

MindTree

Letter to Small Bear

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Dear Small Bear,

When you were small, I always brought back a teddy bear for you whenever I traveled overseas. Perhaps this is what prompted you to give me the nickname "Bear". We have assumed, in the process, that you are the Small Bear. Over the last twenty five years, this has been a sweet summation of the relationship between the two of us. In some ways, that is about to change, as two things happen. For one, in 2007, you will turn 25 and I will become 50. At the same time, you will roam in your own jungle as a fully grown, fully developed individual. It is perhaps a good time therefore for a handover of sorts. It is a good time because, thanks to the increased lifespan of people and prolonged capacity to work, we all have a professional career of about 50 years. Your time for the next fifty years has just started and I am left with twenty more. Given that, a certain feeling of overlap, a sense of transition between the two of us is a nice one. We shared a world of interesting things, and yet our worlds will begin to look different—as different as the world that both connected me to and separated me from my father.

Unlike the age difference of exactly 25 years between the two of us, there was between myself and my father a divide of 47 years, almost half a century. When I joined the workforce, he had retired. Yet, lot of things that shaped my world were in place during his working life. It is fascinating to think about some of those: the telephone, wireless transmission (though carrier pigeons were still in use), space shuttles, satellites, jet airliners, radio and television, antibiotics, birth control and pre-semi conductor computing devices. All these came into this world during his prime. As he faded out, and I began to forage the world, a whole new set of things came about that became pervasive. These are the Internet, cell phones with short messaging and multi-media messaging capability, the human genome project, myriad computing devices from the laptop to the iPod and genetically modified plants and animals.

These are things common to you and me; we share these. Yet, these are going to fade out the way so many things faded out between my father and me. The larger question is, what is that fascinating, defining set of things that would fade in while I am no longer there?

Many of those things, I believe, will have substantive mooring in what came about in my lifetime. This is just the way it has always been: in some ways, today's computers are related to the ENIAC, the valve-based computer that preceded my time. Today's trans-continental, long-haul jets owe their origin to the first plane that the Wright brothers flew at Kitty Hawk. For that matter, today's breakthroughs in medicine owe their origins to ideas or things that have existed in some form or the other for many years. Yet, only sometimes is that linkage substantive and, quite often, it is just symbolic. More interestingly, there are epochal changes that are completely discontinuous. Given that, I wonder how much your jungle would be different from what was mine and is in some parts, ours.

But this letter to you is not really about innovation and gadgets and gizmos and sci-fi. It is about how the world will change; how the nature of work must change, both in response to it and in preparation for it; how it will impact people who work for a living; and what things will probably never change. This requires prophetic apparition that I do not have, Small Bear. Imagine how difficult would it have been for my father to think of "employee stock option plans", Skype and Washington apples in Bangalore streets! Still, a Bear must do what he must. So, here we go with a few things that I think will fade in between our two lives.

The world will see many fundamental shifts in the nature of work. As you know, first came peasants. Then came the blue-collar work force. A few decades later emerged the concept of the white-collar work force. It is interesting that both the blue and the white collar workers were largely creatures of the last century. I wonder why the next generation has not arrived yet. I suspect you will get to see the change of color of the collar. It may even be that you will see the collar-less workforce in your lifetime. Both the blue and the white-collared worker, predominantly male and working to a fixed time, was chained to a space. My sense is, the collar-less worker will be a very global person, less chained and fewer in number. The demand on her productivity will be very high and there will be a lot less place to hide for people who do not add much value, irrespective of whether they are Americans, Indians or Chinese. Passports and work permits will be things of

the past. People will be able to work wherever they want as long as they add disproportionate value.

Were you to ask me what the dominant theme of my professional world has been that differentiated it dramatically from my father's, I would say without hesitation that it was technology. The word was coined in his lifetime but it gained currency in mine. Even in his most spectacular dreams, he could not have imagined the things that I take for granted. I can call you any time, no matter where you are in the world. I can send you instant messages. I can deposit money into your account in the middle of the night. Your mother's kitchen is fully digital—the refrigerator, the microwave, the toaster, the grinder, the cooking range, the dishwasher and the washing machine, all included. All of them are marvels of technology; each one is increasingly becoming more intelligent and more anticipative than before because of "software on a chip". When you and I step out of the house to go to an airport, to a hotel, to an office, to a temple—everywhere you will notice the pervasive nature of technology. I have a feeling that its level and sophistication in 50 years will make my world look even more removed from yours than mine is from my father's.

I also have this feeling inside of me that, the more powerful and pervasive technology becomes, the greater will be the need for human empathy. People will value, more than ever, human contact. A live concert, the touch of a nurse, the smile of a baby, a real voice beyond interactive voice recognition systems will be sought by people. Anyone who understands and lives that magic will be more successful. The more sophisticated technology becomes, the more ordinary will be the essence of its possession. By the same token, anyone who promises a human touch will almost immediately deliver a higher level of differentiation. So, people will be very, very important.

You may ask me, which people? Without batting an eyelid, I will tell you, ordinary people. Ordinary people across the world. During my life, people were called either capitalists or communists. Having said that, there have been the socialists as well, who treaded the middle ground. My belief is that, these represent very inadequately the interests and the aspirations of the people of the planet. Capitalism is as flawed as communism was. As you live in a global society, the rich and the poor will no longer be "local"; their issues will have to be handled at a composite level. Your generation will have to fix the issue of poverty. This can only be done if we move on to an inherently more suitable political ideology that is pragmatic on issues such as poverty, health and education at a universal level. I think, the world is ready for it.

I also believe that your world has to be a more just place. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." The level of inequity that civilization has tolerated is in conflict with the level of intellect the human species is endowed with. It just does not make any sense how access to basic amenities, to information, to everything—in effect, the right to life itself—is skewed in favor of a small section of people. Every child born on this planet must have the same access to the planet's resources. It is not an Utopian dream of sorts. Neither am I a pseudo-communist or pseudo-whatever. This is not about isms and political beliefs. Just think of it this way, what if a human child is not born to a set of parents in one part of the world and is born to someone in quite another? What if you were not born to us and were instead born in Somalia? Or Ghana or Palestine or East Palo Alto? Taking that argument further, why must the accident of birth either lock in access to all that this planet could provide someone while denying it to the others? It is amazing that in a world in which everything can be atomized and moved around the world in bits and bytes, malnutrition, starvation and disease remain as pervasive as they ever were. This is not about earth's resources. It is what it is because of poverty in the human mind. That must go.

Small Bear, I think your generation will think about sustainability a lot more than anyone before ever has. Sustainability in every human action must be addressed and dealt with. I am going to surprise you with a fact here. Do you know whose track record is the worst when it comes to respect for sustainability? It is that of organized business. To understand what I mean, just look at what business has done to the environment. It was the developed countries that first brought the scourge of insecticides and chemical fertilizers and plastic to the rest of the world. They have left these behind and have gone back to clean their own environment. Their unfinished task is being happily carried on by organized business.

I will not take you far in intellectualizing this issue. Let's look at the garbage dump across our house in Bangalore. You know, for a long time I used to pick up strewn garbage from around it, to dump it inside the garbage bin. In the process, I learned a lot about where garbage comes from, what would eventually happen of it and who is responsible for ignoring the consequences of making money. We throw 2000 tons of garbage every day in a city like Bangalore, which has no disposal, recycling or sewage treatment worth the name. And that sums up the situation in every other place in this country and other such nations. Why is organized business blind to the plastic menace that is going to ruin future generations and will kill our Earth by just refusing to degrade for the next 1000 years? Is it that people who make and sell plastics do not know the consequences?

In truth, the supposedly more intelligent, the more knowledgeable, the more "strategic" minds work for business. Yet sustainability is not on their cards. That is why the plastic, the convenient sachets of pan masala or shampoo and the non-degradable diapers will just go back to the water supply and return to haunt us in this very lifetime. Your generation will demand more voluntary disclosure, more self-restraint and more accountability for every business and many of my generation will look as wicked as the Shylocks and the one-eyed pirates of the past.

Small Bear, our Planet is 4.5 billion years old. The human race itself is supposed to be 4 million years old and, within that, the agricultural man is close to 3700 years old. Isn't it interesting, in this context, that we have started talking about our environment only in the past three decades? My generation was the first to begin discussing the environment, even if it was a very superficial discussion. My sense is, in your time, it will rise to an actionable level and either the link will be preserved or break up soon after. The level of irresponsibility we have shown as a race to the issues affecting the world actually makes us look quite uncivilized.

One reason for it is the archaic nature of our political system. I believe that, in most countries, the political system is largely mindless and has outlived its utility. It has been preserved to the point of pickling. Both at national and international levels, political institutions and the way they work are at variance with real issues and the needs of common people anywhere. No, I am not an anarchist. I believe that we live well and conduct ourselves in relative harmony only within frameworks. But I think the existing frameworks need serious change. This cannot be through indeterminate, vaguely evolutionary ways. These need serious, careful shaping of an unprecedented and global level—because issues are no longer localized.

Now, let me change gears and tell you about something else that comes to my mind quite often. Both the mythological and the scientific view of life on Earth tell us that we all came from water. But *Homo sapiens* have been land-dwelling mammals. Quite naturally, all early exploration, conquest and progress was on land. Then came a time when the dominating theme of building the future was the sea. Anyone who could master the waters built great value, power and influence. I feel that air was explored last and it all started with warplanes and commercial flight. In 1957, the Sputnik changed everything. In all this, man has had the least time with air, compared to land and the seas. Your generation will see unusual new activity in this domain and build new possibilities for mankind around air and the ether and the outer space. These may hold the key to the survival of the race. Far too long have we lived in isolation and ignorance, and it is my belief that in your life time, we will come into contact with life outside the Planet. It may not quite look like ET or the cuddly, lovable monsters that come out of animation studios. Whatever 'they' or 'it' might look like, I believe that isolation and ignorance will end. This will signal the end of history the way we have known it.

One of the perpetual issues mankind has dealt with is disease. In no generation before me was it taken to the level we are currently familiar with. In most parts of the world, until my father's time, you really depended on either a witchdoctor or a quack. My father's father was a medical doctor before whose time even the stethoscope did not exist. Germs were not associated with disease. So, all you have to do is to travel three generations upstream and fall sick for a day to know what the Dark Ages were all about. Today, we have come a long way with antibiotics and Magnetic Resonance Imaging and non-interventional surgery. But there are a couple of catches: one is that we do not understand how the human mind works

and how the body-mind interplay truly happens. Secondly, all medicine is generic and, by contrast, all human beings are in reality, unique. This leads me to think that the concept of 'general medicine' is really inappropriate and at a certain level, an act of ignorant faith even as someone prescribes a simple tablet for a headache. I think, in your lifetime, this will change. You will see your medicine as personalized as your unique mind-body composite. This will have far reaching implications on issues of longevity and wellness.

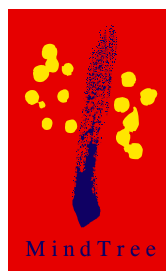
Let me now talk about something very close to my heart and something else that is very close to yours. The one close to my heart is the human quest for spirituality and its manifestation in organized religion. The one close to your heart is music and I will talk about it in a moment. My sense is that, in the mind-boggling changes you will see all around yourself, one thing that will continue unabated is the quest for God, super-consciousness, higher being — call it whatever. The mystic search for a higher form is firm-wired in the human brain and *probably* makes us different from other life forms. Religion is a manifestation of that search in some ways. It is pan-civilization, pan-history. Despite the fact that much of it is in the unorganized sector and has been frequently sought to be isolated from the state, such as in modern times, whenever the latter has overstepped its limits, religion has prevailed. This equation is going to remain just the same.

Now, Small Bear, let us talk about music. I always joke that Bears do not sing. We can only grunt. That will not change for me for sure, given my complete inability to sing to save my life. The truth however is that music is the second largest uniting force in the world, next only to religion. That is why religion always invariably uses music to propagate itself; that is why every nation must sing to state its reason for existence through its own anthem; that is why babies must be sung to before they sleep; that is why we sing when we are happy and listen to music when we feel blue. That is why iPods are such a success and that is the reason every computing device must have the ability to store and play back music. That is also why every national revolt and human upsurge is backed by its own music. It is going to become an even bigger force in your life time. So hang on to your iPod.

It is time for me to close for the day. You and I must continue to visit this space every now and then and watch the "fade out — fade in" process at work. In it, I will live forever through you and your children just as, in me, live all those people before me that you have never seen or heard.

Promise me that you will come back to the fringe of my forest at some time, and we will remain there forever.

(This article was written by Subroto Bagchi and first appeared in the XIME 10th anniversary souvenir. Subroto Bagchi is co-founder and Chief Operating Officer of MindTree Ltd)



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