

Introduction

It may appear, at first blush, that the task of writing one's biography is best left to oneself. Presumably, one has more intimate knowledge about the events that shaped one's personality. More importantly, it is likely that one has better access to the true motivations underlying one's behaviors; for example, what might appear (to an external observer) to be an altruistic gesture may actually be rooted in less charitable motives (e.g., the desire for recognition), and this information is unlikely to be available to anyone other than oneself. On the other hand, however, I have come to be quite skeptical about the ability for people to be objective about themselves. I am a psychologist by training and know this for a fact: people routinely delude themselves into holding unrealistically positive images of themselves. Thus, it may be better to leave the task of chronicling one's life to an external party. In my case, however, the number of people interested in writing my biography, in all likelihood, is zero. In any case, the instructions for the "personal essay" assignment calls for one write one's own essay. Thus, I embark on this project. However, I wish to make the following qualification: while it is my intention to be completely honest (i.e., I will report events as I truly believe they occurred), I only promise desist from committing the sin of commission. (In other words, I won't report things that did not happen.) I will, however, commit the sin of *omission*, that is, I will leave out certain events in my life that I don't feel comfortable revealing to an audience that I do not yet know that well. That said, let's begin...

The Early Years (0 – 8)

I was born in "dirty, dusty" (as my granddad was wont to call it) Trichy, a mid-sized town deep in South India, in 1967. Naturally, people remember very little about the first years of their lives. In my case, the lapse in memory is probably even more extreme: I can easily count the number of episodes from my early life (that I remember) on my two hands. (My weak memory is not isolated to the first few years of my life; I tend not to recount past events in general, as a result of which my memory for past events—as opposed to concepts or facts—is quite weak.) Thankfully, I can depend on my parents and others (teachers, relatives) for an account of my personality during those years. One aspect that emerges quite consistently is that I was a colicky baby, prone to relentless whining and crying. I would insist that my mom stay in close proximity to me and I would apparently start wailing if I she left me even for a few minutes. As a result, I earned the nickname, "suthi-box" (a musical instrument that plays a monotonous background note to other—more important—accompaniments). It is possible that my colicky nature was due to my poor physical health (I was scrawny as a baby) or it may have been rooted in some psychological shortcoming, I am not sure. But because of my colicky nature, I began life as a high maintenance person.

Another aspect that comes through in the early reports is that I was quite reserved. In my report card from my 2nd grade, the teacher writes, “Very Reserved. Needs to talk more.” This would come as a surprise to anyone who knows me now. I am certainly not reserved now; if anything, I could be accused of being too extraverted (if there is such a thing) and have been so for a while. Thus, somewhere between the age of 8 and, say, early adulthood (22), I became more extraverted. Perhaps I always had it in me to be extraverted or perhaps this is something that happened over time as I grew in confidence, I cannot tell. But if I were forced to pick a period in my life when I transitioned from being reserved to being an extravert, I would pick my undergraduate years (ages 17 – 22, approximately). It is during this period that I “found my voice,” probably because the group that I used to hang out with appreciated my sense of humor and worldviews. Plus, the others in the group were even more reserved than I was, which pushed me to adopt the role of the “group extravert”.

A third aspect that shaped my personality during the early years can be attributed to my father’s profession. He worked for the Indian Railways (as a Civil Engineer who specialized in building and maintaining bridges). As a result, we traveled a lot. In fact, in the first 5 years of my life, I spent at least 3 months in six different places: Trichy (where I was born), Vijayawada (where my dad was posted during my birth), Tuni, Rajahmundry (places that my dad was transferred to, soon after my birth), Hubli (my earliest memories—those that I can positively vouch for—are from here), and Secundrabad (I remember this period quite well). As a result of all this traveling, and constant uprooting, as it were, I became somewhat “non attachment oriented” as a personality. For example, it is quite easy for me to uproot myself from one place and go to another, with relatively little sense of loss or nostalgia. I just move on. Indeed, I feel that I am classically conditioned to want to move on after a certain period of stay in a particular place. Likewise, I feel an urge to create new friends and to try new things. I am thus the exemplar of a stimulation seeker and am prone to being easily bored. I need things on my “menu” and would much prefer to live in a place that is buzzing with activity—even if it comes at some cost to my equanimity—than risk the boredom of staying in a calm, peaceful place. (Although things are changing now that I am older.)

The constant traveling and exposure to various cultures, traditions, and languages made me more accepting of differences among people. I remember, for instance, having a heated argument with an older cousin of mine—who had never left our home state (even for a brief vacation)—in the course of which I defended the customs and traditions of the North Indians while he passed derogatory comments against them. I was only about 8 years old then. I genuinely felt a sense of kinship with all people, no matter what their religion or ethnic background, a trait that persists with me to this day. The sense of empathy and connectedness that I feel with others—even those of cultures and traditions that I have little direct familiarity with—has only intensified with time. For instance, I routinely feel a sense of “global love” (that’s the best term I can think of to describe what I feel), a sense of understanding and liking for people in general. My default assumption is that people are good, and that they do things they do because that’s what their tradition and experience has “coached” them to do. Consequently, if their actions lead to a negative outcome for me, my response is typically one of trying to understand where they come from rather than focusing on my own (negative) emotional reactions. On the flip side, however, people who are especially close to me (e.g., my wife and parents) complain that I don’t treat

them as specially as they ought to be. In their view, it's as if I have a huge circle of very close friends but no tighter circle beyond it.

A final aspect from this period that I wish to touch upon is the relative autonomy that I was forced to develop. Employees of the Government of India typically send their children to public schools (which were very inexpensive), which was the case with me as well. The only catch with these public schools was that they were typically quite far away from where we lived. For instance, in Secundrabad, my school was about 6 miles (or 10 kilometers) away from our home. Perhaps because my parents were both busy or perhaps this was the way things were done in those days, I had to take public transportation (bus) to reach my school from home (and vice versa), and I had to do this trip all by myself. I was a mere 6 year old then! A recent conversation with my mom revealed that doing this trip involved a bus change as well, at a bus junction (which, in India, is typically a chaotic place, teeming with a multitude of people—see picture below). Thus, even as a six year old, I had to learn to navigate the complicated (and potentially dangerous) bus routes to negotiate the trip from home to school and back.¹



Figure 1. Example of a bus junction in India.

I imagine that doing the trip by myself would have caused a significant level of stress and anxiety in me; or perhaps not—this might have been a case of “ignorance is bliss” (six year olds are blissfully unaware of the dangers in the world). Negotiating the commute by myself, however, did two things. First, it gave

¹ It's possible that a peon accompanied me on the trip for the first few occasions, but from then on, I was all by myself. It's possible that I commuted with other children. If I did, I have no memory of it.

me a very good sense of spatial orientation. I became very good at being able to conceive (in my mind's eye) a "bird's eye" picture of where I was and how I could get from there to other places. An even more important outcome was that I became flexible in my outlook on life. The physical route to my school (and back) served as a metaphorical representation of the path to desirable goals. Just as I learned to figure out how to reach my school if I missed a convenient connection or if the regular bus were unavailable, I developed the ability to actively generate alternative routes to achieving my goals. I guess I need to thank providence for not tainting my experience in a negative fashion; had I been physically abused by a pedophile, for example, it is quite possible that I would have been psychologically scarred for the rest of my life. As it turned out, the risky decision—on the part of my parents—to let me negotiate the commute to school and back at a relatively tender age has endowed me with skills that I would otherwise not have acquired.

THE FORMATIVE YEARS (9 – 26)

We move on, now, to the "formative years," the period in one's life where one's personality purportedly crystallizes and takes on a relatively immutable form. However, in my case, I am not sure that I can come up with any specific generalizations about how my experiences during this period shaped me. So, I will be rather discursive in my reminiscences about this period.

I divide this phase of my life into five parts: part 1 (ages 9 - 13), part 2 (ages 14 - 17), part 3 (ages 18 - 22), part 4 (23), and part 5 (24- 25).

Part 1 (9 – 13): The Halcyon Days in Assam

The period between 9 – 13, in my mind at least, represents the "golden years of my life". We had moved to Guwahati (the capital of a remote North-Eastern state in India, Assam). It was during this period that I began reading books and forging long-lasting friendships. (I have friends from this period even to this day.) Perhaps the most important reason why I have such fond memories of this period, however, is that our family lived in a cosmopolitan settlement, the likes of which I had never lived in before. The reason why Guwahati was cosmopolitan was simple. Assam was, economically speaking, a backward state in India at that time (and continues to be so even now). So, the Government of India, in a bid to inject greater economic momentum into that state, made it mandatory for employees of the Indian Railways to spend at least 3 years in this state. The Indian Railways employs people from all over India, and the set of employees chosen to be sent to Assam at any point in time is random. As luck would have it, we found ourselves amidst a motley crew when we arrived there. Essentially, people from castes and religions and from all states of India were represented there. Importantly, each sub-group had a critical mass of representation; thus, if one wished to connect with people from one's own cultural background,

one could quite easily do that too. Further, Guwahati is a relatively rustic place, surrounded by the foothills of the Himalayas. There were nature trails and parks and all sorts of nature-related activities in which to engage. And there was the Railway club, where I would routinely spend the evenings, socializing over a drink of Fanta or Thums Up (brands of soda), or playing a game of badminton or table tennis (ping pong). As a kid in his formative years, I couldn't have asked for a better place in which to grow up.

In this period, I flourished in terms of developing friendships and doing the kinds of things that children like to do, but floundered in terms of intellectual development. As a natural correlate of being an economically backward state, Assam did not have good schools and this had a negative impact on my intellectual development. Still, I developed the ability to appreciate the experiential aspects of life. I soaked up lazy Sunday afternoons with a book in one hand and sponge cake in another (and a refreshing cup of tea at my elbow). I rejoiced in waking up to day-long treasure hunts, or to nights of potluck dinners. I fondly recall going on hikes up a nearby mountain, and of aimlessly cycling around the neighborhood. In sum, the years from 8 – 13 were spent in the ideal fashion. It's in this period of my life that I think I came to realize—albeit at a somewhat implicit level—that the ultimate aim in life is to be happy and that wealth, power and fame mean nothing if one is not happy.

It was roughly during our stay in Assam that I began to also notice that I had an interest in metaphysics. Specifically, I was interested in topics that concerned the purpose of life. I can attribute part of my interest in this topic to my father. I remember an early experience—it must have been around 1978 (so, I must have been around 11)—when my dad asked me if I could manage to not think of anything. My spontaneous response was “Yes!” So, my father laughingly asked me to give it a try and it turned out that I couldn't do it, which surprised me. After I confessed that I couldn't not think, my dad asked me to consider not *doing* anything. Even this I found difficult to manage, since I was an extremely fidgety child. I remember my dad making the pronouncement that “sitting still” was an important pre-condition to “not thinking.” He thus lay the groundwork in me to enjoy exploring the workings of my mind, and analyzing the mind-body connection, etc.

I can also remember another experience when, as I was walking back from school one day (I must have been around the same age—11 or so—then), I saw the sky darken. Massive, dynamic clouds gathered overhead and in a seemingly short period of time, the landscape altered in front of my eyes. The wind picked up and the trees swayed in response. The birds reciprocated by flying excitedly in a haphazard fashion. I gazed up at the gathering clouds and saw a flock of white birds (Geese?) form a “V” and speed off into the distance. There was something other-worldly and grand about the whole scene; I remember feeling simultaneously humbled and exalted by it. It's difficult for me to express exactly what I felt, but I seem to have “connected” with that scene in a way that I had never experienced before. Perhaps that was my first conscious experience of being “in the moment”. Later (perhaps one year later, or maybe it was way later—I can't remember clearly now), I encountered a book about the life of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, a popular Indian Sage (who, by the way, is mentioned in *A search in secret India*). The book described how he, as a child or teenager, had witnessed a scene of birds flocking when he first

experienced “self realization”. I remember being a little taken aback by the coincidence, of birds occurring in both experiences (although my experience was nothing close to “self realization”).²

All good things must come to an end, and our tenure in Assam came to a somewhat abrupt end when one of the regional political groups (ULFA) became militant against “foreigners” (anyone not from Assam). My parents decided that it would be best for my mom, my sister and me to leave Assam for the safer shores of Tamil Nadu (my home state).

Part 2 (14 – 17): The High School Years

In going to my home town (Trichy), I experienced, for the very first time in my life, what may be termed as culture shock. Whereas my friends in Assam had been mild mannered, polished, and relatively non-judgmental, my classmates in Trichy seemed crass and offensive. It was commonplace among my classmates in Trichy, for instance, to call me “bastard” or “mother fucker” to my face. At first, I found this to be disconcerting, but soon learned to deal with it (basically, by ignoring it). Later, I too would become adept at dishing out abuses, should the situation provoke it, but I never got to be as “bad mouthed” as them.

This was also a period of my life when I began to gain a better understanding of my cultural heritage. I met more of my relatives with whom I had previously only had a fleeting interaction. I began to regularly accompany my mom and relatives on trips to temples and other cultural destinations, although I never developed a belief in the existence of God. (Today, I would characterize myself as an agnostic.) I became a more regular participant in religious festivities and communal functions (e.g., marriages). Thus, I began to develop a richer schema of the set of values that Tamil Brahmins hold dear.

If I were asked to list the set of characteristics that are central to a Tamil Brahmin’s personality, I would put “emphasis on education” in the Top 3 (with “inquisitiveness about others’ affairs” and “narrow-mindedness” rounding off the list). I finished grade 8 in Trichy and grades 9 – 12 in Madurai, a town about 3 hours by road from Trichy. My dad had been transferred to Madurai after his stint in Assam. For

² Later in my life, I first experienced an event similar to the one that acted as the catalyst in Ramana Maharishee’s life: “going dead”. I continue to experience this even now—the last event having occurred about 2 weeks back), the feeling of being conscious, but of not being able to move my limbs. That is, I am aware that I exist, but I am unable to move my body—as would be the case if I were dead, I suppose. This is a very strange—and scary—feeling, since I can imagine that this state could continue forever and I would essentially atrophy my way into death while being fully aware of it. Strangely, this sensation only occurs when I am already asleep (or close to it). I knew that Ramana Maharishee had experienced something similar to this before, but upon reading Paul Brunton’s book, my memory was refreshed and next time I get to experience the same sensation, I will try to remain calm and see where it takes me. Perhaps it will help me experience my “true self” (i.e., I will get to experience what the Maharishee calls the “shedding of the I”).

those 4 years of my life, I was pushed quite hard by my parents to excel academically, although not quite as intensely as some of my friends or cousins were being pushed. (One of my uncles, for example, went so far as to pronounce that he would commit suicide if his son did not get into the premier engineering institution in India!) My parents merely urged me to excel, without ever threatening dire consequences if I were to fail.

At that time in India (and perhaps even now), only two career paths were considered worthy of pursuit: the medical path or the engineering path. Those pursuing other career paths were brutally consigned to the category of “failures”. Parents of children who did not manage to get into a medical or engineering school were subject to humiliation, which they bore silently. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that failure to secure a seat in a medical or engineering school was treated with the same degree of graveness as would the death of an important member of the family!

It was not just my parents and relatives piling on the pressure on me, it came from my peers too. (And I suppose I was returning them the favor!) So, unsurprisingly, I was obsessed with the goal of getting into a good engineering school (I had no aptitude for biology, so the medical route was out), and competition was intense. I shuddered to think of what my life would be like if I failed to get into a reputed engineering school. And the school of my dreams was Birla Institute of Technology and Sciences (BITS). This school is located in a remote part of Western India, a location that is almost on the diametrically opposite side of Tamil Nadu. I fixated on BITS for many reasons. First, I wanted to be as far away from my parents as possible, since I wished to have the freedom to engage in certain “nefarious” activities, activities that I knew my parents would frown upon. Second, I felt that going to BITS would transport me to the type of cosmopolitan setting that I had enjoyed in Assam. I had always yearned to replicate the experience I had had in Assam and felt that going away from Tamil Nadu—and especially to a place so far away from it—would deliver that to me. Third, and perhaps most important, my desire to go to BITS was a silent acknowledgement that I could not get into the premier engineering institution in India—The Indian Institute of Technology (IIT). About 200,000 students wrote the IIT entrance exam in those days and barely 2000 (1%) got in. I did not think that I had much chance at all (although I did entertain the possibility of a miracle!); my lack in confidence was especially accentuated by my uncle’s pronouncement: that his son would secure the absolute top rank in the IIT exam! (My cousin was in the same year as me.) Further, he gratuitously offered the statement that I—albeit only with proper training—could potentially get a rank in the 300s. His assessment was probably true, but it only served to dent my confidence further.

As it turned out, my cousin did ace the IIT exam (he ranked 11th in India), while I did not find a place anywhere in the top 2000. I had, of course, resigned myself to not being placed in the IITs, but my cousin’s fantastic performance shook me up quite significantly. It sent me on a disturbing psychological spin. On the one hand, I realized that I should not feel jealous of my cousin’s achievement; after all, he had worked hard and deserved the rank he got. At the same time, however, I couldn’t help but feel awed and belittled by the spectacular achievement of someone so *close* to me.

But, I soon managed to relegate the salience of my cousin’s achievement to the background once I joined BITS. (Yes, I managed to get into BITS!) Indeed, shortly after joining BITS, I began to bask in the

glory of my cousin's accomplishment! Through all this, however, it must be said that I never once seriously doubted my intelligence or capabilities. I felt (perhaps delusionally) that I too could have gotten a good rank in the IITs had I prepared well for the exam.

Part 3 (18 – 22): The BITS years

BITS had a *laissez faire* philosophy when it came to class attendance, that is to say, the students could choose to not attend the classes if they so desired. Needless to say, I took full advantage of this lenient policy (much to the detriment of my grades, of course!) There were far more interesting things to do in BITS than attend classes. First off, there were the cricket games that I liked to play and watch on TV. Then, there were the “hang out” joints where one could while away the time while eating samosas and sipping tea. Last but not least, there were the new territories that needed to be explored—wine and women!

I remember my trepidation when I first tried rum (which was my first alcoholic beverage). Just to be safe, I only poured a thimbleful into my glass and drank it in slow sips while the more experienced classmates (with whom I had stitched a hasty—but convenient—friendship) ridiculed by circumspection. I remember the shock I felt at the nasty taste of the stuff—I had expected it to taste sweet, such was my naivete! “How could anyone get addicted to this awful stuff?” I remember thinking to myself.

For the first three semesters (1.5 years) in BITS—if my memory serves me right—, I drank alcohol infrequently and never quite managed to get drunk. But in my fourth semester, I remember at least one occasion when I overdid it; the trip back from the “bar” (although one could hardly call it that) was made on all fours, while I generously lavished the unpaved roads with my vomit!

While I certainly enjoyed the loss of inhibition that followed the consumption of alcohol, what I came to appreciate more was the sensation associated with the consumption of marijuana (or *ganja* as it is called in India). The trip of being stoned was so much more...*trippy*! I remember one of the first occasions when I smoked *ganja*. Three of us had gotten together on the football field to do the deed. It was late evening, so it was quite dark. We crouched on the ground, so as to not attract attention of passers-by. After a few puffs, I claimed that it was doing nothing to me. The others did not respond; they continued to pass the joint around. Soon, the most “senior” smoker in the group suggested that we all lie on our backs to gaze at the stars. Although the exercise sounded unappealing to me, I cooperated. After a while, I made the observation that the stars were *moving*. I didn't recall that stars actually moved. I wondered when they had started doing that! The comment was (obviously) met with uproarious laughter. But the stars *were* moving, weren't they?! It did not occur to me to challenge my senses, such was my acceptance of the information conveyed to me by them.

By and by, I learned to use the sensation of being stoned to question the implicit assumptions that guided my perspectives and decisions. In particular, I began to see more clearly the motives underlying

other's (and my own) comments or responses. How insecure people (including me) were—constantly seeking attention and buttressing of their egos! These insights, however, came at an emotional cost: I sometimes began to feel insecure when I got stoned. I learned that it was important to smoke it only with good friends, that too when the “setting” was right. (No impending exams, etc.)

Part 4 (Age 23): The Year of Drifting

After graduating from BITS, I joined Thermax (a boiler manufacturing company headquartered in Pune) and was posted in Chennai (Madras in those days). Chennai is the capital of Tamil Nadu, so I was coming back to my home state after a hiatus of 4 years in BITS. (I asked to be placed in Chennai since my parents lived there and I wished to be with them again.) Even as I started at Thermax, however, I knew that it was to be a short tenure at the company. The MBA bug had bitten me. I had heard fantastic stories about people getting into the IIMs (Indian Institutes of Management, a collection of affiliated MBA schools) and earning sky-high high salaries; I wanted my fair share of the bounty! I had taken the entrance exam for the IIMs in my last year at BITS, but had failed to get into any of the (four) IIMs. But I had gotten quite close (I was interviewed by IIM Calcutta). So, I knew I could make it if I prepared hard enough. I decided to study for the entrance exam even as I was working for Thermax.

Within the first few days of starting at Thermax, however, I came to realize that my cousin (the one who had gotten into IIT), had not taken up employment. His father had asked him to spend a year (or more, if necessary) to “figure out” what he wanted to do in life. This was, of course, quite unheard-of in our circles, but the idea of “figuring out what one wanted to do in life” sounded very appealing to me (even though I knew that I wanted to get into the IIMs). So, I asked my dad if I too could resign from Thermax to figure out what I wanted to do in life. And he assented! My dad idolized his brother; so, anything that my uncle allowed my cousin to do (including doing nothing), my father allowed me to do!

The first couple of months in the “year of doing nothing” (which started in September of 1989 and lasted till about June of 1990) unfolded as follows. I would wake up quite late (by my household's standards, anyway), around 8:00 am. (My parents routinely wake up around 4:30 am.) Then, I would go for my IIM entrance exam classes, from around 9:00 am till 11:00 am. Then, I would come home, have lunch and settle down to read a novel (typically, one by P.G. Wodehouse). Then, from late afternoon onwards, I would potter around the house, waiting for the evening to turn up. From about 5 pm till about 7 pm, I would swim at The Sterling Club (the club for employees of Indian Railways, located 2 blocks away from our apartment). After the swim, I would come back home for dinner. Then, I would either prepare for the entrance exam or chat with my parents/relatives.

Soon, however, I fell into “bad company”. Among those to frequent The Sterling Club were children of Railway employees who hadn't managed to get into a medical or an engineering school. I can't remember whether I broached the topic of *ganja* with these characters or they broached it with me, but we used our common interest in getting stoned as a platform for forging a friendship.

Our favorite activity (when stoned) was creating music. One of the group-members was a good guitarist and I was a decent singer, so we were the main part of the “band”. As for the rest, they were a willing audience, prompt and generous in their praise. I would, quite frequently, launch into my own revised—usually vulgar—versions of popular songs, and thereby send everyone into fits of giggles.

This period was certainly unique in my life, mainly because of the regularity with which I would smoke *ganja*. So regular was I in partaking of the stuff that I began to grudgingly entertain the possibility that I was addicted to it. This, of course, made me feel depressed. There were some days when I actively sought to avoid smoking it, but someone in the group would pressurize me...and the cycle would start anew. I was learning to become helpless! And it was starting to affect my self-confidence and autonomy.

Thus, when I learned that I had done well in the entrance exams for the IIMs, I rejoiced! And when I learned that I had been offered admission to IIM Calcutta, I was ecstatic. Here, at last, was my chance to break my bad habits! The forced change of scenery would give me the opportunity to break the vice-like grip that the potent cocktail of drugs and friends had over me, I thought.

Part 5 (23 – 26): The IIM Years

When I joined IIM, my aim was to turn into a new leaf. Up to that point in life, I had interest in learning, but was unwilling to toil for it. When I did learn anything, it was at the pace I wanted. Further, I only focused on topics that interested me. Thus, my *modus operandi* was to let the semester drift till it came to exam week. Then, I would desperately cram and, usually, manage to do well. I wished to do things differently in IIM. I wished to be much more diligent and hard-working than I had been in BITS.

But old habits die hard and, as luck would have it, IIM Calcutta had the same *laissez faire* philosophy to class attendance as did BITS. This naturally meant that I chose not to attend classes, right from the start. To complicate matters, I had begun to develop a crush on one of my classmates, but was too shy to express it to her or, indeed, to anyone else. And to make matters worse, it did not appear that she was reciprocating my interest. For perhaps the first time in my life, I actually felt completely listless and went into a bout of depression. The depression led to insomnia and eventually, I fell back into the habit of smoking pot (and consuming alcohol), as a means of diverting my attention away from the impotency that I felt in dealing with the emotional turmoil I was going through.

Even though I was going through all this emotional turmoil, no one else had any clue about it. My “wing mates” (those in the 12 rooms that constituted each wing at the hostel) pegged me as a “weird but harmless dude” whose trip it was to “meander through life”. They took pity on my apparent aimlessness and took it upon themselves to “coach” me for the exam during exam week. I, of course, felt reasonably confident that I would be able to deliver a decent performance in the exams; after all, my last minute cramming had served me well at BITS!

But I quickly discovered that IIM was a different ball game altogether. I came dangerously close to failing in my very first trimester! A classmate of mine was in the same boat that I was in, and we decided to form a team of kindred souls (we didn't manage to attract anyone else to our group) and vowed to "show the others what we were made of". But the competition in IIMs is stiff (think: brainy people willing to sweat buckets), so I never quite managed to do as well as I had hoped. But, a significantly more important thing happened. It was during this time that I found "my purpose" in life (although I did not know it at that time).

I had realized, even during my tenure at BITS, that although I had an aptitude for the natural sciences (I especially enjoyed Math and Physics), the field I was more interested in was Psychology. I was especially interested in issues pertaining to intrapsychic intelligence: the workings of my own mind. I thus sought and studied—out of my own volition—"pop psych" books that were far afield from engineering, like "The Power of Positive Thinking," "Jonathan Livingston Seagull," "Fountainhead," "I'm OK-You're OK," etc. There were, of course, many other students who were also interested in these types of books but, for me, they touched a much deeper chord. While the books were mere conversation starters for most others, they were storehouses of powerful philosophies that I actively used to engage in external (and internal) debates.

Thus, even as I neared the completion of the 1st year in IIM Calcutta, I had made up my mind to specialize in Behavioral Sciences. During the summer internship interviews, while the "hoards" went after the most lucrative jobs, I focused on landing a position at an advertising firm (and got into one of the leading ones). Then, when I came back to IIM for the 2nd year, I only took courses in Behavioral Sciences and Marketing.

Two courses, in particular, had the most significant impact on me and were responsible in shaping of my mindset forever: (1) Organizational Communication and (2) Management of Ethics. Organizational Communication may sound like an innocuous name, but the course was anything but. It involved being closeted with other students who were brave enough to take the course for roughly four days—from 8:00 am till 5:00 pm. I say "brave enough" because we had heard stories that, in some prior years, some of the students enrolled in the course had actually "gone mad" (i.e., become clinically crazy). These rumors sounded apocryphal, but what if they were true?³ The course was also seen as being "too fluffy," which accounted for the fact that not too many top rankers deigned to take it. The section I was enrolled in, however, did have 13 students.

As it turned out, in the four days that we were closeted together (along with 2 faculty members teaching it), all hell broke loose. (I am not supposed to reveal exactly what happened in the course—all of us took an oath to this effect—, so I will only mention what happened in fairly abstract terms.) The first half-a-day was spent engaging in relatively polite conversation ("What did you do over the summer?" etc.). But from then on, people started being *nasty* to one another. One of the students told me to my face (in

³ One of the students of this course in my year—but not in my section—did go clinically crazy, so the stories may have had some merit after all.

front of everyone), for example, that I was “intellectually inferior to him” and that he found me to be despicable as a person! To say that I was shocked would be an understatement. I reeled a little, and my mind raged furiously behind (what I hoped to be) a calmer façade. I dealt my own blows on him and the others. During the course of (the roughly three days) of engaging in such relentless sparring (with very little interruption from the faculty members, I might add), we collectively discovered an important truth: people are excessively polite to one another in real life! Of course, everybody knows that people are biased towards acting more positively towards others than they actually feel, but I discovered the *extent* and *pervasiveness* of this positivity bias. I am convinced that one of the major reasons we delude ourselves into holding a more positive view of ourselves than is justified is because of the (excessively positive) feedback we get from others. If everyone were to be more candid, I think we’d have a more realistic opinion of ourselves! (Not that I am in favor of extreme candor, of course.)

Thus, one major lesson I took away from the course was that others’ positive feedback should be taken with a grain of salt. It also made me less prone to flattery from others, since I knew that it was unrealistic for others to hold overly—or only—positive opinions of me (or anyone else).

A more important lesson for me, however, was what I learned about *others’* capacity to handle negative feedback. I realized that the receptivity to negative feedback depended as much on the person delivering the feedback as it did on the person receiving it. That is, I learned that there is an art and a science to relaying negative feedback. In particular, I learned the importance of two things: (1) keeping my ego out (specifically, it is important for the person providing the feedback to convey that he/she doesn’t hold the “upper hand”); thus, one needs to deliver feedback with a genuine sense of *empathy*, without even an iota of the motivation to benefit from putting another down, and (2), it is important to take time to establish oneself as a person who consistently provides *intelligent* feedback, feedback that straddles the thin line between being non-committal and excessively blunt. Thus, because of taking the course, I believe that I have become a good psychological counselor to many of my friends.

The other course that had an almost equally significant impact on me was “Management of Ethics”. The fundamental tenet of the course is the following: in the MBA school, we are armed with so many powerful tools and techniques that can be applied towards achieving goals, but no one talks about *which* goals are worthy of pursuit. In other words, the instructor for the course suggested that the MBA school may be generating a bunch of leaders who lack direction and that this made the education we were receiving all the more dangerous—it was like “giving hand grenades to monkeys.” The message struck a strong chord in me. I certainly did not feel like I knew what I wanted to achieve (beyond making money, that is). It seemed to me that an important starting point would be to have a good value system, a moral compass to which one can refer when faced with the dilemma of which path to choose. Through my exposure to self-improvement books, I had debated about such issues in my mind, but had failed to reach a concrete conclusion as to which set of values I should adopt. I found the values that others unquestioningly subscribed to, such as “do the right thing” or “follow your heart” completely vapid. This is because I could always think of situations in which these values did not hold, which meant that they weren’t really absolute values. I was looking for a “universal” principle that I could use no matter what the situation. Even something as relatively straightforward as, “killing another person is wrong” seemed to come with qualifiers for me: what if the person concerned were Hitler? I thus dismissed people who

uttered such inanities as, “So long as you don’t hurt others, you’re OK...” (How is it possible not to hurt others? E.g, by taking up a job, aren’t you denying another person the job? Likewise, by buying a cotton shirt, aren’t you promoting cotton at the expense of hemp growers?, etc.) Each of the values that others unquestioningly held up on a pedestal (e.g., honesty, open-mindedness, moderation), I unfailingly questioned: isn’t it better to sometimes lie to make others feel better (so, honesty has its limits)? Should I try homosexuality or bestiality to be open-minded (open-mindedness has its limits)? Isn’t it important to be consumed by the passion for one’s line of work (so, moderation has its limits)?, etc.

Was there no value at all that applied universally, without any qualifications, I wondered?

I asked this question to the instructor and he told me to “meditate”. Essentially, his view was that one had to develop one’s own understanding of what was right/wrong for himself and he encouraged us to go on this path of self-discovery through silence. I found his answer to be simultaneously enlightening and disheartening. How much easier it would have been had he given me an answer (and defended it to my satisfaction)!⁴

The Lintas Years (24 – 26)

After graduating from IIM Calcutta, I joined Lintas, an advertising company.⁵ After a two month stint in Mumbai (Bombay, those days), I was posted in Chennai, again at my request.

Before joining Lintas in Bombay, I enjoyed a two month break in Madras and spent a happy time there, reconnecting with all my friends from the past. By now, I had learned to “use” the drugs rather than “abuse” them. Specifically, I learned to use them to hone my psychological insights and to be informed by the altered perspectives that they afforded, rather than use them as a crutch to escape the mundane life. It’s a subtle (but important) difference.

Having graduated from one of the premier institutions in India, I was accorded a “king’s reception” back in Chennai. I was the apple of my parents’ and relatives’ eyes and could do no wrong in their opinion. To my younger cousins, I was touted as a role model—someone to look up to and emulate. To my friends (and cousins of my age), I was the de-facto leader (or so I thought anyway). By now, my personality had become much more outgoing, and I was blessed with an excellent constitution, which meant that I was full of energy and enthusiasm for doing things and for pushing the envelope, especially in terms of

⁴ I have a more evolved (I think!) view on values now; I will share them if I get an opportunity to do so in the class.

⁵ I had only applied to two jobs—to HTA and Lintas, much to the consternation of my well-meaning friends. One of them—“Little Green Bug” as he was fondly called—went so far as to put my name down for one other job that he felt I needed to consider. I went through the motions with that job interview, but, as one might expect, did not get it.

seeking new experiences. By now, India was experiencing the “disco era” (yes, a bit late!). That is to say, nightclubs were opening up everywhere.

This was a very good period for me, since I was surrounded by people that looked up to me. Given my enthusiasm for organizing parties and the fact that I had more money now than ever before (I was actually spending more than I was earning, thanks to the generosity of my parents), I quickly made a wide circle of friends, many of whom had the same interests as me (the relentless pursuit of women being one of them).

I was central in organizing perhaps a dozen parties in the 2 years that I worked with Lintas, each gaining more notoriety than the previous one. The word of my parties got around to such an extent that even my seniors from IIM (some of whom I had never met before!) began to seek me out, so as to be invited to the parties. We had a clutch of girls who formed the “core” group at the parties. However, while my friends (and even some friend’s friends) made significant headway in converting their interactions with these girls into amorous one-night-stands, I floundered on the sidelines—despite being the “ring leader”. Surprisingly, this did not bother me much. For one, I was a bit of a prude (or a romantic, depending on your perspective): I did not wish to engage in one-night stands. What I wanted, instead, was to be in love. So, although I felt vaguely jealous of those who managed to “get lucky,” hearing of their sexcapades did not prompt me to take any action. I guess I was biding my time, hoping to land a girl worthy of my charms.

(Eventually, I did end up in a relationship, but I do not wish to elaborate on this relationship for personal reasons.)

Even before I had completed my first year at Lintas, I fervently hoped that my future lay in the US. It had been my childhood dream (as it is for many Indians), to come to America. We held such idealized opinions about the US. For me, the main allure was the newness of experiences that I would get from being out of a country in which I had spent a quarter century (25 years). Plus, some of the most salient aspects of living in India, like the grinding and relentless poverty, the squalor associated with it, the enervating pollution, the enraging inquisitiveness of my relatives and friends, were proving to be too much for my equanimity. I was “done” with India, and I knew that the only viable option for me was to get a PhD, since I already had an MBA. But I knew that applying to a PhD program would take sustained planning and serious effort, and I didn’t feel up to it. A myriad forms needed to be completed, plus I needed to take the GMAT and Toefl (and do well in them). And then, there was this business of writing the Statement of Purpose. I doubted if I would ever get to leave India’s shores!

However, one of my very good friends (who continues to be so), paved the way for me: he was already enrolled in the PhD program in Marketing (the field I wished to be in) at UT Austin. He single-handedly changed my fortune by sending me a step-by-step guide to everything I needed to do to get to the US. Plus, he sent me two photographs that provided the “kick in my butt” that I needed to quickly get into action: one was taken at a Pink Floyd concert, and the other was taken in New Orleans during Mardi gras. (The latter showed a woman baring her chest, and my friend had written the following caption on the backside of the photo: *Now I can die in peace*).

THE US YEARS

I came to the US on August 9th, 1994 (after visiting Germany for about a week, thanks to the hospitality of a German exchange student that I befriended at IIM). The period in the US can be divided into 3 parts: Part 1 (age 26 – 27), Part 2 (age 27 – 32) and Part 3 (age 33 – now, 41). Again, there is little by way of specific generalizations about my personality that I will draw from the events in this period; rather, my aim will be to provide a vague idea of the directions in which I evolved.

Part 1 (26): The year in Arizona

As I had mentioned earlier, my main motivation in coming to the US was to gain a change in scenery: I wished to be out of India, to experience (what I expected to be) a richer and easier-to-deal-with environment. In other words, the PhD was a mere ruse to get to the US. Indeed, I did not even know that the PhD was meant for producing research active faculty. I thought that a PhD was simply a “super MBA”!

Given that I hadn’t attended any classes in my last six years of education, I had assumed that I wouldn’t need to attend classes in the US—after all, didn’t the US epitomize the *laissez faire* ideology? Thus, one day (about a month after having arrived in the US), I decided to skip class to watch a TV program. The class I skipped, however, was a PhD seminar on Consumer Behavior, taught by one of the tenured professors at the University. Naturally, the professor was very upset with me and complained to the chair of the department. The chair then asked one of the junior faculty members (with whom I now have a cordial relationship) to “have a chat with me”. This junior faculty took me on a drive in his car and asked me, “So, why did you join the PhD program?” I can’t remember exactly what I told him, except that it was something incoherent. The faculty member then proceeded to give me a severe “talking to,” and ended by sounding out the following warning, “If you are found to be guilty of indiscipline again, you will be expelled from the PhD program...and you may have to go back to India”. (He also proceeded to order me to take my off my goatie and earring—I had acquired these as a sign of my having “arrived”—, since he felt that they were “sending the wrong signals”.)

By nature, I am generally quite unfazed by events, but this one shook me up quite a bit, since I really did not want to go back to India. It helped that I was genuinely interested in the courses I was taking. For the first time in my life, I began to appreciate studying for its own sake. I began to realize that a PhD was really about the love of enquiry. The important thing was, of course, to choose an area of enquiry that would continue to pique my interest on a sustained basis. As I have already mentioned, I had always been interested in the “big questions” of life. It seemed obvious to me that one had to understand oneself well if one were to tackle these types of questions. Specifically, I felt that one couldn’t be blind

to the true motivations underlying one's behaviors if one were to tackle these questions. So, I decided that I would focus, in my PhD, on topics that shed light on "the self". Thus, I plunged into psychology courses with a great deal of gusto. The three psychology courses that I took in my first year at Arizona—in contrast to all the engineering and MBA courses I had taken in India (except the 2 in my MBA that I discussed earlier)—are still fresh in my memory.

As I began my second semester at Arizona, it became clear that there was something brewing in the marketing department: we (the students) heard rumors that the department was "breaking up" and I was told by one of the senior colleagues that it would be best if I transferred to another school. Eventually, a senior faculty member gave me the same advice. The person I was assigned to work with as a research assistant at Arizona was, however, staying back in Arizona; consequently, she encouraged me to stay back in Arizona. She offered to work with me and was generous enough to offer to be my advisor (if I so desired). I wasn't sure what to do and asked her the following question, "What would you do if you were in my place?" She confessed that she would have a tough time deciding, but she added that, knowing what she did, she would stay back. She concluded, however, by saying that she would understand if I wanted to move.

This was a very generous gesture, given that she had taken me under her wing and had encouraged me when others had written me off. Thus, if she felt that I owed it to her to stay back in Arizona, she was legitimate in feeling so. However, I felt like I needed a fresh start, preferably at a university more highly regarded than the University of Arizona. So, I applied to 6 schools (Wharton, Stanford, NYU, Columbia, Duke and Penn State). Penn State and NYU offered me admission and between the two, I was more excited by the prospect of living in New York, so I accepted the NYU offer.

Part 2 (27 – 32): The NYU years

According to Freud, the two most important aspects of life are "work" and "love". Thus, in this view, if one has a good job and a good love life, one is all set! At NYU, I had both. However, for personal reasons, I won't touch on the latter.

It had already dawned on me, during my brief time in Arizona, that the PhD program was different from all the other schooling that I had done previously, the main difference being that the PhD program offered the chance to delve deep into a topic of personal interest. I quickly focused on "emotions" as my broad area of research; in particular, I wished to gain a better understanding of what makes people happy. I had come across a report of the happiness levels of the citizens of various countries and was surprised to see that India ranked quite high; the discrepancy in happiness levels between the first- and many third-world countries weren't as high as one might expect. This intrigued me and so, a faculty member at NYU and I started looking into the role that prior life-experiences—and the expectations generated by them—played in determining happiness levels. (Our hunch was that people adapt to whatever it is that they are used to, and that it is only deviations from this level that impact happiness

levels—an old idea, really, but we applied it to the context of Marketing. Further, in the paper that we eventually published, we emphasized a different theoretical contribution of our research.)

Although I felt completely at home in the PhD program (on most days at least), I came to the realization that I had to deal with a problem: I tended to take on problems that were too big. So, my challenge was to narrow down the scope of my enquiries. Questions like “what makes people happy” are obviously important, but the question is also too broad to be pursued in any single project. Indeed, it would take a lifetime of enquiry by several researchers to answer such questions. Nevertheless, I never lost sight of my grand aim—of being able to shed light on the determinants of happiness—throughout my PhD (and hold it in sight to this day).

Two courses during my PhD program had the biggest influence on me: one, offered by Yaacov Trope (a PhD seminar on Social Psychology), and another, offered by Michel Pham (on Behavioral Decision Theory). It was during these classes that I came up with the ideas that would eventually shape my program of research in the coming years. My dissertation idea (which emerged in Michel’s class) was a creative piece of work, and is widely acknowledged as a relatively big idea. (The first paper from my dissertation is considered one of the new classics and is widely cited, with over 100 cites; this is impressive for a paper that was published less than 10 years ago.) The paper that came out of Yaacov’s class was published in one of the most prestigious journals in social psychology (*The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*) and is also relatively highly cited (with over 40 cites). This paper is an important piece of research, the big idea being that people’s actions can be understood as a struggle to balance between dual desires: the desire to maintain a positive mood (and self-esteem) and the desire for pursuing “accuracy”. (Consider the dilemma involved in deciding whether or not to go for a diagnostic check-up that may reveal that you have a serious disease.) Many of the psychological imbalances in people, I believe, can be traced to the conflict between these two competing goals; thus, the paper provides a parsimonious framework for understanding people’s actions.

Let me now turn my attention to the role that alcohol and drugs played in my PhD days. For the most part, I rarely had the opportunity to consume marijuana, but I did consume copious quantities of alcohol. I forged a friendship with one of the young professors at NYU and we were both “young and restless”. Needless to say, New York City offered plenty of venues in which to exercise our youth and restlessness. It wasn’t at all uncommon for us to consume more than 10 drinks a night and we would do this 2-3 times a week. The excessive consumption of alcohol really began after my second year, I would say. My friend and I would hit the bars first, and then hit the nightclubs, eventually finishing up the night at a greasy fast food joint. (My girlfriend would sometimes join us, but she mostly chose not to—she wasn’t as interested in partying. However, she was OK with me partying.)

It was as though I was releasing all the pent up desire for partying I had accumulated in the previous years. Although I had partied a reasonable amount in India (by Indian standards, at least), I had never really done it the “proper way” or in “proper settings”. In New York, I found out what it meant to *really* party. The clubs were big and the people were fine looking, and I immersed myself in the scene!

I had only a handful of drug-related experiences during my PhD days that I would count as significant. One occurred in Amsterdam, in the summer of 1998 (the summer after my comprehensive exams). I was returning from India to the US and a good friend of mine and I decided to break-journey in Europe. Amsterdam was our top choice as the destination for the obvious reason that soft drugs are legal there. Once in Amsterdam, we discovered that we could potentially have mushrooms instead of marijuana. Neither of us had tried it before, but I had heard very good things about it from a colleague of mine at Lintas. (He had called it a “spring cleaning for the brain”.) So, we decided to give it a try. The “coffee shop” owner suggested that we try the Mexican variety (since it would offer a “visual”—as opposed to a “mental”—trip; the visual trip, he felt, would be easier to take for someone trying mushrooms for the first time). We chewed the stuff up and waited for the trip to take a hold of us...

My friend’s cousin was with us during the trip (she did not partake of the mushrooms herself, although she did not mind us trying it) and our plan was to drive to her house—with her as the driver—that night (she lived in Neunen, about a 2 hour drive from Amsterdam). The trip back to her house is etched in my memory. It was an emotionally expansive experience. It was late evening and so the lights had come on and everything looked spectacular in the lighting. We sped by a game of soccer that was being played in a well-lit and lush football field. Everyone on the field looked so healthy and potent—it was like a game between the Gods! The cars on the highway, all speeding at a relatively healthy velocity (as is to be expected on the freeway), seemed so coordinated. And inside our car, our host was serving up some lavishly sumptuous jazz. Everything was just perfect. At one point, my friend (who was shotgun) turned back to me and smiled a knowing smile (“are you tripping?”) and I immediately knew that he was tripping too. There was no need for words. I remember thinking to myself that I was blessed to have a friend like him and for everything that life had given me. I felt as if everything that had occurred in my life up to that moment—indeed, everything that had occurred in whole *universe* up to that moment—had conspired to deliver that evening to me as a special gift. I fully understood what Robin Williams’s character in *Good Will Hunting* meant when he says: “Life is perfect with its imperfections!” For the first time in my life, I truly felt that I could “transcend” time. I felt the past, the future and the present meld together in that moment. I had been reading “*Freedom at Midnight*” (a book about India’s struggle for freedom, with Gandhi as the protagonist) prior to the trip, and I could feel Gandhi’s spirit smiling benignly at me. I was in a state of ecstatic peace with the world and what’s more, I felt that I deserved to be in that state!

The second drug-related experience of significance occurred in New York City, when the boyfriend of one of my apartment-mates supplied me with three ecstasy pills. A couple of my very good friends were visiting me from outside the US and we all decided to take the plunge into the trip. Of all the substances that I have had, I would rate ecstasy at the top. Although it’s difficult to describe the trip to someone who has never had it, imagine this: imagine a rush of palpable energy through your body such that, for the very first time in your life, you feel like you are *really* awake and alive. Add to this a complete lack of self-centeredness, coupled with unshakeable belief that *others* are selfless too. Then, add intense happiness (its not called ecstasy for nothing!) to the mix. And finally, top it off with heightened sense of sensory perception, such that colors (like even that from a simple traffic light) appear to have (a previously undiscovered) *depth* and *shimmer*, and sound appears to hang in the air like a physical laser

beam. Get the picture? It may seem like too much to handle, but the best part of the trip is that you are endowed with the ability to handle it all with grace and confidence. Time slows, and you feel a sense of certitude about everything you do. You feel expansive because you have no reason to fear anything. All the so-called problems present themselves as trifling challenges, without which life would be boring anyway! There are several epiphanies that occurred to me during the ecstasy trip and I would need to take the time to sit down and list. But here are a few:

When you interact with others with absolutely no ego, that is, without wanting praise or seeking assurance, and when you hold the unshakeable belief that they others are kind, selfless beings, the nature of the exchange (even if words aren't spoken) is profoundly different! You don't need to shirk away from looking directly at them; your gaze is open, friendly and innocent, not fidgety and insecure.

The content of our consciousness, in normal circumstances, is cluttered with emotional baggage from the past and anxiety about the future. Further, we look at things and events from a perspective that is constrained by who we think we are: brothers, friends, MBAs, Indians, men. The quality of the moment is so different—and so much more beautiful—if we could just let go of all this baggage. If only we could learn to exist as “sensory sponges,” without imposing our mind on everything!

Breathing! There is so much wrong with how we breathe, normally. Why do we hurry so much with our breath? The proper way to breath is to let the air work itself into your system—slowly, slowly, the lungs take in the air, one molecule at a time (it seems), such that each inhalation is a protracted act of savoring the air. And the exhalation occurs so naturally when the lungs have reached their optimal capacity. Certainly, more air can be taken in, if desired—indeed, one could inhale forever—but now seems the “right” moment to exhale and experience the warm, moist air take leave of the nostrils.

People are so powerful, so wonderful, so talented. Who built that tall skyscraper—the one that isn't even that tall, really, in the larger scheme of things? How did they decide to combine the shadowy blackness of the windows with the silvery bricks that frame them? Brilliant! How selfless of those native American musicians to take to the streets of New York, just to entertain random passers by? Do they deserve my money? Heck yes, twenty dollars! But more importantly, they deserve my attention.

I am humbled by creation and life and all that surrounds me and all that is within me. I feel privileged to be given the opportunity to be alive and I want to volunteer as a positive contributor to life! Count me in!!

The problem with drug trips (as if I need to spell this out!) is that they don't last. Even if they did, I suppose there is something “artificial” about being on drugs (although, as a purely philosophical issue, what isn't a drug?). In my case, ecstasy came with an added problem: I actually felt *depressed* after the trip. So, I only tried it a handful of times, with each trip, in general, being less intense and less enjoyable than the previous one, till I stopped doing it.

However, I do wish to make the following claim about drugs: they are useful things. Obviously, I can't say with certainty what I would have become had I lead a drug-free life. But, I do know that I would not have experienced what I did if I hadn't tried them. I would thus have missed to learn that “there's a

different reality”. Even if more authentic experiences—those provoked by, say, meditation—are qualitatively different from the ones that I have had with drugs, I can at least understand the broader concept, namely, that we needn’t settle for life as it appears to be more concretely now than I otherwise would have been able to. Because of drugs, I *know*—rather than just believe or think—that there is more to perception and conception than meets the eye.

Part 3 (33 – 41): The Austin Years

I joined the University of Texas at Austin as a tenure track faculty member in the Department of Marketing in July, 2000. Thus, I have been in Austin for 8 and-a-half years now. Almost immediately after moving to Austin, I broke up with my girlfriend (from NYU days) and within a month of the break-up, I was introduced to the person who is now my wife. We got engaged within a year of our meeting and were married six months later.

Despite my wild and stimulation seeking nature, I have always known that I would, one day, settle down to lead a family life. (Unlike most of my best friends, who are still unmarried.) And I can’t imagine a person better suited as my life-partner than my wife. She is, truly, my better half. Although I could list many positive things about her, here are the few that stand out:

She doesn’t hold grudges. In my previous relationships, I would frequently get into the mindset of “counting up the positives and negatives” which is obviously detrimental to the relationship. For any relationship to survive, at least one person needs to be the “big” person, who more easily forgives the other, not just verbally and not just for the moment...and I can’t think of anyone who has exemplified this trait more than does my wife. She is epitome of sweetness and nurturance. Of course, I have quickly learned to reciprocate this aspect (I hope my wife agrees!) and, touchwood, we have a good thing going!

She doesn’t have mood swings! Up to the point I met my wife, I believed it to be a fact of life that people are moody. I would thus assess their mood and let this assessment determine the content and nature of my interaction with them. With my wife, however, there are very few mood swings! It’s not that she doesn’t ever get mad at me or that she is never depressed, but just that these reactions are always justifiable. That is, she behaves in a manner that is entirely appropriate for the situation and never “overdoes” it.

She’s my pillar of strength and stability. God knows that I have done many things to “shock and awe” my wife, but she has always given me the freedom to explore and do what I want to do. I guess I could never have stayed married to someone who attempts to curtail me in any way, but my wife never even attempted to curtail me—it is her nature to “set people free”. I always carry in me a great deal of gratitude for this and this gratitude serves as a source of strength for me.

I wish to close this report by highlighting a recent change that I perceive in myself.

A long time back (when I about 16, as a matter of fact), one my father's sub-ordinates (in the Indian Railways) had been asked to foretell my fortune. This gentleman was supposedly good at reading horoscopes. He took a look at mine and delivered the following prediction: I wouldn't achieve anything of significance till I was about 40 and it's only after that that my life would really begin to take shape. (This was apparently because I was in a "sun" phase till 40—which meant I would be too hyper and too blunt in my dealings with others till then—and that I would transition into a much calmer "moon phase" after that.) I am 41 now and I do feel like what he said is coming true. I am mellower now and the life of stimulation-seeking, for the most part, appears to be a thing of the past. It should be noted that the transition appears to have occurred quite naturally, that is, without much coercion or exercise of willpower on my part.

There are many possible reasons for this change. Perhaps the most important one is that I now have 2 kids! Another important reason is that I am finally coming around to accepting my responsibilities in life. I have been blessed with a certain type of intelligence: intrapsychic intelligence. My insights into the workings of the mind (of both mine and that of others) are superior to that of most others and I have an opportunity—even a responsibility, perhaps—to "actualize" on this gift. My background and experiences makes me especially qualified to apply scholastic rigor to answer life's big questions. Put differently, I believe that I am one of the few people who can serve as a conduit between the scientific community and the masses in addressing such big issues as: what are the factors that determine life-satisfaction and happiness? How can one tailor one's life and circumstances to derive most satisfaction from it? The question that I am most interested in ultimately, however, is enlightenment (which I define, among other things, as a *sustained state of bliss*). Is it possible that such a state exists? If so, what light does scientific research shed on the possibility of achieving the state? How much water does the saying of Jesus Christ and Buddha hold in light of the scientific findings? This is the domain to which I wish to dedicate the rest of my life.

And I look forward to the interactions with all those enrolled in this course, interactions that I hope will provide me the clarity that I know will be important in tackling the big questions I want to go after...