist..."

"That's good. Medical care of the elderly is a requirement," I said.

"Yes, it is. We have most with cases of high BP and diabetes, and a few who are terminal—with cancer and such—."

I went silent. There was work here. The old age home had to provide for everything.

"What do you do about religion... prayers?"

"Ah yes, we do have a room, or you can call it a hall... dedicated for that. It can be used by anybody. Any religion, though we have mostly Hindus. There is one Muslim gentleman and two Christians, I think."

"What was that about, the old man with a grievance against another...?"

He thought for a while.

"Oh, you are referring to Someshwar. He gets his leg pulled by another person here called Raghunath. They are actually in the same dormitory. They have a weird relationship. They are friends, but Raghu is brutal in his comments, and this can give rise to tensions. In some ways, it reminds me of the Bob Dylan poem—"

I looked at him with surprise. "—Bob Dylan?"

"Yes, something about old men... 'Do not go gentle into that good night?'

Was that the title? It speaks of people who turn old and go meekly to their graves... or old age. And Raghu is somewhat of a 'rager.' He talks loudly and refuses to take anything that is against his principles—and that is almost everything. Someshwar is soft-spoken and rigid about his faith and belief. So, there is some friction... Sometimes I feel it is a good thing. Some other times, it gets irritating."

Dylan Thomas. Really? I wondered.

But for an old age home, the poem did seem relevant. (I had later googled it and read the whole poem.)

"Who else rages?" I asked him.

"Nobody. They are quite content... at least they appear to be... Nobody rages and rants... except Raghu who has an acid tongue."

Then he took me to the kitchen where there were a few men and women, cooking Indian dishes. Rice and rotis—Indian fare—sambhar and some vegetable dishes. It was a vegetarian kitchen.

Later, as we sat by the table and the room was packed with nearly 50 people or so, I asked the question, "—We were interrupted when you were explaining to me that gratitude is the only virtue to make you a winner..."

He was silent as one of his workers served us hot rotis and plied some vegetable dishes and the sambhar into the hollow spaces in our steel plates.

"It is not the only one virtue, but it is a great beginning. And as they say, 'well begun is half done,' so gratitude as a primary emotion—an emotive being—is a good way to start living like a winner. Did I tell you that gratitude fills us with grace?"

I replied, "Yes, you did—"

"Grace means we live our lives gracefully. That is the ultimate living. We are kinder, more humane, more understanding and more patient—"

"So, it means that we have to embrace or imbibe these qualities too... in addition to gratitude?"

"In most cases, a grateful human being will naturally get these other qualities. But exceptions are always there. For those people I would say learn the other qualities too. Be kind, to everybody... Learn the simple things first, like speaking softly and not to speak loudly in anger. Don't get

I pondered over the words which I had heard before. It was not Indian. It is attributed to a bestselling Persian poet Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, more popular across the globe as Rumi.

But I let it pass.

We chewed through our food and were silent for a while, savouring the food. It was a hearty meal, and when we were through, we washed our hands—palms in the sink outside the dining hall.

Back in his office, I broached the subject again.

"You were speaking of grace and other qualities that makes us all winners. What other qualities do we have to possess? To make us winners—"

"As I told you, gratitude is the first virtue. And it gives birth to all other virtues. Or it has to have other virtues aid it in our victory." Svaha replied as he swivelled his chair towards me. There was a knock on the door and a man walked in with a tray. It was ice cream. Vanilla sprinkled with varied nuts. He placed the ice cream on the table, rather the cups, and departed with an empty tray.

"Please have," Svaha motioned with his hands, and he picked up one of the cups and scooped out the ice cream and put it in his mouth. He smacked his lips. I could see that he was enjoying the ice cream. I picked up the cup and followed suit. It was delicious.

"Life is like vanilla. In this cup. In the ice cream. The wave we live on... the living wave... that is vanilla. Routine. Ordinary."

I tried to follow his wave of thought. Here, in the ice cream, vanilla was the prime ingredient. The various nuts were like the other virtues that added the flavour. In real life, vanilla was a metaphor for the ordinary. Like when we say a vanilla life, it means ordinary. Routine. In other words, life on the living wave, is vanilla. I was getting through to him, or the other way round.

"I get you," I said to him, proud of myself that I had finally got the core idea.

"Good," He replied and smiled. I almost blushed, taking it as a compliment.

"Many have asked me, if the idea of living above the wave, living like a winner... was so simple, why hadn't more people embraced it... put to practice?"

"True, it seems simplistic, and yet—" I cut him and he cut me.

“—Yet, people don’t practice it. The answer is simple. It is too easy and yet so difficult to follow. It is not a secret. It’s like the air we breathe, the water we drink... we think of them only when we are short of breath or sick or thirsty... The fact is people like the vanilla life. They are bound to it. Everybody lives, so do we. All our lives are meant to be ordinary. We are born, we are raised, schooled, educated, seek a job, find a spouse, have children, save, buy a house, raise our children, and the circle continues. And for most people, this is the life. It is a vanilla life, but to them, it might be all chocolate or strawberry. Vanilla might be plain to some, but to others, it might be a delicacy. Right?”

“Right,” I replied, nodding my head vigorously.

Did he mean vanilla life was ordinary vanilla? And gratitude was kind of, like flavoured vanilla? I asked him.

“Yes, you are right. We just have to add the flavour, and the vanilla life turns extraordinary.”

He continued. “Going the extra mile makes all the difference to the winner. Life is not just about living on the wave; we have to rise above it. We have to be winners. We are winners. It’s just a thought process... a mindset... and yet, people rarely change their thinking. This is what we are. What we have to do... is what they say.”

“But they are also right in a way, aren’t they?” I asked him when he paused.

“It’s rational and it’s logical. But yet, truth is, without some risks, there will be no rewards....”

“You have talked about the positive elements that help you live like a winner. What would you say are the negative elements that pull us down?” I queried as I thought that knowing the devil is a better way to defeating it.

“What a lovely question!”

I squirmed with delight.

“It’s not always right to focus on the positive elements. We have to give cognizance to other elements that hold us down. That way, we are better armed to defend ourselves. Top of the list is entitlement...” He paused to think a while.

I pondered on the word. Entitlement. Isn’t that actually our ego personified?

He continued, "Entitlement is something all of us have... it is our ego, our sense of feeling that we are better than others. Like the rich son who's never seen a life of poverty... He has extreme pride in his wealth. It can buy him anything. Even people's respect. He expects it. That is an entitlement of a kind very much in vogue now. There is the politician who thinks he is above the law—entitlement. There are people who are knowledgeable, intelligent and they feel this gives them a superiority over others. There is entitlement of every kind. Most people have them. Some keep it down. Some let it besmirch their personalities... basically it is a feeling that makes you feel entitled to something which you may be entitled to, but that doesn't mean that you can break the queue... just as an example. It is a part of our ego. It comes to the fore when we feel insulted. When we are shown our place... that's why so many quarrels happen, between strangers, between friends, between members of the same family, between spouses—"

He stopped suddenly, laughing out loud. He had remembered something.

"My wife was giving me the silent treatment today and I suddenly realised that I had forgotten her birthday... Entitlement of just being wished. My fault. I have to make up for it in the evening." He said to me, still smiling.

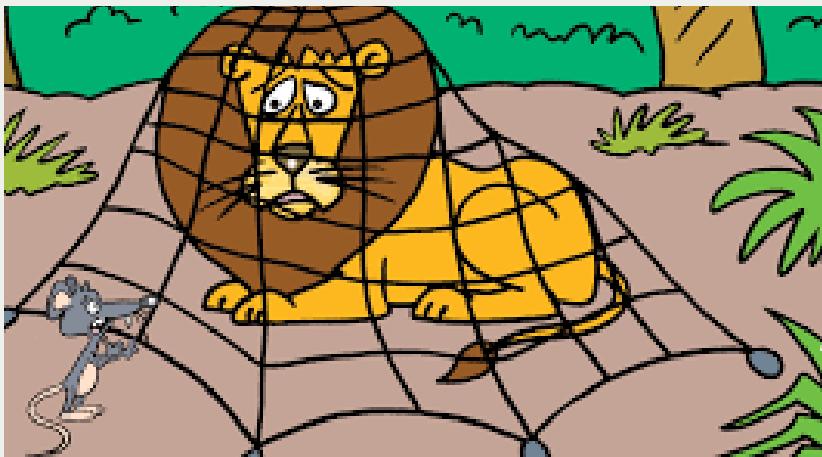
Vanilla life. He had me there. I was confused. I told him so.

"I can understand why you are confused. Vanilla life refers to the fact that every life has its good points. The richest man in India can have a wedding for his son with a budget that runs over Rs. 1000 crore (That is approximately over 1.19 billion dollars!). I remember that I spent a total of less than Rupees 10 million for both my daughters' weddings. Some others have budgets of only thousands! Let's give them their due. Everybody lives life to the fullest. The beggar on the street has his good days. The millionaire has them too. Why envy the rich of their riches when it is hard earned? Anyway... speaking of vanilla life, this is what it means: we all lead a life that our lifestyle and other allied things allow us to. That is life, that is vanilla, a common flavour that everybody has experienced. We can enhance it by adding nuts and other flavours and that is when vanilla life turns surprisingly different, enchanting..."

So that was it. We all lead a vanilla life, exciting in itself but more robust and interesting when we add flavours that make it unique and different.

Interlude Six

Patience and time achieve more...



Aesop's Fables. Who has not heard of it and not been influenced by it? Most of us have heard of the Hare and the Tortoise. Slow and steady wins the race. Yes, indeed, of all the fables, here is one that touches everyone's sensible nerves. But one that everyone must remember and burn into their brains is this: Patience and time can do more than brute force and rage.

The French quote—Patience et longueur de temps font plus que force ni que rage—is attributed to Jean de La Fontaine, a writer who collected fables from many sources, including many of Aesop's fables, and reworked them to evolve fascinating stories which were French in everything, but most of all, a symbiotic tale of human nature the world over.

What is this fable about? It's about a mighty lion and a little mouse. Once, a little mouse inadvertently wakes up a snoozing lion and is immediately

trapped under the lion's paws. As terrified as the mouse was, he blusters, "Do not eat me, mighty lion, and I will repay your generosity."

The lion gurgles with laughter. "And pray tell me, how will you do it? You are a puny little thing, and I am a lion, and I see no way that you can ever help me in any manner!"

The mouse whimpers, "I am small, sir, but when the time is right, even I can be of service."

The lion is in a magnanimous mood. He is not impressed with the mouse's words, but he lets him go and watches the mouse scamper away with a scornful look on his face.

But as fate would have it, one day, not long after he had let the mouse get away, he finds himself trapped in a net left by one of the hunters. As he writhes and turns around trying to get out of the net, he finds it get tighter around him. As he is about to give up, he sees a little mouse gnawing away at the net. Why, it is the same mouse he had let go a few days ago! The mouse works away diligently, and his efforts pry the net loose, and finally the lion is free of the net. Out of the net and out of danger, the lion thanks the mouse for his help. The mouse bows his head humbly and whiskers away.

The moral of the story: Patience and time can do more than brute force and rage.

In other words, do not burn your bridges, do not look upon the poor, the weak, or the simpletons as unworthy of life or your attention. Everybody has their use.

Only time will tell



Chapter Seven

The Old Lady and Her Lost Son



In one of my meetings, later when I had got to know him well, which was a fortnight later, I knocked on his office door and he called out, "Come in." I walked in and saw that an old lady was standing and talking with him. He smiled at me and motioned me to take a chair. I sat down and got out my phone.

"This is my cousin sister. Rukmini Akka; she is one of the residents here," he said to me.

She did a namaste in Kannada—Namaskara. I replied similar greetings to her as I stood with folded palms. Then I took the chair.

She was around 85, I guessed. She was stooped a little and had a walking stick in her hand. She stood just 5 feet and with the stoop, she must have lost another half a foot. She was dressed in a printed cotton saree, which was off-white in colour with a white blouse. Her hair was neatly tied into a bun, and it was all grey. She looked at me and then went back to her conversation with Svaha. I couldn't understand what they were saying as I was paying little attention to them; I was busy answering some text messages on my phone. I was so engrossed in the texting, I never knew when they finished talking. I heard the old woman say bye and I looked up at her. She was saying bye to Svaha. She looked at me and just nodded her head, and I nodded back. Then she walked out of the room.

Svaha sighed and took his seat behind the table.

"She's a good old lady but very troubled."

"Why is that?" I asked curiously.

"She will tell you more, I gather—if you meet her and talk to her. But what I can tell you is that she is looking... searching for her son who went missing almost 40 years ago."

"40 years ago? That's pretty long back, and the trail must have gone cold! Why now? Sounds intriguing," I said, suddenly very interested in the old lady.

"Oh, you'll find the story very interesting. Would you like to meet her? Talk to her?"

I said, "Sure." I wondered whether the old woman would be interested in talking to me.

"You know a lot of people and perhaps you can help?"

"I can try. But first let me know the whole story," I said to him, though I knew there was little I could do.

He made a call to her and asked her if she was free to meet me. He said something about me knowing a few government officials in the police and CBI. I smiled at the reference because I had told him in passing that I knew a couple of officers in the government.

She agreed to meet me, and we walked out to her cottage.

She lived in an independent house which was single-storeyed. It was next to, or behind, the dormitories. There were four cottages, or houses that were built like cottages. Circular and with red tiles. The architect had painstakingly created a house that was spacious, had two bedrooms, a hall, and a kitchen. One bedroom was on the ground floor and there was a bedroom on the first floor. She had a maid too, who lived with her and helped her through her daily walks of life.

It was an idyllic scene. A garden spread out before the house. There were no white picket fences. Just some flowering shrubs giving an aura of a fenced area. The door was open, and Svaha knocked and walked in. Though it was warm outside, the interiors of the house seemed cooler. There was no air conditioner, and the fan was whirring in the living room where the old lady now was.

She did not get up but I said a Namaskara with folded palms and she reciprocated.

"Please sit," she told us in Kannada. She had a faint rural accent, which I later learnt was because her childhood was in a village and schooling had done the rest. She had gone to a city for her college and from there on she had been urbanised, but her accent remained.

"Thank you," I said while Svaha told the lady it would be helpful if she told me, as I could also do my bit in searching for her long-lost son.

She was silent for a minute or so and then opened her eyes and looked at me in the eye and said, "It's a long story or an old story, or both—but it has got to do with a change that has come through and I have been looking for him—my son—since a year or so..." She drifted off pensively, and I was silent respectfully.

Svaha stood up from his sofa, where he had been seated. "Akka (meaning elder sister), you can tell him the entire thing. I have got something to attend to."

He looked at me and said, "Come and see me later," and he was out of the door.

I watched him go and then looked at the old lady. She asked me whether

I wanted anything to drink and I declined. Even then, she beckoned her maid who was in the kitchen to make some lemonade.

I waited.

"Let me tell you something about myself. I was born in a village near Belagavi—or Belgaum—and though we were well off, we were sent to the local government school. For nothing better to do, I studied up till 10th here... Though I was engaged by the time I was in the eighth grade. My parents wanted to marry me off then only... that was a time when little girls who hit their puberty were thought to be ready for marriage... But I wanted to study and made a ruckus, and they allowed me to continue with the assurance that I was to get married after 10th. I passed out of 10th and as luck could have it, my husband-to-be was away on some long work, and I got admission into a college in Belgaum—I hope I am not boring you?" She said abruptly.

I assured her I was not. I was visualising a strong female in the past. She got what she wanted.

"Just as I was about to enter the 12th... or PUC II year, this guy was back and I was married off to him. I could not do anything. I thought I would study after marriage too, but that was a pipe dream. There was too much to do. For my husband, my in-laws... It was a joint family with three brothers and three sisters. It was a full house, and it was only when my husband got a job in Harihar... we shifted. By then I had three kids. Two sons and a daughter. The eldest son is in the US and the daughter is married to a defence guy. It is the third child—a son—that I lost when he was around 13."

"13 seems quite old... he would have found his way back?" I said, rather defensively.

"Ah, you are right. But he was not normal. He was born with swalinateya... —what do they call it?—autism or ASD?"

I looked at her with surprise. "Autistic?" This was getting more difficult.

"Yes, he was born like that. Physically perfect and mentally not so much. Right from infancy, he needed much attention. He would always be crying. He would always throw tantrums. From infancy to childhood, he was a handful. My other children did not get the attention they deserved... But they were good and normal and did well in studies. By the time he got to be 13, he was okay, manageable, but still required assistance. He did not mind being alone. Other people's company he

abhorred. He never went to school, but I did manage to teach him the Kannada language... he picked it up well, but he never could get into a school. There was no school for special needs kids, and when it came, it was too late."

I wondered what went on in their little heads.

I later learned that many famous personalities had the first level of autism or ASD—Autism Spectrum Disorder—and it had been classified into three levels. The lowest or the first level was when people with this disorder could manage having a fully successful life, albeit with some peculiarities that, over time, became acceptable to people around them. Sheldon, from The Big Bang Theory, was definitely a character based on this disorder! But this guy, her son, must have belonged to the second or third level.

"What happened?" I asked curiously.

She continued, "We had a tough time during those days. We did not get any support from his family. My father had enough on his hands, but helped with the education of the children. Even my son could go to the US for further studies due to his help, and my daughter's marriage happened because of his generosity."

She was lucky to have a supportive family, I thought to myself.

"In every other way, we were unlucky. One day, my husband had an accident while riding his bike. He skidded, on a huge road hump that had been put overnight and without any white stripes, etc., and a truck hit him and ran over his leg. He was taken to a local hospital, unconscious, and when I was informed, I ran to the hospital. My first son and daughter also reached the hospital and, in the commotion, I had left my younger son at home without a caretaker."

She stopped suddenly and went pensive. Old memories had been stirred up, and like demons, they attacked the soul and mind, like ravenous hyenas finding a dead prey, unhindered by other scavengers. But then, it was a natural emotion for any human. More painful because it had not been resolved. Loose ends are always a bother. They never help complete the picture.

I waited and she picked up the conversation, after a while. "My husband was in bad condition. The doctors told us that he needed—his leg—to be amputated... lose a leg from his knees down... His right leg. We had no option but to agree, and his leg was amputated, and he was in bed for .

more than six months, and he walked with a crutch later. There was less money, and we had to spend much on his recovery..."

I could imagine the pain she had been through.

"On the day of his—my husband's—accident, this was exactly on Wednesday, the 24th of August in 1983. I remember the date now very clearly. But then, I had forgotten of him. That he was alone at home. It was late at night. I stayed back at the hospital and sent my son and daughter home. We had no phone at home. I did not know of my son."

"What was his name?" I asked her because she failed to name her children. Especially him.

"His name was... is Ramakrishna. We used to call him Ramu. The others are Vivek, who's currently in the US, and Valli, the daughter who's married and stays in Behrampore... she's married an army officer."

"That's interesting. An army wife. Please go on," I said to her as I sipped the coffee which was turning cold.

"Well, it was only in the morning when my son came and told me that Ramu was missing. We were used to his disappearing but he always would be back, brought back by some kind people... We expected him back by the next day. When he didn't turn up the next day, we went to the police station. But being busy with my husband in the hospital, my hands were full, and my mind—or is it my heart?—was less impacted by Ramu's disappearance. I think, by the fourth day, I was relieved when there was no news about him. Deep in my heart, I wished fervently that he remained unfound. And God answered my prayers. He never came back."

I was silent, taking in the story and feeling small strings pulling my heart. Whatever had happened to the boy? How could a mother feel that way? Time and situation can change anybody. Why not mothers?

"You had nothing to do with it... But why are you looking for him now?" That was a more interesting point. He had disappeared when he was just 13. Now he could be more than 55, an old man, whose sickness might have grown."

"Only two years ago, my fortunes changed. Life was good before that; my eldest son was in the US and bought me a house in Bengaluru. But I had little money of my own. My husband passed away when he was 65, and we were very short of funds. He had filed a case against his brothers for a stake in the farm, but it was going nowhere. And then, suddenly two

years ago, both the brothers-in-law died in a fire in their warehouse... I went to their funeral. And there I was told that they would give our share of money to me and asked me not to go ahead with the case. The money ran into crores. I said yes, and just a month later I was a very wealthy woman."

She was a millionairess. She did not appear rich, simple as she looked.

"What could I do with the money? I offered it to my son and daughter. They said they did not want it. Imagine! And then it flashed to me that I could give it to my last son, Ramu. But where was he? I had the money. I hired a retired police officer to search for him, and it is more than a year now, and he has got nothing but false leads that are quite frustrating. Do you think God is punishing me for my actions in the past? I had prayed that he be not found. And he was not. Now I want him back. I can make him live well. I have prayed to God very devotedly. I have been to so many pilgrimages. Given to the poor and needy. I sold my house and moved here. I have done everything possible, and I am still hopeful." Her voice quavered and she went silent and remained silent for a long time.

I felt the silence feel like an elephant was in the room. I was wary of breaking the creature.

"Tell me," she asked me, "How can you help?"

"It's been really late... 40 years is a long time. But we can try. I can ask my friends, and if it requires another agency—detective agency—I can put you on to someone I know who does all kinds of work."

"That would be really helpful." She grasped my hands and held it passionately.

"Of course, I would need his pictures of how he looked and how he may look now—perhaps you already have them?" I said while I disengaged my arms gently from her grievous self.

"Yes... yes... yes. I have all that," and she got up and went to a desk and pulled out a drawer, and pulled out a file. Then she walked back and handed it to me. It was quite a bundle. I scanned through it. I saw his pictures, a couple of them, and a few sketches, which I presumed, was how he might look now.

"I will talk to my friend and see what he says," I told the woman as I stood up. I did a quick namaskara to her and walked out feeling disquieted. This was going to be difficult to handle. It was

Interlude Seven

The Incredible Stephen Hawking



You could say he was an actor. He starred in Star Trek, The Simpsons, and even The Big Bang Theory. His life was the subject of the 2014 film, The Theory of Everything. He had a good sense of humour and an adventurous soul—human traits that added to his phenomenal mind.

But Stephen Hawking was actually an eminent scientist—most notable since Albert Einstein and Isaac Newton. And he belonged to two centuries: the 20th and 21st century (8th Jan, 1942 – 14 Mar, 2018). What made him special was that he was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) at the age of 21; he was given only a couple of years to live, but he disproved his doctors by living to the ripe old age of 76. He worked out of a wheelchair for the rest of his life, unable even to talk without using a computer-aided speech-generating application.

He discovered what might prove to be the key clue to the Theory of Everything, and advanced the understanding of space and time.

His findings helped shape the course of physics for the last four decades, and his insight continues to drive fundamental physics today. Hawking's body had weakened, but his intellect stayed sharp. Within two years of his PhD, he had trouble walking and talking. His engagement and marriage with Jane Wilde—he had three children with her, Robert, Lucy, and Tim—renewed his drive to make real progress in physics.

Hawking studied the work of Roger Penrose: that if Einstein's General Theory of Relativity was proved correct, at the heart of every black hole, there must be a point where space and time themselves break down—a singularity. Hawking realised that if the time direction were reversed, the same reasoning would hold true for the universe as a whole.

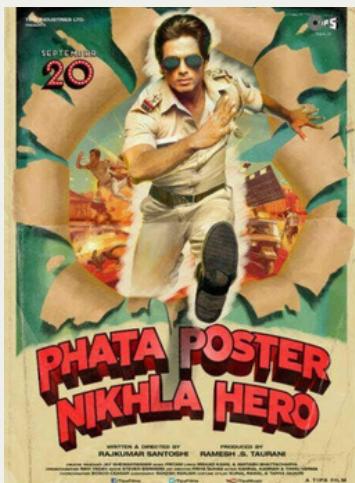
A Brief History of Time catapulted Hawking to cultural stardom and gave a fresh face to theoretical physics. It sold more than 25 million copies worldwide.

Hawking remains an enigma and legend despite his physical challenges and stands as a role model for those that are differently-abled.



Chapter Eight

'Pataphysics Aur Nikla Hero



His findings helped shape the course of physics for the last four decades, and his insight continues to drive fundamental physics today. Hawking's bод "Have you seen or heard of a film called Phata Poster Nikhla Hero, which was released many years ago?" Svaha asked me one day when we were in the midst of a discussion of how living above the wave was consistent or inconsistent with the great philosophies of the world.

So, this question about a Hindi potboiler seemed like a digression. I, however, decided to humour him.

"I have not seen the movie—I read some good reviews and the name is amusing." It translates to 'the poster tore apart and out came the hero.' It was supposed to be a pun.

"The name is what we should focus on." He guffawed loudly at my look. Then he asked me, "Have you heard of 'Pataphysics?"

I said I had heard of it but nothing more.

He went silent for a while before he spoke. "There is a philosophy of absurdism that was popular because it defied all logic. It was called 'Pataphysics, or Pataphysique in French, which is an alteration of the word *métaphysique* (metaphysics). The first known use of the term was in 1934. It is written with an apostrophe before the first 'p'. That, in itself, should tell you that it is an absurd theory or philosophy. 'Pataphysics satirises nonsense. It is said to be created by the Frenchman, Alfred Jarry. Alfred's most famous work, *Ubu Roi*, was a forerunner to his

becoming a role model for avant-garde artists. The play playfully scorns the French monarchy and explores themes of chaos and anarchy. Andrew Hugill's book 'Pataphysics is another important book on the subject. Alfred propounded that the world couldn't be understood in one easy way. Basically, he was making fun of people, the academicians, et al., and their pretentious knowledge who assumed they knew everything."

I thought it was amusing. "Amusing," I said. "But tell me, why talk of 'Pataphysics... does it have anything to do with the living wave?"

"Life is a bit absurd in itself and hence the connection," He replied with a smile.

"Yes, I guess so," I concurred with him, "in parts..."

"To understand 'Pataphysics is to fail to understand 'Pataphysics," He quoted. And he continued, "It's a playful philosophy that mocks the conventions of science, religion, and philosophy. It revels in absurdity and paradox, intentionally defying traditional logic and embracing contradictions. It rarely makes sense and therein lies its whole essence. Life can be, sometimes, something like this."

I think I understood him and 'Pataphysics to some extent. But I was still dark about most of the topic.

Svaha looked at me and laughed.

"Your perplexity is like a world—a mirror to rationality. We live in an absurd world but seek logical answers to it. It is like the era has not changed where eminent thinkers of the day believed the universe and everything in it could be explained and understood in a single book. Science does too, in the Theory of Everything. But that's a fickle dream. That's why 'Pataphysics matters."

I tried to grapple with reality. But he continued.

"This brings us to the realm of metaphysics. Perhaps 'Pataphysics is a meta-metaphysics that suggests that everything—both physical and metaphysical—is a kind of imagined fiction. True, it makes fun of everything but it does not shield itself from being made fun of. 'Pataphysics, it is said, will always be sardonic. It is nonsense..."

I finally saw the rational or irrationality of 'Pataphysics. It was nonsense.

"Do you mean that life is nonsense?" I asked him seriously.

He laughed boisterously. I waited

“No, I don’t mean life is nonsense. But the philosophy of ‘Pataphysics states that unequivocally. And I tend to agree with it, sometimes. Like Murphy’s Law. It has its moments. Wait, I will give you some statements of ‘Pataphysics...” He picked up his phone and entered something and then a few seconds later he held the phone so I could see what he had searched.

Examples of ‘Pataphysics Ideas

- Correct definitions are the same as wrong definitions
- All religions are equally important and imaginary
- Chalk is actually cheese

I laughed out loudly. But I understood him clearly now. Murphy’s Law got me to the element. And this was better.

He kept his phone down and said to me, “But let’s move forward. What do you understand by metaphysics?”

I stared at him, puzzled. I thought I knew the answer, but right now, I was speechless.

“Okay, let me break it down for you. Physics refers to everything physical, and metaphysics refers to everything beyond physical things. Superman—or Metaman—is something ahead of the ordinary man...”

I wondered then whether I finally understood the Superman of Clark Kent or the Superman of the philosopher.

“I overstep my boundaries when I refer to Superman. Let’s come back to the ordinary life and the meta within us.”

He seemed to be enjoying himself.

I wondered what he was coming to.

“Every part of the human body is physical. The arms and legs, to the heart and brain... but wait, we have sight and hearing, which are again electrical signals which are physical in nature, so what part of the human body is metaphysical?”

He was silent and waited for me to answer but I was stuck in a blank mind.

He cleared his throat and then looking into his papers he articulated, “The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states that the word ‘metaphysics’ is notoriously hard to define. Elsewhere there is an elaboration of the word: ‘One might almost say that in the seventeenth century metaphysics began to be a catch-all category, a repository of philosophical problems that could not be otherwise

classified as epistemology, logic, ethics or other branches of philosophy.¹ Wikipedia defines metaphysics as the branch of philosophy that examines the basic structure of reality. It is often characterised as first philosophy, implying that it is more fundamental than other forms of philosophical inquiry.

"I would like to propose a new definition. Let us be content with what physics stands for. All physical forms that we are acquainted with: the universe in general and even the black holes within. Those without physical form belong to metaphysics. The simplest example is our thoughts. Imagine, within ourselves, thoughts are metaphysical—only thoughts... without a physical form. When spoken out, words—electrical vibrations that have been converted from metaphysical form to a physical form. Voila! We have formed a connection between the philosophical metaphysics to the physical physics!"

I tried to understand him. And to an extent began to understand that metaphysics was a real thing. Because I knew my thoughts were real.

"So, then there is much to what ancient philosophers thought about it to what the middle-age thinkers reworded. It is definitely beyond physics. It is ahead of physics. It is metaphysics!"

"Isn't all philosophy metaphysical?" I countered.

"Let's leave that debate to students of philosophy and to the esteemed philosophers. We have to explore what it means to live life as we know it..."

I looked askance at him. "Is this another aspect of life... what does it meant to live as a winner?" I looked at him, quizzically.

"Yes, you are right." He looked straight at me and said, "This relates to life as we know it, and why living like a winner is really quite simple."

I did not get that part.

He was not influenced by my look at that moment either.

"We know for sure that there are two parts to life. The physical and the metaphysical. We understand our thoughts and reactions are responsible for that. To become a winner, we have to conquer our metaphysical part—which could be or is our conscience—and this would unequivocally nudge our physical counterpart towards the right direction."

"But what I think I know of metaphysics is that it alludes to something different, something deeper..." I told him with confusion writ on my face.

He was quick to reply. "True, very true. Simply put, metaphysics deals

with the nature of existence, truth, and knowledge. According to the world, metaphysics explores the fundamental nature of reality, including the relationship between mind and matter and substance and attribute, and potentiality and actuality. It is a complex and abstract field that seeks the principles and structures of the universe, such as space, time, and causality. The key point is it is an abstract field. I have just rounded it off to conscience—which is not far off the mark..."

I could see some sense in his explanation.

But why were we discussing metaphysics? I wondered out aloud.

"We were actually discussing 'Pataphysics and its co-relation to life, and that's how we ended up discussing metaphysics," He answered patiently.

I tried to review the discussion and thought deeply about the ramifications on the larger goal of riding the wave of life or staying above the line, to becoming winners in the long run.

"So life is really unpredictable and there is every chance that we are doomed to fail if we take one wrong step?" I asked him.

"Life is unpredictable. But our thoughts and actions need not be. That is where the line or the wave of life gains equilibrium. We get many chances to fail and to succeed. Actually, the chances to success are more than the chances to failure."

I looked at him unsure of what to make of it.

"Fools die many times, the valiant die only once." Have you heard of this adage? It is similar to normal life. Smart people, wise people will make the right choices. Fools will make the wrong ones and they pay for it."



Interlude Eight

The Romance of the Masai Mara



A Bar-tailed Godwit recently (2022) is said to have flown 8,435 miles (\$13,560 \text{ km}) non-stop from Alaska to Tasmania. The 11-day journey, without rest or food, was tracked by a satellite tag. The Guinness World Records book has recorded this bird flying non-stop, breaking the record for the longest non-stop migration of a bird. What a bird! And what stamina and endurance! But then it is not the only one. Many birds migrate thousands of miles to beat the winter.

So do the Monarch butterflies, tiny little things, who fly on their dainty wings from Mexico to Canada!

Whales do in the oceans, and animals do too on land.

And one of the most magnificent and awe-inspiring scenes of migration is by millions of wildebeest (or gnus), zebras, antelopes, and other herd animals who cross the Serengeti and Masai Mara region. It's a fascinating scene. So magnificent and large it is, that it's called the Great Migration,

and people from all over the world come here to witness the astounding scenery, especially the river crossing.

This migration is actually a continuous, year-long journey of animals migrating through Tanzania and Kenya in a cyclical manner. They follow the seasons. East Africa's wide wide-open grasslands are the setting for the migration as millions of wildebeest (also known as clowns of Africa!), Burchell's zebras, antelopes, and other herd animals make the trek from the Serengeti in Tanzania to the Masai Mara in Kenya. While significant numbers into the multi-thousands do clump together, more often there are smaller herds spread throughout a region or multiple regions. All of these herds make the trek with two things in mind: fresh grazing lands and water. And on the way, they multiply.

Along the way, many migrating animals become prey to predators including lions, cheetahs, crocodiles, and hyenas. Hundreds of thousands of wildebeest and over 40,000 zebras perish in this tough trek, mainly younger ones. The lions get the pick of the pack, a break from regular buffalo meat.

This migration spans some 1,200 miles over two countries. And the migration itself is made up of events that we call life. These events include mating rituals, calving, and the shifting fortunes of the herd, all of which are influenced by the subtle changes in rainfall that occur through the year.



Chapter Nine

Plan to Win



One day, I decided to quiz him further on the best way to live.

"The best way to predict the future is to invent it.... It is a quote by an eminent personality and has been attributed to many," he told me when I asked him the question.

"So, all we have to do is plan and keep up with the plan." He appeared smug.

It seemed simple enough, but the catch was that we did not always stick to the plan or, as in most cases, the goalposts kept changing as time passed by.

He reiterated my thoughts.

"Planning is very important. It's like budgeting. As we have to manage with a budget, so also, we need to plan and adapt to the circumstances. If we don't have a budget, we are prone to end up in disarray. Hence planning is essential for everything. It is one way to stay a winner in life."

"Seems easy enough to say but hard to follow..."

"On the contrary, we are programmed to plan, but it is because we are insouciant to the needs of life, that we sometimes throw good sense to the wind and do what suits us most. Instant gratification..."

"...That's a nice thought. So, instant gratification is the enemy of planning?"

"You will notice that more often than not, it was, or is, the search for instant gratification that leads us down the path of irrationality."

"In fact," he continued, "Instant gratification has been the reason for the rise and fall of mankind."

A profound statement that was all too incredulous.

"Really?" I asked him aloud, incredulity in my voice.

He smiled. "It is a simple observation that has deep ramifications... Consider the fact that the human body is similar in many ways to the animals. We have a mind, but it had developed and found congruence with life. But yet, we are physically prone to listen and act out according to our physiological needs."

Before I could drag him back with more questions, he stopped me.

"Bear with me as I tell you about our plans and our psychological make-up."

This sounded intriguing.

"I have told you the wave or line that we need to traverse or ride in order to be a winner. But I believe there is something more." He said as he leaned back on his chair, eyes closed.

I listened patiently.

He continued, "From infancy, we are exposed to varying emotions and circumstances that mould us. But unconsciously, we are being more affected than we realise. It is almost like we are weaving, or life around us is weaving, threads to form a blanket of what we ultimately become in our later lives." He laughed suddenly and I looked at him quizzically.

"Reminds me of Charlie Brown and his friend with the real blanket..."

And I smiled too at the imagery.

"But the blanket or web that is woven around us is psychological and goes on to influence almost every part of our lives."

I was doubtful and I asked him to elaborate.

"Every word we hear, every action and every emotion that we are subject

to... or exposed to, is recorded in our brain. Knowingly or unknowingly, we act out according to our affinity to that thought, and in the process, we seal our fates."

I was sceptical. "But it is not something proven?"

"One arm of psychiatry believes profoundly in the subconscious. Freud himself was so sure of the subconscious mentality that his entire profession is based on psychoanalysis. He developed therapy around this line of thought. Freud is, in fact, the first person to develop a model of psychic structure comprising Id, Ego, and Superego. Apart from psychiatry, modern medicine alludes to mental health as one of the main constituents of health care. So, there is a possible, real possibility, that we are framed by our unconscious self, that is to say we are guided by them, in our words and deeds."

"Are you saying we are a sum of all that has happened to us in the past and even, right now?" I asked him.

"That is exactly what I'm saying. But like free will is debatable to some extent, so also, to say this without any arguments is nigh impossible."

I got him. But I wanted to hear more.

"Can you give an example... of this in real life?"

He laughed and said, "I can and I will. Take my own life for example. I was born with a silver spoon. And my father and mother were both educated. They were religious but not fanatically so. There were bits of superstition that lingered and held its sway. I got a good education. Read some good books and education till the master's level, helped me further my brain skills. All through childhood, I was influenced by my parents and relatives, then by my teachers and friends, what I read and saw. I was influenced aplenty by movies. And my actions were a reflection of who I was genetically and who I had become through indoctrination or doctri nation... education, people, parents, friends, life..."

He went silent and I could see he was trying to grapple with the past. I let him be. Silence filled the room.

"The best way to live is to improve yourself every day. The rich try to be richer. The religious seek to get closer to their Gods. The poor have to aim to get richer. The illiterate must try and get educated... there is a scope for everyone to improve themselves. If you stop doing that, you cease to live, and cease to be a winner." He concluded with a wry chuckle.

Interlude Nine

Richard Williams



"A goal without a plan is just a wish." Antoine de Saint-Exupéry said this, and Richard Williams, father of Venus Williams and Serena Williams, took it to heart. King Richard is the 2021 biopic that depicts the journey to stardom for tennis players, Serena and Venus Williams. Although the movie shows the sisters' early years, it mainly focuses on their father, Richard Williams, and his methods for their success. These methods not only focus on their physical training but highlight the importance of mental training. And planning was an integral part of the mental process. Planning.

While training in their neighbourhood park, Richard would hang signs around the court. "You are a winner!"—very basic, but if you constantly see it, hear it, and say it, one might start believing that.

"If you fail to plan, you plan to fail." This motto was not only on the park posters but also seen on a magnet on their refrigerator in the film.

There is no need to change this direct quote from Richard. You stick to your plan and you are a champion in the making!

Venus was approached by a shoe company before her tournament debut, offering her an endorsement deal for \$3 million. She chose to wait until she was able to show off her skills before signing the deal. Later, she signed a deal with another company for a whopping \$12 million. She was only 15.

On their way to practice, Richard drives the family through a mansion-filled town. Still moulding their confidence, he tells them that one day they'll be able to buy whatever house they want.

When a tennis coach asked Serena, "Who would you want to play like?", she answered, "I'd like other people to want to play like me."

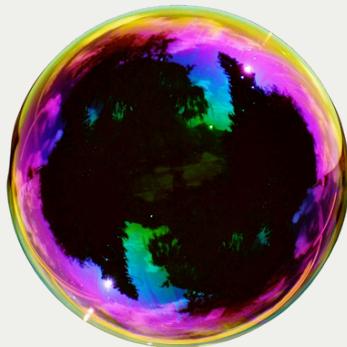
Another direct quote, this time from Venus Williams. Her response right before her first pro-match against Arantxa Vicario, when asked how did she think she would do.

She is said to have said, "I'll just do it."



Chapter Ten

Scientific Reasoning...



"Let's talk about whether there is any scientific reasoning to the wave we are supposed to live above." I broached on the term again, wanting to know whether there were any laws that governed our living. I wanted a perspective that challenged contemporary thinking: whether it was fate, destiny or karma, God, or anything else.

I was meeting him after a break.

He looked up from the accounts book he was peering through. His spectacle on his nose was round, like Gandhi used to wear them. "What was that, again?"

I repeated my question.

He put away the book he was seeing and looked up at me. "Indeed, there are plenty of scientific reasons. I have told you about the chaos theory, absurdism, and the butterfly effect. Let's take it further. We are actually the after-effects of our moments lived shortly in real time, forever stored in our hippocampus, like hippopotamuses in a placid lake: that makes our

life a compendium of moments knitted together like a colourful Christmas sweater: and that is like saying, we are just an overblown moment in time's confounding and eternal journey to nowhere.

Your thoughts are cognitive substances, linear products produced by your hippocampus, stored as an electrical impulse, sub-atomic and invisible to the human eye and beyond the understanding of the material amygdala, but multidimensional in subject matter. Your thought is now a memory, stored forever, retrieved randomly. I am thinking now and it is now a part of this conversation as well as my temporal lobe. Your thoughts are the algorithms that define your life. Think carefully.

You can read a million articles and books on making better decisions, avoiding bias, and raising your EQ, but they'll do you no good if your emotions regularly swamp your ability to think through problems constructively."

I listened to him quietly.

"Scientific reasoning is the root of becoming a winner," He said, and I believed him.

"But it has to be backed by strong and controlled emotions," He continued. "This is a way of saying that good decision making, healthy relationships, and all-around success in life depend on getting your emotions under control."

"So, becoming a winner means that you have to control your emotions? Can your relationship with others also improve?" I asked him politely.

"Very true—you have to control your emotions if you want to become a winner. And as to relationships—you have to hear what a study has to say about a happy life. A Harvard Study of Adult Development has concluded that when it comes to living a long and happy life, the quality of your relationships matters most."

"Really? A good relationship is what makes for a good life. Could you then say a quality relationship is a step ahead of scientific relations and emotive control?" I questioned him further.

"They are all symbiotic in reality. Scientific reasoning can lead us to better control of our emotions, and this in turn can make us better human beings with quality relationships."

I understood him very well now. But it was still far from my objective of realising whether the wave that we understood to control our lives had

any scientific reasoning or realistic formula that could be applied to it. I said so to him.

He was pensive for a moment, then replied, "There are no scientific facts associated with the view. There are a vast number of studies and case studies that prove many of the points in the wave theory. But realistically, I have no clear picture of the studies that have been done. An astrological Janam Kundali (Birth Chart) might be the closest relative, but as you know, they can hardly be right in all aspects. It is true that a majority of our human composition is affected by the gravitational pull of celestial objects. But do they really govern your life totally? Debatable. So many factors are an essential part of a man's life. The organic and the inorganic. Genetics, family, education, friends, aptitude, attitude, challenges, likes and dislikes... the list is long and cannot be numbered and counted as a single element controlling lives."

"So, it is literally a belief system?"

"Belief, yes. But that is the important part of life. To believe in something is called faith. It can be hyperbole in some cases. But to subscribe to a belief that can be explained realistically is plain common sense. So, I would call it common sense rather than a belief system."

An answer that had both positive nuances.

"Can you tell me more on this," I persisted.

He laughed out loud. "Common sense is very uncommon, and it is better we call it intelligence. I could go further and call it emotional intelligence. For example, In The Good Life, (a book) the writers, Robert Waldinger and Marc Schulz, explain that emotionally intelligent people don't let their emotions drive their actions. They are said to employ the WISER Model to process their feelings and actively choose a wise course of action. What is the WISER Model? WISER stands for Watch, Interpret, Select, Engage, and Reflect. Basically, it is to think before reacting. I concur with the model."

"So, you would say that this is a part of the wave and not the wave in whole? That, it helps or goes a long way in making us winners?" I asked him seriously.

"You said it. It is a part of the wave. An important part. While it would be debatable which is more relevant. Small things matter. Bigger things matter more. So, we should have the ability to understand what is more important and pick that element. For refinement and a purpose."

"What happens to those whose thoughts or common sense—in this case, unintelligence—leads them to make unsavoury decisions?" I asked him, suddenly feeling left out among the many losers.

He looked at me with a sage-like air.

"For most humans that is always the case. They are unable to make a wise decision. Or even a logical one. In this case, many are apt to take the advice of the wise. That is good. More important is to take the example of successful stories around us and follow that. Follow the people who succeed in life. Follow the system. You are less likely to fail when you have good role models."

"That is quite an answer," I told him quite sincerely.

There it was. I was flabbergasted at the simplicity of the plan. All roads lead to success. To victory. Even fools can win this race. Everyone had an equal opportunity to ride the wave of success. Everyone could stay above the line. They just had to make the move.



Epilogue

Ramu Comes Home



Between the conversations with Svaha, we had touched upon the subject of Ramu. In the last conversation, he had told me that Rukmini had gone out of town to meet some people in this regard. I decided to catch up with her after she was back.

I have tried hard to grasp Svaha's principles on how to live like a winner, and it seems like a tough job. First comes the acceptance of such a philosophy, and next is to give up the denial of some practices which have become a norm of our daily life. For one, how does one become another person? For, giving up all that I am, at least, most of it, will make me into another person. Perhaps a better person. We need a reward for everything we do and everything we accomplish. Perhaps that will prompt us to live a better life. The reward of becoming a better person is in itself much of a winning of this game we call life.

But I thought I should address a concern, and that was to be directed to

Svaha. Over all my discussions, there were multiple thoughts on how to live like a winner. It was almost confusing. I said so to him in one of my recent discussions with him.

"You speak of so many factors that contribute to an individual living like a winner. The Four Quadrants, the ABC of Life, Gratitude, Hippocrates... it is somewhat confusing. There are too many issues... Too many variables..." He replied nonchalantly, "That is the thing. There are indeed too many variables. We cannot be good at everything. We cannot control all the variables. But accomplishing a few, even one, would make us a winner."

"You are saying that despite so many variables, if we can conquer one of them, we might still lead an accomplished life?"

"Yes, indeed. The important thing is to know that there are many factors that can make you successful. Knowledge makes the man a more complete individual. And if that knowledge leads you to control one or more factors, you are the dictator of your life: you can turn it around as you please."

We spoke some more and then I left for home.

It was a few weeks later that I received a call from Svaha.

He told me excitedly, "Ramu has been found."

I was stunned and happy with the news.

I learned later from him and others on how it came about. I had personally talked to a senior official in the police in Bengaluru, and he had come up with a blank. I had put him across to a private investigator who had been hired by the mother. It had been some days and I had lost track of the case. But here it was, right in my face, and I, in some small way, was responsible for the happy ending.

The PI, Anita, after painstaking investigation and some bit of serendipity, had zeroed in on Ramu having been through a hospital. Ramu had somehow reached Bengaluru by train. He must have been coaxed into doing this by someone who saw his rolled gold chain as the real thing. He had his head smashed hard and he was shorn of the rolled gold chain around his neck, as well as his card—which had details of his home and address—and left for dead. But some cleaners found him in the train compartment, unconscious. He had been taken to a nearby government hospital, where he was operated upon and stitched up. He had been in the general ward when he was visited by some nuns from a convent in the city. They saw him lying alone, unattended, and, moved by his

pathetic condition, offered to take him to their own nursing home. The government hospital, overrun with patients, had agreed quite easily. He was transferred to the nursing home and was treated well and regained consciousness, but his memory was kaput.

He did not recall his name or address. But he was correctly diagnosed as suffering from Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). He had difficulty in communication, social interactions, and had a repetitive behaviour disorder.

As serendipity would have it, a couple from Norway, who were also doctors—the woman being a specialist paediatrician—were visiting the convent and happened to come to the nursing home. They had met Ramu and taken a keen interest in him. They apparently felt that they could get him better treatment in Oslo, and with due permissions from the government, an emergency passport made out to a John Doe, they had taken him by a chartered flight to Oslo.

The PI had tracked Ramu to the convent and got the details of the Norwegian couple and their contacts. They had come back to the nursing home with Ramu 10 years later and tried to ascertain his past, but found nothing to help them. The PI had pursued getting in touch with them and found out that he was a Norwegian citizen now and partially cured of his Autism. He was now 55 years old and apparently had no recollection of his past. Until the PI met him personally at Oslo.

The mother agreed to send the PI to Oslo to verify whether this guy, called Jakob Anderson, was indeed Ramu. She gave her all the details she had of her son. She revealed that he had a birth mark on his chest—a brown finger-tip sized cluster of pigment cells. They had sent his photographs throughout his growing up and the latest, and the mother was convinced that he was her boy.

The PI met Ramu in Oslo and confirmed that he was indeed Ramu. The verification of the birth mark was a crucial part, and it had been proven to exist. But a more important part was whether Ramu or Jakob was keen on meeting his mother and siblings. The PI confirmed that Jakob was overjoyed and eager to meet his mother, though he barely remembered her.

He was coming back with the PI.

I went to the old age home in the morning, as he was expected to come straight from the airport to meet his mother.

I met Svaha and his wife at his house. The mother was there. All jittery and nervous, but absolutely ecstatic with happiness.

We received a call from the airport from the PI and later when they were in the car nearing the old age home. We stepped out, all of us, nearly 30 of us including a priest/pujari, to see the cars drive up to the villa.

The vehicles stopped. I stood a distance away while the mother rushed up to the first car. The doors opened and out stepped Ramu. He was tall and rugged with long hair. He had a beautiful smile on his clean-shaven face. He looked around and spotted his mother. No introductions were necessary. He seemed to know instinctively that she was his mother. He did not say anything. He reached out with both his arms and enveloped her in a heart-wrenching hug. I could hear her cry loudly, unabashedly. And he was crying too. Softly, and the tears rolled down his cheeks. I couldn't help brushing away a tear from my eye.

The surprises were many.

After they had hugged to their heart's content, Ramu introduced his wife, who was tall and pretty with short red hair. She hugged his mother and kissed her fiercely on her cheeks. Then two kids in their teens stepped out of the other car and were introduced to the mother. They were Ramu's kids.

"This is life," Svaha whispered to me as he threw both his arms out pointing towards Ramu and his mother, and stretched them out sweeping to his left and right.



Conclusion

Continuous Learning: Education is important. School, college, and the entirety of life is a classroom.

Embrace Gratitude: Fill your heart with gratefulness.

The Power of Grace: Grace will follow.

Cultivate Virtues: This is accompanied by very positive feelings, such as being humane, kind, thoughtful, and understanding.

Forgiveness: With understanding will come forgiveness.

Humility: With such feelings, you will surely be humble.

Control Negative Emotions: Control your envy, jealousy, anger, and disenchantment.

Curb Entitlement: Contain your feeling of entitlement.

Action Over Inaction: Don't be lazy or procrastinate.

Start small, end big.

Eliminate Negativity: Stop doing the things that negatively influence your life.

Discipline and Commitment: Give your 100% to work, your employers, and your colleagues. Be disciplined and plan for the future.

Observe and Adapt: Observe and adapt the good ways.

Daily Improvement: Improve yourself every day; a fraction of improvement per day will make you complete in less than a year.

Emotional Mastery: Control your emotions. Take control of your life.

Conscious Response: Think before you react.