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When all goes wrong... lessons to learn

T.T. Srinath

When interviewing the sage of Arunachala, Ramana Maharishi, a disciple asked him “if one has choice?”

Ramana told his disciple that ‘every individual has choice’, however what he does not have control over are ‘the consequences of the choices one makes.’

The thought expressed by Ramana gains amplification with an illustration.

Each of us may take a decision to travel from where we are to where we wish to go.

This is a choice we can and may exercise.

Yet whether will we get to where we wish to go is not always assured.

In our journey from one place to another there are possibilities that we may not have factored.

If say, we are travelling by car from Chennai to Bengaluru, a choice we have made and acted on, the journey or trip may or can be loaded with some imponderables.

For example, we may have a flat tyre; or there may be a sudden hartal or ‘road roko’ that may delay or abort our trip.

Having made a choice we may have to realise that with each choice comes consequences. Over these consequences sometimes we have control and sometimes we do not.

When the choice was made to go by car to Bengaluru from Chennai it seemed completely possible; the car had been serviced, the petrol tank was full, the journey was being made on a safe road and yet we may not have reached.

Does this mean we had erred in our planning or execution? Neither.

In my most recent experience of being the member of the cast of a drama troupe that was to tour Canada and the USA, the truth of having no control over the outcome and the consequences thereof was revealed.

For over a year my colleague, a man given to meticulous planning, the director, also a person, structured and detailed and I had worked hard, coordinating with sponsors overseas, ensuring actors were well rehearsed and monies necessary for travel organized. Yet the play, scheduled to be performed in 10 cities over 6 weeks did not happen.

We reached the shores of North America and were received by our host, in Canada, where we kicked off the tour.

Subsequent performances were aborted owing to the Coronavirus.

Despondency surely set in and the refrain 'why us' kept coming back to each of us as we retraced and returned home.

In the solitude of aloneness, examining what we could gain from the experience, several lessons are offered and all the lessons seem to gain relevance if we apply them to the life we can live, to organisations as they may cope with rapid and unsettling changes and even relationships that we want to fashion in a particular way.

What are the lessons and how can we profit from their messages?

Lesson 1: Our moment of truth. Jan Carlzon, the former CEO of Scandinavian airlines in his famous book on the success of the airline he helmed in the 80s says that 'our moment of truth occurs when we are confronted with an impossibility, a situation that we did not bring on yet one that we have to face.'

When such occurs how do we wish to respond?

Lesson 2: When the tour was aborted, and it happened owing to what is now being considered pandemic, our director and my colleague did not allow themselves to 'fret.' They swung into action, setting aside their personal disappointment and organised for the actors to return home without delay.

This was necessitated by the likelihood of airlines cancelling flights, which they did shortly after, and the need to cut any expenses that would have to be incurred in continuing to stay in a foreign land.

Lesson 3: The effort was to focus on what needs to be done. The law of abundance, made popular by the book 'The secret' emphasises the dictat 'where your attention goes so does it grow.'

Thus all attention was diverted to ensuring safe and quick passage home, with the looming likelihood of suspended air operations and the need to keep costs in check.

Lesson 4: Possibility thinking was resorted to Robert Schuller in his book on possibility thinking says 'if we look for answers where we have not, we will find them.' This he says will only happen if we allow ourselves to explore possibilities.

When the options for cheap airlines tickets were becoming restricted, those who were in-charge looked at various permutations, some of them involved de tour and some required long layovers. The criteria was safe and immediate journey home at reasonable costs.

Lesson 5: This required the planners to go with the flow. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book 'Flow' says that it is imperative to not block oneself with debilitating thoughts. Going with the flow he says will open channels and create options. The blocks he says come when, quoting the famous psychologist Carl Jung 'we resist it persists; when we accept it transforms.' Resisting suggestions offered, dismissing ideas even if innocuous without examination, builds pressure in us and we embroil ourselves in debate.

Lesson 6: Martin Seligman who made popular his theory 'learned optimism' in the 90s constantly reiterates the need to unlearn to be pessimistic, which he believes is a quality we embrace as we mature into adulthood, and learn to be optimistic.

As a child nothing is impossible for us, be it riding a cycle from which we may fall off on learning to ride yet not give up or even curious to play with a dangerous gadget. As we graduate into adulthood we become less enterprising and diffident.

The need is to therefore rekindle the child in us which then gives us the willingness to not take no for an answer.

Lesson 7: Barry Stevens, a gestalt therapist, writes in her book 'Don't push the river, it flows anyway', that our inability to live or stay with uncertainty and ambiguity pushes to want closure. Yet many things in life cannot be closed at once and require time.

Buying a cheap ticket, getting a good bargain, demands patience and requires us to not rush to find 'the missing piece in the jigsaw.'

Likewise when air tickets had to be bought it urged us to explore with many agents. Doing so requires appreciating the truth that

Lesson 8: Olson emphasises in his book 'Complex Adaptive Systems', each situation that presents itself with variables unclear is like a band of jazz musicians. There is no 'one way.' Each member adds to the ensemble and music happens through a process of co-creation.

If organisations respect the contribution of each of its members and recognise that everyone has a stake the outcome may be optimum.

Drawing on the wisdom of those who may have travelled and possibly urgently needing a ticket owing to demands on them may offer suggestion if sought.

Lesson 9: Finally, when the decision has been made it is important to let go what did not happen and 'feed forward' as Marshall Goldsmith, the reputed International coach prescribes.

Rajinikanth, the popular Tamil film actor suffered a major setback to his reputation and popularity, when after several successful films, all in row, his film 'Baba' failed.

Many who knew him counseled him and suggested he quit for perhaps his time had run out.

Rajinikanth bided his time and came back after a year to act in what went on to become a blockbuster 'Chandramukhi.'

When asked how he had risked this effort, Rajinikanth is purported to have said, "I cannot let yesterday's failure prevent my today's success."

Giving up is not an option if the hunt is to win.

(The writer is an organisational and behavioural consultant. He can be contacted at ttsrinath@gmail.com)

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