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Context to the nugget

Venkat speaks about his years at IIMA and how his thoughts and beliefs got shaped by some of his friends (Sridhar Rajagopalan and Sunil Khairnar). He also speaks about how the course LEM (Laboratory in Entrepreneurial Motivation) taught by Prof Sunil Handa got him to articulate his direction sharply with the following words “I see myself as an instrument or tool that’s available to society and my choices should be guided by maximising the returns that I will give to the society’

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And picking up in IIMA, I am curious about one of the quotes that I picked up as I was doing the research Venkat in one of the LEM courses in IIMA on the course on entrepreneurship you used the phrase “I see myself as an instrument or tool that’s available to society and my choices should be guided by maximising the returns that I will give to the society’. Say more about this, where does it come from because when I go back to campus days, I can’t remember anybody around me having that framing in terms of how they thought about themselves? So, if you could talk a little bit about where that self-awareness came from?

Venkat Krishnan (VK): A couple of things. First is like I said pretty much even in college did a lot of work in the extra-curricular space while I was in undergrad college and got a chance to work with... so starting from my... in fact, I would go back to even school, Airport High School where we had some... lot of underprivileged, not so privileged kids coming there to the same school and I used to spend a lot of time helping some of them prepare for exams, learn concepts that they won’t get in class etc. So, teaching friends, tutoring them for free and stuff like that. I even tutored some kids for money in French later on and stuff like that but I kind of felt that some of us are just outrageously lucky, right, like I told you in the beginning? So, there’s always been this feeling that I don’t really believe that I have done anything great, it’s just where I was born that has made a huge difference and anything we can do to give other people a leg up so that they can get at least somewhere close, say you can’t possibly completely equate it, you can’t make the same base, only government can probably do that but can we at least help some people get a base so that they have a fair chance at least to compete in the world and stuff like that. So, that thought was already there in the mind even when I went to IIM, one of the thoughts definitely in the back of the mind was entrepreneurship. I have been very strongly entrepreneurial from college days, school days etc. and therefore the idea of doing stuff if you are building a business that will help people all of that stuff was also there at the back of the mind. And, I think, two three things that happened, a couple of very close friends on campus so in the dorms that are just like on the floor 10 people. So, two very good friends, one Sridhar Rajagopalan with whom I then went on to set up a... and still probably one of my closest friends today. Sridhar and I used to spend a lot of time together on campus just talking about various things discussing. We have gone on 25-30-kilometre walks in the night all the way from IIM

Ahmedabad to the railway station and back walking. One of those was with Sridhar carrying his laundry clothes in his hands, because we had actually gone to pick up his clothes and decided to continue walking and went all the way and came back. And we would talk about a lot of things, we would talk about politics, we would talk about what is the right thing to do in a country like India, how do you solve these issues of poverty, how do you solve these inefficiencies in the system and stuff like that. So, we used to keep talking about a lot of these things. And, I think, that had a significant, of course, influence in that point of time in shaping the mind further. The other was Sunil Khairnar, again a batch mate and dorm mate and Sunil comes from an agricultural family. So, he grew up in a farmer's house, he has been a farmer throughout his childhood and so he was doing the program at IIMA but one of the most amazingly intelligent guys I have come across, deeply introverted so you don't actually realise but so much depth, it was extraordinary. And the spirit of service of wanting to do something for farmers that he had in his heart, I think that must have also had a rub of a kind. So, it was just the sangat, right? I mean, you get shaped by the company you keep. So, there was a huge influence of the company as well on the thought processes. So, I think, and I guess once you realise that everything you have is because of the world has given it to you and not because you got some false notion that I am just a wonderful rock star who has worked very hard to create everything I have got in my life then it kind of almost as a corollary follows that you then ought to pay it forward, right? And so, I have pretty much from very early in life, I think, the articulation in that LEM reflection note was very sharp but otherwise I had always kind of been in that direction of thought that I have everything I need, I don't really need anything else, what's the use of myself. I am an atheist, I don't believe in god, I don't believe life has a purpose even spiritually and philosophically I quite... people find it paradoxical that I actually think Thanos is a very interesting character, right? If at the click of a thumb you can get half the world to not exist, it actually helps the world in various ways and stuff like that. So, given that there is no predefined purpose of life, we have to construct our own purposes, right? Or you have to go and walk off a cliff and die, there is no purpose in life, why exist kind of a thing. So, there are two important things that have guided my thought process. One, since I am here, I might as well be of value. So, I don't seem helping myself as a purpose.

Yeah, so like I said, I think if you have to create your own purpose in life, in my case I think I was very clear that I had everything I needed and I didn't really need anything else. And therefore, the best use of my life is to be of use to others. In that sense I have seen then and I continue to see myself primarily as a resource that is available to help improve the situation for society as it exists to the extent possible. And therefore, my decisions are always guided by that. So, every time that I have come across the key criterion for decision-making is which of these paths helps me create more change, or create more impact, social purpose and that's been kind of driving all the decisions. The second one that I am very, very clear about is that each of us needs to be net positive contributors into the system. So, I am acutely aware that... and we consume from the system in various ways, the more obvious ones are the physical resources that we consume, right, and like the environmental impact of our life and stuff like that. So, those are things I am very, very clear about. So, I have a commitment to make sure that I plant enough trees to offset at least 1.5x of my carbon footprints throughout my life. And, maybe I will even do 5x of it so that it offsets all my family's carbon footprints or something like that. But also, very, very clear that at no point do I want to be a parasite on the society? So, at one point of time after a certain age, if I am not being able to be productive, I would really love it if I could just go and euthanize myself. To me that would be the ideal option. Never be a burden on the society, be of value or don't exist. So that is the second and very strong.

DJ: And when you say productive, how do you...

VK: The first criterion, right, adding value to society, contributing back.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: If I go back to my two years at IIMA and reflect on what is the course that made the most impact on me. It was not any of the Finance, Ops or Quant courses. It was actually a course called Exploring Roles and Identities conducted by Dr Indira Parikh. We would go away from Ahmedabad to the Rann of Kutch and spend a week there talking about how we are dealing with various elements of life.

It was hard to put a finger on what it did to me at that point in time but in a way, it showed the potential of unlocking the mental models that people have in their heads and driving value in their life. In a lot of ways, what I do now is a lot similar to the experience I had at ERI but I guess the power of a great education is not just in the specific knowledge it imparts but also in the seeds that it plants in your head that germinate over a period of time. Thank you for listening.

End of nugget transcription

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive’s / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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