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Context to the nugget

A lot of us "go with the flow" either because we want to conform to expectations, minimize risk or don't listen to our inner voice. Atul talks about how he was an exceptional student in school and ended up in UDCT - one of the most prestigious places to study Chemical Engineering. He talks about the disconnect he experienced at that point and how he moved forward from there.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): One of the things I am curious about is, how much of whom we are gets baked in early in our lives. So, maybe you could reflect on the formative years of your life, first 10–15 years. Could you talk a little bit about what got formed then, which still forms a core part of who you are?

Atul Kasbekar (AK): I actually had exceptional grades in school. I was in Campion and then in Jai Hind. This is, we are talking now in the '70s and early '80s. So, if you had the grades it was generally assumed at that time that you will become one of three–four professions. Primarily, it was engineer, doctor, chartered accountant, and etcetera. I was exceptionally good at chemistry. I enjoyed that subject. My dad had a chemical factory. It almost seemed logical that I'd become a chemical engineer. Now, I had the grades to get into UDCT, which is now called the ICT; at that time, the University Department of Chemical Technology.

DJ: Possibly the best chemical degree in the country.

AK: Easily. In the country, by far, and rated, I think, in the top 10 in Asia as well. So, it was just one of those things where you got into UDCT and everybody was like, oh my god, you got into UDCT! But when I got there, I realized that chemical engineering had very little to do with pure chemistry per se. The chemical process was pretty much already known. You had to design equipment. It was more physics, and physics I hated. So, all of a sudden, I realized that I was quite easily going to be the worst chemical engineer known. Then, when I checked a lot of the former grads, I found very few of them were still doing chemical engineering. And I couldn't for the life of me figure out why one would spend four years doing something and eventually they are selling insurance or running some company that had absolutely nothing to do with chemistry, the chemical process, physics, or engineering. They were in finance. So, it seemed to me like a singularly useless waste of four years. So, I started talking to people, which is an interesting story.

DJ: This is during your engineering?

AK: Yeah. So, in the first year, I realized *yaar, yeh main nahin kar sakta*. This I really should not do. I am giving you this little build up because then it becomes relevant to where my parents were in the context of this. So, I spoke to a couple of people. One of them was Pralhad Kakkar. And he said a very interesting thing: '95% of humanity goes to work every day and 5%' I am sure he made that number up in his head but it seems very accurate '5% makes a living out of what they enjoy'.

DJ: And how did you get to him out of curiosity?

AK: I don't recall exactly. I think it was, the former head of Air India was a family friend and he headed the advertising of it. So, he said, why don't you meet this filmmaker? So Pralhad said, 'Just ask yourself what is it that nobody needs to tell you to do, and if you are doing that to make a living, then you're never really working. You are never getting up on a Monday morning and going to work. Weekend comes, ho hum, big deal, the rest of my week was also fun. So, if you are going to work, I figure you can work for 6, 8, 10 hours a day. Beyond that, the motivation has to be a passion. Otherwise, it will be work very soon.' So, I said, OK, nobody needs to tell me to take pictures. It was a very serious hobby. I took some rubbish photos of dogs and cats and horses and sunsets and my sister, whatever, but I enjoyed that. So, when I started talking to my parents, we met a couple of people. I met Gautam, which is a very interesting story as to how I met Gautam Rajadhyaksh.

But when I spoke to my parents, they were freaking out. And you can't blame them, because my dad is the eldest of five brothers and he has a Master's in mathematics. The second one is an architect and third's a doctor, the fourth's a chemical engineer, and the fifth one is a chartered accountant.

DJ: What would be called respectable professions...?

AK: Yeah, in the context of then. So, they were like, you want to be a photographer? Great, but what you are going to do for a living? That kind of thing. But what was interesting was that I wasn't someone who was flippant. I captained my school for cricket, in debates. I represented Maharashtra at the republic day parade, in the NCC. I was school captain. I captained basketball. So, it wasn't like this guy is going to chuck it all away. So, they could see that he would be fairly seriously about whatever. So, I have to say, it was a very big decision for them and hats off. They tried all these things of, 'But why don't you finish the degree and then you do whatever you want to'. And I was like, why would I waste three years, makes no sense.

To give absolute due credit, even though he couldn't afford it at that time, my dad insisted that 'Whatever education you want is not a problem. You figure out which is the best place in the world to go to and I will send you there.' I was like, but you can't afford it right now. And he said, 'Shut up! That's none of your business. But this is your long rope, because education is everything.' He always had this thing about degree. So, I said, photography, I don't really need a degree. I can assist people, I can learn, etcetera. He said, 'No, I want a degree to make myself happy. That degree is my receipt for the money I am spending. So, you give me my receipt. I don't care what you do with this.' So, it was a great line. He said, 'This is your long rope. Now, you come up with it or you hang yourself is up to you, but I am giving you that long rope and after I have taken care of your education and your sisters' education, etcetera, your mother and I will studiously spend your inheritance.' Which I thought was a very cool thing.

And that's one of the few lines I have brutally used with my kids, '*Kya padhna hain bataao?* You get that one shot at the title. After that, good luck, buddy. And if you need me to make phone calls, I am more than happy to make them. Do you need me to stand guarantor of something? I am happy to do that. But you go on your journey now.' Then, that safety net right now which is right under your arse, for my kids, I will move that now 30 feet below, and then further below, and then take it away.

DJ: But it's also interesting that you moved from best in the country to sort of best in the world just in terms of once you said photography. The fact that they said...

AK: There was nothing here. There wasn't anything I could do over here. I checked that out. There wasn't anything. There were some small courses at JJ, which was part of learning fine art. I can't paint to save my life. So, it's not like I am going to do classes in sketching and painting and *side mein photography karo*. So, it needed to be a dedicated program. At the FTII, it was primarily film and moving cameras and that's not what I wanted to do. So, it just then boiled down to where and at that time there were pretty much like three or four places in the world. There's lot more options now. I mean, even pre-internet there were few more. But there was RIT in Rochester, there was Brooks Institute, there's Art Center in Pasadena, in California, and, I think, there one was in London or something. Brooks had a really good reputation at that time. There were a couple of Indians there before me.

DJ: Just persisting with that juncture. Often, it is very easy to be dissatisfied with status quo and say, I want to do something else. So, what's your sense on how do you separate the real passion from a distraction?

AK: If you have to be a photographer you have to a) focus. So, focus has been a strong point in my life, I suppose, even from then, even before it was necessary for me to *focus* on subjects. So, I was quite clear *ki yaar*, I love this. And what Pralhad said makes sense. Someone was telling me what this David Guetta kind of DJs make and it is numbing. It's actually unbelievable. So, I mean, who would have thought that? So, I didn't know at that time, that no matter what you would chose to do, which is true of today and maybe let's say from about a decade ago to now, where you could make a very good living at whatever it was. So, actually, it was a bit of a punt in the dark. There weren't that many known people. When I came back, there were, I mean, I can literally name the five people who were established as photographers. Today, you can throw a stone and hit one. Commercial photography. It just was one of those things where '*yaar, karte hain, yaar*'.

In Campion, where, even if I say so myself, I was like best boy and sterling student, absolutely, even my professors and all called me and said, 'What are you doing?' and the term 'wasting your life' showed up a lot at that time. In fact, I was telling Raju Hirani, inadvertently, of course, Madhavan's track in 'Three Idiots' is really my life. Because he switched in the movie from engineering to becoming a wildlife photographer. So, I shoot wildlife once in a while, but they're mostly on two legs. But that's my track so to speak. And the line in 'Three Idiots' is 'you be very good at what you do and *success jhakk marte tere pichhe aayegi*' that kind of thing. So, it never was something *ki* if I will do this, I will make that much. I just wanted to take pictures and if someone is paying me to take pictures, oh my god, how nice. Or they gave me an extra zero, even better, but you know I'll take the picture anyway.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Two takeaways here for me. 1) What Atul says about liking Chemistry and doing Chemical Engineering was quite thought provoking. Devil is often in the detail. Getting into the Restaurants business because you like good food. It is critical to be nuanced about what a career path is and what about it makes it relevant and exciting for you. 2) Power of listening to your inner voice. Along the way, there are enough people that tell you "you ought to be doing X, Y, Z" given your past. But you are the best judge of what is right for you.

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End of nugget transcription

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Atul Kasbekar - Nuggets

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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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