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Context to the nugget conversation

Ayse speaks about why she thinks Nelson Mandela is one of the Master Designers of Life she admires. She speaks about how he evolved through the various twists and turns he went through. We connect the dots with some of the insights we learnt about Gandhiji from Dr Ramachandra Guha.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Diving into the book *Ayse*, before we dive into the framework you have, the one story that stood out for me or one example was of Nelson Mandela. In the book, you refer to him and you call him a master designer of life. I have seen a lot of people use a lot of different adjectives on Mandela but master designer is not one of them. Can you say more about why you think he is a great designer of life?

Ayse Birsal (AB): Absolutely. I think because of the way he reinvented his life again and again, and how he went from a lawyer and a political activist to being a prisoner, and then, coming out of prison and going back into politics and then becoming the President of his country, and through it all, I mean these are major life changes and through it all, he seemed to never lose his optimism, his humanity, his empathy for himself and for other people, and how he turned challenges into opportunities. And these are truly the principles of thinking like a designer that I talk about in my book and I feel like he embodied these. And he never gave up, and he never lost sight of who he was, and he was always at the service of other people. So that is why I thought, you know, his life could have turned in so many different ways, but he redesigned his life again and again, without losing sight of his values. And that to me made him a master designer in addition to all his other qualities.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This nugget from *Ayse* about Nelson Mandela reminds me of my conversation with Dr Ramachandra Guha (RG) about Mahatma Gandhi. Couple of things in the conversation got triggered. One is the point around how experimentative Gandhiji is with his beliefs.

RG: *"I think of course there was diet, there was medicine and then there was sex or celibacy, so there were these three main obsessions. Well there was a fourth which was interfaith harmony which we have not talked about, which was, some ways most important, what kind of Hindu he was? We can talk about that later now in terms of his personal idiosyncrasies and eccentricities; he experimented a*

great deal with that, so it was, what should we eat? What is good? What is bad? What is healthy? What is unhealthy? What excites the senses? What does not excite the senses?

DJ: And it seems like a very scientific trial and error kind of a...

RG: Then there was medicine, where he went from being someone who opposed modern medicine to someone who saw a place for it, particularly after he had two surgeries that saved his life one for one for piles and one for appendicitis so he adopted above plural pragmatic approach to medicine and then there was celibacy which was the most peculiar and bizarre thing where he was so obsessed with celibacy that he conducted this strange and notorious experiment or testing it by sleeping with his grand-niece which I have described in a chapter in my book and that came from some peculiar belief that if you are sexually pure you can control society and tame the passions, that you tame the passions within, you can tame the passions outside with Hindus and Muslim pursuing each other this is totally absurd, absurd and also I say a manifestation of vanity that if he is sexually pure Indians would stop fighting with each other so then there is in terms of in his inner journey his religious journey which is again very interesting and very novel and worth spending time on and the discovery, so Gandhi was a Hindu and even he call himself as a Sanatani Hindu but he was a very special kind of Hindu, for one thing his Hinduism did not require a shrine to express itself so in adult life he went to a temple only once which is a Madurai temple in Meenakshi because they had finally admitted Dalits the kingdom of god was within him Ram was then in his heart so that's the first aspect as a Hindu. No ritual, no shrine, faith is within you its inside you, you don't need a church or a mosque or a temple."

DJ: The other piece that stood out for me in my conversation with Dr Guha is the point he makes about the fluidity of how Gandhiji thought about his identity! He didn't quite confine himself to any one particular box.

RG: "I think his best to read out just three paragraphs of my book to explain how Gandhi himself saw his multiple callings, so here I am reading out Gandhi what I say about Gandhi and then there is quote of Gandhi in between "To deliver India from British rule was by no means Gandhi's only preoccupation the forging of harmonious relations between India's often disputatious religious communities was the second the desire to end the pernicious practice of untouchability it his own Hindu faith was a third and impulse to develop economic self-reliance for India and moral self-reliance with the Indians was the fourth these campaigns were conducted by Gandhi in parallel all were to him of equal importance, in 1933 he wrote to a close friend that "My life is one indivisible whole, I cannot devote myself entirely to untouchability and say neglect Hindu-Muslim unity or Swaraj all these things run into one another and are interdependent, you will find that one time in my life an emphasis on one thing at another time on another but that is just like a pianist now emphasizing one note and now another but they are all related to one another" and this is what I say in the end for Gandhi political independence meant nothing at all unless it was accompanied by religious harmony, caste and gender equality and the development of self-respect in every Indian, other patriots had used the Hindi word Swaraj to signify national independence. Gandhi made Indians aware of its true or original meaning Swa-Raj or self-Rule. So that is Gandhi in his own words and that is also as I told you a little while ago I don't believe in saying this is the most important thing the only cause just a one route to success, Gandhi conducted his multiple careers and saw them of equally importance and at different times different aspects of his work came into the forefront others receded and those came into the forefront and so on."

DJ: Three things stand out for me from my conversation with Dr Guha. 1) Gandhiji had a scientific approach to life and conducted many experiments 2) He was not fixated about his beliefs and was

willing to evolve them 3) He didn't box himself by any single identity. He was fluid about who he was being at various points in time.

If this is of interest, you might also like the conversation with Vinay Sitapati at the podcast where he speaks about Narasimha Rao. That conversation is a master class in leadership under constraints.

Thank you for listening.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Dr Ramachandra Guha that is referenced: [Inner journey](#).

Nugget from Dr Ramachandra Guha that is referenced: [Multiple identities of Gandhiji](#).

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Identity: Identity refers to the reputation, characteristics etc. of a person that makes the individual or the people around him/her think about them in a certain way. To put simply, how do we think of ourselves and what to the others think of us. Identity is a key element that we need to wrestle with during pivotal transitions. Herminia Ibarra shares her insights on how we should treat Identity as a Work in Progress that gets influenced by the journey we go through and the choices we make. Ram Guha speaks about the multiple identities of Gandhiji. Atul Kasbekar speaks about how he saw his identity evolve from being a photographer to a producer. All this and more in this playlist. You can access the playlist [here](#).

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Ayse Birsal - Nuggets

- 86.01 Ayse Birsal - Journey to becoming a Life Designer
- 86.02 Ayse Birsal - Nelson Mandela - a Master Life Designer
- 86.03 Ayse Birsal - Deconstruction and Reconstruction - The 4 step process
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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the 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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