

Traversing the Road not Taken

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One of the books that created a lasting impression on youngsters of my generation was a novella 'Jonathan Livingston Seagull' – a simple fable authored by Richard Bach. The hero of the story is Jonathan Livingston Seagull, who is, well, a seagull. The narrative takes us through the young bird's quest to learn to always fly higher than he had ever done before [1]. His life mission – which borders on obsession – is a metaphor for an individual's ability to attain self perfection. Some critics consider the work to be too simplistic and banal, but I feel the moral we derive from its reading merits consideration.

Each of us, in our own ways is like the little Jonathan Livingston Seagull, always engulfed in a struggle to reach our best potential. Students often ask me for suggestions on how they can become the best in the profession. I have sometimes heard seasoned colleagues, who have years of successful practice behind them, express frustration at having fallen short of realizing their biggest dreams. I have observed many young doctors, who, on joining Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP), seem lost as to the actual role they can play in the organization.

Medicine is a very demanding profession. It always expects more than our hundred percent. The pressures of the profession are such that one can easily get overwhelmed by the day-to-day challenges, and forget our own purpose in life. Undesirable though such an outcome is, only a few of us are suitably equipped to escape from its inevitability. So, is there really a way out? I feel there is. The key concept here is career planning. Do we really look so far ahead that we can see ourselves in the distinct roles that we need to play as life progresses?

THE FUTURE BELONGS TO THE BRAVE

Humans by nature are explorers. Every bit of progress that we have made in the course of civilization has been possible only because somebody was brave enough to take the first step forward. There was someone somewhere always who decided to look into the horizon and step out of the box. That someone became somebody because he or she decided to imagine a different future

and create something new, keeping an open mind that welcomed new ideas and influences. It is because of people like these that humankind has prospered and achieved progress by making new discoveries and inventions, by provoking new reforms and revisions, and by building great systems and institutions.

These are the pioneers and pathfinders of tomorrow. Many a times the comfort and security of our routine makes us wish for a hassle-free life. Our common culture also does not encourage risk-taking and experimentation. Instead of encouraging inventiveness, society actually tries to always push us into the safe path. There is even a popular proverb that conveys the native wisdom, as when we say, 'curiosity killed the cat.' However, I am glad to say that there is also an interesting rejoinder to this proverb that rewards active enquiry. And it goes like this, 'curiosity almost killed the cat... but satisfaction brought it back!'

It was the psychologist Abraham Maslow who popularized the term 'self actualization' [2]. He devised 'hierarchy of needs' that is an elaborate roadmap for each individual to reach one's fullest potential. When we speak of imbibing the self-actualizing spirit, we are speaking about an entirely different mindset. It is a mindset that allows us to embrace our complete nature than just a portion of it.

If we are to absorb this concept fully, we must first understand that being a doctor is not a one-dimensional commitment. There are, as far as I can see, four ways in which one can be good doctors. These ways are: Healer, Teacher, Leader and Inventor/Innovator. Many of us fall short in our life journey, because we unwittingly live within our own self-imposed limits. We need to break through our own walls and traverse through all these stages in order to cultivate the liberating spirit.

DOCTOR – THE HEALER

Every doctor is at heart a healer. This is our primary duty and commitment. Total mastery of this terrain is the key to success in all of one's future goals. This goal has been

inbuilt in our DNA since the day we entered medical school or perhaps even before. Knowing how the human body functions and what makes it tick is basic to us. So also is knowing how to identify illness and provide relief to the needy according to the best of one's ability. Every young doctor is well advised to direct all of one's energy – and ambition too – to this singular mission. Without this you have no future in this calling. It is an uncompromisable commitment that should remain till the end.

DOCTOR – THE TEACHER

When we gain sufficient experience as healers, we also have a duty to become a teacher and a mentor for others. This is the way in which transfer of knowledge takes place in our profession. An engineer, for example, first learns the theory in the classroom and then tries it out on the factory floor after getting a job. This is not the case in medical science. The learning has always been with hands-on approach from day-one. There is no other way to learn medicine. Therefore, every experienced doctor has a holy duty to transfer his knowledge to others, by becoming a teacher, or through participating in mentoring activities and in Continuing Medical Education (CME) programs.

DOCTOR – THE LEADER

Human beings are social beings, and we need human leadership. We gravitate towards a leader whether we like it or not. Good leadership is essential for maintaining the integrity, growth and sustainability of our own small self-made universe. Its benefits are intangible, but without good leadership the entire system will run the colossal risk of a collapse. Leadership is the ability to take responsibility for the well-being of those around us. We need to identify our leadership role and live up to it. Even of an ordinary practitioner, the common man sees us in a leadership role and surrenders his or her child's life to our better judgment. Hence discharging sound leadership is essential in our profession.

DOCTOR – THE INNOVATOR

This is a role that requires tremendous passionate involvement, creative enquiry, and perhaps a little bit of

raw talent too. These are the few brilliant doctors who harness their knowledge to venture into new frontiers by coming up with better solutions for the same problems that we were all trying to solve [3]. They are the pioneers and pathfinders who open new horizons for the entire profession. One does not need to be an Einstein to be considered as being inventive. It only requires for us to be self-critical, observant and insightful. Willingness to dump an established mode and try out a better path that looms promisingly, and ability to use imagination to configure new pathways is essential.

SATISFACTION IS THE KEY

Each of us has the potential to fulfill all these roles in our own ways and become our own better selves. Doing so truly makes us into complete doctors and self-actualized beings. Organizations like IAP provide us the opportunity to achieve these goals. Being an active member of IAP extracts us out of the four walls of our practice, and gives us a chance to be more than a healer. It does not take much to fulfill these roles, nor is there a specific benchmark to judge your performance in them. It is just a state of mind that we need to cultivate and apply in our daily routine so that our every tomorrow will be better than our yesterday.

In conclusion, I feel obliged to remember the immortal lines of Robert Frost:

*Two roads diverged in the woods, and I –
I took the one less travelled by,
And that made all the difference.*

REFERENCES

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3. IndiaBioscience. Bhattacharyya U. Pushing for Medical Innovation in India. Available from: <https://indiabioscience.org/columns/conversations/pushing-for-medical-innovation-in-india>. Accessed September 18, 2018.