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Context to the nugget

Vinay talks about how he has thought about his career choices. He speaks about the fact that after his 12th, he could have possibly become an architect instead of a Lawyer. He also talks about his thinking at each of the transition points where he made critical choices (Law versus Architecture, Law to Journalism, Journalism to study PhD in Politics). He also talks about how he thinks more about the quality of the product he creates with his diverse backgrounds than sweat about the notion of his identity.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): How you thought about the various forks in the road after 12th?

Vinay Sitapati (VS): To give you some sense like I am sure with the others in the podcast at the time at the time you are making the transition, at the when the fork in the road presents itself you typically go through instinct or you are not really rationally thinking through what lies on the either end of those two choices but looking back I just can think of myself, am I basically focusing on am I enjoying myself? And am I growing and am I being relevant? I think these are the three things that, looking back that I try to ask myself that these three forks and I am only 34 so I don't have all that many forks and I don't know the end of the road in many of those forks, so please keep in mind that unlike your other guests on this podcast I am not that success story that you are now reverse engineering to find out that what worked? But if I want to just look back at my limited career and my limited life I could think of three forks the first is when I finished my 12th standard now unusually I had taken classes in fine art painting as well as in science and even then I had a sense that I had an interest in creative expression no I like painting I also like writing so there was a clear choice that presented itself between law and architecture so I got into national law school Bangalore, India's best law school and I also made it I think to the final round of the interview for in CEPT Ahmedabad which is arguably India's number one architecture school and I have to kind of pick between two and I picked law it was intuitive I think my father also pushed me saying that look it was better suited to your personality and looking back that was exactly right because I enjoyed doing creative things but I also enjoy speaking and writing and law is much more suited to that so I think that was the first kind of fork that I could have got either way I could have been an architect or a lawyer as I turned out I am neither but what I am doing is little more suited to law and the skills required to be a lawyer than it is to be an architect. The second career fork was in 2007, so I had done 5 years at National school of law at Bangalore, I got into Harvard law school for masters, I was over the moon but then the question was what do I do after that? Do I be a corporate lawyer in the US? Am I back in India litigating or do I be an academic? So I was thinking through these choices and I remember taking a class in corporate law guy called Guhan Subramaniam who Indian origin guy but basically American

who taught corporate law in Harvard law school and he had a joint appointment at Harvard business school and he was the best teacher that I can think of, he had spent some time at McKinsey, his courses were highly structured, every minute it seemed was planned and he was very good, and I worked hard and I think I got a B minus or a C plus or something like that and I think it was a very clear symbol that if you are taught by the world's best teacher in a particular subject and you work hard and you do badly then you should look for something else so I think it was a very clear signal, I also was interested in writing at that time, I was never interested in academia I like the idea of a university so it was determines do a PhD and I was thinking of a PhD in political science because I was more and more interested in Political and Law rather than law itself and I didn't applied immediately for a PhD because I felt like I should have something approaching life experience and working as a political journalist in Delhi with Indian Express seemed like a life experience that could complement a PhD in political science, in India you can't work for parties in the same way so just seemed and it also catered to my interest in writing so I came back to India, and came back to Delhi and worked in journalism and most people thought that I was ridiculous but given that I already had a degree from Harvard Law school they didn't thought I was crazy they just thought I was eccentric and I think there is a big difference in the two, like poor people are crazy rich people are eccentric so if you have options and you screw it up people think you are eccentric, if you have no options and you screw it up they think you are crazy and I wanted to spend only a year in Indian Express, I wanted to cover that 2009 elections the one which UPA comes back to power so I wanted some experience in covering campaigns and writing about them and I did a lot of that but I loved my job too much and so the third fork in my career came around 2010 when I was asking myself, I like Delhi, I like reporting I clearly like this world of politics and the world of the public sphere, I wasn't getting paid much but I liked so should I do that or should go to pristine where I already got a seat for a PhD in political science and that was the third fork, I sort of thought about it and I just picked a PhD because on the assumption that I could always come back and pursue journalism and on hindsight I think it was one of the best decisions I made because it gave me a lot of skillsets like research library to study documents that journalist doesn't give you, what journalism gives you is the ability to interview the ability to write quickly sticking to a deadline academics are terrible at that, so it was a very good compliment in my current job the current book I am working on or the last book this marriage of journalism, law academia with all its rigors, I think has really helped me so looking back in my limited life I would say these are the three forks.

DJ: Back to the point of coming to Delhi and working as a journalist after a degree in Harvard law school I am sure a lot of your classmates must have been pursuing a career, whether compensation levels were huge multiple talk to us about what was easy and what was hard about that choice?

VS: It's a good question on the hindsight I should have been worried about this question but I had enough of the sense of the kind of hours they put in, especially if you are a corporate lawyer in America to realize that, that kind of money with a lot of physical, emotional stress, the fact that you may not be doing things that you are enjoying so an average corporate lawyer has work in some cases or some clients that he or she loved but if I would ask them they would say that's the 20% of the time and I didn't want a career where I am being paid a lot but I am happy 20% of the time so looking back again I had the sense of the kind of money you have made if you are a corporate lawyer in New York I also had the sense of the cost of that and also look from Harvard law school getting a corporate law job in New York is not, it wasn't a walk in for me I would have to add effort because this was just after the financial crisis, so it wasn't as easy as you think it is after a Harvard law school degree.

DJ: Given the various things you have done so far how do you think about your identity and how that's evolving?

VS: I have a Law degree I have been a journalist I have been an academic and you can be bad in all three so that's been a bit of question are you an academic think of view, as a poor academic, journalist you are nowhere in India you say "*Gali ka Kutta na ghar ka naa ghat kaa*" so it's a little bit like that but I think the one thing I have learnt that A is focus on the product not on the category so question is not are a journalist, are you an academic but what is your output? If you are a journalist you can be somebody who writes books and articles that are so well researched and refer to existing scholarship in a way that more better than academics and as an academic you can be somebody who actually gets on the ground gets her or his legs dirty in a way that would put more journalist to shame so rather than ask yourself which category you fit in I think it's very important to realize what product you fit into and the second thing I have learnt from all this careers is that, you would think that academics would talk about academic ideas all the time and lawyers would talk about legal rights but actually all of them are talking about the same thing which is whose office is smaller whose office is bigger and a lot of the things you are associated with law for example legalese speaking in legal jargon is actually ensure that to create artificial value for a lawyer, journalist write a certain code, academics use jargon because if they wrote in simple English people will realise that often they don't have value and so all different professions end up creating protocols that are not intrinsically adding value but to exclude normal people and make them feel special because that's why you will pay them if a lawyer wrote in simple English then the client may be able to do that too, then why do you need to pay a lawyer? So I think one advantage I have had is I have been able to separate what I hope is a lot of bullshit associated with these professions to ask at its core what value is it providing.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Couple of things that struck me here.

First is about being clear about who you are and what gives you energy. He brings that up in the context of the trade-off between being a hot shot Corporate Lawyer in the US and pursuing Journalism in Delhi. He talks about being paid a lot of money but potentially being happy only 20% of the time. I find that people often don't have a clear articulation of what gives them energy and what does not and I have seen several high-achievers making wrong decisions because they went with the flow rather than thinking what made sense for them in particular. Especially, in a country like India where resources are often scarce, I find people over-indexing on processing the external world but not spending enough time in the inner world on what gives them energy and direction.

The second thing that struck me was what Vinay says about focusing on the product versus identity. In the complex world we live in and in the nature of value that is being added at the intersection of disciplines, it is often hard to attach a label to a person or a role because that transcends multiple disciplines. Focusing on the product rather than over-sweating your identity is a good way of thinking about it especially when you shift trajectories, you can go through a period of what I call identity vacuum which can be unnerving when people cannot really slot you into a category. Focusing on the quality of the product is a good way to deal with these transitional phases.

Thank you for listening. If you are new to the podcast and want to get a sense of the nature of content that is covered, you might want to go to YouTube and type "Playtopotential Highlights from 2017". I have tried to capture the key takeaways from my various conversations last year with

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leaders across disciplines. If you want to listen offline say during a car ride home or during airplane travel, you could also access the Podcast on iTunes, Stitcher, Saavn and several other podcast apps. Google has recently launched an app for podcast listening on Android platforms too. If you went to playtopotential.com, you would also have the opportunity to listen to multiple voices curated by a topic.

To give you a sense, one of the playlists is Reinventing Self. Leaders across disciplines have spoken about how they thought about staying relevant and made choices along the way.

If you find the content purposeful, please go to iTunes, rate the show and share a review. It will help others discover it. Thank you for listening.

End of nugget transcription

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Inflection points: Inflection points are when the notion of “what got you here won’t get you there” hold. Whether it is a company moving from a start-up to a scale-up or a leader moving from a CXO to a CEO role, these passages of play have to be navigated carefully as there is a high risk of derailment. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Reinventing self: “How do I stay relevant” is a question that all of us have to grapple with as we go through our respective journeys. Careers aren’t linear any more. Some of the leaders talk about how they managed to pivot during their journeys and significantly change trajectories. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Law: What questions should we ask ourselves before we consider a career in law? What is that one distinctive trait that people should have for them to flourish as a lawyer. What are the options that open up when you start out with a career in law? Perspectives on some of the questions above. You can access the playlist [here](#).

Academics: Insight from the world of academics on the realities of the path and the nature of questions individuals should ask themselves before they pursue a career in that direction. It is interesting to notice that excellence in academics in schooling and under graduation is not necessarily a predictor of excellence in the world of academia. You can access the playlist [here](#).

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Vinay Sitapati - Nuggets

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- 30.02 Vinay Sitapati - Delivering good judgments
- 30.03 Vinay Sitapati - The reflection habit - decoding signal from the noise
- 30.04 Vinay Sitapati - Managing time, unfettered curiosity and resilience
- 30.05 Vinay Sitapati - Leadership under extreme constraints - Lion, Fox and Mouse
- 30.06 Vinay Sitapati - Staying relevant through transitions
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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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