

Why I am at the Reunion



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On the fifth floor of the Museum of Modern Art in New York hangs this painting by Salvador Dali.

The strange landscape features clocks that have melted on to hard objects. The surreal appearance of these objects deepens as we better understand the pervasiveness of memories.

Memories store how we have experienced life. And our perceptions are often distorted or tainted by our memories. The painting is entitled "Persistence of Memory". The clocks, or the memories, are depicted as malleable, casting doubt on just how sure we can be of what we remember. The high school reunions are all about our earliest memories; a time to wonder at their persistence to forever shape how we have learned to see our lives.

50 years is such a long time! How did we get here so fast? I am grateful to Piyush for insisting I attend the reunion. I was fretting giving up the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas this year. The incredulity of my wife and daughter at my hesitation eventually tipped the balance. I now wonder just what was I thinking? Thank you, all members of the organizing committee, for dreaming up this amazing event; and making it happen. Lot of work!

I will make three short points about the prism through which I am seeing this event: (1) Heaven, (2) Fulfillment, and (3) Exit Ahead.

(1) Heaven

The earliest memory of this Prarthana Mandir is associated with that wonderful tradition of Pratah-Prarthana. Starting with 4th grade, I remember waking up very early (5:30 AM?) and riding that old green school bus from the old Sharda Mandir to the new. As I got older, riding a bicycle in the pre-dawn cold to school didn't diminish the exquisite quality of the ordeal. We sat on the cold floor under the watchful eyes of Vajubhai Dave (the fearless founder and the legendary principal). Manibhai played a dilrooba for a few minutes, I now forget his standard playlist, which ended in a contemplative silence. After some yoga with Ramanbhai

Dave and the calisthenics performed with Prabhubhai Patel's military precision, we broke out joyfully into the games. Being handed a banana on the way out, we happily rode the bikes home with endless chattering. Barely enough time would be left to cleanup, eat, and return to school for the classes.

I recall a line from a poem by William Wordsworth at the French Revolution (not that the French Revolution and Pratah-Prarthana have anything in common).

"Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven!"

I concede the point that it is a bliss to be alive in any dawn, however, being young with you all in those dawns was heavenly. It is true that we make our own heavens... and hells. We also make the choices to reside in either. I am grateful to you for the role you played in creating that heaven for me.

So many stories come to mind of this heaven. Awareness of the differences among our respective families' material resources came long after we had taken a measure of each other and made friendships in the glow of that equality.

These friendships, untainted by utilitarian motives, have happily endured. A strangeness of the tradition of the boys and girls not talking to each other must be noted. Talking with the other gender doesn't normally denote romance. I recall being punished once for talking in class while Dayashankarbhai Upadhyay. I was made to go sit in the middle of the girls for the rest of the class. He missed the point that he also punished the adjacent girls simultaneously. Or perhaps, he didn't miss the point; he merely, and deliciously, enjoyed the delicate discomforts he was causing. Not forming deeper cross-gender friendships then was a loss. What were we thinking?

No memory of a heaven is complete without the memories of our youthful pranks. And no pranks of our youth come anywhere close to the one that came about on a trip some boys had taken to the north. While in Delhi, Alankar had arranged for us to stay at the home of his grandparents at 5 Tuglakh Road. Mr. and Mrs. Gulzarilal Nanda were incredibly gracious, in fact extravagantly affectionate in welcoming the grandson and his friend into their home. Mr. Nanda was a saint, beyond the touch of muddy politics of the day. Mrs.

Nanda was his rock-solid partner and a matriarch who loved life. In the midst of their inspiring lives, we dropped in for a few nights and we were treated by them as family. [Thank you, Alankar, for bringing us to experience their gentle kindness.] Now onward with the prank. Mrs. Nanda had a mynah bird that spoke back, clearly, any words you spoke to it. She had trained the bird to say, in a cadence, "SitaaaRaaam". The bird would promptly repeat back... "SitaaaRaaam". Every morning and evening, or when passing by the bird, she would say, "SitaaaRaaam". The bird would immediately and happily chirp back, "SitaaaRaaam"; all to her great satisfaction.

Fascinated, we boys were rapt with attention. One afternoon, Yogesh spent some time with the bird. That evening, Mrs. Nanda, as she presided over dinner, express a puzzlement. "I don't know what has happened to this silly bird," she said. "When I say Sitaaa Raaam to the mynah bird, it keeps saying DintaaaRaaam. Just what on Earth is that?"

All of us boys slowly sank under the table, unable to contain a gut-busting attack of pure laughter. To this day, I start laughing when I see talking birds, and remember this as the best prank... of all time.

(2) Fulfilment

Speaking of time, we all experience it differently, on different occasions. It can move too fast when we are having fun. Or slow to a crawl when we are not. There is pressure when there is little of it; and a sense of luxury when there is plenty. We have heard admonishments about its value and importance for all the accomplishments that await.

But accomplishments are no guarantees of fulfilment. And fulfilment is a deep sense of satisfaction; a simple, authentic joy of being alive. So... let's leave unopened our ledgers of accomplishments, or the tales of fortunes made or lost; and really talk about what we have experienced by way of joy and fulfilment.

I expect we will talk of our loves and family, kindnesses given and received, lives changed and remade, intense moments when we have felt to be really alive!

(3) Exit Ahead

Now that we are all 65+, the road ahead is shorter than the one we have already travelled.

I have seen our future! It is Plasma when our Sun will go nova. Nothing shall survive that Tandava dance of a dying star, blowing itself up to smithereens. Wait just a short couple of billion years! If that is too long for you, let's try comprehending a span of just a few thousand years. Arguably, Ramses II was the most important, and the most accomplished, pharaoh of the ancient Egyptian dynasty.

He built a huge monument to himself facing the Nile at Luxor. Giant statues of the great leader and his queen, gazing into the horizon, casting long shadows at dawn and dusk. Sheer height and the size of these statues easily intimidate us mere mortals.

English poet Percy Shelley wrote a poem entitled Ozymandias. That is the Greek name for Ramses II. I believe the poem to be a contemplation on our ambitions for accomplishments, leaving a lasting legacy, even a drive to achieve some historical importance. Here is how it goes...

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Lightening our loads, then... Let's laugh. And lift each other up. Let's tell funny stories. And sweet little lies. Let's sing; and let's dance. As if it is our last dance. Fulfilment awaits!
