

Serendipity

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Upon finishing high school, I strove to become a millionaire by age 28. I figured that the obvious way to get there was an undergraduate degree in commerce. I had been accepted to the most selective university in Canada. I figured that I must be smart, very smart. Since I was so smart, I did not really have to work or do my readings. Just going to class should suffice. As it turns out, I was not quite smart enough. Not smart enough, in any event, to score high enough in my first-year math and economics courses to be accepted into the commerce program.

Instead, I stuck with the courses at which I excelled: politics and French. This decision was much to the chagrin of my mother: “What in the world are you going to do with a degree in political science?” It would end up taking me the better part of ten years to convince my mother that I could actually earn a living in this way. In the process, I would also end up learning an important lesson, one I did not come to recognize until some years later: Stick with what you do well and you are likely to succeed.

I was living in Toronto, Canada at the time – perhaps the world’s most diverse metropolis insofar as ethnic, linguistic, and religious pluralism are concerned. As I was passing by one of the city’s busiest downtown intersections one day, I witnessed an exchange between a man standing on a corner protesting vociferously against allegedly anti-Tamil practices of the government in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Judging by the man’s

complexion, he was a Tamil himself. Meanwhile, another man had started berating him – in clear yet broken English. In other words, that man was an immigrant himself. The man speaking in broken English was telling the protester in no uncertain terms that this was Canada and that he had better check his grievances at the border rather than importing them, for he had come to this country precisely to get away from all this conflict.

For a novice convert to the study of politics, that was food for thought. Why is it that in a city as diverse as Toronto interethnic relations were relatively harmonious? Moreover, why were communities getting on fairly well which, by virtue of their ethnic background religion, language, or culture, would have been at odds with one another in their country of origin? That made me think back to my childhood. Why was my city of birth, Munich, comparably homogeneous relative to Toronto? How might one explain that attending school in one place, my friends basically all looked alike, whereas in Canada my acquaintances came from so many different backgrounds and many – like me – had not even been born in Canada?

Despite Toronto's deep diversity, people, by and large, treat each other with equal dignity and respect. That contrasted sharply with the five years I had spent in the Middle East where differential treatment had clearly been a function of a person's ethnic, religious, and regional origin, with the worst treatment reserved for South-East Asian guest labourers. My time in Kuwait – where I had come to live as a result of my father's line of work – was also formative insofar as shortly after we had moved there, Iraq declared war on Iran. For weeks on end, I would awake to the bluest sky, and the blackest horizon. The Iraqi oil installations at Basra were but 60 kilometres from where I lived. When they were shelled, the horizon turned into a solid black canvass. But why *do*

countries go to war? Why would they inflict such suffering on their populations and spend so much money on destroying one another rather than on improving the lives of their citizens?

The most glaring contradiction, however, I found in Canada itself. Why would an entire province – Quebec – strive to secede from the same country to which people the world over were flocking to find work and be treated fairly well, especially as compared to the treatment they might receive in many other societies?

Evidently, politics mattered. These phenomena occupied a good deal of my undergraduate time. In the process, I made another curious discovery. Many of the people who seemed to know best how to solve the situation with Quebec only spoke English. Could they really understand the grievances of Quebecers, the majority of whom have French as their mother tongue? For my part, I decided I had to learn French to understand both parties' perspectives on the dispute.

After spending a summer in Quebec, I decided to further my linguistic skills by studying in France. There I became aware of another conflict. During my year in France not once was I confronted by the police. Yet my friends whose ancestry was visibly North African would have their papers checked by the police on a regular basis.

From the philosopher Aristotle I had learned that patterns matter. I had stumbled upon two of them. On the one hand, majorities who control the institutions of a given state make a habit of treating minorities differently to the point of perceiving them as a threat. On the other hand, minorities seem to have misgivings about the state in which they reside – or at least about how they are treated by that state.

I now work for Canada's only military university. Securing a job at the Royal Military College of Canada was a conscientious choice. I wanted to teach peace and conflict,

civics and society, politics and government at an institution where most of the students would actually end up directly applying what they learn. Presently, many of the officer cadets I teach will find themselves in one of the world's hotspots. Their mandate will be some form of enforcing peace: keeping combatants apart, re-establishing security in countries that have been ravaged by war, and assisting in getting the people, their country, and their government back on track by providing security, humanitarian, economic and development aid, and by enhancing the indigenous capacity to build democratic institutions and a sustainable peace. My task is to help them understand why politics, government, and society in Canada seem to work, so that they may be better able to fulfill their peace-support mandates abroad.

Some of my former students have ended up wounded and even killed. That, in turn, has motivated me to think more about what might be done to warn about the impending escalation of violence in a conflict. I am not just interested in helping my government save money which can thereby be freed up for other purposes. I am also cognizant of how privileged I am simply by virtue of where I was born, where I grew up, and what I have experienced. As someone who believes that every human life is equally valuable, I feel a sense of obligation to help those less fortunate than I to safeguard their lives and improve their circumstances. Understanding more about conflict is a step in that direction.

I have become more interested in making a difference in recent years. My research interests used to be primarily academic. But I have to give credit to my friends from anthropology who have convinced me that research involving human beings ought never be an end in itself. For human beings, as Immanuel Kant contended, should never be treated as means to an end. In framing and designing my research,

then, I have come to ask myself what benefit someone in the places I study might derive from my work.

From Aristotle I take not only my inspiration as a social scientist but also my approach to learning. I have come to believe that everybody is good at something. But to find out what that something is, one has to take risks, try new things, live on the edge. I have this funny feeling that most people either never had the chance to take a chance or, more likely, prefer not to take chances. I feel for those folks; as a result of that attitude, they may never end up flourishing as human beings. Human flourishing entails a certain spirit of experimentation. But those who try something new need also be prepared to fail. A talented friend of mine during my undergraduate years consistently fared very poorly in his studies. His philosophy was that he had not really failed because he had not tried; had he tried and then failed, then he would have really failed because he had tried.

I arrive at quite the opposite conclusion. But today's Academy rarely encourages students to experiment. As a result, universities are replete with one-trick ponies. In his famous fable, the venerable Sir Isaiah Berlin refers to them as hedgehogs: They live contently in their hole, wary of venturing outside let alone too far for fear of the dangers that lurk. The fox, by contrast, sly and cunning, roams the woods. Foxes, to paraphrase Berlin, may not be extraordinarily outstanding at any one thing. But they lead an interesting life and fare reasonably well for themselves. Owing to their experience, they are well prepared to cope when confronted with unforeseen challenges. However, there is a drawback to being a fox. By virtue of the life they lead, they may never be the best at anything. Is it all right to settle for second place? There is nothing wrong with being second best. I much prefer to be second best in many a thing than best in but one.

Curiosity, experience, and reflexivity are key ingredients of the scientific endeavour. Be it x-rays or penicillin, so many of the world's great discoveries were accidental. There is nothing wrong with accidents. It is quite all right to have them. For how are we to learn otherwise? Accidents need not be mistakes. They can be opportunities to learn, to discover, to make a difference. If we shy away from them for fear of taking a risk, we miss out. Serendipity is the spice of academic life.