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Memoirs

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The preparation: family, childhood. Born into a family of doctors, destiny allowed me to see the profession from close quarters in my childhood. My father Dr. Pravin Haribhakti was a renowned Dermatologist who was devoted to his practice and worked actively in practice, all his life till he lived to 86 years. For many years, he was a professor of Dermatology at the Sheth VS general hospital, where I joined as a medical student in 1983, at its affiliated NHL medical college.

My father was doing his MRCP in the UK in the early '60s, and my mother Purnima, was working in the computer field in the UK. She came to India, and soon I was born in Mumbai in 1966. Later they settled in Ahmedabad, where my father joined VS Hospital, and my mother worked in the Physical research Lab. (PRL) as a computer programmer, having been interviewed by Late Vikram Sarabhai. All through my childhood, I have seen the disciplined life of my father, who worked very hard for 12 hours each day. My mother sacrificed her career for upbringing of her three sons.

During this part of my childhood, I was a witness to the life of my late uncle Dr. Jayant Haribhakti, a legendary surgeon of Gujarat, having a large practice, and an even bigger reputation as a noble surgeon. He had done his FRCS in 1946, came back to Ahmedabad, and started his practice in a first of its kind private clinic, "Polyclinic", with a team of doctors, which became a landmark address in Ahmedabad for the next 40 years. He had struggled to become a doctor, as my grandfather Bhagwandas Haribhakti, who was a magistrate in British India, could not afford his son's medical education in Mumbai, as there were no medical colleges in the erstwhile state of Baroda. Our family hailed from Baroda, had an illustrious history, serving as the first citizens (Nagarsheth - today's Mayor) during the Gaikwad rule.

During my childhood, I saw how a doctor and a surgeon are respected in the society, and this sowed the seeds of the medical profession in my mind at a very young age. I was also fortunate to go to Polyclinic and observe surgeries while I was in school, and I must say that this was indeed fascinating, and was instrumental in later choosing my career path.

I was an average student in GLS school, but fortunately had brilliant friends, who inspired me in my formative years of high school. Around the age of 12 years, while I was in Baroda on a vacation, one of my aunts, who knew astrology, saw my hand, and instantly said I would become a surgeon. I remember, in my mind I said, "Don't joke, do you know how many marks I get at school? Being a doctor is far-fetched for me, let alone being a surgeon!". In the 10th boards, I scored only 65% of marks, and this was a wake-up call for me. The choice of science in 11th standard was not difficult for me, as I had no inclination for commerce or the arts field.

I was always a mediocre student, and it was only in the 11th and the 12th grades, I progressively started scoring more marks, due to my greater efforts and good coaching by my teachers like Prof. Gemavat, Prof. N A Desai and others. Fortunately, I scored 86% in the 12th boards, thanks to all my hardworking and studious friends like Devang, Pallav, and Krunal with whom I was a tuition partner. I had a hard time deciding a career choice between medical and engineering, as computers was an upcoming field, and I was fascinated by it too. Finally, my medical background overpowered me, and I was admitted to NHL medical college in 1983.

The plan unfolding: Medical education, marriage. In the NHL medical college, out of a class of 100, we were only 20 odd students from English medium, and the rest were from native Gujarati medium, who had great difficulty adjusting to the medical terminology. This gave me a complex that I was "privileged". This pride was shattered in the first semester exams, where I failed miserably in Anatomy. This was indeed an eye opener, and I soon realised the fact that there is no alternative to hard work in medicine. Though I looked like a fool to myself then, retrospectively, I thank God for that early lesson in my life. Our physiology teacher, Prof. Rao was a lasting source of inspiration for me.

While in medical college, I befriended Neebha, two years my junior in class, who happened to be the daughter of my father's friend, whom we knew from childhood. She was to become my

better half for life. She played a truly inspiring role in my career. I was never a ranker in my life, but after her entry in my life in the third MBBS, in all the future exams, I stood first in the university, and was selected as the best outgoing student of the College. She had always been a topper, and continued to top in the university throughout her undergraduate and postgraduate in Ophthalmology. We got married during my second year residency and her internship in 1990.

The choice was clear during my internship that I wanted to do general surgery and later a speciality like cardiac surgery or other. As I was ranked 1st, I had a choice to select the unit of surgery, and I chose Dr. Rahul Thakore, a gentle surgeon and a noble human being, as my teacher. While in my third year, Dr. Thakore retired and I was transferred to another great surgeon Dr. Vasant Valu, who was a very humble person, and a fast surgeon. The second year rotations gave us an idea of the subspecialties where I was exposed to cardiothoracic surgery, gastro-intestinal surgery and paediatric surgery, and inspired by teachers like Dr. D G Yagnik and Dr. Aniruddh Shah.

At the end of the three-year residency, I passed the exams with flying colours and again, first in the university. Now I was faced with a choice between GI surgery and cardiothoracic surgery. Cardiac surgery was a glamorous speciality, while GI was an upcoming speciality. To resolve this, I met one of my teachers in cardio-thoracic surgery, Dr. DG Yagnik, a great surgeon, whose surgical flow was like a rhythm in an orchestra. He gave me an important life lesson. He said: "Whatever you do, you must do it well; whether it is a hernia surgery or a bypass surgery, does not matter". The idea that Cardiothoracic surgery was an institutional surgery, whereas GI surgery could be practised in a small private hospital, probably tilted the balance of my career choice in favour of GI Surgery. My parents were very supportive of my higher education and my going out of Ahmedabad for training. My wife, Dr. Neebha, wholeheartedly supported me by bearing the distance between us for two years soon after our marriage.

The foundation: Speciality training. In 1988, when I passed MS general surgery, there was no laparoscopic surgery, but I

was inclined to develop the field of endoscopy, and I saw that there was a good potential in this new speciality, which was yet to be developed. I decided to pursue the field of GI Surgery as my career choice. There were very few centres for training for GI surgery in India, and I started exploring the information. I was exploring going to the UK, under the double sponsorship scheme which was in force then. I tried, but was told that it is a long process, unless you have an overseas sponsor, which I did not have. The only way to explore the information was by word of mouth, as there was no internet, or another source. Mumbai, Bombay in those days, was the Mecca for patients with all complicated diseases. With the help from my cousin brother, Dr. Vijay Haribhakti, an onco-surgeon of repute in Mumbai, I specially visited Tata Memorial Hospital and Bombay Hospital for training opportunities. At Tata, I was told the fellowship involves rotation in other sub-specialities, which I was not willing for. I was offered a fellowship at Bombay Hospital, under the renowned surgeon Dr. V. N. Shrikhande, which I was ready to join.

Meanwhile, one medical gastroenterologist, and my Asst. Prof. in VS, Dr. SI Patwari, who was trained from AIIMS, and now settled in Ahmedabad, asked me to go for a visit to AIIMS-GI surgery, New Delhi. I took this opportunity to combine this visit with a visit to Sanjay Gandhi PG institute of medical sciences (SGPGI), Lucknow. My visit to both these institutes changed my vision, and my life too.

I met a senior resident, Dr. Vivek Kohli at AIIMS, who while on a walk to his hostel quarters told me two things. One, GI surgery AIIMS will give you the best surgical hands-on experience training in India, as all the major surgeries including lienorenal shunts are done by residents in training. Secondly, so far, no one from outside AIIMS has been able to get into this department as a senior resident. Instantaneously, I accepted the challenge to be a part of the department, there and then.

Then I visited SGPGI Lucknow; a super speciality training institute, where M.Ch. in GI surgery had just started. This was an awesome experience. I had never imagined that an institute of this magnitude and excellence was existent in India. It became

my dream to do M.Ch. in SGPGI. Back home, I communicated with Prof. S Nundy, Chief of GI Surgery at AIIMS to accommodate me as a senior resident in the department. He said the selection is by interview, and that currently there was no opening. I decided to join as a trainee in 1992, without a regular job, and worked very hard like a regular senior resident for 3 months, and later got selected for the job of a senior resident, the first time someone from outside AIIMS got into the department.

Prof. Nundy was a great teacher, an ardent disciplinarian, very open and a nice gentleman. He was completely devoted to patient care. His profound words remind me, during patient care even today. He would say, "Don't change a winning game, always change a losing one". Having had a limited hands-on surgical experience so far, at AIIMS, I got an opportunity to perform some very complex open GI Surgery, along with an excellent academic programme with great faculties like Prof S Nundy, Dr. Peush Sahni, and Dr. Girish Pande. We also had wonderful co-residents like Dr. Subash, Dr. Vivek Kohli, Dr. Deepak Govil, Dr. Radhakrishnan, Dr. Rajan Chaudhary, Dr. Adhikari from Nepal, Dr. Baruah and others. At the academic programme, we were all scored for our presentations, and criticised for it. I learnt the art of audit and healthy criticism, which helped me tremendously in my life. The famous words written on the blackboard in the seminar room, "Winners don't quit; quitters don't win" helped me to continue my training in spite of the very difficult work schedule.

While in AIIMS, I applied for M.Ch. in SGPGI and GB Pant Hospital, Delhi, the only two places in India, where M.Ch (GI) was possible. There were only four seats per year in India. The Madras programme was only for Tamil Nadu domiciles. In 1992, I did not qualify for the M.Ch. seat and narrowly missed one attempt at GB Pant to Dr. Anil Agarwal, who later became the chief of the same department. While in Delhi during the early part I was staying with my father in law's friend Mr. Shishir Dholakia, a senior counsel at the Supreme court. While I was upset at not getting through M.Ch. entrance, Shishirbhai gave me another valuable lesson of life. He said think 30 years later,

would you like to be MS with 30 years or M.Ch. with 25 years' experience? The choice seemed clear that I keep trying for another position.

The next SGPGI entrance exam in Dec 93, where I thought I was most well prepared due to vigorous training at AIIMS, and my regular preparation, and was my best shot. While waiting at the Delhi station for a train to Lucknow to appear for M.Ch entrance exam the next day, the train was delayed by 2 hours, and I crazily ran up to the engine driver and told him to make sure I reach Lucknow at the scheduled 7 am time. It was a miracle that I landed at Lucknow in time and fortunately, qualified this time, and got selected to my dream place SGPGI for the M.Ch. degree programme.

After leaving AIIMS, and joining SGPGI in Jan 1994, I was told I could not join as there was a case in the High court by a reserved candidate demanding reservation and the court had ordered a stay. So I was admitted provisionally as a SR, and the Registrar told me that the case is likely to be dismissed soon. I had no other choice. The next 2-3 months were very stressful as the court case dragged on, and I was then ready to file my application as an affected party. The case was soon dismissed by Lucknow High court with a strongly worded judgement that there cannot be any reservations in a super speciality course. I was admitted to the M.Ch. programme finally with retrospective effect.

At SGPGI, I saw how the medical and surgical departments were working in close co-ordination on the same floor. That inspired one more dream, to develop a GI institute in future where medical and surgical GI specialities could work in tandem with each other for the benefit of the patient. I worked at the dept. of surgical GE, SGPGI for three years from 1994 to 1996. During this time, I had an opportunity to get the best training under the leadership of Prof. SP Kaushik, Dr. Vinay Kapoor, Dr. Rajan Saxena and Dr. Sadiq Sikora. The academic environment was amazing, and the peers and colleagues such as Dr. Ibrarullah, Dr. Anu Behari, Dr. Ashok Kumar, Dr. Vivek Singh, Dr. Prasad, Dr. Brijendrasingh, Dr. Sonawane, Dr. T D Yadav, Dr. Mahesh Thombare and others were very supportive and competitive.

These years of GI speciality training from 1992 to 1996 paved the foundation for my future career to develop. At SGPGI, I got excellent hands-on experience in GI Surgery, and also training in performing laparoscopic Cholecystectomy. By the time I completed my training, I had performed 7 Whipple's pancreaticoduodenectomy independently, more than 100 laparoscopic cholecystectomy apart from many other major GI surgical procedures. I was ready to take on life as a GI Surgeon.

Early career building: The Freelancer. After completing M.Ch. in Dec 1996, I came back to Ahmedabad in Jan 1997. I was inclined to go overseas for further training, but due to family compulsions, I decided to postpone going overseas. It was on Feb 26, 1997, that I started my private practice in "Polyclinic", where my late uncle Dr. JB Haribhakti had toiled for 40 years.

On the first day of my private practice, I was sitting and making a format to record my cases, when a young Muslim couple walked into my chamber for consultation referred by Dr. Kanubhai Shah, a renowned urologist. The wife had gallstones and was symptomatic, so I advised cholecystectomy. While Polyclinic did not have facilities for laparoscopic surgery, so I said we would go ahead for an open cholecystectomy. They immediately agreed and asked about the operative cost. I was flabbergasted. I had never thought in my life, how much a cholecystectomy would cost. So hesitantly I said my charges would be Rs. 3000. They readily agreed and said let us do the surgery tomorrow. After they were gone, I went to the theatre to see the instruments, the OR having multiple tubelights, but a good L & T cautery. I called my classmate Dr. Atul Shah, a surgeon practising close by to come and assist me for the first case. The surgery, fortunately, went very well, and the lady went home on the 3rd day. When she came on the 7th day for suture removal, she brought another Muslim lady, and said, she also has gallstones, and you have to operate on her at the same charge. I started frantically calling my other friends to find out the prevailing surgeon fees for different procedures!

Meanwhile, I started a 5 bedded nursing home, Haribhakti Surgical Hospital (HSH) on 15th June 1997, and I got affiliated

with VS Hospital as a Hon. Asst. Prof. in Surg GE, and to another trust hospital, Jivaraj Mehta Hospital (JMH) as a consultant. We were blessed with our only daughter Pranali in March 1998. I resigned from VS Hospital after 5 years and joined a new multispeciality corporate Hospital, Sterling Hospital, in 2002. During these years, I learnt and developed advanced laparoscopic surgery attending multiple conferences and training programmes. We also started a “Lapskills” programme to train surgeons in the art of laparoscopic surgery. I organised at least one major conference every year during these years. I wrote the first and second edition of the multi-authored Surgical GE book and created a DVD Atlas of GI Surgery consisting teaching videos, and later an online repository for learning, www.gisurgery.info for patients and surgeons.

The dream fulfilled: Kaizen Hospital. As a group of doctors, we started a 50 bedded GI speciality Hospital “Kaizen Hospital” in Nov. 2011 in Ahmedabad. This was a dream being fulfilled. Now, I was working in one place throughout the day, and as a team. Both these initiatives channelized a lot of my energies, and optimised outcomes, and helped us grow even more. All these new endeavours come with great hardships and efforts, and it is only at sunset, one can enjoy the fruits of the labour of sunrise. At Kaizen Hospital, we are now a team of 6 GI surgeons and a medical GE. I am extremely fortunate to have this wonderful team working in harmony for the care of patients. Currently at Kaizen, we see 12,000+ patients, perform 1100+ major surgeries, and 3000+ endoscopic procedures in a year.

Memoirs

- 1. There is no alternative to hard work in medicine.*
- 2. Whatever you do, you must do it well.*
- 3. Winners don't quit; quitters don't win.*
- 4. Think from a long term horizon; 30 years from now.*
- 5. It is only at sunset; one can enjoy the fruits of the labour of sunrise.*

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The **Big 5** Values

- 1. Honesty & Integrity*
- 2. Education & Hard work*
- 3. Continuous Learning & Sharing*
- 4. Academics, Research & Innovations*
- 5. Full circle: Back to the Roots*

Honesty & Integrity. All through my childhood, I had been exposed to the core values of humanity: being honest, simple and basically avoiding doing anything immoral or unethical. These were imbibed in me through the stories of my grandfather, and my 2 uncles, Dr. Jayant Haribhakti, who had a reputation as an honest man and Mr. VB Haribhakti, a chartered accountant in Mumbai, of impeccable integrity, who started from a humble beginning and flourished in the financial capital with several partners and multiple offices in India and abroad. He is currently actively working full time at the age of 92 years. I also realised that this may be a harder and a longer way to succeed, but definitely a better way, as it would give lasting success by upholding the core family values.

When I started my career, many of my friends said, it is not possible to survive without unethical means in private practice. So far, I am happy that I could prove them wrong. My advice to the young generation: Choose your way by your own self, rather than being dictated by others. Do what you feel is the right thing to do, and you will be rewarded appropriately sooner or later.

Education & Hard work. We all know, there is no alternative to the best education and hard work. I saw how education and hard work transpired our family, in just one generation, as my grandfather became a magistrate. I was very fortunate and privileged to get the best education in my chosen field in India, and abroad. Even in the early days of practice, I spent long hours in patient care, and sometimes in administrative affairs of organising a conference. Even in the later part of my career these long working days have continued, but now, due to the team and working in one place, work time is highly optimised. These days, one can work more smartly in the digital age. There are several options of the internet, blogs, social media, and other sites where one can share their knowledge, rather than having a physical presence at meetings.

Continuous Learning & Sharing. I always feel like sharing my learning with others by way of conferences, books, atlases or

writings. There are various options to let people know what you are doing, which is called marketing or business development in commercial terms. I have always believed that the scientific and the ethical route to marketing is sharing knowledge and skills. Others would instantly know your competence, once they experience first hand. So much was I fascinated with the concept of continuous learning, that I explored the Kaizen philosophy, and with a view to utilise its principles in a healthcare setting, we named our maiden venture as Kaizen Hospital.

“Kaizen” is not just a word, but is a Japanese philosophy of making continuous small improvements in our workplace, in the processes and systems, to achieve a large difference in the final output of quality. The principles such as ‘5S’, Muda (waste) elimination, lean manufacturing, quality circles (PDCA cycle) etc have been utilised by many large companies such as Toyota, Sony etc to achieve high levels of quality without much increase in cost. Today, “Kaizen” quality philosophy is taught in most management schools, and is being implemented in many organisations across sectors for quality improvement.

Academics, Research & Innovations. In my opinion, academics and clinical research form the foundation of clinical patient care. In this information age, there is so much information overload, that to keep abreast, we need to filter the evidence, and decide what is best for our patients. Teaching the next generation is our responsibility. Our teachers have been very kind in passing the torch to us. It is our responsibility to pass on this flame of knowledge to the next generation. There is a peculiar satisfaction in giving back to society in teaching, which is a very noble value. I have realised that it is the teacher who benefits the most while they teach and share.

Full circle: Back to the Roots. I was spiritually inclined right from my childhood. My grandmother was a great devotee and would spend her entire day in devotion to the Lord. Many other family members had faith in divinity, and this culture inculcated in me a sense of reverence to the almighty for giving much. My real journey started when I found a spiritual teacher (Guru) in

the form of Pujya Guruma Samanandji in 2008, whose ashram is in Gandhinagar. Since then me and Neebha are actively involved in learning the Vedanta scriptures.

The covid lockdown actually was a blessing in disguise for me, as during this time, for the first time, I had so much uninterrupted time to study, and share my learnings. This helped me to dive deeper into the Shreemad Bhagavad Geeta, and to understand the meaning of the secret, Shree Krishna is unfolding to us, and to try and assimilate this in my life. This is a great challenge in itself.

This spiritual dimension has provided me with an inner peace and satisfaction, heightened awareness and focus in my work, and a sense of calm even in the most difficult situations. I feel I should have dwelled much earlier into this treasure, to make a worthwhile difference in my life, but console myself with thinking “it is better late than never” or “that is not last that comes at last”.

The Big 5 Values

- 1. Choose your values by your own self, rather than being dictated by others.*
- 2. Do what you feel is the right, and you will be rewarded appropriately sooner or later.*
- 3. “Kaizen” is a Japanese philosophy of making continuous small improvements in processes and systems at workplace, to achieve a large difference in the final output.*
- 4. There is a satisfaction of giving back to the society.*
- 5. For any good deed, it is better late than never.*