

WALKING THE UNSEEN PATH: WHEN DESTINY SETS THE CLOCK

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Most journeys are imagined backwards.

We tend to believe that success emerges from deliberate planning, relentless ambition, and disciplined execution. Yet when I look back across a career spanning surgery, education, leadership, and reinvention, a different truth reveals itself: fate often sets the clock, not us.

My journey has been shaped as much by unseen forces as by conscious effort by instincts that defied logic, by relationships that arrived unannounced yet proved decisive, and by opportunities that initially appeared as disruptions. What I once perceived as deviations from a planned path were, in retrospect, the very pivots that defined it.

Early in my career, I believed that hard work alone could produce a linear trajectory. Life, however, unfolded in layers complex, unpredictable, and deeply interconnected. A brief conversation in an airport lounge, a moment of trust in an operating room, an unexpected administrative appointment, a late-life academic pursuit across continents—these became the true inflection points. Not awards. Not titles.

At the core of this journey, two constants sustained me. The first was faith not merely in a religious sense, but as a quiet conviction in the meaning of effort, in the unseen alignment of events, and in the value of action without attachment to outcome. The second was relationships, the silent strength of my late mother Sushila, the unwavering companionship of my wife Sushma, the guidance of mentors, the trust of colleagues, and above all, the gratitude of patients who allowed me into the most vulnerable moments of their lives.

A Flight and a Fellowship

In 1971, early in my surgical career, I accompanied a patient with renal failure to Delhi for hemodialysis; my first encounter with that technology, and an awakening to a domain that would shape my professional life.

The following morning at the Delhi airport, I noticed Dr. B.N. Colabawalla, one of the pioneers of Indian urology. I was young, unrecognized, and uncertain. Yet something within me urged an approach. I introduced myself as a student of Professor K.C. Gangwal, my mentor.

What followed was an extended conversation from the lounge to the flight to Jaipur. As we parted, he posed a simple question: “Would you apply for the Hindustan Warner Travelling Fellowship?”

That single interaction altered the trajectory of my life. The fellowship exposed me to leading institutions across India Christian Medical College Vellore, and premier centres in Kolkata and Mumbai and introduced me to stalwarts who would permanently influence my thinking and practice. It ultimately led to my admission into the Magister Chirurgiae (M.Ch.) Urology programme at Christian Medical College, Vellore, Tamil Nadu.

More importantly, it reinforced a principle that has stayed with me ever since: *destiny often requires participation; it responds to initiative.*

From Observer to Surgeon

At CMC Vellore in 1972, I began under Dr. M. Mohan Rao as an observer. Initially not permitted to operate, I immersed myself in disciplined observation and learning.

One evening, during a kidney transplant, the team found itself short-handed. Dr. Rao turned to me almost in passing: “Would you give me a hand?” That moment was not planned, not negotiated. It was simply offered.

I stepped in and performed my first live donor nephrectomy. The trust extended to me opened further opportunities, and by the conclusion of my fellowship I had actively participated in multiple transplant procedures. On my final day, I was informed that my M.Ch. application had been approved though I had never formally pursued it. Persistence had spoken where formalities had not.

This phase reinforced an enduring lesson: *readiness invites opportunity; preparation precedes recognition.*

All India Institute of Medical Sciences Delhi (AIIMS): The Subtle Call of Destiny

In 1976, comfortably established as a lecturer in Jaipur, I applied almost casually for a position at the All-India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi. The interview call arrived just days before the expected birth of our son Akshay. Every rational consideration suggested I remain. A trusted friend insisted I go. I took the advice.

The journey was chaotic, the interview was delayed, and at one point I nearly turned back. Yet when my turn arrived, there was unexpected clarity and ease of expression I had not anticipated. Months later, the appointment came.

Looking back, the decision to attend despite every inconvenience was not strategic. It was instinctive. And it reaffirmed something I would experience repeatedly throughout my career: *destiny often speaks softly; it is easy to ignore.*

Jawahar Lal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences, Pondicherry (JIPMER): The Test of Resolve

In 1979, I left AIIMS to join JIPMER, Pondicherry, charged with building a urology department from the ground up. The decision was driven not by comfort, but by possibility.

The reality was demanding. Limited infrastructure, administrative rigidity, and an unfamiliar environment tested both my professional and personal resilience. My first major independent case a complex ureteric injury following gynecological surgery, required a level of surgical judgment I had not previously exercised alone. The postoperative course was turbulent. Doubt was unavoidable.

One afternoon, walking barefoot across uneven terrain to reach the hospital, I questioned my decision deeply. That evening I encountered a line from Sri Aurobindo: *“The solution of a problem is through it.”*

The patient recovered. The procedure succeeded. And with it came not only professional recognition but an internal shift from doubt to acceptance. That phrase has guided me since: *difficulty is not deviation; it is often the pathway itself.*

Institution Building and Academic Leadership

Over the following decades, my journey expanded well beyond the operating room.

At the Sanjay Gandhi Postgraduate Institute (SGPGI), Lucknow, from 1989 onward, I had the opportunity to establish and nurture a Department of Urology that grew into a Center of Excellence including one of the country’s highest-volume living-related kidney transplant programs. My subsequent tenure as Director brought engagement with healthcare delivery at a systemic level, balancing clinical rigor with administrative responsibility.

In 2003, I was appointed Vice Chancellor of King George’s Medical University (KGMU), Lucknow, during a period of significant institutional instability. The environment was fraught with mistrust, political interference, and systemic challenges. On my first day, senior administrators tendered their resignations as a customary gesture. I chose to tear them up.

Trust, when offered without preconditions, carries transformative power. That decision shifted the institutional culture. Together, we navigated a turbulent period and restored credibility and stability to the institution.

I also had the privilege of serving as founding Vice Chancellor of the Virtual Medical University, the “Medvarsity” established by the Apollo Hospital Group in India contributing to the emerging landscape of digital medical education, a domain that continues to redefine how knowledge is disseminated.

These roles deepened my conviction that *leadership is less about authority and more about trust, alignment, and collective purpose.*

A Leap Across Continents

At the age of 61, following a long academic career in India, I attended one of the earliest International Robotic Urologic Surgery (IRUS) conferences on robotic surgery in Detroit. During a casual conversation, I received an invitation to join a programme, then at the very forefront of a technological transformation in surgery.

The decision to move to the United States was neither calculated nor inevitable—it was, once again, a response to an inner prompt. On May 13, 2006, I joined the Vattikuti Urology Institute at Henry Ford Hospital, Detroit, at the invitation of Dr. Mani Menon, who not only provided the placement but facilitated an expedited O-1 visa and generously supported my Executive MBA programme at the University of Michigan.

It was among the most stimulating periods of my career. My first task was to bring order to the department’s database on robotic radical prostatectomy, which became the largest and longest single-Centre database of its kind, the raw material for several seminal publications. I subsequently had the privilege of leading expeditions nationally and internationally to develop robotic applications in renal surgery, pediatric urology, and robotic kidney transplant recipient surgery.

I later pursued coursework in economics at Stanford, biostatistics at Harvard, and data science and machine learning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at an age when most consider slowing down. And it was a singular honour to be represented, alongside Raj Vattikuti and Mani Menon, in the *Many Voices, One Nation* exhibit at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.

Reinvention, I came to understand, is not age dependent. It is curiosity dependent.

The Vattikuti Foundation and Global Impact

My association with the Vattikuti Foundation began in 2010 with a brief conversation and a handshake: no appointment letter, no formal contracts, no protracted negotiations. As CEO, I have had the opportunity to contribute to the global dissemination of robotic surgery and surgical innovation, with particular emphasis on expanding access within India.

A defining achievement of this work has been the establishment of a network of Collaborative Vattikuti Institutions spanning multiple continents. These include Providence Hospital in the United States, King's College London in the United Kingdom, the Orsi Academy in Belgium, and four leading institutions across India.

The Foundation's broader work in establishing robotic programmes, training surgeons, and advancing emerging technologies including Mako Stryker and MR-guided focused ultrasound programs, reflect an overarching vision: democratizing access to high-quality care within the range of affordability through philanthropy, innovation, collaboration, and the deliberate cultivation of institutional partnerships across borders.

Academic Contributions and Recognition

Academic engagement has remained integral throughout. I have contributed more than 250 peer-reviewed publications, edited journals, and participated in global scholarly discourse across multiple continents.

As founding Editor of the *Indian Journal of Urology*, I had the opportunity to shape a platform that continues to serve the specialty. My sustained engagement with international publications, including the *BJU International*, further broadened that contribution.

Recognition including the Dr B.C Roy Award and Padma Shri Award? conferred by the Government of India has been deeply humbling. Yet in retrospect, such honours feel less like personal achievements and more like acknowledgments of collective effort: of the mentors, colleagues, and institutions that made the journey possible.

The defining moments of a career, I have found, are rarely planned. They are encountered. Each requires a leap, not blind, but intuitive.

Closing Reflection

Life does not reward those who never falter. It favors those who continue with sincerity, despite uncertainty.

I do not view my journey as one I designed. I see it as one I participated in with effort, with faith, and with gratitude.

If this reflection offers anything, it is not a blueprint but an invitation:

To act with courage even when clarity is absent. To value relationships as the true currency of a life in medicine. To remain a student, regardless of age or achievement. And to walk humbly and free trusting that the unseen clock keeps perfect time.

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