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The Season to Do Good and What I Learned From Some Real-Life Heroes

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Coming back from a seven-week trip to India and stepping into the season of "doing good" -- with the spirit to give all around -- I found myself wanting to celebrate the heroes who do more good than they hope to receive. And maybe find a road map for myself while doing so.

I have often wondered about choices people make in their lives -- to do, or rather to not do, certain things. Growing up with ample opportunities around me where help was needed and things could be done, I had thought of dedicating my life to the same. But as life happened, I realized that I am not as altruistic as I would like to be. Securing good life for myself, providing for my loved ones, and earning social respect kept me busy. And although I reason often (maybe for consolation); that my day job helps me contribute more and with more influence than I could have if I would have chosen to do so full time, I wonder about the ones who do much more.

A personal experience of quitting my then very hectic job to focus more on opening my organization, only to regret the decision (fueled by realizations of missed opportunities and promotions) forced me to admit my weaknesses. I realized I first and foremost need to excel in my job and only then can be happy and committed to doing other things. The realization only left me more in awe of the people I have had the good fortune to know who have made sacrifices -- and continue to make -- to dedicate their lives solely or primarily for the betterment of others. So I had decided to sit down with two of them in this trip and ask how they do it. What they regret? What they don't? What are the rewards? And what are the challenges? And how do they deal with regrets and challenges? I hope to celebrate them with this piece and also provide candid insight to others like me who wonder about doing the same.

I wanted to start with Sushanta Giri. He is the founder and coordinator of Baikunthapur Tarun Sangha (BTS) -- an organization that started as a small club to help with disaster relief in the overwhelmingly neglected deltas of Sunderban (West Bengal, India) -- and now runs schools, a health care center and hospital, sustainable agriculture programs, women and child health camps and disaster assistance programs. The region; often devastated by hurricanes and floods and lacking electricity, income and education opportunities (children walk for hours to attend school every day and have to miss school during the monsoons as snake bites and other incidents are all too common) and even a hospital (nearest health assistance was 3 h by river when I had visited the projects in 2008), is more known for being the abode of the majestic Royal Bengal Tiger than for the plight of its people. But it's the latter that fueled Sushanta's determination to not pursue a job after graduation and return to the area to find BTS instead. That is what he does now - in his own words - 'whole day, 100%'.

I was certain; knowing where he lives and that he ventures into the city (just like he had come to the upscale Kolkata mall teeming with festival shoppers for our meeting) often, he has regrets. So I asked him about what got him started and of his regrets. He was honest on both. His own education had been possible only for the relentless insistence of his mother and he had spent two nights sleeping in the railway station before he could find means and accommodation for his higher education in Kolkata. But he had lost his mother soon after as there were no treatments to avail back home when she fell ill. That regret caused him to reject an offer from the Delhi School of Journalism and travel back to the Sunderbans instead after graduation.

But he was also candid in expressing how he feels when he sees people drive by in cars, wondering if he could have been doing the same instead of walking in the Indian summer heat. But he finishes the sentence with mention of the beggars. The ones who catch his eyes as commonly in the city as the cars. They, he said, remind him that his choice was the right one.

I asked him about his support system. Often plagued by thoughts of sacrifices my loved ones will have to make if I choose to forsake my high earnings, I wondered how he convinces his wife and son. He says he doesn't need to. He continues to be in awe he says, that he has always found everyone in his life to share the same intention he does - development of the Sunderbans at any cost.