

In Praise of Serendipity

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I wish to relate a personal experience and draw a larger lesson. If it looks like a bit of bragging, I assure you that it is needed to set the scene.

In my BE degree from Bangalore University, I stood first not only in my branch of engineering, but in all three branches, and from all three universities of the State of Karnataka. I applied for the ME degree in Aeronautics Department in the Indian Institute of Science (IISc); my confidence was such that it was the only place to which I wrote. I passed the ME degree in 1970 with first rank: you can still see my name in the roll of honors in the department.

My friends advised me to go abroad for Ph.D. and one of them got me the application for MIT. But I had seen enough examples of first-rate thesis work at IISc. Add to it my own sense of patriotism, and I stayed behind for Ph.D. under the supervision of Professor Roddam Narasimha, a star researcher and a teacher at the time. I learnt a lot from him and it took me roughly three years to complete the thesis. Since I was busy doing other research, I delayed submitting the thesis until 1974; it received the P.S. Narayana Medal for the best in Mechanical Sciences. I was also busy with several other activities such as organizing discussion sessions among fellow students on science, society and philosophy and serving briefly on the council of the student union.

For whatever reason, some of my professors in the department had said to me all along that there wouldn't be a problem if I wanted to join the teaching staff of the department. My goal was thus clearly set: I would join the aeronautics department and become a professor!

However, an unsought opportunity to go to Australia materialized even before I received my degree formally. When Narasimha visited me there a year or so later, he said that every serious researcher ought to work in a good US university for a couple of years. I thus went off to the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, which then had perhaps the best Mechanics Department in the country. There, too, I did pretty well. A year down the road, I told Narasimha that I was ready to go back to IISc; he recommended that I write to the Director, Professor Satish Dhawan, to whom he would send a strong letter of support. Though Dhawan no longer had much contact with students, his glow had touched me briefly on two or three occasions. I promptly wrote to him and waited for the letter of offer to arrive: After all, I had done well by every measure that IISc valued—so what was there to doubt?

How wrong I was! Some seven months went by and no response came. In a moment of dejection, I accidentally saw on a bulletin board the advertisement for an assistant professor at Yale. I asked my post-doctoral mentor, a first-rate researcher, Professor Stanley Corrsin,

what he thought of Yale. My ignorance was such that I didn't know that Yale was one of the great universities of the country. As a confirmed skeptic, he said that it was "slightly better than Hopkins in reputation," which meant to me that it was a pretty good place. Frustrated as I was at having heard nothing from IISc, I immediately sent my application to Yale.

I forgot about it pretty much until I received a call from Yale some three weeks later and was asked, "Can you come for an interview?" That was a Tuesday, as I recall. I asked, "When?" The caller said that a seminar slot was open for Friday, if I could make it. Thinking that he meant the Friday some ten days hence, I said "Yes, I can manage, and the ten days will be enough to prepare a talk". He said, "No, no, I mean this Friday". I said, "Fine", and began putting my talk together immediately. The next evening, a secretary in the building took one look at me and said, "Kiddo, let's buy a decent shirt and pair of pants for you to wear for the interview." She drove me to a shopping mall and chose a shirt (which I wore but once), a pair of pants and a tie. My 'sophistication' had not yet reached the level of a jacket.

When I visited Yale, I learnt that they had interviewed scores of candidates without offering the job to anyone for some four years. I came away thinking that the visit was a waste, but it was only a month later that I was offered the position! It was thus less than two months between my application and the offer. I was to learn later how extraordinarily fast it was for the traditionally snail-paced Yale.

It was by then nine months or more since I had written to IISc, and the contrast was obvious: Yale really wanted me and IISc didn't. I took the Yale job. Soon after, however, I received a letter from Dhawan. It began with apologies for the tardiness, which was caused by the fact that he "had been wondering what to do" with me, but he had finally decided to make me an offer (though it wasn't exactly what I had applied for). I wrote back that I had just accepted the Yale job, and so couldn't accept his offer immediately; I would, however, take it next year if it could be kept for me until then. I never heard from him again!

Thus it came to pass that I spent the next 20 or so years at Yale, becoming full professor in six years—soon appointed to a chair with joint appointments in Mechanical Engineering, Physics, Mathematics, and Applied Physics. My work there seemed to have caught the attention of a few people.

In short, for some ten years, I was preparing for a career in IISc, a goal that seemed entirely attainable. I repeat that I had done quite well—there and elsewhere. However, the absence of a timely response, a certain sense of neglect that I felt when my second letter went unanswered, just changed my life plan. The incident left me with a poor impression: when opportunities later came my way to return to IISc, I felt reluctant to do so. (Dhawan, however, remained one of my heroes through all this and I got to know him well later; when I was

the first Dhawan Professor in the Aeronautics Department, he and his wife came to attend my lecture, which, alas, was the last I saw him.)

I have since then accepted the role of serendipity: for, what else could it be that my career was made at a place about which I had not heard until I got there! How I met my wife and how we got married is a similar story. My present position as Director of the International Centre of Theoretical Physics and Abdus Salam Professor was an act of pure serendipity, as well.

Now for the larger lesson: To those younger colleagues who have come to seek consolation because they did not get the one thing for which they had worked hard and long, I have sometimes related this story: Instead of bemoaning your fate of the moment (and you do encounter disappointments), you should perhaps seize opportunities of the moment. This is not always possible and you cannot look for such opportunities actively; but when something that jives with your personality comes along, you should consider it seriously even if you had never before thought of it consciously. You might be happier for it. This philosophy has worked for me.