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Context to the nugget conversation

Raghu goes into depth about how for every Pandava Archetype, there is a Counterpoint on the Kaurava side who has similar set of skills but the difference is the orientation (dharmic vs adharmic). He also goes on to speak about how each of the Pandava archetypes has a shadow side that they need to get in touch with to be effective as a Leader (as a King in those days or as a CEO today).

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Let's talk about that Raghu, I was going to get to that. You talk about the notion of counterpoints in the book for at the least the Pandava archetype.

Raghu Ananthanarayanan (RA): Not Pandavas, in Kauravas.

DJ: In the Kauravas. So, can you talk a little bit about, you know, in the book you talk about Bheema and Duryodhana, Yudhishtira and Bhishma on the other side. Arjuna and Karna on the other side, Nakula and Gandhari on the other side, and Sahadeva and Shakuni on the other side. So, can you just shine the light on just the distinction between these two and how they end up on different sides?

RA: Yeah, see if you look at the essential character of Yudhishtira, this is a person who will use his psyche, his everything to respond to order and see how the situation is orderly disorderly and bring it back to order. There's even a very interesting discussion at the end of the war on the 18th day, who should lead the war? Should Bheema lead the war or Yudhishtira lead the war, because it has to be a decisive battle. So, they go to Krishna because they can't resolve this question. So, Krishna says, Yudhishtira has to lead the war because Bheema will escalate the war. He will not know how to fight in a way that you can bring peace at the end of the war. This is brilliant. So, the Yudhishtira's power lies in going into areas of chaos and bringing in order. You take Bhishma, he is also a person with great knowledge, wants to create order, but he is so rigid about it that he cannot respond to the context. So, when the Draupadi vastra-haran is happening he is the final arbiter of truth. He is the one who has the power. He simply isn't willing to say that rules are rigid, dharma is not following the rules. So, he ends up in the Kauravas side. You take Nakula, he's serving, you hardly hear about him the whole of the Mahabharata but he is always there in every scene, he is mentioned, but there's nothing much mentioned about him because he is setting the context. He sacrificed himself completely for the context. You take what Gandhari has done. She has gone into a situation which is terrible, she is betrayed, her husband is blind and all that fine, but if I want to serve will I blind myself also or will I be the eyes? So, in the idea of service that Gandhari brings in, there are lots of very, very, you know, nice things but she has self-sacrificed herself to the detriment of the context. You take Shakuni and Sahadeva and it's interesting in many of the battles these are

the people who have to fight and kill each other and only one of them can survive in the Mahabharata battle. So, you have this intelligent person who can see who has forethought, who has foresight, and the way Sahadeva uses foresight and the way Shakuni uses foresight, they are the counter points. So that's the brilliance of the Mahabharata. So, it tells you in different contexts how a dharmic mind of a certain archetype will act, and how the same archetype if it awakens an adharmic motivation how they will act and how this will lead inevitably to a confrontation, which is destructive.

DJ: And back to the Pandava archetypes Raghu, you also say that each of these archetypes have a shadow side.

RA: That's right.

DJ: So, can you talk a little bit about how we think about that and how do we manage that?

RA: Yeah. See, the most famous scene in the Mahabharata is Draupadi's vastra-haran. And what is happening there. Just imagine yourself as like this Bhishma, Yudhishtira archetype, always doing the right thing, whatever but you are human. There's a part of you that will rebel against this kind of rigid, keeping aside my feelings, keeping aside my intuitions, keeping aside my passion and doing the right thing. So, what happens to that energy? You keep pushing it, you keep pushing it. So, here you have Shakuni who has understood this so he has seen your shadow. So, he tempts you and you as Yudhishtira give the most exalted reasons to actually gamble. That's the shadow side of you. And these are related. So, this side would like to play, it would like to just say, damn the rules, damn order, damn what's right and wrong, just let me go. Now, these sides are there in all the Pandavas, because every one of them at some point of time or the other screws up, they make a mistake. Now, the fundamental difference between the Pandavas and the Kauravas is every time they make a mistake, the Pandavas go into a period of agyantavasa, they go into retreat and they ask themselves in doing what I was doing what was I really doing, where did it come from? And then they go and meet sages, they do tapas, it's all described, how they work with it, and how they work with themselves, and it's very interesting because especially after this gambling scene in the agyantavasa when they go into the exile, they meet sages who tell them stories about other people who did something similar and how they came out of it.

DJ: Fascinating.

RA: And at the end of that the actual agyantavasa period when they become exiles to themselves is a fascinating story. Each of them, there's actually a discussion before they go in to Virata where they ask who will be the... how will we not be recognised at all, disguise. So, it is described like this that Yudhishtira smiles and says I will go as the gambling companion to the king. So, these shadow sides which are my strangers and to myself in a sense have to be met, have to be understood fully so they have to live with it for one year. And these are five people who have always been kings, they have to be servants. They have always been together; they have to be completely alone. So, they have to go and explore parts of themselves that have never been touched. So, imagine that I am a leader who has not worked with my shadow selves. What will I do with my power when the context triggers the shadow, triggers the compulsive parts of me. They will just come out and I will use my power to justify it, I will use it to cover it up and it's a disaster. We have seen leaders, national leaders and so on who have just been rampant with power, they have not worked with their shadows. So, the Mahabharata makes it very, very clear, unless you have really, really worked with your shadow, you cannot enter a dharmic war.

DJ: And relating that to let's say a contemporary business life Raghu, what would the equivalent of an agyatavasa mean? Would that mean going to a meditation retreat, would it be something else?

RA: No, going into agyatavasa in a current context would mean two things for me. I mean, most of the CEOs I have coached also this has been my advice. One is, see, most people who come to a CEO level and very senior levels are fundamentally intelligent people and they also have an ability to look at themselves, it's not as though they don't have that ability, but when you get these compulsions and the shadows opened up, they overpower you, they are more powerful than you. So, there are two-three things that are necessary. One, you have to have a daily practice where you set aside time to sit back and ask fundamental questions of yourself; I call it the Arjuna time. Every leader must set that aside and ask very deep questions plus health and whatever, that is a separate thing. The other thing is it is necessary to go on a retreat every now and again to really pull out of what you are doing and go and do something that will really help you to touch parts of yourself that lie completely hidden in your normal everyday life. The other is to read books like Mahabharata, not to read the usual thing that says, this is how you have to be a leader, that's how you have to be a leader but to read a wide variety of things. So, it allows you to reflect off your thinking and so on and also do thought experiments. Take up a situation and do a complete thought experiment, different triggers will come up. So, you take the thought experiment fully. There are texts like there is a text called the Tripura Rahasaya in which the wife coaches the husband how to be a good king.

DJ: Isn't that true in all houses... just joking.

RA: But this is an old book that tells you exactly how to do it. And one of the things that is done is this whole thing of this guy has taken on a few complete thought experiments where he lives one life out, he lives another life out and all that to understand fully and I don't know if you have read the book Hermann Hesse's, Siddhartha, there also there are these things where he uses this thought experiment thing fully. But it requires courage and why a coach becomes useful is because when you do these by yourself your mind can play tricks on you and when you have to really look at the difficult parts of yourself, you will quietly do an escape trick and think that you have got the logic.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: What is fascinating for me to note is that traditional education often emphasizes building skillsets but the mindset development is often left to chance. Like Raghu says, whether you behave like a Duryodhana or Bheema, Karna or Arjuna, Sakuni or Saheva, Bheeshma or Yudhishtira, Gandhari or Nakula can make all the difference. I recently came back from a trip to the National Defence Academy in Pune, Khadakwasla where it was fascinating to see how the cadets were being moulded at the skill set level but also at the mindset level. I wrote a small article sharing some of my reflections from the trip. You can find that on my LinkedIn page, it is under Deepak Jayaraman.

One of my clients told me this in the context of how he builds trust with the people he works with. I will say this in Hindi first to get the point across. He said "Yaar Trust ke liye sirf do cheezen chahiye. Aukaat aur Neeyat. Aur Agar neeyat theek nahin ho, to aukaat ka kuch fayda nahin hai". The English equivalent is that to build trust, we need two things – Intent and Capability. If Intent is not in the place, there is no point having great capability. Interestingly enough, a lot of our training and grooming is around capability building and developing intent is often left to chance!

There is so much more to say here but I will pause here and leave you to marinate in this wisdom from Raghu! Thank you for listening.

End of nugget transcription

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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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