

A second career

by

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Being something of a novice in such public speaking, and not having my familiar prop of a blackboard or pdf file flashed on a screen from a computer, I beg your leave to ‘read out my talk’ (since I am more confident of my writing skills than my speaking skills). Let me ease into this talk by telling you of its genesis, as well as *why me?*

A couple of weeks ago, I received an email which began with the writer of the email introducing herself as representing a \$12 billion firm whose Global Outsourcing (BPO) business based in Chennai addressed a variety of needs for vertical segments that include financial services, publishing, transportation, telecommunications, healthcare, advertising, and investment banking. The writer of the email went on to invite me to give a lecture as part of a ‘Leadership Series’, and said some of her people would like to come and talk to me about it some time.

Curiouser and curiouser, as Lewis Carroll would put it! I was sure that her organisation did not really want a lecture on abstruse points regarding the interconnections between von Neumann algebras and free probability. So I sent back a puzzled response asking the writer (who was your colleague Jaya, by the way) if she was aware of who I was and just what I did, gave her the link to my home-page, asked her to take a look at it and decide if she still wanted her people to talk to me. Prompt came the response: not only was she familiar with my home-page, but she had also read some pieces of mine carried in recent weeks by ToI, and it was the subject matter of those that she wanted me to talk about. She said she would like me to talk about *how organizations and leaders should look beyond the narrow interests of profits and how they should look at creating broader societal impact which will benefit businesses in the longer run...*

By the way, Lewis Carroll (referred to above) was actually the pen name used by a mathematician called Charles Dodgson who wrote such masterpieces as *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* as an alternative pastime; but almost nobody remembers his mathematical legacy! I, too, am a mathematician, and while I must have given more than 500 lectures, this is the first time I have been asked to give a non-mathematical talk. All my life, I have been a

research mathematician, writing papers and books, lecturing to students, guiding research work leading to Ph.D. theses, participating in conferences on such exciting themes as *Operator Algebras and Ergodic Theory*, etc.. So why am I committing this rash act of stepping out of my comfort zone, venturing into uncharted waters, and attempting to talk on something other than mathematics which is what I have been trained in for just about forty years now?

I think I can fairly safely describe myself as a moderately accomplished mathematician, having been elected Fellow of all three science academies in India, awarded the Bhatnagar Prize (considered the highest honour that our Government confers on one of its scientists), being invited to conferences all over the world, etc., etc; in short, I was one cocky guy with everything going for him. The story this talk is about started about 10 years ago - when I was visiting the beautiful Math Sciences Research Institute in Berkeley, located on top of a hill with a breathtaking view of the bay below - and I noticed a little difficulty in all the necessary climbing and walking. Shortly after I returned to India, I gave a lecture at ISI, Kolkata, which was attended by a former colleague of mine, who had not heard me speak in some years. He had noticed some slurring in my speech, and diffidently suggested that I might want to seek the opinion of a neurologist. The reason I mentioned awards, globe-trotting, etc., is to drive home the point that things can change overnight.

I had one of those ‘life-changing moments’ when I made an appointment to see Dr. Krishnamoorthy Srinivas, whom I had happened to hear giving a popular talk in my institute. I walked into his office, and I could tell that I was in the presence of someone special. Over time, I learnt how right that was. Just imagine, if you can:

1. He does not charge you anything, and when you insist on paying something, he tells you the name of a charitable organisation to which a donation can be made, if you so wished;
2. He spends most of his time attending to patients from the most rich and powerful to the most poor and underprivileged, at such places as the Voluntary Health Services in Taramani.
3. He insists on your fixing up your appointments beforehand with him on the phone, and his punctuality ensures that if your appointment with him is for 11 am, you can safely arrange to make a subsequent appointment to meet somebody else at 12 even after allowing for 15 minutes’ travel time.

4. He is one of only three Indians to have been offered an honorary membership by the American Neurological Association. As can be imagined, his list of honours will take a full hour to list. If interested, you can always ask Google!

You may well wonder if such a doctor indeed exists in today's world!

After two years of various tests and MRI scans to eliminate other possibilities, he zeroed in on the diagnosis - multiple sclerosis. Google will tell you that this condition manifests itself in various forms, with the worst case scenario involving a steady deterioration of motor functions at the very least. Since then, I must have had at least ten MRI scans, and made periodic visits to the doctor, where I was always reassured by his calming assurances that among his patients, my condition was among the best.

Thus mine did not seem to be of the very virulent variety, but over the years, my ability to walk any non-trivial distance became increasingly suspect. I hobbled around with a stick for some years and even that was proving more and more taxing. Last year, the International Congress of Mathematicians (held once every four years, in different countries) came to India (to Hyderabad) for the first time ever. Having attended ICMs in Berkeley, Kyoto, Berlin and Beijing, I was not going to miss the chance of playing host on my home turf to many friends from outside India.

That was when I decided - my next life-altering decision - to go to *Callidai Motor Works* and get a motorised wheel-chair. I had met Bhargav Sundaram, the owner of this company on an earlier social occasion, and it was difficult to not come under the spell of his electric optimism that with such supporting devices, one could resume a perfectly normal life. And his workshop was a revelation - being manned only by people with some manner of disability, moving around on an assortment of wheels, all working in great camaraderie and with brisk efficiency.

I did take the wheel-chair to the ICM in Hyderabad, and had an absolute ball, whizzing around on it. Back in Chennai, I find it most convenient to leave it at my institute most of the time, as it is not so convenient to use it in my apartment house or even in my own apartment. That is when I started bullying the Director of my institute - a very supportive, sympathetic, and immensely

accomplished number theorist - into doing something about making as much as possible of the institute accessible to my wheel-chair. (The drive-ways into the porches of two buildings were re-fashioned, with the steps at the entrances to the buildings removed, and the drive sloping up gracefully from the road to the level of the floor of the ground floor, so the wheel-chair could just drive in and out of the buildings!) The administrators of my institute had the intelligence to realise that by providing a congenial atmosphere for people like me, they were making a hugely worthwhile investment for the future, and not merely 'taking pity on me' or being socially responsible.

That was also when I realised that I had been inordinately fortunate, in so many ways: for one, I had such a supportive administration, which facilitated my continuing to be a productive and useful member of the institute. (I now play the role of an unofficial 'head of the math group there.) On the other hand, just about any building outside my institute is, more often than not, very inaccessible to the disabled. I wanted to **do** something about this sorry state of inaccessibility that we were surrounded by. So I fixed up to meet and talk to an old friend of mine called Hema who had been affected by polio even as a little girl, and has, over the past sixty-odd-years, built a fantastic organisation called the *Association for People with Disabilities*. (You should ask Google to educate you about APD if you are not familiar with the organisation or how it was started.) Hema certainly **did** something about problems faced by the disabled, and I went to her like a student seeking a guru's guidance. After we had spoken for a while, she asked me to try and write so people became aware of the problems faced by people like us. (By the way, Google can never provide what her wisdom can! It can only drown you in a flood of information, not distinguishing the garbage from the pearls.)

Some time before that, I had been to a meeting of the Indian Academy of Sciences, Bangalore, which had been organised at what must surely rank as **the most** disabled-unfriendly building I have ever seen. So I wrote a short piece called *Stairway to Heaven or ...*, referring to the number of steps you had to navigate to go anywhere in that masterpiece of sadism; that piece subsequently appeared in *Current Science*, published ironically by the same Indian Academy of Sciences! - but only after some of my more vitriolic phrases (such as 'masterpiece in sadism') had been edited out. I used that piece and some other samples of what I had in mind to convince a sympathetic editor of the *Times of India* to give me a column, which I called

Different Strokes for Different Folks, where I could air my views to *periodically remind people of the special needs of the differently abled*. This editor, Jaideep Bose, has been so supportive as to give my column a prominent spot on the top right corner of the *Op-Ed* page opposite the Editorials page, marked by a striking banner in red, and appearing every other Saturday. In fact, there was some mix-up in communication, resulting in my second piece appearing only three Saturdays after the first one. When I wrote to Jaideep demanding an explanation, he shouldered the blame for not having reminded somebody that it needed to be done. Although this was almost definitely that junior editor's mistake, Jaideep came through a winner in my eyes: a good leader does not blame his underlings for minor goofs!

So now I have a 'second career' and I find myself reinvigorated, with a new purpose in life. It was almost as if this second career was fated. My closest friend, whom I first befriended more than 40 years ago, in my first year of college, was blind. Venky was sighted until about the age of 11, when something to do with how his retina was growing 'turned off the lights on him'. I have seen his fierce independence and aversion to 'sympathy and commiseration', and have become a more sensitive and better human being for it. He has devoted his entire life to empowering the disabled all over India and the world by helping them identify their problems as well as working out possible solutions, which he would try to facilitate by using the contacts he had built over a life of working in this area. I still remember my first meeting with him : we were talking after 8.15 pm in his room in the hostel (Room No. 42, Bishop Heber Hall, MCC, Tambaram). Now 8.15 was the time of the 'roll-call', after which you were supposed to be in your room studying. We thought the 'roll call' was over, when the warden of the hostel walked in and wanted to know what we thought we were doing. Quick as a flash, Venky tells him that he was informing the new secretary of the college's 'Students Service for the Blind' of things needing to be done. I did not have a choice of refusing even if I had wanted to! My job turned out to be organising enough readers for the six blind students we had in our college then, as well as working out a schedule so that each blind student had readers for at least two hours a day at times mutually acceptable to reader and read. I myself read quite a few hours; and Venky was smart enough to directly talk to and get the most attractive girls in college to read to him!

Back to my column: in addition to trying to write something relevant

every two weeks, I have been trying to also apply pressure on my academic contacts to force their institutes to build the odd ramp that could make all the difference. (I had written an impassioned plea (in my column) to the heads of our centres of higher learning to make their campuses models of road culture and accessibility, thereby creating models for the rest of India to follow.) It is funny how many of the better funded and supposedly top-drawer research institutes exhibit a surprising amount of inertia. If at all their administrative bosses (Directors) responded, they were quick to say that their institution is extremely sensitive and sympathetic (*again that word!*) and is taking all possible steps to improve the situation; while the slightest bit of probing shows that there are no elevators to access the higher floors! Very often, I find that I have better results when I write a personal mail to a friend whose general sense of values I have regard for. The Vice Chancellor of the University of Hyderabad was one such friend, Ram Ramaswamy, whose response to my entreaties have far exceeded my best hopes. A visit to the entry titled 'Different Inabilities' in his blog hcurocks.wordpress.com will tell you what I mean - as well as give a peep into the accessible functioning style of an effective leader. Bottom line: a lot needs to be done, and there are good people if only one looks for them.

It's funny how I remind myself of my father, who had lived the first sixty years of his life worrying about what were then called 'personnel matters' and now fall under the umbrella of 'manpower planning'. When he retired from that, he started a completely new second life, as a highly respected correspondent of the school Vidya Mandir in Mylapore, Chennai, where he had a long innings of almost 20 years. I still find acquaintances of mine who are alumni of that school look at me with heightened respect when they discover my father was *the* V.S. Shankar - and this included the owner of the wheel-chair company *Callidai* that I mentioned earlier. I will be 60 in April, and am just getting started on my second career; but am already gratified to receive periodic emails thanking me for embarking on my self-appointed crusade. My favourite one starts with:

I've been reading your insightful articles in the Times Of India and after reading each one I went...aaah!!!

this was from one who described herself as having *had polio as a kid and had used crutches and a brace on her right leg all her life*; and she ends her mail with

Thanks for taking the cause of people like you by convincing TOI to let you have your say. Let's hope that our voice is heard through your writing and more sensitivity is shown.

In response to the mandate given to me by Jaya, let me just point to the illuminating examples of Lewis Carroll, Dr. Srinivas, my father, Venky, Hema, Bhargav Sundaram, ... and deduce that investing in people will always earn the richest dividends. As a friend of mine said, employing disabled people is a win-win situation: you invariably get people with a very good work ethic, whose loyalty to your organisation would be far greater than that of one for whom employability is not a big problem; and as a bonus, you do your bit for a socially important cause.

Let me conclude by saying:

At the end of the day, when your life is evaluated - by reasonable people here as well as by the almost surely more critical judges at the Pearly Gates - touching even one life as suggested by the email quoted above - or more lives, if you are lucky - should far outweigh most things you do. Surely a marketing director at my age would have wasted her life if she had nothing to show for her life other than having convinced a large number of people to eat one brand of breakfast cereal rather than another. I do not have to preach such self-evident truths to you who are fortunate to work in the enlightened environment of an organisation which appreciates the need for fostering socially relevant programmes or considers it worthwhile to make you sit and listen to sermons by people like me. I would like to leave you with two thoughts: people like me do not need sympathy; we need future leaders like you to create an inclusive environment that is conducive to our leading independent and productive lives with dignity.

THANK YOU.