

What a CEO Needs

Close encounters of the déjà vu kind...

Fondling age-old memories can be slippery. Sometimes, you feel as though you caressed those events only yesterday. Then, at other times, you feel as if they have slipped away in oblivion. The elusiveness adds to the mystic feeling. And it is in this mysterious confused state that Oct 19, 2012 found me drifting back to this sleepy place in Uttaranchal after a hiatus of 25 years, a campus town called Pantnagar . The occasion was my silver-jubilee college reunion. How will it feel to go back to a place that at one point meant the 'world' to me, and then gradually became just a 'point' in my world?

Four from our group who have continued to stay in intermittent touch shared the six-hour car drive from Delhi to Pantnagar. As we were busy catching up, an amusing debate came up: How many of our professors might be still *teaching*? Upon reaching Pantnagar, the very first friend we ran into kidded: How many of our professors might be still *alive*? And when the alumni meet started with the keynote, we discovered that 7 out of our 157 batch mates were *no more*! And almost equally tragic, I couldn't even remember the face of any of them!

To break the gloomy thought chain, I took a pause from the session and strode my way towards the hostel where I had first stayed as a freshman. I purposely walked alone, to be able to observe my first feelings at each encounter with a familiar sight. The distance seemed longer than I remembered. There was a reason for it, now I recollected. I used to traverse this lane on a bicycle given by my Dad—a very old one that belonged to my sister, with a stick welded in-between in a desperate attempt to disguise it as a gent's cycle. A humble initiation, indeed, to life in college—a far cry from a big bang entry into adulthood that one grows up fantasizing.

I reached the hostel and headed straight to the room where I had first boarded. The room seemed more beat up than the way I had left, almost as if someone intended to preserve it in anticipation of its tryst with me in the future! This is where I had the first drink and the first smoke of my life. I was a balanced youth actually, had never dreamt of falling into any bad habit. Then in the very first month as a boarder, a whole gang of my new friends had once barged into my

room. Everybody started smoking and coerced me to go for a 'puff'. I surveyed around for an escape and picked the most innocent looking of the lot. "If Sumit smokes, so shall I", I triumphantly declared. How was I to know that Sumit had already earned 'chimney' as his nick name?



File photo, Pantnagar 1986, my core gang from left.. Sunil (my best friend#1), SUMIT, Sanjay, Sandeep, Shahid (my best friend#2), Anupam. Don't know what I am doing up there!

Bemused, I walked out of the room towards the hostel cafeteria, the place that held the most noisy and lively memories. I vaguely remembered the thank-you speech I had delivered there after winning the bitterly fought election as a freshman for the student union. I had sort of pulled a coup by managing to garner support from sworn rivals—Jats and Thakurs—thanks to my noncontroversial demeanor and diplomacy with both sides.

I walked out of the hostel and decided to take a detour on my way back to alumni sessions in the main college building. Not too far from our hostel was the girl's hostel; the lane between the two hostels was a very popular road for obvious reasons. How many times I must have strolled here! Preparing to walk on that road itself used to be a weekend ritual—a jacket borrowed from one friend, shoes from another, jeans from the third one; there was no concept of shaming in sharing.

Then when I finally crossed the girl's hostel, I paused for a minute in front of the locked gate. This is where I had first fallen in love and this is where my heart subsequently broke too. Twenty-five years ago when I last stood staring at this gate, there was an overwhelming sinking feeling. But this time, I could smile widely about the same memory. The episode was a part of growing up; life eventually took me to an even more beautiful romantic pasture.

I made it back to the alumni meet, and the boring sessions continued. However later that evening, when the cultural evening especially planned for the alumni was put up by the current students, the show simply took my breath away! Subsequently, when they requested me to propose a vote of thanks, I shared with the young students pretty much the same things that I have written above; of course, with my own *déjà vu* twist...

*Historically, French and English aren't exactly known for their mutual generosity; very few instances of gift exchange are recorded between the two cultures. The expression **Déjà vu** happens to be one of those rare (albeit underrated) French gifts to the English dictionary. So special that even in the present day, there is no exact equivalent in English for this wonderful expression. The Wikipedia elaboration of *Déjà vu* is—"The phenomenon of having the strong sensation that an event currently being experienced had been experienced in the past." In other words, the event is different but the emotion being experienced is identical.*

*The emotion of a startup entrepreneur who drives several miles in search of the cheapest motel to stay during his business trip is analogous in its **grounding** nature to that of a young man riding an old camouflaged ladies cycle.*

*The mistake that a business executive commits every time he strays away from a **data-driven** methodology is no different than the perception blunder of a freshman who wrongly concludes a stranger's traits by mere looks.*

*The art of maneuvering around in the business world abundant with peculiar customers and employees is similar in its **diplomacy** instinct to that of a student who amicably gathers election support from warring factions.*

*The realization by CXOs that 'winning' requires **collaboration** by all stakeholders—employees, customers, vendors as well as society—is quite akin to the wardrobe-sharing customs between college-going youth with limited means.*

*And, of course, the spirit of **calmness** that every successful executive is expected to maintain through the cyclical ups and downs of business is comparable to the extreme emotional coaching of the young lover's heart.*

*It is my belief that as the future keeps on unfolding; virtually every feeling invoked within us has a repeatable pattern, almost as if everything that happens has happened hundreds of times before. Only if we can recognize these patterns and thus learn from our past, there is an opportunity to mold our temperaments to achieve more intended results in our daily lives. For instance, the above story highlights in **bold** 'five' predictable characteristics that hold great value, especially for grooming a CEO's temperament.*

Over the last several blogs, we have had a few interesting opinion polls on topics of varied interest. In this particular blog, I have a vested interest in hearing out the readers. Amongst the highlighted temperaments in the above article, there is one specific must-have trait that I believe is of paramount importance for a CEO to be able to efficiently execute his role. It would be interesting to see if the audience agrees with my assessment on the most pivotal trait amongst following options: a) Grounded; b) Data-Driven; c) Diplomatic; d) Collaborative; e) Calm. And yes, this time I promise to reveal my choice after I have heard everyone out



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