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Mr. Karani - Ajpa's friend

December 19, 2001.

Dear Dr. Athreya,

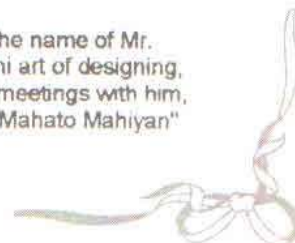
"Strange are the ways of life!" When I look back at 35 years of our relationship, I am amazed at how two total strangers could come so close to each other through a chance encounter. There have been times when we have not met for long periods, and yet there has been no ebbing in the relationship. If someone asks as to what I remember this long friendship for, I can state without hesitation and a moment's delay the following three aspects of my life:

- A clearer definition of an abstract concept like *Excellence*, through our several meetings with that well-known sculptor Mr. Davierwala who conceived, designed and sculpted the Excellence Award, and many meetings organised by ICEE where excellence as a part of daily life was described by those who practised it
- Your suggestion that Gandhiji should be studied as a manager and an executive (distinct from him being described as a saint and a mahatma, or the Father of the Nation). I should take up that project, and in that endeavour interview some of the close inmates of Gandhiji, my advantage being a Gujarati and therefore the ease with which I could speak and establish a rapport with most of them who were Gujarati
- Finally, (quite unknowingly) planting a seed thought in my mind to change my profession from a shop-floor engineer busy in manufacturing and assembly to that of management, whether in a company or independently

We had nothing in common way back in 1966 - you as a management consultant of repute and I a shop-floor engineer at one of the lower rungs of hierarchy in a large organisation like Voltas Ltd., when we first met in one of the meetings of the Indian Center for Encouraging Excellence (ICEE). It was not even a meeting in the true sense of word, since I was just a part of the audience in a large gathering in which you were one of the principal organisers and on the stage along with the speaker. And yet a friendship was established very soon, which flourished and blossomed over the years, so much so that a meeting in person became inconsequential for a sustained deep and warm relationship. I believe it requires something more than having a common profession, or client-professional relationship, or academic encounters. It is one such trait of life that brought us together, viz. Excellence in life.

I still do not recollect how or who directed me to that meeting of ICEE, or who was the speaker. I do not even recollect how we really came to say 'hallo' to each other the first time. What I remember is the fact that I plunged whole-heartedly in that activity, and felt honoured and privileged to be assisting people like you and the veteran journalist Madhav Kamath in this activity of search of excellence. We all had one common bond that held us together (and is even holding us together today): Excellence is not person-, or gender-, or status-, or richness-specific. It is attitude specific, and a person however low in social hierarchy or professional work can still be practising excellence in its highest and ultimate form, quite often unknowingly. Under the banner of ICEE, all of us together were in search of this excellence, and put it across to others - both through organising meetings and through print-media by publishing a bulletin called 'Excellence'. My role was that of collecting information of excellence from language papers and magazines and translate them in English for use in the bulletin, as also writing feature articles from time to time about institutes and individuals who practised excellence on a sustained scale.

The idea of 'Excellence Award' (something like Oscar Award) came later, and you got the name of Mr. Davierwala who was a well-known name as a person who had achieved excellence in his art of designing, moulding and casting forms in metal and a wonderful human being. I would join you in meetings with him, when he pushed us to give him a concrete definition of what we meant by excellence. "Mahato Mahiyan"





was our key-phrase. It was amazing to watch how he could finally translate this key phrase in design just through use of four syllables A-C-M-E, and giving these four letters a shape as steep and pointed upward as a church steeple, and gave it an appearance of a goal hard-to-achieve, worthy of putting one's full life behind it for achieving it, and yet with a sense of beauty and aesthetics that would continuously leave an inner urge to strive for it. The series of lectures I heard at ICEE from more of ordinary people rather than the great, but all on their march up the steep slope of "Mahato Mahiyan", having reached substantial altitude, and yet full of humility and wonder of life, looking forward to reach still greater heights. All this has ingrained excellence in me.

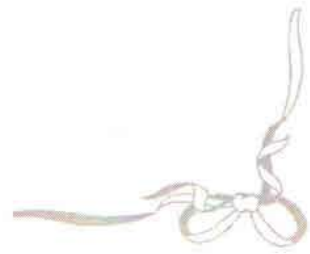
The idea of the study of Gandhiji came much later, probably in end-1972. You suggested to me to study Gandhiji as an executive. I too was a great admirer of Gandhiji and his achievements, but that was in the traditional sense. This idea was quite novel to me. Moreover, I was quite blank about management vis-a-vis life of Gandhiji. You gave me the book "Effective Executive" of Peter Drucker, and asked me to study Gandhiji from the same management traits Drucker had described in his book: Time management, Selection of tasks "What I and I alone can do", Selection of people, Selection of priorities. The study of the book made this subject very exciting. I took a tour of Saurashtra and Gujarat. I met Prabhudas Gandhi, Narandas Gandhi, Manubehn Gandhi, Kanu Gandhi, Shankarlal Banker, Manubhai Pancholi, all of whom helped me discover this new vision of Gandhi. I spent hours in the Gandhi Smruti Library at Bhavnagar, which has several thousand books of and by Gandhi. For me, this whole experience was "open-o-sisme" of the Alibaba caves, and a huge treasure chest opening before my eyes - wide with wonder and joy.


In Gandhi Ashram of Rajkot, I met Prabhudas Gandhi and Narandas Gandhi individually - both nephews of Gandhiji. Prabhudas Gandhi lived as a child under tutelage of Gandhiji in Phoenix Ashram in South Africa along with many other children. His autobiographical book "The Dawn of Life" in Gujarati (Jeevan-nun Prabhat, a Navjeevan Publication) is a masterpiece of history of that life and those years. He gave me insight in the time-management aspect of Gandhi there in his early years of his "Experiments with Truth". He could narrate equally well many other instances of Gandhi's life, when he would go out of way to ensure keeping time. Gandhiji was a stickler for time, and very strict with himself in keeping time.

I will not go in to details of my interviews with others. I will just say one thing, though. None of them had ever been interviewed about their great master in such a manner. All the interviews thus far had been of him as a great man. This very approach once explained was quite thrilling and revealing. Each one of them told me their knowledge about Gandhiji in this light, whether in selection of own tasks, or selection of people - from Sardar Vallabhbhai who was in great lime-light to many like Thakkarbapa and Babelbhai Mehta and Ravishankar Maharaj who buried themselves among the adivasis, the social outcasts like prisoners and bandits to help them reestablish back in life and society; or selection of priorities - in Noakhali in 1946, or in Baliapada (a Muslim slum in Calcutta) instead of Vice-Regal Lodge in Delhi on 15th August 1947. For me, it was not just understanding Gandhi in this new light, which in itself was a great revelation. It was understanding life itself, and how one could organise it, if one pursued it with patience and perseverance.

Now I am coming to the last part of my letter. A pointer towards a new direction in my life. Your role was limited, and (from my point of view) not intentional. Yet this direction-pointer came in my life at a very crucial period. We never even discussed that aspect - that I should switch over to management. But that book of Peter Drucker, the study I made of Gandhi and the people I met, helped me take a proper direction at a time when I was searching for a change - not in job, but in a meaningful work after more than two decades of working in blue overalls. From 1st January, 1975 to December 2001 has been a long stretch of time - from my just stepping in the field of management making my way gradually in a new arena to being an independent management consultant from 1986 onwards.

Excel Industries was willing to take the risk of accepting me in their top management team as Executive Assistant to the Managing Director. Dr. H. N. Nanjundiah, then management consultant to Excel Industries became my mentor. I learnt as many practical lessons from Late Sri Govindjibhai Shroff, MD and Chairman, and books and magazines were my teachers. Daily lessons from everyday life are still my






close companions as a practitioner of management, and I take as much as I give in my professional life. The lessons of excellence and those learnt from life of Gandhi stand in good stead.

Saying 'thank you' is not our tradition. But I will say this much: I am ever so grateful to destiny that it brought us together in a very meaningful combination, which has enriched my life. Usha informed me that you will be celebrating a milestone birthday this 28th. Body slows down in activeness after a certain age. Mind and intellect continue to operate and sharpen. I can only talk of two of your many associations that I know of - at Dnyana Prabodhinee of Solapur where there is always a mention of you when I go there, and Excel Industries, with whom you have remained in touch.

May God give you many more years of such meaningful association of service and joy !

Sincerely yours,


B. J. Karani.

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