

ROCK STARS

Growing Stellar Performers
in Organizations

**Rozaine Cooray
and
Pujitha Silva**

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ALSO BY ROZAINE COORAY

From Crisis to Character, 2014

A collection of published articles based on organizational psychology on how to navigate day-to-day challenges at work

Colours of the Sun, 2010

A novel. Shortlisted for Gratiaen Awards and State Literary Award 2010

Dedications

Writing is my first love and being able to find time to write amidst many other roles I play is a privilege. RockStars happened to be something I initially saw myself being forced into, when Pujitha mentioned the importance of making the P3 Model available for many to critique, appreciate and apply in their own lives. We had worked on the research and ideas for the book for over three years and we were well into the sixth draft. It had been read and evaluated by our team many a time. Yet the writer in me was not convinced. It was as if something was missing.

To Yavin

I have much to be grateful for, for the walks on the beach which largely gave me the inspiration at the time to work its magic. It brought together different people, stories and perspectives to crystallize some specific anecdotes that fitted well to the stages of the Model. In the quest of searching for the missing piece of the story, one morning it occurred to me the importance of keeping it simple. And just like that, it came together; the P3 GROWTHS Model, Pujitha's work on the human body as a leadership model for over ten years, the research done by our teams, and now the plot of the story.

The story line of this book came together during the course of one day while spending time with my then one-year old son. The journey of the book in many ways resembled some of the junctures in our own paths. Writing this book, challenged me to address my own biases to truly step up to change the way I looked at a situation. Some chapters took longer than others but the higher the stage in the model, the more challenging it was for me to write without sounding preachy.

I want to acknowledge my support system that made this book possible. I want to thank our team at Forté Consultancy and Full Life Coaching, especially Kartini and Raiha, who worked on the research aspect of human behaviour at each stage. I want to thank our parents, who continue to believe in us and support us even when they fail to understand why we do what we do. Finally, I want to thank our Chairman, the wonderful father he is for us, for believing in us and mentoring us to achieve our goals.

As a Psychologist, RockStars provided me a platform to understand human behaviour (myself included) at each level of the Model. And as a writer, it helped me to realize the importance of simplicity and timing. As a wife it encouraged me to focus on the synergy of our strengths and as a mother, RockStars gave me the hope to work on creating a better world for our children.

Rozaine Cooray

From the Author of the P3 GROWTHS Model

What is life all about? How can one find fulfillment in life? These were thoughts and ideas that I grappled with for some years. I struggled to understand how we could all uniquely contribute to the world, and how we could wholeheartedly pursue this mission without being tied down by the strappings of life.

Most of us are happy in our comfort zones, and life needs to give us a rude awakening to pull us out of these comfort zones to pursue what is meaningful to us. More often than not, we tend to stay in the mundane, because we lack courage, or due to the excuses we give ourselves, waiting for that perfect moment, to step into the unknown.

For a new life to begin, there needs to be a death. Not necessarily the death of a person, but a death to an old way of doing things, an old habit, a form or structure that has kept us hardwired in the status quo of life.

My world was shaken in 2004 during the Tsunami, when I saw much death and destruction around me, but that was not strong enough to draw me out of my comfort zone. Then in 2008, my father had a stroke. Watching life ebbing away from a once healthy person who was dear to me was the beginning of an awakening. In 2009, I lost my job as a design engineer in Australia during the global financial crisis, signaling the death to yet another phase in my life. This released me to explore new opportunities towards a life of greater meaning and purpose.

Eventually, when in 2011 my dad passed away, I felt the shift within me to start serious change. It was now or never.

I began to explore the idea of life’s purpose, and how one’s mission and accomplishments in life could be passed down to another generation in a way that life and success would continue past our time, so that the next generation may live a better life. This reignited and reinforced a passion for mentoring and coaching, which I knew would be a way of life for me and the birthing of a new professional identity as a Life and Executive Coach.

I was led to try and integrate the different facets of my life to create one fulfilled life, which for me, was the beginning of a new journey of growth. The engineer in me tried to understand how exactly this would be propagated. From my background in Biomedical Engineering, I knew how the human body is a complex system of integrated structures, organized in a systematic way where cells form tissues, tissues form organs, organs form systems, to eventually form the body, whilst all sharing a common DNA. I was led to consider whether the lessons on how the human body is organized could be used to transform the organizations we are a part of, the families, the companies, cities, societies, and even countries. The engineer in me also tried to bring a sense of process, orderliness and structure to this idea of growth and how it is brought about.

These ideas came together to form the P3 GROWTHS Model (Figure 01).

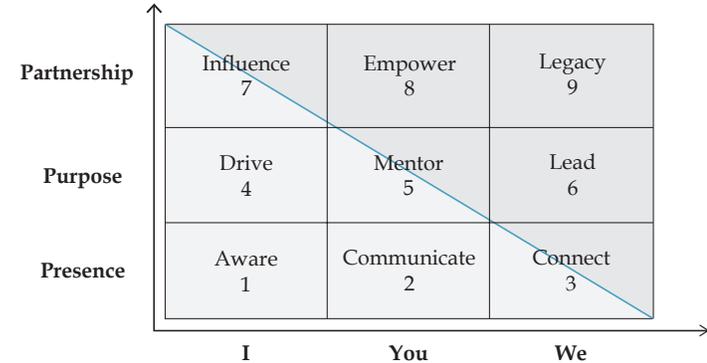


Figure 01

The P3 GROWTHS Model describes growth as a combined response of 3 stages, namely Presence, Purpose and Partnership in facilitating meaningful change. Presence is about making a connection or perceiving the change required. Purpose helps shape the direction of the intended change. Partnership leads to taking action towards making the change a reality. The model explores the idea that growth occurs in three areas, in relation to the ‘I’ (intrapersonal), ‘YOU’ (interpersonal), and ‘WE’ (community). These concepts are captured in the nine-stage model of growth, and each individual stage will be elaborated on in the chapters that follow.

Yet, despite the model having come to life, I lacked the confidence and courage to explore how the model could be applied, tested and developed further to fit into a corporate setting.

It was at this juncture that I met Rozaine Cooray, a Psychologist practicing in organizations in Sri Lanka, working

towards building people and organizations. With her insights and encouragement, I was able to better see how the model could be applied to the different facets of organizational life.

Together, over the next few years, we explored the model's application in transforming corporate organizations, and sectors such as education, and overall communities. Programs were developed and facilitated; our work was presented at international conferences and published in journals. However, there was a need to share the model in a simpler way such that a wider audience could learn from it. This led to the writing of *RockStars*: a book that could be read by people from different stages and walks of life, to share the lessons of the model in a personally meaningful way.

RockStars brings to you, the P3 Growths Model, woven into a story line by Rozaine, with the intention of creating awareness in you towards a paradigm of growth and success that can ultimately lead to a fulfilled life. It brings to you the stories of real people that we met on our journey, who believed and embodied the principles of growth and transformation that the P3 Model stands for. The book is a presentation of struggles, the pains of change, and the stepping stones in life that lead to finding fulfillment.

The journey of bringing this book to life has truly tested us. We had to experience death in many ways, of old dreams we could have pursued, of success we commonly see being defined by society and culture, in light of the greater vision of transforming the society we live in, and of creating a better life for the next generation. The journey has transformed us and given us greater meaning and purpose, as I hope it will for you too.

Dr. Pujitha Silva

Foreword

Amidst many books on leadership and personal development, *RockStars* stands out with the simplicity of the ideas it offers. Written by Rozaine and Pujitha, two individuals who are passionate about transforming lives and communities, *RockStars* is a book that conveys the truths of life and leadership in a unique way.

In *RockStars*, Rozaine and Pujitha have conveyed ideas about transformation through the conversations between two men who sit at two points of their middle-age years. The characters are relatable; real people with flaws and who have gone through struggles. Insights and pearls of wisdom about life are intertwined into the characters' stories and in the resolution of their struggles. What is most unique is the use of organs from the human body as an analogy and source of lessons on the truths of leadership, strength, and life.

RockStars highlights and emphasizes a concept of yesteryears that became outdated - role modeling. It reminds us the importance of role models in nurturing good values in individuals. After all, in the early years of human civilization, dynasties were built and knowledge was shared, purely through the transfer of wisdom from father to son - from generation to generation.

Over the years, people shifted to sharing and accessing information through the written word. As the "gurus" and "experts" started conveying messages tinged with hidden agendas and conflicts of interest, a need arose for unbiased sources of information. Thus, scholarly articles and scientific reviews became the primary mode of knowledge sharing

and learning. With *RockStars*, we are encouraged to find role models and gurus who are of good character, who drive no hidden agendas. It inspires us to seek these individuals to find the lessons and insights that cannot be found in scholarly articles, but are only found in real stories of real people.

RockStars carries in its pages stories of vulnerability, of authenticity, of the importance of character and values, in running the race to success. It calls the reader to pause and reflect on who we are, what we do, and why we do it. It shifts our focus from achieving too much too soon; to focus on achieving what is actually meaningful.

As a doctor and an educator, I see *RockStars* bringing change and transformation in lives by forcing us to ask the questions we stopped answering, urging us to learn from the past that can nourish us for the future, by reminding us that in the 'rat-race' to success, we have the responsibility of preserving our integrity and being good people.

It was my pleasure reading *RockStars*, and believe that the next reader will find this book not only insightful in the context of life, but also entertaining and heartwarming in the story it narrates.

To Rozaine and Pujitha, I offer my best wishes for the success of this book, and hope that this is the next step in creating the transformation they envision in families, organizations, and the country as a whole.

Dr. Rukshan C Fernandopulle

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 Consultant Obstetrician & Gynaecologist
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Eye for thy light
 Ear for thy words
 Hand for thy grasp
 Heart for thy pulse

Spine for thy form
 Brain for thy thought
 Mouth for thy pitch
 Air for thy lungs

Womb for thy child
 Blood for thy life
 Oh! the perfection of thy human body
 And the imperfection in thee!

At work

Just a week ago, I didn't know what I was signing up for when I had that crucial conversation on my performance feedback with the new Managing Director. My feedback had been excellent as always; what else can you expect from a fiercely ambitious manager who has diligently mastered the art of his functional unit over the years? I am known to be a good manager, approachable, open-minded and friendly, but also focused and serious about delivery. Mainly, my job has been to make decisions, give guidance, train people on their tasks and manage the overall operations, and 'operations' is what I am good at. Being an engineer by profession, I have always worked with systems and processes, and numbers and analyses are what I am comfortable with.

Six months ago, my former boss had opted for an early retirement due to his deteriorating health. A workaholic himself, this realization that he may have spent too much time at office under tremendous stress over the years, had occurred far too late. The team and I dearly miss him but we are also thankfully relieved that he had invested much in our growth so that we have been able to operate without a boss till now.

Today, when the MD asks me whether I happen to have any concerns, I don't hesitate to be honest about the boredom that is setting in. I am thirty-five years old, and have faithfully served this company for twelve years now and it has been my home since I joined the workforce as a management trainee. My former boss had been talking to me about setting up the operations in a new plant that is coming up in the vicinity and the possible vacancy as the Factory Manager. He had told me that I topped the list in the succession plan, so last year was all about training and coaching for this unannounced position. I knew that there were others who were

more experienced than me and that such a promotion would be a contentious one. However, I was willing to take up the challenge as this role would finally validate why I had worked so hard all these years and stayed with the company, despite having had opportunities to join other companies which probably were better paymasters.

Honestly apart from having the two kids, career-wise, life has not been very challenging in the last five years. Of course I have had transfers from one plant to another to train and ensure quality and productivity and to initiate new processes and have new systems up and running. However, the satisfaction has been somewhat short-lived. My growth within the company has been mostly horizontal – acquiring different variations of the same skill. What I now want is something more, even though I don't know how to articulate what I want. The new MD (who I hear is from the US and a trusted friend of the owners of the company) seems to be a task-master. During our initial chat, he asks me whether I am willing to take up a different task but doesn't make any mention of the position that I have been trained for.

He mentions that he is not happy, and is in fact disturbed by the rate of turnover and absenteeism amongst the machine operators, a phenomenon that has been constantly high for many, many years.

This is an industry trend, and I hope he is aware of it.

He describes how internal research based on exit interviews and community research externalized the reasons, attributing it to new mushrooming factories in the neighborhood offering better incentives.

I mention to him the personal and social issues faced by our female workers, and how we have over the years provided them with support and empowered them as much as we could, to which he responds, 'Now, this is all true. Except that it is not the total picture'.

He emphatically mentions that the internal research maybe biased, that it fails to see the loopholes within our own system; he adds that we need to have a better emotional working environment.

'People think it's just about the incentives. There's more, there's definitely more to what meets the eye. People leave their bosses Roy, not necessarily the company. And I am sure there are other reasons and we need to get to the root of the problem to see why people are leaving at this rate. I don't think we are inhuman; in fact we have some of the best CSR initiatives in the country. However, we may be mechanical in how we relate to our people or make them feel. We have to get off our high horses and connect with them at their level. This is why our corporate office and the high end executives can be very unpopular amongst them. This is your model factory. You change this factory and give us the recipe to replicate it in other factories too', he says.

Eh! Hold on! Isn't it...

'Look, I want to get it done. We have to address this. I want to put you in charge of a change initiative that involves all the line managers and supervisors of the machine operators. One, I want to see how the workers feel about their supervisors, one by one, with all the names included. Two, I want you to give these managers feedback the way you think is right. You make a call on that. Three, I want you to tell them that they have six months to change and that we will support them in whatever way possible. At the end of six months, we would carry out this study again and if they have failed to change by then, we will have to let them go. I want to make this factory great. That's why I have been hired and you are my man for this, Roy'.

I stare at him, completely startled by his request; in my opinion, it is lopsided. We, as a company, are doing really well, so why upset the apple cart? We hit the numbers even before the

stipulated timelines and our managers have endured and served the company during tough times. How arrogant of him to think that his initiative would change anything for the better.

If at all, it'll be disastrous. Who the hell hired this guy?! And hey, listen. The engineer in me likes to keep the talking to a minimum and focus on what needs to be done, step by step, systematically. I am not comfortable with listening to how people 'feel'; as wrong as it may sound, that is the truth. I think people should come to work in order to work. Feelings are for family and home.

I am lost in a whirlwind of thoughts.

'I have observed you Roy,' he continues. 'I think you are the right person; you have the right temperament. You have so far not offended anyone. Everyone likes you and you are good at what you do. You have credibility because you know what you are talking about'.

'Not when it comes to this', I tell him still horrified by the thought of it. 'I am clueless'.

'You'll learn the ropes around this job. Just a heads up. It's going to be tough, so be prepared to be the bad guy. I am sure now, we will be able to talk about your real growth in six months. Make me proud and moreover, make yourself proud', he adds encouragingly.

What? I am flabbergasted. This is not the offer I have been expecting. This offer seems to be that of an underdogs, leaving me speechless and somewhat paralyzed from the neck downwards. Maybe there is a hidden agenda. Maybe this guy is setting me up for failure so if we didn't perform as a team, he could blame it on me. Why should I even trust this man? Maybe I should speak to the cluster CEO or GM. But by doing that, will I breach the pecking order? Shock mode on; my mind is a tornado of questions and indignations.

The company has invested on expensive executive training programs for the top performers, and I have been sent on some of the most prestigious ones so to speak. This is payback time, yes, but hey! Can some new guy order me around like this to fire people if it comes to that? Am I not too young for this role to begin with? How would most of the senior management respond to this?

'I need to grab something to eat before my next meeting; it's the management meeting and I will tell the board that I have put you in charge. This is coming from the top Roy - the 'very top'; first priority of the quarter. We will announce the role tomorrow to the factory. It is a double promotion in my opinion, 'Head of Change Management' and you would directly report to me. If you are wondering what HR would say about it- they already know, and they think that it is better that a separate unit handles it'.

'The very top, meaning the "founders"?' I ask.

'Yes, I was specifically asked to come from the US to see that things are done differently. I was an engineer myself there working for Ford', he explains.

'I don't know. This is definitely beyond the scope of what I can offer to this company. I know nothing about change management. Besides, I was trained to oversee the operations of the new plant', I say, overwhelmed.

My wife usually tells me I am painfully calm even when I am supposed to be emotionally charged, when people cross the boundaries. But not today, not after hearing this.

'That's why you'd have to learn then. All the best Roy. This is an offer based on potential and trust; so congratulations'. With a brief nod in my direction, we shake hands and part.

A perfect storm!

I wake up to the sound of the alarm, loud and shrill next to my ear. Sighing, I get up. I look out through the glass window, and gaze for a few seconds at the stars in the sky. The alarm reads 4.30 a.m. It is time for my morning run. Our natural alarm clock is fast asleep in his cradle, today. He had turned five months just yesterday.

I have long since been trying to get into the habit of going for a run every morning, and of course with the excuses I make to stay in bed a bit longer, exercise seems to be the last thing on my list. Living just minutes' walk from the beach, I am at an advantage. Nevertheless, I have taken a while to get accustomed to waking up earlier again after the birth of our son. But today, I have no choice, and as I absorb the first moments of wakefulness, my thoughts enter a world of turmoil, turmoil that still flusters me in my sleep. How am I going to approach this new role? Why did I ask for more challenge? There is no one but me to blame.

I stealthily rush downstairs not wanting to wake my wife up. I skim through yesterday's papers while waiting for the water to boil for my coffee. An article in the bottom corner of the paper catches my eye. It isn't the contents of the article on reforms of a chain of companies in the country that interests me, but the salt and pepper haired man in the photo who looks achingly familiar. The article goes to say how this medical doctor (who had been practicing in the UK) turned Vice President of a chain of companies employing sixty-thousand people, has gone on to transform the business in a bottom-up approach, saving the organization from a massive bankruptcy in its core business units.

I continue to read more about this doctor and his team as I sip my coffee. Then it dawns on me who he is: the guy

who walks at lightning speed on the beach with a stick in his hand to chase off stray dogs who might occasionally cross his path. Ah! That's right! Never knew he is a medical doctor.

The article interests me particularly, because of the dilemma I have regarding my own work situation. I put the paper away, check my earphones and leave the house hoping the run will help me to get some clarity in my thinking.

I cross the rail tracks, and walk out onto the beach. I glance around for a few seconds, before plugging in my earphones and starting to jog in the direction of the Mount Lavinia Hotel. I jog to the beat pounding loudly in my ears. Each time I feel tired, I slow down to a brisk walk. In this manner, I reach the end of the beach strip, right next to the hotel. At this place, I pause for a while to look around. I take in the mild light of early dawn as the gentle breeze soothes my aching muscles, when I suddenly notice the familiar face from the papers walking by. 'Aha! I knew I've seen this guy before', I think to myself while appraising the tall, slender man who seems to be in his mid-to-late fifties; Oh well! It's difficult to guess.

I smile and nod a greeting, and he salutes me in response.

'That's an incredible story, to turn something around like that', I call out as he passes me heading back in the same direction.

'Ah! Yes. I like to stay away from the limelight. Don't enjoy it much you see', he says still walking.

'Yeah I know what you mean', I add wanting to join him in conversation.

'Boy, you've got to walk faster than that if we are going to chat,' he says laughingly. 'The old man needs his exercise'. He extends his hand and introduces himself, 'I am Edward, but you can call me Ed.'

'And I am Roy', I respond with a handshake.

'I hear you were a doctor before. That's interesting; doctor to a Vice President in the corporate world. You must be someone who loves change', I comment.

He smiles, 'Change is inevitable when you take the macro view. So, it's not about whether you like it or not; it's about whether you can take it or not'.

He grins and asks me about my family, and draws some reference to his wife who is from the area being friends with someone we know in common. He asks me about my wife, kids and work. When it comes to the topic of my work, I struggle to answer in confidence.

'I go as Head of Operations at the moment, but there's a bit of change that's taking place within the company; so I think my role will change in the days to come which makes everything uncertain at this stage', I reply hesitantly.

'And you are someone who hates change?' he asks, smiling knowingly.

I nod bashfully. 'Yeah somewhat, but it depends on the area; I am ok with machines and people who can fit into a system; you know, the things that can be planned and organized'.

'You mean you like predictability and to be in control of a situation. Do you think the sense of control comes with the system in place?' he asks.

'Hmmm...you could say that', I add. 'It's more about the touchy, feely stuff that I am uncomfortable with. That's definitely not my area', I smile.

'Ah! I understand', he says looking across the shore. 'Look, I've got to stop here as that small shop across the railway lines has the meanest toast bread, dahl curry and sambol. You are welcome to join me if you like', he offers invitingly.

I feel slightly disappointed as I remember that I have promised my team to meet them over breakfast at the factory an hour before work, which meant leaving to work early.

'I'll definitely join you next time but today I need to head to work pretty early. Maybe I can meet you Saturday morning?', I ask, hoping he'd say yes.

'Yeah, sure. But I don't run like you. I walk. So if you are okay to walk, we can meet on Saturday', he says with a wave of his hand as he heads towards the rail tracks.

'I'll walk with you sir', I tell him, relieved that I'd get another chance to meet this guy.

For some reason, I feel a sense of hope as if this guy may have the answers I am looking for.

As I run back towards home, a good thirty minute run, I am surprised by my own openness with the guy. I rarely talk about work with anyone. Desperate, I am! I think. But hey! What a difference a day makes!

Back at work

During the week at work, I find out that the management would put a hold on the announcement of the new promotion, till I get my homework done on how to initiate this project. I am to present my plan to my boss next week.

My boss has told me that I should do this alone as the findings will be very sensitive. What I do not anticipate is the reluctance to co-operate from some of the crucial people from HR. This promotion where I would function as an independent party in an area that overlaps with that of HR, is being seen as unacceptable and downright insulting for some on the team, including some Senior Managers. I can really do without this drama but the gauntlet is thrown, and there is no going back.

I try to see who can really help me in this, who will be on my side. I put down flowcharts, and request some statistics from HR to be made available to me. On top of my current role that I still have to fulfill, I find myself overly absorbed in the how, what and why of the whole initiative. I like to believe that people would be on my side, that they would cooperate, collaborate and combine forces with me.

In my frustration, I reach out to speak to one of my good friends outside of work and he suggests how it looks like, that I am the pawn that the company would now manipulate to get the unpleasant work done, to spell out what they don't want to, to fire the people they don't have the courage to confront. Speaking to him does not help at all, and with the increasing amount of chores in the home front after the second baby, my stress and the lack of sensitivity towards household issues, is not really welcomed by my wife either.

The following week is a horror. I find myself thinking even in my sleep: putting models and processes together in order to plan it out,

keeping the repercussions in mind. I get disturbed by the impending deadlines occasionally.

I feel overly cautious and aware of the emotions slowly simmering around the factory. Despite claims of confidentiality, someone has (as always) leaked the secret. I find myself having to explain to people why this initiative is underway, justifying why it is I who will be driving this change. I receive countless text messages, emails from personal email addresses, and many perplexed looks from faces in the cafeteria. My conversations with peers become non-personal, overly technical, and almost fake. I become extremely sensitive to the passive-aggression around that is brewing somewhat strongly beneath the surface.

One morning, Naren, my colleague, whom I have been grooming to take on my position in Operations, approaches me in the cafeteria, and says 'Roy, I know this is hard for you. I know what people are thinking and how difficult it maybe for you to ignore it, but know that I am there to support you. Apart from making sure that everything in Operations flows smoothly, I can make time after work to support you in anything you need me to do'.

He further adds laughingly, 'When the going gets tough, the tough get going'.

I smile, thank him, and ask him to oversee the Operations unit for the time being.

EYE FOR THY LIGHT

Back at home in the night, my wife often finds me awake whenever she wakes up to nurse the baby in the early hours of the morning, and then there are other times I pretend to be asleep. There are also instances when the need to get things off my chest is too strong, that I relate the happenings of the day and my plans on how I could approach this initiative. Most of the time, she looks at me nonplussed but listens patiently. She would always finish off the conversation with a reminder that I am prone to high cholesterol and blood pressure (as a result of generational garbage) during times of high stress. In one instance, she went on to suggest that maybe I should speak to a few friends from outside work or even get the help of a consultant who could assist me in planning it out.

The plus side of this insomnia is that I am able to get my exercise done. I remain sleepless in bed till 4.30 am, then have my coffee, and go on to run the whole length of the beach, which helps me clear my thoughts. It has been five days since my first chat with Ed, and as agreed I am waiting by the railway tracks, when I see Ed walking towards me, illuminating his path on the dark street with a flashlight.

'Good morning Ed!' I call out expectantly.

'A very good morning!' he replies as he switches off the torch.

Once again, I am struck by how energetic he is, a delightful trait to see. I envy his bursts of positive energy.

'So you told me Roy, that there's a lot of uncertainty in your job?' asks Ed after casual chitchat about current politics in the country. I am cautious about who I divulge information to about my company.

'Ah Ed, I have too many questions which I cannot put into words. In a nutshell, I'm trying to wrap my head around a new initiative the company wants me to lead in an area that I have very little idea of. I actually don't know from where to start', I respond, honestly confused about what to ask. 'But to start with, maybe you can tell me what you think is the most important thing in the life of a professional?', I ask, hoping that this general question would open up many discussion points.

'Ah! You think I'm a guru!', he laughs. 'I'm not, Roy. I can only tell you what I've learnt in my life.'

He continues, 'To answer your question, the most important thing in life is to see beyond the prison of our own thinking. Let me start with a story'.

'Once, there were two criminals who were on a life-sentence in two adjacent cells, in one of the most notorious prisons. Everyday, one of the prisoners would relate stories about the happenings on the playground of a school that was next to this prison', he narrates.

'Through his small window, he would look and share stories about different children and the games they played. He would specify the actions of children in so much detail that he had stories that would fill in the first half of the day. Next to the school was a market-place, and during weekends, he would relate the happenings within each stall - from fresh produce, to the dairies' and the butchers', he continues.

'Years went by, till one day, the stories all stopped. The prisoner had died late in the night, and his body had been removed before the other prisoner had a chance to pay his last respects. They had never seen each other given the strict rules that applied within the compound', Ed pauses for a few moments.

He continues, 'However, the other prisoner asked the guards whether he could have the cell of his friend, the one with a small window. The guard looked at him and exclaimed, "what window?"' Ed stops and pauses.

"Well, the window through which the other prisoner would look into the outside world to narrate stories about the children in the playground and the market place", he responded. Then the guard replied, "Ah! That would not have been possible even if he had a window".

Ed stops again and looks at the horizon. 'The guard added, "Not only was the cell completely sealed but he was also completely blind"'.

I feel the goosebumps rise on my skin.

'Wow' I utter.

We walk for a while in silence.

'The real sight is "insight". With our eyes intact, we could still be blind'. Ed completes the story.

The mornings are slightly chilly in November and I notice how the sea has carved its territory differently this morning on the beach. The high dunes have been lowered and new ridges are being formed to accommodate the strong currents of the waves.

Ed speaks, 'Roy tell me, what is the most important part of a house or a building?'

'The foundation', I answer.

'Yes, you are right, because it is the base on which everything else is built'. Ed agrees and continues to walk. 'I am going to share a personal story with you. When we were schooling, during big matches in one of our somewhat junior years, my friends and I experimented with alcohol. You know what it is like to be in an adolescent peer group wanting to grow up too fast. It didn't agree with me much, and I spent three days sick in bed, obviously not the best first experience'.

I smile at Ed, picturing the scene.

He continues, 'My mother got me to promise her that I would never try it again until I was out of school. Believe it or not, I kept my promise. In the more senior years, no one could ever persuade me to drink as I was resolute and strong. This continued during my university years and it was tough for anyone to challenge me to enjoy even a glass of wine'.

'Almost seven years since my promise to my mother, I met this beautiful girl at a party through my friends', Ed relates with a wide grin. 'I was so completely blinded by her that when she offered me a drink, I just didn't want to say no; maybe at the time I thought that she would think I was weak if I did so. All went well until it was time for us to go home and then there was this movie-like customary brawl over the girl. How predictable right? And guess who the superman in love was? And a drunken one for that matter', he says laughingly.

'So I beat some people up in a very uncharacteristic rescue mission. I got jailed for half a day until mother dearest

had to come along and rescue me; you can imagine the shame! She told me that day "Well Ed, I got you to promise me not to try it till you are out of school. Now that you are in Medical College, it is your choice. But now, I have another request to make. Please do not ever, ever do anything that is not 'YOU' just to please someone or to fit in. I thought I have taught you better". And then, my mum who had never ever raised her hand to me, slapped me hard right there at the police station saying. "This is for being a total idiot", Ed smiles reminiscently.

'You know Roy, that incident still remains one of the most vivid memories, and even though it has been years since she passed away, I consider her to be the one that laid the foundation. When she was on her deathbed, as not so long after that incident she developed a rare brain condition, she told me that who I am is my greatest gift for the world, and that I need to strengthen what I am good at while being aware of my limitations', Ed pauses, gazing at the horizon with emotion.

'She told me this beautiful story of two men at a wood-chopping contest, one giant and one dwarf who competed against each other to judge who would chop the most amount of wood by the end of the day. The giant laughed at the sight of the dwarf and humiliated him for even considering contesting side by side with him. During the competition, the giant noticed the dwarf leaving to take a short break every two hours or so. The giant would laugh and insult his competitor saying, "Being short is bad enough; now you even take breaks. How do you suppose you could beat me?", to which the dwarf would keep quiet', Ed relates.

'At the end of the contest, when it was time to count the number of logs chopped, the giant was surprised to find out that the dwarf had chopped more wood. He asked the dwarf, "How did you manage to do that?" The dwarf, unperturbed, answered, "You thought I was taking a break every two hours. I was merely leaving to sharpen my axe"', he concludes.

I smile at how Ed drives the message home through his stories, almost transporting me to my younger years.

Ed continues, 'Seems like a childhood fable, but she narrated this when I was well into my twenties. You see Roy, this story helped me not only to realize my strengths, but also to continue sharpening them in the years to come, and this became an integral part of my identity. She told me I could choose to define myself as a doctor, a son, a man, or whoever I saw myself as. She said that first and foremost, I am me, and that I should never compromise on that identity, what I hold dear, because deviating from it would mean cutting corners on my values. She told me, "See, the dwarf was never ashamed of who he was; he was never overconfident about his skill, nor did he falter when others unreasonably humiliated him. He was sure about himself, because he knew who he was"'. This served me well over the years, Roy'.

Ed pauses for a few moments.

'OK, so how would you define this identity?' I ask.

'Those are the foundational stones. The ones that are hardest to break'.

'Like?'

'Values, principles, morals. I mean whatever you want to call it but what continues to dominate your decisions and actions. Almost acting as DNA for behaviour at times', Ed explains.

We walk a few more meters in silence.

'Roy, what do you see?', Ed asks, suddenly.

'You mean what I see now?', I ask him.

'Yes', he replies.

'I can barely see much except the far-away buildings under the patches of brightness, thanks to the glowing road lights. It's still quite dark', I answer.

'Roy, I want you to observe; can you not see anything? I know that it is a dark morning and there is little moonlight, but can you not see anything at all? Not even my silhouette tagging alongside yours?' he challenges.

Feeling slightly embarrassed, I answer, 'Oh! I see you, I see the white effervescence of the waves, I see the sky slightly turning colour from pitch dark to being just dark, the stars, and I see the lights of the hotel...'

I continue till Ed interrupts, 'Okay, if you are to see everything as they are, what would you need?'

This sure sounds like a viva. 'Light, we need light to see', I reply unsure about how he would respond.

'Ah ha! Light', Ed says.

Ed stops as if to absorb the sound of the waves breaking into the shore. We walk for a minute or two in silence. Then as

a giant wave approaches the small stony pier crashing with a loud roar, Ed adds, 'Light is an incredible energy'.

I notice the change of colour in the eastern sky. The sky is a dark purple blue turning almost into a thick layer of navy blue. The sea in return is lighting up as the spray covers us from head to toe. I remove my glasses to clean them with my t-shirt.

'How do we see Roy?', Ed suddenly disturbs the silence waking me up from my contemplation.

'With our eyes of course?', I answer, and add again, 'I mean first with our eyes, then with the other senses'.

Ed continues with his explanation.

'The eye is a remarkable organ: it is one of the powerful doorways to the world around us. It is complex and it enables us to perceive the colour, shape, depth, and motion of objects in our surroundings by taking in light. The retina, like the film in a camera initiates a message to the brain about the image of the visual world'.

He pauses for a while to stretch his arms in front of him. I look ahead at the great Indian Ocean, and watch the waves for a while. We start walking again quietly for some time.

'Visible light is electromagnetic radiation that is visible to the human eye, and is responsible for the sense of sight. This is what we commonly call "light". This is only a small fraction of the entire electromagnetic spectrum. There are other types of radiation that we cannot see. What we physically see is what we sense, and what we sense is what shapes our perceptions about ourselves and the world', he explains.

Ed continues, 'We cannot see or appreciate most of the electromagnetic field, but that does not mean it ceases to exist around us. Just the way our eyes perceive only certain frequencies of electromagnetic radiation, we as humans are also only aware of certain things in our surroundings. We are literally blind to so much that is around us! To add to that, we filter through what we see in life, choosing to focus on some things and not on others; often overlooking perspectives different or contradictory to ours'.

'To be aware is to open the inward eye, to recognize ourselves, first and foremost', Ed explains. 'For this, we not only need reflection, but feedback from others and openness to new experiences and learning. We need flexibility in thinking and action. This not only helps to gain more awareness of ourselves, but also of the situation and others around us'.

I add with the little knowledge I have, 'And the blind spots we have are just like the blind spot in the retina that "fails to see"'.
"

'Ah! Yes!', Ed agrees happily.

He pauses for a while, giving me space to reflect on what I just said. I try to connect Ed's thoughts to something in my own life. Have there been situations where others' viewpoints about myself did not match up to my own, I wonder. Plenty of situations, I realize, including the management's thinking that I am the best person to drive this change initiative. I share this with Ed.

He considers this thoughtfully. 'Some of us overestimate our abilities leading to overconfidence, whereas some of us tend to only focus on the negative aspects of ourselves,

highlighting our weaknesses all the time, whilst disregarding our potential! This is generally the case in those with self-esteem issues. A balanced view on both positives and negatives is crucial in this situation’.

‘Sometimes it is important to shift from only giving attention to those weaknesses we perceive, and take a moment to acknowledge our strengths. Acknowledging these strengths helps us to be grateful for who we are – a complete polar shift from low self-esteem’, he comments.

We walk in silence for a minute; the sky is light blue now with white clouds reflecting the yellow rays of the sun.

‘What a great privilege to be a part of this beauty!’ Ed exclaims, admiring the sky as we continue to walk. ‘Likewise, what a privilege it is to be grateful for who you are and what you have, both good and bad’.

We turn back at the hotel. The sea is rough here and the boulders make this stretch more picturesque than ever. Ed stops to greet a friend on the beach who is jogging and continues thereafter, ‘Eventually, we all want to grow to be the best we can be. Awareness is critical for growth, which is why it is crucial in succeeding in any arena’.

I remain quiet as he continues. My thoughts are in constant motion this morning, I realize. But I feel incredibly present in the moment, like when I watch my kids play or smile in their sleep.

‘Thank you so much for your time Ed. I’d like to walk with you more often if it’s ok.’, I say.

‘Yes, let’s meet next Saturday. Now you give it a good thought. Life’s too short to go with the wave and whatever that uncertainty you are facing at work, might be a good thing. See what you can learn from it’, Ed adds.

I smile in agreement and start to jog back home. For some reason, I feel more confident about facing the day.

Back at work

I design a survey to be distributed to the factory, managers, and the levels below. I cross-check this with my boss and roll it out.

At the same time, I entrust the job of collecting the data to a small team under me headed by my friend Naren. I personally carry out the focus group discussions amongst the machine operators.

Furthermore, we gather information from the recruitment team, induction team and training units, and all the documentation from exit interviews.

I am the first to report to work almost everyday and the last to leave, weekends included.

It's been a hard day's night!

EAR FOR THY WORDS

It's a beautiful day and the stars are still visible in the weakening darkness of the morning. I have always been a star-gazer; since my childhood, I have been fascinated by the mysteries beyond the skies.

From Aristotle, Copernicus, and Galileo to Hubble, Tombaugh and Gamow, I have a collection of books that I guard like gold. Stargazing is my hobby; it helps me to relax, fills me with awe, and reminds me how small my problems are.

So yes, before I bought myself a smart-phone, after a stressful day at work, my wife would find me in the balcony with my telescope. Having a complete beach view and living at the end of the lane has its perks. I am ashamed to say that setting up the telescope has become harder lately, now that I have an easier way to relax – social media. What a cheap trade off!

Stargazing was my father's favorite pastime. As a young boy, I would sit on his lap and he would help me see bits of the constellations and tell me captivating tales about outer space. Those moments, watching the sky in the quietness of the night, built the strongest bonds between my father and myself. When I was fourteen years old, he had a sudden heart attack and passed away at 41 years of age. But I worked at it on my own. I found comfort by continuing to find wonder in the stars. It somehow helped me to stay connected to my father. To my horror and people's surprise, I never cried at his funeral.