



THE GLOBAL JOURNEY OF AN ASIAN

The entrepreneurial journey of a complete outsider

R. Palan PhD

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Table of Contents

[Foreword](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Introduction](#)

[On the Wings of Hope](#)

[Thirty Years Ago](#)

[Early Days](#)

[Defining Moments in my Life](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[The Dream](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Getting Started](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Differentiation](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Growth](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Lessons Learned from Life Experiences](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Global Journey - Challenges and Insights](#)

[Wrap Up](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Selected References & Recommended Reading](#)

[About the Author](#)

Introduction

On the Wings of Hope

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Whether you like or dislike the policies of President Obama, you cannot but give him credit for his audacity of hope. When Barack Obama won the 2012 elections, in his victory speech, he reminded his supporters: “We did not win because of fate or luck; we won because of the hard work by all of you.” His quest to become President in 2008 was an attempt to break the glass ceiling; he did it with hard work and a plan. There is a saying that success comes from 99% perspiration.

When he delivered the twenty-minute keynote titled *The Audacity of Hope* at the 2004 Democratic Convention, Obama was catapulted to national prominence. In his speech, he talked about hope, not blind optimism. He said, “I’m not talking about blind optimism here – the almost willful ignorance that thinks unemployment will go away if we just don’t talk about it, or the health care crisis will solve itself if we just ignore it. No, I’m talking about something more substantial. It’s the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs; the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores; the hope of a young naval lieutenant bravely patrolling the Mekong Delta; the hope of a millworker’s son who dares to defy the odds; the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too. Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope.”

It is this *audacity of hope* that helped me set out on my global journey too.

I could relate to the words of Obama. I didn’t believe in blind optimism, nor did I wait for a stroke of luck to fall upon me. I certainly did not think that achieving my goals will be easy. My focus was on a journey with the hope that I could help people achieve their best through learning, and in the process, find a decent quality of life for my family. It was this passion that ignited my entrepreneurial spirit. It was this audacity of hope that pushed me to believe that I could succeed in adding value to the community and society that I lived in.

Some have the ability to succeed in what they want to do within a few years; others take much longer. Mine was a long journey but in the end, I did get where I wanted to be. I did it by wanting to be there, by design, by working with talented team members and with the support of family and well-wishers.

As I stood on the fringes of a new career as an entrepreneur, my thoughts raced back to an evening about thirty years ago and the *defining moments in my life*.



You may agree or disagree with Obama's politics but no one can deny the audacity of his hope. He simply inspired me.

***“We did not win
because of fate or luck;
we won because of the
hard work by all of you.”***

President Barack Obama

Thirty Years Ago

...

It was late evening on a rainy Malaysian day. As it often happens with young graduates just out of University and unsure of what the future holds for them, I was in a deep thinking mode – or maybe another more reflective word would be ‘a gloomy mode.’ My classmate Nat, a liberal, was debating about the rationale of fairness in the world while I, a pragmatist as I defined myself then, sat slumped in the chair trying to figure out how to excel in what I liked to do.

Seated on the garden chairs adjacent to the then Bank Bumiputra building on Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur, we watched the Klang river flow with fury. I needed to emerge out of the gloominess. So I forced a smile and said, “Nat, I have this funny feeling that one of these days, I will be a great success.” He burst out laughing with the words, “Good for you, but I do hope you know *what that success you are looking for is.*” The day ended that way about 30 years ago.

A friend of mine, Uday Khedkar, always seeks to have ‘*crucial conversations*’ for us to move forward with our lives. To me, this conversation with Nat was not only a crucial conversation but a defining moment in my life. I get sentimental when I recall this day after all these years.

When I look back at this journey, I wonder how I managed to achieve my goals the way I had defined them. Success has no single standard; wealth is not the only standard. It often involves defining what you want and going after that goal and achieving it. I could have collapsed many times over on this difficult journey, but I did not think so when I started out. The journey was commenced with a passion to achieve something in life and disprove the many sceptics who strongly held that I could never achieve my goals or that I would only be successful if I fit one of their paradigms.

This is the journey of an *ordinary outsider* – a chronicle of events of a professional trying to be an entrepreneur in the world of the soft sciences. It has been an awesome journey, exciting like a roller coaster ride. Not exactly the life of celebrities like Sir Richard Branson, David Beckham or Ian Botham, still challenging and adventurous in its own way.

This is one journey that proves the point that you can reach your dreams in your own way, simply being who you are and staying true to the purpose of your life. That is, if you figure it out at all what the purpose of your life is.

Many a time I have wondered if the journey would ever get started. Sir Michael Caine, nominated for the Oscars six times and winner of two, remarked that it was a long way from his origin – London’s Elephant and Castle – to Hollywood. As he says, the shortest distance between two points is not always a straight line. My journey took me to about 30 countries. It certainly was no straight line, and sometimes the lines were so blurred that I thought there were none.

If I could sum it up, I would say it was all about “*Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope.*”

***“Hope in the
face of difficulty.
Hope in the
face of uncertainty.
The audacity of hope.”***

President Barack Obama

Early Days

...

The irony is I never was quite sure where I belonged. The son of a Malaysian father and an Indian mother, I grew up in different countries. My father's ancestors migrated to what was then Malaya in the late 1890's. My father was born in India and came into Malaya via Burma (Myanmar). As it often happens with Indian families living abroad, marriage is a strategic alliance and takes place in India. My parents' marriage was no different.

I went to a Jesuit boarding school. Then, it was Pre-Medicals in a Lutheran college, followed by three years of undergraduate study in a college run by an Islamic trust. Finally I did my graduate studies in institutions that were dominated by freethinkers. I studied and worked in different countries, both Asian and Western. As my former colleague Jeremy Spoor would say with his dry British wit, "You were a mixed up kid." Probably this explains why I am a bundle of contradictions. Despite being a capitalist, I despise what capitalism sometimes does to accentuate poverty. Despite being entrenched deeply in the theories of psychology, I sometimes preach what I need to practise myself. Nevertheless, my *awareness of my own contradictions* has helped me grow into a better person. Or at least, that is what I believe.

Getting started meant *knowing myself and living in the moment*. It took me quite a while to figure out who I was before figuring out what I wanted to do in life. Some would say I had an eclectic upbringing. I didn't know then what it meant, but for sure I knew I had difficulty fitting in. 'Misfit' would have been the appropriate term.

My children make fun of my dislike for durians, the Malaysian choice fruit. Indian friends say I am not quite Indian as I do not follow sports such as cricket, the national passion in India. American friends ridicule me when they get to know I have never been to a football game. English friends sometimes sneer at my English pronunciation and Aussie colleagues chuckle at my poor seafaring abilities. So, 'misfit' is probably the correct word.

Nevertheless, being a misfit or finding myself being an outsider did not stop me from going on this global journey. I did get started with great determination when I figured out what I wanted out of life. There were many colleagues who supported me in the pursuit of my goals in life, particularly in moments when I was about to give up. My journey was undertaken with lots of perspiration, some luck and lots of support from friends and family. It was simple, nothing out of the world, but I have enjoyed it immensely.

I had great joy watching the Indian movie *Three Idiots*. The movie about three friends chronicles their journey through life and it showcases the importance of living your life and the need to connect your purpose with your efforts. In the movie, Aamir Khan says "Connect your passion with your purpose and you'll be able to excel." The catch phrase in the movie '*All is Well*' aims to give credence to the belief that when you pursue your passion, all will be well.

Indeed, *all is well* and you are more likely to succeed when you connect your purpose with your efforts and follow through with sustained efforts.

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