



Speech delivered by

Subroto Bagchi

Chairman, Odisha Skill Development Authority



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Council Chair Shri Kris Gopalakrishnan, Director Prof Govindan Rangarajan, Deans, invited guests, members of the media and very importantly, my dear graduating students

It is an honour and a privilege to be here with you today. The Indian Institute of Science is the most revered education and research institution in the country, consistently ranked among the Top 100 in the world. Given the stature of this Institute of Eminence, you could have showered the honour of delivering the convocation address on people far more accomplished and well-known than I. They would have been delighted to accept. Yet, you chose me and that makes me feel very humble. Thank you.

To the graduating class of 2022, my heartiest congratulations on successfully completing the first phase of your professional life with glory. It was expected of you when you were accepted here. And you have done well. Now of course, begins the great journey of even greater learning, of contribution and impact-making. I have no doubt you will make your alma mater proud in every way as you chart your own path. My hope for each one of you is that you will be outstanding human beings who will bring all the powers of knowledge and action to make science an instrument of human betterment.

Today, as I bear witness to your convocation, to this great rite of passage, I want to share with you my thoughts about the idea of giving, one of the dominant themes that define our everyday existence and, as a result, our journey through this planet over an entire lifetime. From the time we arrive, until the time we leave, every moment of our existence is defined by the act of giving.

Give to build relationships

You and I were born, we came to this world, because someone gave us life. We did not exist as entities until we were given life by two people who came together. And as we arrived, we arrived with nothing: we were naked, vulnerable, unable to fend for ourselves, dependent on a nurse for the first breath, for food on the mother, for shelter, clothing, life-skills, and education on other human beings.

I was born to a small-time government servant way back in 1957 in an obscure place in Odisha. My parents shifted home every year because my father had a transferable job.

By the time I was sixteen, I had lived in twelve separate homes in many different places. I am a child of displacement. People like me must learn to find equilibrium much faster, much deeper than other people. Human equilibrium is born of relationships. The stronger our connection and the deeper the relationship, the higher the state of equilibrium.

Building relationships is a process. A key part of that process was ingrained in me by my mother, Labonya Prova. Wherever my father's job took the family, she would quickly make friends with the neighbours in the government quarters.

None of these quarters had running water or electricity. You can well imagine the place, and the kind of life people lived therein. No sooner would we make home in a new place, than my mother's kitchen was up and running. Her cooking went to the neighbours and, every other day, their food would come to our home. I am the youngest born of my mother. As a result, I was always around her, and it was my job to run to this auntie or that auntie's house to deliver a little pot of curry, sometimes some kheer on a special occasion. I was my mother's food delivery guy!

But on a serious note, I now realise that it was my life-lesson in giving. My mother was not just giving curry and kheer and whatever else. She was giving a little piece of herself in boundless joy. It did not stop there.

This act extended to boiling an herbal mix for someone's child whose fever was not coming down. It also manifested in taking her utensils to join community cooking for someone's child's marriage. Remember, those were pre-kalyanamantapa and pre-caterer days. You remember I told you how often we moved from one place to another—every year or two. Too short a time, one might think, to build meaningful relationships. But, when my mother died, people showed up whom I had not seen in decades, people who had known my mother fifty, sixty years ago and who still kept her in their hearts. But this is not just my mother's story. Listening to me, I am sure many of you in the audience have similar stories.

While we are growing up, we do not actively realise that someone's act of giving is constantly shaping our journey, defining who we may be. Think back in time as you sit here listening to me. Let your mind go back 5, 10, 20 years prior to your coming into the Indian Institute of Science. Think of people who directly contributed to your coming to IISc.

You can remember who first wakened in you your love for mathematics or sparked your joy in biology or physics or whatever else. Someone in your life gave you self-confidence. Yet someone else gave you ambition, the power of sense-making, and resilience. Someone gave you vision. Someone pushed your way a chance for an interview that has made all the difference.

And, in the years to come, this phenomenon of giving, giving, giving, will manifest in many other ways. Someone will give you a job, a special assignment that becomes an inflection point in your career. Sometimes an angel will come to give you a shoulder when you think the world is falling apart. Someone also will one day give you a challenge that will completely deconstruct your sense of self and there, you will have your chrysalis moment.

Giving what is yours to give

As I was growing up, I was very blessed to develop an awareness of the process of giving, its nature, its manifestation, its effect on us and the impact it can have on our collective existence. One of my siblings, my third elder brother Amitav, became an early exemplar for me. As I have told you before, we were a family of limited means. Amitav was sent to a college hostel with just a few pairs of clothes, one blanket, and one sweater. Come vacation time, he returned with none of those. What happened, my mother demanded. He said he gave it all away because there were kids who had nothing.

I was deeply influenced by his acts and often mimicked him when I was in college. Sometimes, not the right way. I remember, as an NCC cadet, I had the chance to represent the State at the Republic Day Parade in Delhi. There, I was adjudged the Best Cadet of India. I returned from Delhi with dozens of uniforms, sweaters, blankets, and other supplies that I did not return to the quarter master as I should have.

Nobody asked me to, because I was walking on water, having shaken hands with the President of India and had breakfast with the Prime Minister in her official residence. In the following days, I gave away all the supplies to rickshaw pullers and poor people. I felt very magnanimous. Years after, I read a line from Mother Teresa. She wrote, "Before you give, you must have." I was reminded uncomfortably of how I had given away things which I did not have. They did not belong to me. They were given to me on lien. Mother Teresa's words need to be understood at two levels. The first is that you need to focus on having something. Do not fall prey to false altruism, particularly when you are just starting your life as an adult and as a professional. Give yourself time. Create, build, save. Have before you can give. But at another level, Mother is saying, you cannot seek glory in giving away what does not belong to you. Robbing Peter to pay Paul is not the way to give. And there I was, feeling benevolent, giving away things when I was only a custodian.

Let us fast forward to my joining the Indian Information Technology (IT) industry. This was in 1981. It was at an embryonic state. I strayed into the industry with a liberal arts background. I had no idea about bits and bytes. From vacuum tubes to semi-conductors, from erasable programmable memory to Index Sequential Access Media, from how pixels were generated by a cathode ray tube to pins rearranging themselves to form ASCII characters in a dot matrix printer, all this simply bewildered me. I had to learn to survive. And I had to learn fast.

So, I would fall at the feet of all the geeks and nerds from the IISc and the IITs of the world who were my colleagues. I needed to know like hell, and someone had to give, give, give like hell. I am who I am today because of the dozens of people in the R&D wings of companies like PSI and Wipro who gave me their knowledge in abundance. At the time of giving, they had no idea where life would take me one day, what the knowledge given to me will lead to and, least of all, what credit, if any, that they would ever get. The bricks that became the castle in my care today, are all their bricks.

Once I joined the IT industry, everything happened in fast-forward mode for me. I was like a child in a candy store. There were some serious setbacks but more serious opportunities. The biggest thing that came my way was an opportunity to go to Cupertino, the heart of Silicon Valley. Just so you know, Cupertino at that time was little more than a village. Wipro asked me to set up the operations there to convert their R&D from a domestically focused cost centre to a "Global Lab-on-Hire."

My job was to pitch our R&D capabilities to companies like Sun, Intel, HP, AT&T, and many Silicon Valley start-ups. When I looked at the overall eco-system in the United States, I was fascinated with how deep and wide and varied the idea of giving is in that country. In the fleeting time I have with you, I will pick and share a couple of them that had deep impact on me.

The first one is about the Founder Chairman of a company named Tandem that does not exist anymore.

But in its time, it was one of the leaders in fault-tolerant computing. It was a Fortune 500 tech company and I got to interact with Tandem R&D because we ported their proprietary code onto UNIX. Early in my interaction with them, I learnt that Jimmy Treybig, the Founder Chairman of Tandem was also the Chairman of the local School Board.

I could not imagine how the world's first designer of a fault tolerant computer, chairman of a Fortune 500 company, had the time and the commitment to serve a school board in his backyard. And school boards in the US are serious things. You do not serve such boards in a light-touch, symbolic manner. Yet, Jimmy was doing what he was doing because he had a deep-felt need to serve his local community. An act of giving must not be merely symbolic. It must be substantive. I learnt from people like Jimmy Treybig that we need to make big commitments to small institutions and the most precious contribution we can make to them is by making ourselves available. Of course, they need the money, but more than that, they need our involvement. We can only be great global citizens when we make ourselves locally relevant.

Give to build institutions

And the money is relevant. Often, we need big money to start big projects. We need big money, unconstrained money, for solving big problems. We need big money to seed institutions that will be timeless. Take the example of how Memorial Sloan Kettering Hospital, the world's oldest and the largest among cancer care and research institutions of the world, came into being.

It started in 1884 as the New York Cancer Hospital through an act of philanthropy. Over time, it grew through significant donations from many individuals. In 1945, Alfred Sloan, chairman of General Motors gave a grant of 4 million dollars, and his colleague Charles Kettering took responsibility of oversight. That was the inflection point for the institution that has played an iconic role in cancer care and research. Stories like these abound wherever you go in the United States. Institutions like Stanford, Yale, Harvard, and Princeton have been built over time by the generosity of people who could write a cheque and simply walk away from it. Small acts of generosity are most definitely significant. But institution building is a different game altogether. Minimalism does not work here. You need large hearts, large purses, and large acts giving.

Here is another example. Seven years after New York Cancer Hospital opened its door, two men accidentally met on a long voyage over the seas. One was an ascetic and the other a patriotic businessman.

The ascetic was none other than Swami Vivekananda and the businessman was Jamsetji Tata. The ascetic was on his way to the religious congress in Chicago and the businessman was looking for technical capability to start a steel plant in India. They spoke about spirituality and at the same time, the need to create a scientific temper in the country.

The discussion left a lasting impression on the mind of Jamsetji Tata.

Five years later, he wrote a letter to Lord Curzon, the then-Viceroy, about the need to build an institution to pursue the knowledge of science. Lord Curzon in turn asked the Nobel Laureate, William Ramsay, to suggest a suitable location. Ramsay said Bangalore. The King of Mysore, Krishnaraja Wadiyar V, gave 371 acres of land. And Jamsetji Tata contributed in cash and kind. That is how Indian Institute of Science came into existence. That is how we have produced an education and research institute that is consistently ranked among the world's top one hundred. That is how you and I are standing on this ground today.

Keep in mind that large acts of giving, which alone can create timeless institutions, come with no guarantee of success. You can crunch data to say, this needs to be done, and this is most likely to succeed. But there is no guarantee signed by destiny. Large acts of giving require you to respect the power of emergence, and to truly embody philosophy of karma, which is the detachment of action from attachment to an intended outcome. When your time comes to give, give with joy and abundance.

We are wired to give

You remember I opened with a story about how my family moved from place to place every year or two. I learned how to manage that displacement, and the accompanying sense of uncertainty, by watching my mother build relationships within every new community.

That instinct to reach towards each other, that need for community, that need to be part of the circle of giving and receiving, is embedded deep within all of us.

I am reminded of a beautiful experiment by scientist Dr. Tara Thiagarajan. Dr. Thiagarajan was originally a student of mathematics. Later she went onto studying management but finally turned to neuroscience to eventually lead Madura Microfinance. Her lifelong passion has been to link principles of neuroscience to financial measures for poverty alleviation. In the process of conducting research at Stanford, where she earned her doctoral degree, she took a few cells from the brain of mice and then she systematically cut off their synapses, keeping just the nuclei intact. She left those on a petri dish and went away for a few weeks.

On her return, she found to her amazement, the cells had regrown their tentacles and were actively communicating with each other—that is, giving and receiving information—through their newly developed synaptic ends. Dr. Thiagarajan postulated that human brain cells exhibit the same behavior.

So you see, right down to the cellular level, we are designed to reach out to each other; we are designed to constantly communicate with each other; we are coded to be with each other in an energetic way. And giving, as in the signaling process between the cells in the petri dish, is basic to our existence.

The time has come for me to wrap up the conversation for the day. But before I do that, a few lines from a poem by Rabindranath Tagore hum in my mind. For you, I paraphrase in my words what the poet seems to say:

*“Everything, everything that belongs to me—
My wealth, my voice,
The things I have seen, the sounds
I have heard,
All my comings and my goings,
My dawns, my dusks—
I will give you all of this.
The strings of my instrument will play truest
when they are in your hands.
Everything, but everything, must return
to you.”*

My friends, as you graduate today, here is my sincere wish: as you grow and prosper in life, may you give. May you give in boundless joy and abandon. Let the world say, here is someone who gave more to life than they ever took from it.

Go, Kiss the World



Odisha Skill Development Authority

1st Floor, Rajiv Bhavan, Unit-5,
Bhubaneswar-751001, Odisha
0674-2394415
www.skillodisha.gov.in

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