

R. GOPALAKRISHNAN



SIX LENSES

VIGNETTES OF SUCCESS, CAREER
AND RELATIONSHIPS

'R. Gopalakrishnan has brilliantly crystallised how the six lenses of life (purpose, authenticity, courage, trust, luck and fulfilment) will make you understand who you are and what matters most in success, career and relationships.' JAGDISH N. SHETH



SIX LENSES

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Vignettes of Success, Career and Relationships

R. Gopalakrishnan



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Acknowledgements

Why I Wrote This Book

'I saw a medieval map once. It showed the earth as a flat disc with Jerusalem in the centre. Rome was bigger than Africa, and America was not even shown, of course. The heart is that kind of map. The self is in the middle and everything is out of proportion. You draw the friends of your youth large, then it is impossible to rescale them when other more important people need to be added. Anyone who has done you wrong is shown too big, and so is any one you loved.'

—Ken Follet, *Edge of Eternity*

In February 1966, I was persuaded by friends and in my own head that in my final year at IIT, I had the credentials to win elections to the post of Vice President, Technology Students' Gymkhana. It was prestigious and high profile on the campus. Apart from a busy calendar of extra-curricular activities, the post gave one the legitimacy to talk to the very few girls on the campus. The campus was indeed conservative, so such legitimacy had huge value.

A US presidential-type election programme was to be mounted. Soap boxes and town halls in the hostels, in the play grounds and in the classes, all of these were par for the course. It lasted about two months, it was exhausting, invigorating and tiring all together. Finally on the D-day of voting in June 1966, the election result was announced. Since I had won, and by a decent margin, I was on Clou Nine. It was an incredible feeling to represent all of IIT's 2,500 students, and to lead the Kharagpur sports contingent to the prestigious Inter IIT Sports Meet at IIT Bombay.

On a Sunday some temporary quietness and solitude descended upon me. I heard a knock on my dormitory room door. 'Hello Anil!' I said cheerfully, welcoming my long-standing friend from school classes. Anil and I had studied from Standard IV in the same school and all the way to IIT now, some twelve years in all. Anil was a brilliant student, a bit shy and reserved compared to me, and always ahead of me in the class ranks by a bit. It had been my ambition for long to top Anil, but somehow never happened from 1954 right up until 1966. While I had been a good 'loser' to Anil in academics all these years, I was a proud 'winner' with the election results, or so I thought. Such thoughts of self-relation were flushing through my head, though unspoken and uncommunicated. I was sure that Anil had come to pump my hands and wish me all the best. But what followed was a complete shock and surprise.

Anil sat nervously at the edge of my bed, fluttered his eyes and flashed me a somewhat unfriendly stare. 'So you think you are great because you have become the Vice President of the campus. What is so great about that? Are you any the better for having won the election? There is no much difference between you and me: we are the same age, we are not too distant in academics, we have studied in the same school and now at IIT, we are dear friends and like each other. Then how come you have won elections and are being cheered by all the students on this campus? And no one even knows who I am?' he ranted with some really deep feelings of what I thought was antipathy. 'C

my God, he is jealous! How could he do this to me?’ I thought.

~~In an instant I had judged his behaviour to emanate from jealousy. Such an assumption allowed me to explain his behaviour completely. Quod Erat Demonstrandum. Thank God for assumptions, they help you to understand the complex world.~~

Soon I realised that I was dead wrong. Anil was not jealous of me, far from it. He was pained, not with me, but at his own plight. That is what he had come to express. As he narrated his life story voluntarily, he came from a home where his father was a drunkard. He described the home scene evening after evening, disruptive and tense. His mother worked extra-hard to keep the children away from the family suffering, but how much could she do? It was an emotionally disturbed environment for young Anil to grow up in.

Even now my memory of the episode shatters me. Although I cannot be blamed, I chide myself for judging Anil with wrong assumptions—especially because the wheels of fortune and fate took our lives in completely different directions. While I went on to do whatever I have done, Anil dropped out of IIT, did odd jobs, and finally had a nervous breakdown by the time he was in his 40s, and has been a resident of a mental counselling institution since then. I get to see him occasionally—I always come out feeling helpless, saddened and bewildered.

How I wish I had judged Anil correctly right in the beginning by seeing him through an alternative set of lenses.

But what are those lenses and how do you learn to view things from another perspective? It is to imagine these lenses that I set out to write this book.

What makes for success and fulfilment?

All human beings increasingly struggle with the stress of life, and particularly business executives trying to understand and achieve what success in career and life mean; realising that the accomplishment of such success does not automatically lead to contentment and fulfilment; figuring out how to judge events and situations without judging people. The important lesson most people learn is that there is no universally accepted measure of what success is. Success depends on how the individual views his or her goals in life and how he or she thinks meaning can be found in career and life.

Understanding this reality makes success and the lenses through which to view life goals and accomplishments rather ambiguous, personal and quite wide open. And yet all the billions of people on this planet are chasing success as though it is a reality, a tangible, palpable reality!

I wrote this book to explore the nuances that lightly surround perceptions of success and fulfilment; also to appreciate the relationship of success with one’s views about feeling fulfilled. The word ‘vignette’ in the sub-title of this book derives from a design of vine leaves, and connotes an embellishment without borders; this book is a bouquet of thoughts and ideas but with no rigid border and framework.

Career and life books sometimes come through as offering cookie-cutter tips to avid readers who want instant, pre-packaged wisdom. They pretend to suggest action rather than inspire thinking. That is why there are several popular books on techniques, littered with the mundane and the mechanical. Frankly, if it were that easy then everybody would do it. I have not set out to author a definitive book of rules and tips about success and fulfilment.

The life stories of celebrities are highly readable and inspirational. Celebrities are written about a lot and their stories are commented about a lot; some aspects about them also suffer exaggeration and distortion. The stories of celebrities do bear interest for the reader because celebrity stories are about people who are widely accepted to be successful. Their stories are presented like fairy tales which romanticise more than depict stark realities.

This book is based on PLU's—people like us. PLUs inspire as well as instruct readers in different ways compared to the stories of celebrities. It is comforting for ordinary people to know that PLUs like themselves, struggle to think through dilemmas, do not know precisely what they want out of their lives and careers or struggle to live a life of fulfilment despite possessing all the trappings of success. This may perhaps be one of few such books that is based on chronicling PLUs.

PLUs are unable to recall the magical moment when 'eureka' clicked in their brain. A eureka moment clicking in their brain often, but it is not recognised by them as a eureka moment and there is no thunder and lightning that blinds their mind!

These realities caused me to want to write a book from an experiential perspective—about the stories I have encountered and how they helped me think about things. I did not want to be prescriptive with pat answers and solutions to the issues of success, career and relationships. The stories involve people whom I have known, from business and society.

Why should the reader be interested in the lives of PLUs, ordinary characters? As integrated human beings, like the reader, the PLUs have three life influences: first, their genetic personality; second, their inner journey of experiences (self-awareness, mental complexity, childhood character influences); third, their outer influences (education, parents, job and friends). These three merge in one track to influence how they think and act. This integrated track defines who they are as human beings. So when you read about other people or interact with friends and work colleagues, if you wish to understand that person as an integrated human being (as you should be interested), then you need to understand that person's inner and outer life influences.

The biography and experiences of Nihal Kaviratne, Geeta and Jamshed Irani are integral to elucidating the ideas in this book.

Looking for a gap that is shaped like you

When the child is born, it can be likened to a smooth pebble of a certain size and colour; both are determined by the genetics. Then as the child grows and throughout the life of the person, experiences leave an impact on the smooth pebble—chips, marks and incisions, so that each pebble develops a unique shape of its own. A France-based American writer, Ms Pamela Druckerman, expressed an imaginative view by suggesting that each person has a shape that must fit into the jigsaw of the world. 'Somewhere in the world, there is a gap shaped just like you. Once you find it, you will slide right in.'

To illustrate this point about finding a gap that is shaped just like you, I recall the story of how Leela Chitnis, India's top film star of the 1940s, found the gap shaped like her ('My Aunt Leela', *Indian Express*, October 9, 2005).

Leela was the skinny and gawky daughter of a professor; she wore thick glasses. She fell in love with an urbane gentleman who was fourteen years her senior, Dr Gajanand Chitnis, who was involved with the Marathi stage as a writer and director of plays. Dr Gajanand Chitnis was not economical

successful, so the shy and self-conscious Leela started accompanying her husband to the rehearsals she earned a bit by helping with the costumes and the sets.

Every evening she watched and observed the goings on; something must have been lodging in her brain all the time. One day, the heroine of the play failed to turn up. Leela was thrust on the stage only because she had attended the endless rehearsals. She felt hugely challenged, but she performed with natural elan—and brilliantly. Very soon roles poured in. Then she signed for her first film.

Until 1940 Lux soap was always advertised with foreign film stars because Indians thought a poor character to model for advertisements. In 1940, when Lux sought Indian models, Leela was the first to be chosen. Soon thereafter, she became the leading Hindi film star. In her quest for a gap she could fit into, she viewed events and things differently from other people.

As Leela's story of apparent coincidences demonstrates, Leela found the gap that was shaped like her.

Differing views of the world

When we see world maps, we are used to seeing the Americas on the left side and Europe and Africa approximately in the middle. New Zealand appears in the bottom far-right corner. When I visited New Zealand, I found an interesting, almost unrecognisable version of a world map, constructed from a New Zealand perspective. New Zealand was right in the upper middle of the map. The mass of Europe, Asia and Africa spread from below upwards on the right side, like a mushroom. The Americas appeared on the left, but with the United States and Canada below Brazil. Argentina was above Brazil and was sticking upwards. They had merely turned the map upside down and placed New Zealand at the centre. The map presented a reality through a different lens (<http://www.flourish.org/upsidedownmap/>). The imagery of this New Zealand-centred world map makes a subtle point about what we remember of what we see.

So here is the message. We lead our lives in concentric circles. In the first circle, there is a bubble 'I'. The nuclear family appears, large and close. In the second circle, there appear childhood friends, school friends as well as relatives. In the third circle, we accommodate college friends, work acquaintances and relationships. In the fourth circle, there are casual friends and easy-to-forget relationships and episodes. In such a map of concentric circles, the deeply impactful people for you, whether positively or negatively, appear to be large and the others less so.

The brain stores memories of people and events differently for different people even though those people witness or experience the same event. This multiplicity is captured brilliantly in the 1950 Japanese film *Rashomon*, directed by Akira Kurosawa. A woodcutter and a priest are sitting together under a shelter, trying to stay dry under a heavy downpour of rain. A commoner joins, thus making a three-some, who discuss the brutal murder of a samurai warrior by a bandit in the forest a little while ago. There are multiple versions of what actually transpired—by the priest, the woodcutter, the bandit and the samurai's wife. The gripping plot of the film involves these characters providing alternative, self-serving and contradictory versions of the same incident.

A memoir is what the author remembers. A memoir is telling a truth as the writer sees it. One memoir writer discovered that her account of the first meeting with her ex-boyfriend was completely different from his. Such situations arise because the heart map of work colleagues and bosses are drawn differently by different people.

Learning from my own experiences and after deep thought, I can say:

- a. Your 'shape' is determined by the way you view events and people in the world around you
- ~~b. When you find and fit into the gap that has a 'shape' like you, you feel successful and fulfilled.~~

So I sat down to gather my thoughts into a book about how success, career and relationships are interconnected. I conjured up the idea of six lenses through which, according to me, you view the world. Most likely you are not conscious that that is how you view the world. Your view of these is influenced by what you see through the lenses on each eye.

There are no answers, just stories

Societies everywhere have found that ideas and life lessons are best communicated through anecdote, parables and epics. Stories have proved durable and effective for centuries in civilizations all over the world. The revival of mythological themes in the Indian publishing industry in recent years is further evidence of the power of such storytelling, of the value of conversing with the heart rather than only with the head.

I have tried to bring together in this book several lessons that I have learnt through ideas, values and emotional energy.

Every person's experiences lead to extraordinary lessons for that person. Most of us have a deeply held view that our experiences are too commonplace to be of interest to anyone else. Furthermore, the effort involved in transforming commonplace experiences into lessons is daunting. That is why experiences and lessons perish with that person. The person's memories and lessons are wasted in the same manner that rainwater flows into the sea, not being effectively conserved, but accidentally helpful to the few whom the rainwater might serve on its way to the sea.

I rather like what an American radio producer, David Avram Isay, has tried. He founded *Storycorps*, which is an ongoing oral history project. Since 2003 his company has collected and archived more than 50,000 interviews with 100,000 participants, thus creating the largest single collection of voices ever gathered. His endeavour is based on the simple idea that everyone around you has a story that the world needs to hear. (<http://itunes.com/apps/tedconferences/ted>). His is an accurate assumption that every person has a heart-warming story to tell some other person, irrespective of how ordinary that person might be.

The idea of this book came to my mind out of my struggle to reconcile many aspects of work and family life—questions such as:

- How can you reconcile differing views of the same person?
- How can a person get the best out of both career and relationships?
- Are there fixed features of good character and a good life?
- Can character be consistent under all circumstances?
- How can one be inspired by others' leadership while accepting their faults?
- Is our perception of others based on whether their virtues are emphasised or their failings?
- How can one reconcile others' virtues and failings simultaneously?
- Do external events constitute a balanced and fulfilling life or an internal mind-set?

In order to resolve these struggles, I tried reading a few books of philosophy. Some of them helped

little. I think humans are born to learn, not to be taught. To illustrate this point about human beings being born to learn, not to be taught, I recall the story of B.K. Nehru, a scion of the eponymous Nehru family.

A cousin of the former Indian Prime Minister, B.K. Nehru was conversing with his London School of Economics professor Harold Laski some fifteen years after his graduation. A bit hesitatingly, Nehru told his professor that he had found little use of the professor's teachings during his practical career in the Indian Civil Service. The deep-thinking Laski responded, 'That is quite okay. I was not trying to teach you lessons in economics; I was merely teaching you how to think. And that I seem to have done very well, from what you say.'

I needed something practical. I needed somebody to chat with me rather than enlighten me. I needed a story or a conversation about how to think about the dilemma rather than a pat answer. I needed authentic and practical examples, at least some from the life stories of real people, people like myself rather than well-known figures.

However, I am cautious about parsing success into a formula. Career and life cannot be run through formulae. That is one reason why the reader will not find a summary of the points or tips at the end of each chapter. There are no formulae, there has to be further thought and introspection by the reader.

I found that the challenge of writing up life experiences into instructive, and perhaps inspiring stories is not faced by me alone. If only experienced people, who have developed patterns out of their life's incidents, would write their version of the dilemmas they faced, would it not be valuable? The book need not be only about rich and famous people; it must include ordinary people, the kind of people one encounters during one's career and life.

It appears that you can write your way to happiness. Scientific studies have revealed that writing about oneself and personal experiences can be beneficial to health. We all have a personal narrative that shapes our view of the world and ourselves. By writing and then editing our own stories, we can change our perception of ourselves and identify obstacles that stand in our way of enjoying well-being. So, at the very least, I stand to benefit!

I must confess a huge vulnerability. Would I be up to this task? Did I have the depth and background to explore such a subject? Maybe.

As psychologist Brene Brown has stated in her much-viewed TED talks, it is perhaps best to confront one's vulnerabilities. It could be the best way to deal with that enervating sense of vulnerability if it is standing between expressing oneself fully and keeping quiet. I decided to confront my vulnerability about whether my narrative would be interesting to the anonymous reader out there.

What This Book is About

'You see a green object looks green, not because it is inherently green. It looks green because the object retains all colours and reflects back green. To retain something, you should not keep it, you should give it back to others. If you want to be joyful, throw joy at others. When you have money and share with others, then you will be seen as generous. The context matters.'

—late Father Jacques de Bonhome,
Professor, St Xavier's College, Kolkata

This book is based on an obvious idea. I know it is obvious because the mark of a blindingly obvious idea is that it is usually ignored. The obvious idea is that we judge people and events through assumptions which we have adopted, consciously or unconsciously. So the key message of this book is that we lead our lives under the impression that there is a reality, but, in fact, there is only our perception of a reality. Our feeling of success and fulfilment are influenced by our perceptions, and our perceptions are influenced by the lenses through which we see the world. By rotating the lens through which we view the world, we change our perceptions; and by changing our perceptions, we can reconsider what success and fulfilment mean to us. This key message is the substance of the book.

There is a film sequence that brings out clearly how widely different the perception can be about what constitutes life's accomplishments. In the film *Deewaar*, there is a dialogue between two long-lost brothers (Amitabh Bachchan and Shashi Kapoor), separated in their childhood. They reconnect many years later and discovered their identities. The powerful and arrogant brother boasted about his accomplishments and possessions, 'I have lots of money, a big house, pomp and power. What have you got?' The modest brother dramatically responded, 'I have with me our dear mother whose blessings are my treasure.' The brothers were viewing their accomplishments through very different lenses.

A person who is beautiful tends to judge the world in terms of attention and attraction. A hugely wealthy person may judge other people through their display of wealth. The way you measure yourself is usually how you measure others, and how you assume others measure you. That is why we have such different measures of what constitutes success and fulfilment.

Career, work and relationships

Work accounts for a huge proportion of our lives. Work occupies about a third of our physical life because work occupies about a third of any day. But work affects almost all of our emotional and psychological life. Our professional accomplishments, the position we reach and the success that we

achieve seem to define who we are, how others perceive us, and all the trappings that come with work. ~~An apparently small issue at work, like a stressed relationship with a boss or colleague can spill over into personal or domestic life in a disproportionate way.~~ Why do we work? To get influence. There is an intimate but causal connection between work and influence.

The word 'relationships' is used in a broad sense: partner, spouse, children, siblings, school cohorts, work colleagues and friends. There is a deep and causal link between relationships and the enjoyment of life. Nobody who has friends fails to enjoy life. Conversely, a person with few friends has a higher chance of suffering through his or her life. Poor relationships destroy mental peace and human harmony. People rarely succeed unless they have fun in what they are doing.

A great source of urban tension is the work–relationships balance. Paying enough attention and giving enough time to both is not easy. We tend to view work and family as being opposed, and there is a polarisation between work and family; you can have one or the other, but not both. According to this perception, there is a constant search for compromise. However this is not true.

As we go through our lives, we experience many events and episodes. For instance, a person may give up opportunities for his or her professional advancement in order to take care of parents. Viewed through the lens of work, the person's decision does not appear impressive. But viewed through the lens of purpose and family, the person might well appear to be responsible and sensitive. Both are valid views, depending on the lenses through which the event is viewed.

Later in this book, Nihal Kaviratne's story is narrated about how and why he gave up a chance to study at Harvard. He did so to ensure he did not lose his love in life. Nihal's story exemplifies the point that such choices are not compromises or accommodations. Such choices maximise the person's sense of self-worth.

The quest for success and fulfilment

As managers and human beings, our sense of fulfilment is shaped by our search for meaning through our work experiences, dilemmas, conflicts, successes and failures. The quest for fulfilment is what makes us loyal to causes, bosses or to companies. The quest for fulfilment makes us behave with a cynical or suspicious temperament. The quest for fulfilment makes us slaves to either wealth or public benefaction. The quest for fulfilment can make us happy, contented people or possibly angry and frustrated individuals.

Contrary to feelings of victimisation when we are faced with difficulties, we are not victims of our circumstances—we make choices. We do not compromise our life, we decide our life and its course. When we think of our decision as a compromise, there is always the lingering feeling that we have sacrificed something unhappily. If you give up something happily, then you do not feel compromise has been made; you feel you have made a choice. In this manner we instinctively shape our attitudes and live our lives to weave them into a design that defines who we are, what we want to do in our lives and what makes us happy.

Read about this real life incident in which a choice was made by a job-seeking candidate.

The job candidate who arrived late

Company Director R.V. Raghavan (*What Professional Managers Can Learn from Family Businesses* TMTC Journal of Management, January 2012) narrated this incident which occurred during a whole day of interviews he did while seeking a candidate to join his company. I have reproduced it with the permission of the author and TMTC:

‘Ensnared in my hotel room, I was feeling increasingly incensed that my 10 am appointment had not turned up even though the clock was close to striking eleven. I had set aside the day for meeting a number of candidates for a senior opening, and the day had not commenced well. Just as my thoughts were turning to the next appointment, the bell rang rather loudly and insistently. Lo behold, this turned out to be the first candidate.

‘He was a trifle breathless, perspiring, with clothes that laid no pretence to crease. He barged in even before the customary civilities had been completed, collapsed on the sofa, took out a handkerchief to wipe his palms and forehead and proceeded to heave a rather large briefcase on to the coffee table. In what rapidly raised my consternation, he opened the briefcase, took out a gift-wrapped box and offered it to me with great alacrity. Bristling with impatience and embarrassment, I turned sharply towards him and asked him what this was for.

‘I have been married for over fifteen years’ he explained ‘and after all these years, we have been blessed with a baby boy this morning. I am coming straight from the nursing home, and as you are the first person I am meeting, I would like you to share in my joy’.

‘That incident, more than any other I can recall, brought home to me rather starkly how very conditioned, righteous and self-assured professional managers can be in their attitudes and approach: and how essential it was not to jump to conclusions when confronted with situations that are not as structured and seemingly logical as their professional training and exposure might have led them to expect. That degree of openness, bereft of presumptions or pre-conceived notions is an essential mind set to dispassionately examining and determining what professional managers can usefully learn from family-managed businesses.’

So how would a psychologist have analysed this? Let me try.

Situation: The director was on a rushed trip to hire a suitable candidate for his company department.

His Perception: This candidate does not care about the job I might be able to offer because I cannot even arrive on time. How on earth could he be a potential candidate to join my firm?

His Need: To find a technically competent and disciplined candidate for his firm or department.

Thus: He is furious and takes the decision not to consider that late-comer of a candidate.

Afterwards the situation and analysis looked like this.

Situation: The director was on a rushed trip to hire a suitable candidate for the firm or his department.

His Perception: This candidate is a really good human being. He did what was right for his family, and it is so natural an instinct to be with his wife when she was ready to deliver a long-awaited baby. He is a caring person.

His Need: To recruit a good human being who is also technically competent.

Thus: Well, let me give him a chance to show his experience and knowledge. I should be understanding.

This simple but true story is the day to day story for every person: you just change the context, view the same facts through different lenses, and you judge things quite differently.

An experiment was conducted in an American university through which an actor who acted the role of an academic managed to persuade distinguished academics that he too was a brilliant academic!

The expert Dr Myron Fox

An experiment was conducted at the University Of Southern California School Of Medicine in 1970 which two speakers gave lectures to a classroom of MDs and PhDs (psychiatrists and psychologists) on an irrelevant topic. The topic, 'Mathematical Game Theory as Applied to Physician Education' was chosen to eliminate the factor that the students being lectured may know anything about the actual subject. Students were divided into two separate classrooms; one classroom would be lectured by an actual scientist and the other by an actor who was given the identity of Dr Myron L. Fox, a graduate of Albert Einstein College of Medicine.

In the first half of the study the actor was instructed to teach his material in a more staccato and inexpressive voice. This lecture was then compared to the control lecture by the scientist. After the lectures, the students were tested on the information they had learned and the students who attended the lecture taught by the scientist learned more about the material, and performed better on the examination.

However, when both 'Dr Myron L. Fox' and the scientist presented their material in an engaging, expressive, and enthusiastic manner, the students rated Dr Fox just as highly as the genuine professor. This lack of correlation between content-coverage and ratings under conditions of high expressiveness became known as the Dr Fox Effect.

The experimenters created a meaningless lecture on 'Mathematical Game Theory as Applied to Physician Education,' and coached the actor to deliver it 'with an excessive use of double talk, neologisms, non sequiturs, and contradictory statements.' At the same time, the researchers encouraged the actor to adopt a lively demeanor, convey warmth toward his audience, and intersperse his nonsensical comments with humor... The actor fooled not just one, but three separate audiences: professional and graduate students. Despite the emptiness of his lecture, fifty-five psychiatrists, psychologists, educators, graduate students and other professionals produced evaluations of Dr Fox that were overwhelmingly positive...The disturbing feature of the Dr Fox study, as the experimenters noted, is that Fox's nonverbal behaviors so completely masked a meaningless, jargon-filled, and confused presentation.

A subsequent research study found that prestige of research could even be increased by a confounding writing style, with research competency being positively correlated to reading difficulty. In the world of management, possibly in every area of human knowledge, we do encounter situations where bombast passes off as expertise, don't we?

This Fox experiment clearly brings out how a total non-expert managed to convey an impression to experts that he himself was an expert! Perception can actually be modified to alter what the reality is—by turning the lenses through which a situation is viewed.

It is incredible but true that normal, intelligent people can be psyched to believe untrue things. Here is the well-known case of how perfectly sensible and educated people were made to believe completely untrue things by placing them in a particular context.

Philip Zimbardo alive

Religion and social etiquette teach us that most people are basically good, but that some become less good or actually bad. In other words, the majority are good people, but some become bad people. Former Stanford professor, Philip Zimbardo, said recently the opposite: we all (emphasis all) can be evil! (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/philip-zimbardo>). What made Zimbardo say that? It was his experiment fifty years ago.

In 1971, academic Zimbardo conducted an experiment at Stanford University. A part of the

basement of the psychology department was converted into a mock prison with bars, cells et al. An advertisement for student volunteers elicited a generous response and twenty-one were selected. Some were 'appointed' as guards while some others were prisoners. Zimbardo himself became the prison superintendent. The objective of the exercise was to determine why prisons are such nasty places. It could be because nasty people go to prison or prisons are so nasty that good people become nasty.

Soon the 'guards' unleashed a terror regime to control the prisoners. Even though the students were all normal, nice, pacifist people, the intensity and speed of their conversion to nasty guards took everyone by surprise. It became so nasty that the experiment had to be stopped ahead of planned time.

Many years later, when interviewed, one of the guards, David Eshleman (now running a home loan company in California) claimed that he did not turn nasty, he was merely trying to please the superintendent, Zimbardo. Another guard, John Mark, recalled the event as nothing bad happened, it was just a boring experiment. Zimbardo insists that 'evil environments turn most people, not necessarily all, to behave in an evil way.' He quotes Germany's Auschwitz and I remember India's Partition.

Whatever the academics aver out of this experiment, the fact is that by a turn of the lenses, the so-called reality can be changed into a different perception.

What you see is not what there is

In 1962 I began to attend the physics classes of Father Jacques de Bonhome, a Belgian Jesuit who taught physics at St Xavier's College Kolkata. He had a physics degree from a European university and there was something distinctive about his understanding of young students as well as the art of teaching. I remember him as a tall, wiry figure with an aquiline nose and high cheek bones on his rather thin face; De Bonhome looked serious and austere, although that veneer hid a caring and warm teacher.

Father de Bonhome was the first one who sprinkled onto my curious, young mind the mysterious message, 'what you see is not what there is'!

Father de Bonhome was teaching optics, not philosophy. What did he mean by saying 'what you see is not what there is'? 'You see colours through your eyes. Remember the basic rainbow colours of violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange and red. When all of these colours combine, you get white light,' he would say with the mastery of simplifying complex science. 'When white light falls on any object, the object, based on its own nature, selectively retains some colours and reflects back some others. So when you see a green shirt, it does not mean that the shirt is actually green. It merely means that the shirt has absorbed all colours other than green and throws back the green colour to you as the observer,' de Bonhome would state with his lilting Belgian French accent. 'So the green shirt is not green, it looks green because green is what it returns to you.'

And then he would add with the tone of Jesuit renunciation, 'You see, to retain something, you should not keep it, you should give to back others. If you want to be joyful, throw joy at others. When you have money, give it to others, then only will you look generous. The context matters.'

With his flair for mysterious-sounding statements, Father de Bonhome would teach us about stroboscopic effects. My reader need not be put off by this high-sounding term. It is the simple reason why, for example, in a movie reel, the cart-wheel appears to move backwards when the cart is moving forwards. Our eyes flicker at 60 CPS (cycles per second). Any moving object that is bathed in light which is flickering at 60 CPS will appear to be stationary to the human eye. So fluorescent tube lights are programmed to flicker at 60 CPS, so also are our television screens.

Thus Father de Bonhome delivered two messages: first, that the context influences our perception of the nature of objects placed into that context; second, that the frequency of light influences our perception. So there is no reality, there is only perception. Gosh, is there no reality according to physics?

After graduating in 1967 when I underwent the standard medical tests before being appointed as a computer trainee in Hindustan Lever, Medical Officer Dr Ramnik Parekh presented me some circles with coloured dots inside. After asking me to identify the numbers coloured within, he said with a tone of discovery, 'Oh, you are partially colour-blind!' I was crestfallen and thought that my budding career was about to be derailed by this natty looking doctor in half-sleeves. 'No, it will not affect your career unless you try to become an airline pilot or artist,' he announced cheerfully and I went on to join Hindustan Lever.

Years later, I read what colour vision scientists had to say about my long-standing question, is it possible that what many see as red colour is seen as blue by some others? Jay Neitz, University of Washington, and Joseph Carroll, Medical College of Wisconsin, both say that people do not all see colours in the same way. There are colour-sensitive cones in our brains and these can make one person see blood as red, while another sees blood as blue. I always thought that blood had to be red, and that was a reality! Not true.

Animals and insects perceive the same reality differently from us humans. Unlike humans who have simple eyes, insects have compound eyes. Insects have thousands of hexagonal lenses through which signals reach their brains. That is why a fly sees your fly-swatter device moving towards it at a leisurely pace, thus helping the insect to avoid getting swatted, whereas you have moved the swatter at a furious pace! (*The Economist*, July 25, 2015).

What you taste is not the taste it is

We tend to think of food preferences as largely to do with taste, though it is a much more complex phenomenon called flavour. Our tongue has only five taste receptors: sweet, sour, bitter and salt are the traditionally known taste receptors. Only in recent years have we learnt about a fifth taste receptor, umami (literally 'yummy') which makes certain foods savoury tasty.

However it appears that it is not just these five receptors that account for what we think as taste of food. Perception is influenced, in addition, by over four hundred smell receptors. These smell receptors work in distinctive combinations. For example if you take in a sharp breath, hold your breath and then eat a banana, you will find the banana to be a somewhat flavourless item. But if you breathe out while eating the banana, it tastes like a banana. Try this and see how the context can change the perception of how a banana tastes.

What is happening is that the brain reconstructs what our senses are reading and we assume that what we sense is real. But it is not anything real, it is merely the brain at work.

The brain constructs our reality

As early as 1868, Thomas Huxley had said that there is a definite connection between the brain activity and our conscious experiences. I listened to Donald Hoffman, cognitive scientist, speak

June 2015 at TED (<http://itunes.com/apps/tedconferences/ted>) about whether we experience the world as it really is. His speech left my unprepared mind a bit confused because his well-presented arguments challenged my long-standing assumptions. What Hoffman states is difficult to understand at first, 'Space and time are like the computer interface, and objects are like the icons on the screen. There is no reality to space, time and objects.' According to Hoffman, 'space, time and objects, which we think as being reality, are, believe it or not, reconstructions by our brains of what we see based on our assumptions.'

The importance of assumptions bears repetition. When everybody perceived the reality of the world as being flat, the view that the world is round just would not register; likewise for the assumption that the sun rotates around the earth, not the other way around. With regard to evolution we have grown up with the age-old assumption that the ability to see reality accurately confers an evolutionary advantage through, for example, early detection of predators. The ability to see reality clearly may be nothing more than possessing a firm set of assumptions, which, incidentally, may be wrong! Experiments have shown that those who see accurately (firmer assumptions) may in fact have poorer survival chances than those who see inaccurately!

Based on experimentation in the recent decades, Donald Hoffman says that there may be no objective reality around us; our mind reconstructs reality (note it does not construct, but reconstructs) for us based on the assumptions we have unconsciously made.

Phew, what lessons? From optics to life. I cannot forget Father Jacques de Bonhome, partly for giving me the love of physics, but also for putting the profound thought that there may be no reality into my plastic mind. It all depends on what your eyes see and how your brain processes the sight.

The colour that I see as reality may not be a reality. The moving object that I see may not be moving in the way that I perceive. My brain is reconstructing what I see on the basis of my assumptions about life and things. There is no reality, there are only perceptions created through the human eyes and the human brain!

We see each other as the person we see in flesh and distinct— father, mother, teacher, friend, colleague. Physicists will tell you that we are comprised mostly of empty space—molecules, atoms, electrons, quarks and so on. Biologists will tell you that we are what the micro-bacteria do in our gut. I suppose that is why any of us fits into a small urn when we are done and cremated.

But this is when my brain button ticks. Is this not what ancient Indian philosophers stated centuries ago? But like every one of my readers, I reckon that I try to understand the sayings of my ancestors through the academics of modern neuroscience.

The six lenses idea

If there is no reality in the way we tend to think of reality, then it can be a most bewildering world to live in. Indeed it is. If the world is bewildering (and complex), it is difficult to make sense and that in itself can lead to a great deal of stress. That is why man needs a mental model, which can help to simplify the world and help to lead a happy life with sanity.

In [chapter 5](#), I describe how I arrived at a model that can help our brain to understand why we see things the way we do, why others see the same thing differently, and how we can, if we wish, change the way we see things.

Imagine that you are viewing people and events through an optician's eye-testing frame. There is a left eye and a right eye. The left eye represents the world of work, perspectives from the professional arena of employment and influence. The right eye represents the arena of the family, relationships and

enjoyment.

~~On the support frame of the optician, there are lenses that can be rotated to improve vision during testing. The rotation of each lens changes the clarity and the view. There are zillions of perspectives that the viewer can get. He or she has to select the view that best suits him or her. Our perception of events in life is a bit like these two eyes, watching and judging things through the lenses on each eye. There are six lenses that shape our perception of the leadership challenges encountered in work and family: purpose, authenticity, courage, trust, luck and fulfilment.~~

More of these and many anecdotes in the rest of the book...

The book has a chapter that corresponds to each of the six lenses I mentioned. Each chapter leads in with the stories of real persons, with the facts. Anyway, there's nothing like the 'full facts'; nobody but nobody knows the 'full facts'. Life is all about getting on with an appreciation of as many facts as possible.

Gathering Phase of a Life

'A man's past keeps growing even when his future has come to a standstill.'

—Aravind Adiga, *Last Man in Tower*

In the eponymous novel by Aravind Adiga, Masterji Yogesh Murthy is one of the residents of Vishra Cooperative Housing Society at Vakola, Mumbai. He had been a science schoolteacher for thirty-three years. His neighbours respect him for his knowledge and age, but perceive him as a quaint product of the past. Masterji is a widower who, unfortunately, has also lost his daughter. Fellow residents living in the building see Masterji as an old man, a man whose past keeps growing when his future has come to a standstill. But Masterji does not think of himself in the same way. He reckons he has much to offer and that is Masterji's inner view about his life and experiences. Throughout the novel, Masterji's actions are guided by his assumptions about himself, while others find him very difficult to understand because of their assumptions about him.

With many people, the first part of life is spent in what I call the 'gathering phase' while the second part is spent in the 'scattering phase.' In the gathering phase, the individual is focused on improving financial status, power, wealth and things that are acquisitive in nature. In the second part of career and life, a person goes through a scattering phase when the person seeks and wants to share experiences, time and even wealth with others; in this way the individual seeks meaning to life.

The story of Nihal Kaviratne that follows in this chapter demonstrates these very well. His story is, in fact, presented as the gathering phase, followed by the scattering phase.

Everyone can view his or her life from inside as the protagonist to whom things are happening, from the outside as an observer who watches things that are happening. In the first view, you are the actor. In the second view, you are the audience. The British philosopher, Jonathan Glover, said that if we really want to understand ourselves, we need to achieve a sort of intellectual binoculars, which is an ability to view ourselves through two eyes: in any situation we are both the subject and the object.

Life stories help to achieve this intellectual binoculars because the narrator tells a story by viewing himself as a subject with free choices, and also an object, which happens to be what it is. The following life story exemplifies the point, but, more importantly, it tells the story of an ordinary person.

Nihal Kaviratne was born from a Sri Lankan father and an Indian Catholic mother. He was raised with Western influences; early on, he became a vegetarian with such a soft heart that he revolted against all forms of unfairness and injustice. He gave up a chance to study at Harvard because he feared that he might lose his precious girlfriend, whom he courted, married and stayed married to for the rest of his life. He retired from a senior executive position after a forty-year stint at Unilever. He had earned and saved well during his career. His family consisted of his wife and daughter, Shyam

and Mallika, and the loyal Smita, treated like a family member, but not related by blood—how she came to be a virtual family member is an important part of the narrative. Looking to do something useful after retirement, the narrative tells the reader how he chanced upon the dire condition of cancer-affected children who don't have a clean and safe home from where to get treated for cancer. He went on to set up an institution called St Jude. Whereas Unilever was his first preoccupation for forty years, it is now St Jude, which defines who he is, what his life means to him and how immense fulfilling it is for him.

It may appear that the details of his life story tell the reader little. But it is a whole narrative, and I expect that different readers will consider different details to be irrelevant. But here is the full story from the subject, looking back at his life as though he were a spectator.

To repeat what was said in the last chapter, we are integrated human beings with genetic influences, inner influences and outer influences. You will see all of these in active inter-play in the narrative.

Nihal Kaviratne's childhood

Nihal Kaviratne CBE, 71, is a portly man with twinkling eyes. He has the mannerism of periodical stroking his head as though he were settling his hair, which is largely non-existent. He comes through as a man of apparently easy manner, but is, in reality, a man of great determination. I should know because he had been my contemporary in Hindustan Lever and our careers and families tracked together for many years. He has been immensely successful in his professional career and his personal life. He certainly feels complete. He is not rich or famous, but he has been successful, has provided well for his family and rightly feels that he has accomplished much with his life. Importantly, his spirit and view are in concurrence that there is more to be achieved—like Masterji.

I recorded our conversation and am keeping to the conversational style in this chapter.

RG: *Nihal, I would request you to just say a few words about your background and your early life.*

NK: Like it happens with most of us, the early influences get stored on to a hard disc, which then get drawn on as one gets older and as beliefs and attitudes begin to harden. My father was Sri Lanka Sinhalese, and came from an old family of agricultural traders. My great grandfather made a lot of money and built Kaviratne Place, which is still a fine address in Colombo.

My great grandfather was not happy with my grandfather, who liked the good life. He loved cigars, he loved his drink and he was not very good at the family business. In fact, he lost some of the business that my great grandfather had developed. Finally, Kaviratne Place had to be torn down and the proceeds split among various cousins. The family graveyard still exists and the place is still called Kaviratne Place.

My father started working in the Galle Face Hotel in Colombo and took an interest in two things—aeronautics and archaeology. He became an aeronautical engineer, but, on the side, also an amateur archaeologist. He joined a French expedition which was engaged in excavating in the ruins of Kandahar for civilizations as old as Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. The closest aircraft factory was quite far away, the HAL factory in Bangalore. So, in 1942, he worked his way to Bangalore, found a job at HAL and he continued his archaeological interest in Kandahar with the French expedition. I remember he used to bring my mother some wonderful stuff, like bracelets, from the ruins there (things that they were allowed to take away officially). Anyway, this was 1942 and he was in pre-Independence

Bangalore.

~~My mother's father was a doctor in Rangoon in Burma, and his brother was a pharmacist. Together they had a very nice setup in Rangoon. They made decent money and had a nice network of patients. My mother's father was an Anglophile, and he made sure my mother and her sisters were taught Western classical music. He brought them up in a western sort of way in what was then British Burma. He had an abiding faith that the British would never allow the Japanese to enter and take Burma, so the family stayed on despite the fact that everyone else was leaving the country. When the Japanese did arrive, the family took the last boat out from Rangoon and landed in Calcutta. An interesting aside is that one of the co-passengers on the boat was a Mr Mentzelopoulos. Many years later I met his daughter, Ms Corinne Mentzelopoulos, of the French winemaker Chateau Margaux with whom I am now connected with to build the image of Chateau Margaux in India.~~

My mother's family worked their way down from Calcutta to Bangalore. My maternal grandfather was a broken man because his wife, that's my grandmother, died of cancer. It tore him apart that even as a doctor he could do nothing about it. In Bangalore he started a modest business, again as a medical practitioner. He died three years later at the relatively young age of fifty-three. I think I was three years old at the time of his death.

Thus it was that my parents met in Bangalore. I was born in Bangalore out of the love marriage of Hubert Sumarasinghe Kaviratne and Madeline Lazarus. The early years were wonderful, full of birthday parties for my sister and I who were two years apart. We were brought up with values that were very much western.

In religious terms, I had an unusual cocktail of influences. My great grandmother was a Brahmin and a devout Hindu. My grandfather on my mother's side had converted to Catholicism. My mother was a staunch Catholic. I was baptised and so was my sister. My father's entire family were Buddhists. Many years later, my wife, Shyama, and I went to Sri Lanka on our honeymoon. My uncle who was the secretary of the Mahabodhi Society there, made sure that we got married according to Buddhist rites. So this melange of three religions has always been a part of me. The way of life that the three religions have embedded in them have had an impact on me that has been long-lasting.

RG: *How has this melange of religions influenced your thinking?*

NK: It stimulated my curiosity and, most recently, I started taking interest in two other monotheistic religions, Islam and Judaism. They continue to be so and I wonder why they cannot find some ecumenical common ground.

But something else also happened. You know that I am a vegetarian. The first influence is the Brahmin influence of my great grandmother. She used to tell me that my father was an evil man because he was trying to feed me animal protein to make me strong and to grow. I eschewed meat because of my great grandmother and her influence. Nevertheless, I would eat some meats if they were very heavily disguised in flavour (like sausages) despite my great grandmother.

The second influence was an episode. At the age of nine, I received an airgun as a present and used to shoot at targets. One day in the bedroom of our house, there was a sparrow sitting close to the ceiling and I took a pot-shot at it. I wounded it and it fell. I nursed it for several days despite my father telling me that it was dead. That was probably one of the turning points in my life. It's a small thing but from that day I've never been able to countenance physical pain and the death of any living creature. I can't even swat a mosquito.

To this day, those vegetarian roots have survived, much to the amusement of many people, who look at my size and my western upbringing and just cannot understand why I am vegetarian. But I went much beyond the physical because I started seeing people and aspects through a different lens.

RG: *I am interested that you use the word 'lens' because my thesis for this book is that life is about the lens through which you view your experiences.*

NK: I agree with your thesis—life is indeed about lenses. That is why the same episode can have different effects on different people. It was around the time I turned vegetarian that this care for people who were in some way weaker than myself took root, not necessarily underprivileged or poor people but those weaker than me in some way. My heart always went out to them. I will never forget the day my sister and I were in a rickshaw coming back from school. We saw a ragged man on the street. We stopped and asked him what he was looking for. He had dropped four *annas*, which was the currency in those days. He was distraught and searching furiously for those four *annas*. My sister and I went home to my parents, who were not at home. An English lady friend of my mother was visiting. We begged her for four *annas* and took the coins and rushed back to the place where this man was. We couldn't find him. I can never forget this episode because what that man was looking for was all just four *annas*. I have since then always had this huge desire to help bring equality in terms of strength to those who are in some need, especially those who are worse off than me.

My parents' marriage broke up. As a result, during the traumatic years leading up to the split, I went off to boarding school for three years. There are two people in my life who taught me virtually all that I know. One was my mother, who taught me how to wire an electric plug and at least half of everything else that I know. The other half was taught to me later by my boss and friend, Rajes Bahadur, but more about him later.

The three years at boarding school helped me gain independence from my mother, to whom I was very, very attached. Later on, she got custody of my sister and me. We came to live in Mumbai. My father married a German lady and went away to Germany. I have two stepsisters from my father's second marriage (they now live in Spain and Portugal). My mother married a Parsi gentleman surnamed Vicaji, who was the first cousin of Thelly Vicaji, also known as Mrs JRD Tata.

During those years another thing happened. My mother and my stepfather lived larger than their life and they were always spending more than they were earning. So they were always in debt. As a result there were continuing moments of cash crisis. Not that it ever meant that they denied me anything, but there was always the tension and anxiety of a cash crunch because they were spending more than they were earning.

RG: *So this observation by a growing person provided yet another lens through which you view earning, spending and money?*

NK: Absolutely. One of the things that got deeply embedded in me at that time was that I was never going to be in debt and that I would do everything I could to save; and save not just for myself but to make sure that everyone who was dependent on me was safe. None of my family should ever want for anything. I would save more of what I earned than I would spend. And that also has always been a strong driving force for me from those years. I then went on to The Cathedral & John Connon School in Bombay, as had my stepfather and, later, my daughter.

Reaching for high-hanging fruit

Through all of this narrative, Nihal displayed a sense of self-control. He seemed to be able to postpone gratification of things he craved for, like money and family love. I was curious to know more, 'Is it

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