

THE STORM AND THE CALM: GANESH N RAJAN



I was born into a semi-orthodox TamBrahm family. My parents were well-to-do and permissive, considering the times. One could say that I never learned to be grateful in my

early days and developed a sense of entitlement. Nevertheless, I was shy with strangers. I was a loner with no firm friends. In fact, I used to spend my school recess alone.

Most of my schooling was in Bangalore. I joined an engineering college there. In my first year at college, I was approached by a girl and set out on a relationship, which I knew I did not want as permanent. I always thought, "This will do for now." But the relationship grew intense. I became lazy about my academics and spent most of my time in this relationship. But then, I developed suspicions and misplaced wariness of the girl with whom I was involved. This mushroomed into doubting everyone around me.

My symptoms began earlier than the mistrust. The first identifiable ones were olfactory hallucinations. The smells ranged from perfumes to garbage. I then concluded that what I smelt was contextual – Bad smells for bad intentions and good ones for good purposes. These symptoms were followed by hearing people talking in asides and auditory hallucinations.

I heard the voices of people I felt were against me. They were perpetually criticizing me. I also thought I could listen to other people's thoughts as if they were speaking them aloud, ventriloquist style. Additionally, I began reading meaning into the gestures of the people around me.

During this time of mental collapse, I met with an accident while riding my mobike to college for an academic examination. Although I was totally unprepared for the exam, I believed the answers would come out in the venue, plucked from my imagination. The floridness of my symptom reached an inflection point following this accident.

I kept silent for two days and nights after the accident as I did not know who I could trust. I felt anything I said would be misconstrued and used against me by others. I eventually broke my silence, and my responses helped with my diagnosis. I was diagnosed with schizophrenia at the age of nineteen.

Over the next three years, there were several so-called 'positive symptoms' of schizophrenia. I experienced strange visits by a cat in the middle of the night. The cat would jump onto my windowsill at the moment of arguably profound thought. One night, in a mirror, I saw my reflection as someone else... deformed, along with a pungent stench of urine. I experienced a whole host of other unreal visions and delusions. For example, I saw a paper mâché doll opening and closing its eyes with intense stares and a look that followed me

everywhere. I also saw the footprint of the first man on the moon etched in light on the floor.

In addition, I experienced grandiosity. I felt that I somehow owned everything around me. A parked car, the garlands of a flower seller, the luxury watches on a billboard, and such. I could even tell that the passing motorcade of a political figure was all for me. I further believed I was going to learn a supreme divine truth.

Then, during this period of florid symptoms, I suspected that a boy, our help in the household, was ridiculing me. This resulted in the first time I was violent. Subsequently, there were a couple of incidents of slapping other people. But, again, I remember the violence always only happened when I felt I was being ridiculed. I have since learned to control my temper... almost wholly, regardless of the stimulus.



I steadfastly continued my medication over the testing times despite experiencing some distress. My family was highly supportive and non-judgemental. They gave me my space and time. I was eventually able to study, albeit with some tutoring. I returned

and finished college creditably after responding adequately to treatment for the condition. I joined my first job with a leading Indian engineering group in sales. Notably, I did not reveal my diagnosis to my employers.

I met my wife, a colleague in the same company. We grew closer by exchanging letters as she was based in Delhi and I was in Bangalore. I told her about my condition after she got to know me better. We were married within a year.

Six months after getting married, I got my visa to study in the USA. I joined a mid-western college. I got a scholarship and was then joined by my wife in the USA. I completed a double Master's, again creditably. I used to get my medicines sent through people visiting the USA from India.

We moved to the southwest USA when my wife got a job there. I found employment as a consultant in a Fortune 500 company in the same city. When my wife got pregnant for the second time, we returned to India. After that, I changed three jobs in India due to my delayed understanding of what people expect and how professional relationships work.

Though the symptoms had almost entirely stopped due to medication, my negative thinking was a burden. Consequently, I went for counseling sessions, where I learned to let go of negative thoughts. In addition, I realized there is no such thing as a perpetually blue sky in life.

Meanwhile, my wife's career was growing in

leaps and bounds. I started taking smaller assignments to manage both work and home. I authored a book in my spare time that shared my insights as a patient with schizophrenia.



When I turned sixty, my wife had reached a professional pinnacle. My chores began to predominantly revolve around the house. I once again used my spare time to write another book, this time fiction, but on the same theme of schizophrenia in a more easily digestible manner than my earlier work.

I had built a façade early on because of my shyness and a sense of inadequacy deep down. As a result, I constantly compared myself with others. I overcame this comparison habit and developed an acceptance of what life dishes out only after understanding three things.

My three main insights are:

- (1) Meet your fate: make your destiny – Fate is what you meet, and destiny is how you meet it.
- (2) Realize you are unique – There will never be a collection of atoms like yourself and others.

- (3) Know [your] betterment in every circumstance. There is some way you are inevitably getting better where all is grist in your mill.

Looking back, I think my first book could have been informative but was hard to read because of an effort to say the exact thing. I relied on complex vocabulary and sentence constructions. I had the opportunity to revisit the first book and recently brought out a second edition. I call it “Being Here Now: Insights of an ex-schizophrenic”

Sometimes, when highly stimulated by a movie or an intense discussion, I experience ‘fringe’ symptoms of auditory hallucinations barely in the audible range. I am told that some people wake from sleep with these kinds of voices, which automatically subside to complete wakefulness. For me, these ‘fringe’ symptoms subside about five to ten minutes after the over-stimulating event.

I was a heavy smoker and had developed a taste for junk foods. While I cannot say a lifestyle change was caused by schizophrenia, it certainly contributed to my decision to look after my body. I quit smoking more than a decade ago. I also began to watch my diet. After that, I began to exercise. My lifestyle change has changed my emotions and contributed to my maturity and health. I now feel much more in control. Before I changed my lifestyle, I experienced sleep apnea and had to use a CPAP machine. However, after becoming conscious of my body’s fitness needs, including what I put into it, I no longer needed the apparatus.

I discovered Eklavya serendipitously. I was looking for someone to review my second book, and I found Anil ji. Eklavya has contributed a lot to my ever-growing maturity.

25 years ago, I failed miserably to set up a self-help group in Chennai. I wanted to help, but willingness alone was not enough. It was not until the COVID pandemic that I found answers. Technology enables people to be free of geographical location; only a convenient meeting time is needed. However, that proved to be only a platform. I was stuck with finding persons who would willingly participate. It was then that Anil ji gave a simple solution to get started. No advertising... no social media posts... and no professional endorsement. He asked me to reach out to people I knew. This proved an excellent way to start. Although we are just beginning, the first step has been taken.

Initially, the issues seemed so large. A structure for the meeting could not be provided. For now, it remains this way. We discuss topics of interest and occasionally refer to the RI methodology. However, the usefulness of the RI tools has been established. Participation is getting better. Hopefully, the Support group will flourish and be helpful to more numbers in the times to come.

The meeting is conducted primarily in the English medium and takes place every Wednesday from 7pm on Google Meet.

My advice to fellow members:

Communicate. Communicate. Communicate. Reach out. Reach out. Reach out.

If whatever you experience can be seen as a positive influence, is socially collaborative, and not causing harm, it IS okay. No label needs to define you.

Keep a sense of humor, always! Wish you wellness, always!

(Ganesh N Rajan is Eklavya Foundation's Chennai-based Self-Help Group coordinator.

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