

DESTINY



Forty Years in a Wonderland
(1985-2025)



R. Devadoss Pandian



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To
Oli

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PREFACE

I came to the United States intending to stay only briefly. I remained for forty years.

This memoir is an account of those years of my life in the United States. I did not keep written notes or journals during those years, and I must therefore acknowledge that some factual details—dates, sequences, or specific references—may not be entirely precise. What I offer here, however, is lived experience as I remember it: how events unfolded at the time and how they have settled in memory over the years. I have written this memoir with my family, friends, and colleagues in Tamil Nadu, as well as the wider academic community, in mind, in the hope that other readers will find these reflections on education, migration, and public life in two societies of interest.

The narrative is divided into three broad phases of my journey.

The first concerns my departure from India and the circumstances that followed. Leaving my family behind, I came to the United States to study and, while here, to learn as much as I could about the people, their culture, politics, and government. I intended to return to India as soon as my studies were complete. I did not envision a permanent life in America in the least. Yet, life has a mind of its own. What began as a temporary stay gradually became permanent, shaped by unexpected turns I could not have foreseen at the outset. India remained central to my identity even as the United States became the setting of my daily life.

The second phase traces my academic career. I joined a college as a faculty member, expecting, like most academics, to devote myself to teaching and scholarship. What followed, however, was something I could not have imagined when I first arrived. I was eventually

appointed Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty, the chief academic officer of the institution. It was, in many ways, an “only in America” moment—not because such advancement was impossible elsewhere, but because of the color-blind openness of an academic culture in which the pursuit of excellence runs deep.

The third and final section reflects my long-standing engagement with American presidential politics. As someone deeply interested in public affairs, I followed the presidency closely over the decades—from Eisenhower to Trump. These reflections are not political analysis in the strict academic sense, but personal viewpoints shaped by experience, curiosity, and the perspective of an outsider. Each presidency left its own imprint, and together they formed a continuous narrative of change in American political life.

In bringing these three strands together—migration, academic life, and political reflection - I have tried to present the evolution of a life shaped by two countries, two political cultures, and a continuing effort to understand them both.

FROM INDIA TO AMERICA: THE EARLY YEARS

The year was 1977. I was a professor of mathematics at The American College, Madurai, a prestigious institution of higher education in Tamil Nadu, India. I had my M.Sc. and M.Phil. degrees in mathematics and was a confirmed member of the faculty since 1965. In the 60s, colleges in Tamil Nadu required only a master's degree for a teaching position. Comfortably settled, with my fascination for mathematics, I decided to obtain a Ph.D. degree in mathematics. I knew that there were many good mathematics Ph.D. programmes in India, including the one in Madurai, but strangely, I wanted to go to a different country for my Ph.D. work. Part of the reason for my interest in a foreign country was that I wanted to be with the people of a different country, to understand their culture, their ambitions, their way of life, their politics, and their government.

I did not want to go to the USA, as I thought I had some knowledge of the country and its people. I very much wanted to go to China, or the USSR, or one of the European countries. I soon learnt that I might get admission in these countries, but not fellowships, which meant I had to pay for everything. Whereas in the USA, I understood that in most cases, admission into a Ph.D. programme in mathematics came with a fellowship and waived tuition. Should I go to a foreign country for my Ph.D. work, I knew that I would be leaving my wife, Priscilla, whom I called Oli, and our two young children, son Satyan (4 years old) and daughter Divya (3), back at home for at least

a few years. Oli was a professor in the Department of Botany at Lady Doak College, Madurai, a women's college, another great institution in Tamil Nadu, and was a confirmed member of the faculty. I was confident that I could make a good supporting arrangement for her so she could manage day-to-day life with the two little ones in my absence.

Starting from scratch, my first step in this process was to send a letter to the American Consulate in Madras (now called Chennai), asking them to send me a list of universities that offered Ph.D. degrees in mathematics, which they did very promptly. Just using common sense, I chose a few universities from the list, including George Washington University in Washington, D.C.—the name sounded good—and sent in my enquiries. One could not imagine how tedious the application process was in those days: no one with expertise to consult, no internet, no online applications, no Xerox machines, no phones, etc. In regular mail—no courier service—it would take more than a month to get a question answered by a university in the States.

I believe that sometime in early 1978, I got a notification from George Washington University (GWU) in Washington, D.C., that I was admitted into their programme. I was informed that my tuition would be waived, that an annual fellowship of \$3,000 would be paid, and that I would be asked to teach four courses over two semesters. Of course, I gladly accepted it, but there were problems. The university had to issue a form called an "I-20" for me to get a visa at the American Consulate in Madras. One requirement for the issuance of the I-20 was that I had enough resources in dollars—\$6,310 in total, a threshold established by the State Department—to live in the States,

which meant I needed an additional sum of \$3,310. I wrote to GWU, making a strong case that I could very well live within the fellowship offered by GWU. It wrote back, saying that regardless of whether or not I would be able to live within the fellowship, I had to provide evidence that the required resources were available as mandated by the State Department. So, the biggest hurdle was to find resources to supplement the fellowship.

I tried many avenues with no success. I consulted with Charles Ryerson, a good friend of mine for many years and himself a doctoral fellow (Columbia University, N.Y.). Charlie had a long relationship with the American College, dating back to 1955, when he spent three years at the College as an Oberlin Shansi Teaching Fellow. Subsequently, Charlie became a frequent visitor to the College and to the city of Madurai, building deep relationships with them. I came to know him in 1965 when I joined the College as a member of the faculty in the Department of Mathematics. We became friends. We had serious debates and contentious arguments about politics, culture, and religion, which, ironically, strengthened our friendship. When I consulted him regarding the State Department requirement for the I-20, he was very emphatic that I needed real money, not just paperwork to satisfy the I-20 requirement. His worst fear was that I would not be able to live on a stipend of \$250.00 a month.

With the dollar vs. rupee exchange rate at that time, the real money needed was well in excess of Rs. 27,000, an unthinkable amount in those days. With all efforts ending up in vain, confident that I would somehow manage to live within the means, Charlie talked to Mr. Telfer Mook, Secretary, United

Church Board for World Ministries, in New York. With a recommendation from the senior leadership at the College, Dr. M.A. Thangaraj, Principal, formally wrote to Mr. Mook and got a letter from him stating that the Board would “meet” some of my expenses. It was tacitly understood that I would not need or seek the Board’s assistance. I got my I-20.

As obtaining a visa and travelling to the USA seemed imminent, I started thinking about renting a place in Madurai, in a totally supportive environment, where Oli would live with our children. This would be the first time she would lead an independent life. We were very fortunate in that Ms. Alice James, a retired OCPM High School mathematics teacher, was renting out a portion of her house while she was living in an adjacent portion. The house was in New Colony, just south of OCPM, within walking distance of Lady Doak College and the Seventh-day Adventist elementary school, the one our children, Divya and Satyan, attended. Oli knew Ms. James. It was a perfect arrangement for Oli and the children.

Obtaining a passport took months. Compared to that experience, the visa process, I was told, was very straightforward. But there were rumors afloat that the American Consul General in Madras was treating – perhaps on the advice of the State Department – every student visa applicant as a potential immigrant, and that the Consul would deny a visa if, in the interview process, he determined that the applicant had the intention of eventually emigrating to the USA. It was very hard for me to believe that any Indian would want to emigrate to the States. I knew I would be deeply offended and angry if the Consul General were to ask any questions suggestive of my intention to emigrate to the States.

I hail from a family profoundly attached to Indian soil. My father, a mirasudhar (modest landowner), born in 1901, was a Gandhian all his life. He was very emotionally involved in India's struggle for independence. An active member of the Congress Party at the regional level, he had vast influence in local politics. Following in the footsteps of my father, I developed a strong interest in politics and government, which grew exponentially as the years passed.

I was advised to go to the American Consulate with all the paperwork ready in hand and to wait in line. You would be called on a first-come, first-served basis. If you did not make it that day, then you had to come the next day. What was awkward about the whole experience was standing outside the building on the walkway in a long queue, waiting for your turn without knowing whether you would make it that day or not. It was a spectacle for people passing by. I did not know why the Consulate did not show some respect for the applicants by making arrangements for them to be at least seated or lined up inside the building under some shade. I made it the same day. The Consul was very professional, respectful, and did not ask any question that I would have considered to be demeaning. I got my visa.

I fervently hoped that I would have a housing arrangement on the GWU campus. However, to my utter disappointment, the director of the graduate housing unit wrote to me, informing me that all of the graduate apartments were full and none were available for me. When I asked about an off-campus apartment, she replied that her office could not assist me in looking for one. Basically, what she told me was that I was on my own and that they couldn't do anything to help me.

My challenge was to find a temporary place to live in D.C. — even a dirt-cheap hotel — at least for a couple of weeks.

While this problem was vexing me, a good colleague of mine, K. Paramasivam, a Tamil professor, introduced me to Mr. Don Larkin, an American. Don had spent a couple of years in Madurai on a project and learned Tamil from Prof. K. Paramasivam. Don lived in Arlington, Virginia, on the border of D.C., with his wife, Cecilia (Cissy). I wrote to him. He was very kind and wrote back immediately. He wrote that he would do his best to find a place for me to stay, but expressed his doubts about whether it would be possible for me to live in the States with my meagre \$250-a-month fellowship, let alone find an apartment. After almost a month, he wrote to me again, saying that he could not find a place for me, adding that his family would be going on vacation for two weeks and that the best thing for me would be to stay in their house during those two weeks and look for a permanent place to stay. He added that Cissy's parents would be at the National Airport to receive me and take me to his house. This was a very generous offer and a huge relief for me.

It was August 22, 1978, when I boarded the Pandian Express train to Madras, en route to Washington, D.C. There were hundreds of students and faculty giving me a boisterous send-off. As the train steamed off from the station, I waved goodbye to Oli, our children, Oli's elder sister Hannah, and my father, standing away from the crowd. Divya was sleeping on Oli's shoulders. I knew that my siblings, along with Oli's relatives, were there to see me off. Numb with the emotions of the occasion, I did not feel the anxiety of leaving Oli and the

children. It did not sink in that I would not be seeing them for a long time. It was as if I were just going to another city in India.

It was an Air India flight from Madras to New Delhi, my first experience flying. Apparently, I did not feel the excitement, as I slept during the short flight. Another Air India flight took me from New Delhi to London and then to New York. When I landed in New York, I instantly began to observe carefully the people of this new world. The first thing that struck me was that Black people—they were then called Negroes in our history books—were all over the airport doing low-paid blue-collar jobs. That was not what Charlie Ryerson had told me about Black people in the U.S.A. He had given me a totally different impression of them when he visited my village to study the caste system in Tamil Nadu.

The flight arrived late at J.F.K. Airport, so I missed my last connecting flight to Washington, D.C. My friend, Charlie Ryerson, showed up at J.F.K. Airport to receive me and see me off to Washington, D.C. Since I had missed the connecting flight—it was late in the evening—we took a taxi to his apartment in New York, where I stayed overnight. During the 30-minute drive, Charlie had an animated conversation with the taxi driver, who, I came to know later, was a Black woman. A woman taxi driver was a huge surprise to me. I would admit that I did not follow anything she said during their conversation. The next morning, he put me in a taxi to the airport, and I took a morning flight to Washington, D.C.

As arranged by Don, Cissy's parents were at the National Airport to receive me. They drove me to Don's house, showed me around, gave me the key to the house, and left, wishing me the best. Don had left me very thorough and thoughtful

instructions, seven pages long, with an incredible level of detail. The typed instructions were so clear that I felt I could go anywhere, anytime, anyplace – using a bus or subway train – without any difficulty whatsoever. That feeling was very comforting.

Night came, and I was all alone in the house. For the first time, the numbness was gone and I began to feel the pain. The very thought that Oli and the children were almost 10,000 miles away, that I could not talk to them now, that if I wrote a letter it would take 15 days to reach Oli and another 15 days for me to receive a reply from her, and that I would not see them for years started haunting me. For the first time, I was deeply saddened, and I struggled to cope with the reality of loneliness.

The very next day, I went to GWU by taking a bus and a subway train. Washington, D.C. was a high-energy city. Seeing people around and meeting and chatting with Ms. Mary Brown, the mathematics department secretary, who had been communicating with me all these months, provided some respite. Interestingly, GWU was a couple of blocks from the White House and the State Department. The Washington Monument, the Lincoln and Jefferson memorials, the Smithsonian, as well as the Capitol building, were all within walking distance, and so was the infamous Watergate building.

I hoped to find an off-campus apartment before Don's family returned from vacation, but it did not materialize. I closely followed ads placed in the Washington Post for apartments for rent and made phone calls. The response was always that the unit was filled and no longer available. I was not sure the unit was really filled, as some calls I made were within a few hours of the ad being placed. Don also tried to

help, but despite his efforts, we could not find an apartment within the range of what I could afford, so I ended up staying with Don's family for a few weeks.

Having reached a saturation point, I wrote a letter to the graduate housing director, detailing the efforts I had taken to find an off-campus apartment. I explained the awkward situation I was in as an uninvited guest in a stranger's place, telling her how it had badly affected my Ph.D. studies. I met her and narrated my story in person. She was very receptive and, on the spot, offered me a graduate apartment on campus—a one-bedroom apartment—just a few yards away from my mathematics department, which was housed in the University main library. The rent was \$200 a month. My monthly stipend being \$250, I knew it was a risky proposition, as it would leave only \$50 for my meals and other expenses. Regardless, given that my department as well as the University main library building was just a few yards from this apartment, I viewed it as a golden opportunity and accepted the assignment immediately. Moreover, I was confident that I would find a roommate, which would reduce my rent to just \$100 a month.

A couple of episodes are worth mentioning after I moved into my apartment. I was so relieved to find that there was a grocery store, Safeway, within walking distance situated inside the infamous Watergate building. I could not believe my eyes when I entered the Watergate building, one about which I had read extensively in India, involving a scandal that ultimately resulted in President Nixon's resignation. The experience was a big deal for me.

On a mundane level, as I walked into the Safeway store, I noticed something odd: only certain items were marked “sale.” I thought every item in the store was for sale. Someone explained to me that “sale” here meant the item was sold at a discounted price. On my way back to my apartment, I saw a girl—I could easily guess that she was a GWU student living in one of the university apartments—carrying a brown bag with groceries. My heart broke. I wanted to rush to her and offer to carry the bag to her apartment. Then I paused for a second. Perhaps women here in this land did carry their own bags. I told myself to slow down, observe the culture of this new land, and act appropriately.

While I was trying to cope with new life in a foreign land, food became a constant challenge for me. I enjoyed food and I was a voracious eater. I did not know how to cook. I did not have the kind of resources nor the time to go out to restaurants all the time. Just a block away there was a small deli in a GWU building—not a cafeteria or a restaurant—which sold mostly sandwiches with ready-to-eat items, relatively inexpensive. I tried this place once. There was a long queue. I closely watched what the people in front of me were ordering because I did not understand anything written on the menu board. The man in front of me ordered an egg sandwich. Easy. I asked for the same. The fellow at the counter asked me what bread. I was bowled over. He ran through a few names. The name white sounded good, so I said white. For the next several weeks, I did not have any problem ordering a sandwich for lunch: egg sandwich with white bread!

I longed to connect with any Tamil living in the metropolitan D.C. area. I knew that my old colleague, A.K.R.

Thilagar, who was in the Zoology Department of American College, Madurai, had come to the States to pursue his Ph.D. at Catholic University. I called him one afternoon. He sounded as excited as I was when he heard my voice. He lived in Gaithersburg in Maryland, a 40-minute drive away. He came to see me the same day and took me home. I had the pleasure of meeting Premila, his wife, who was a wonderful person. She fed me a special meal. She taught me how to cook rice and prepare a simple chicken curry. The same night, Thilagar dropped me at my apartment. We became good friends. They invited me frequently to their house to have meals with them. It is hard to express my gratitude for their friendship and Premila's radical hospitality.

I gathered that there was an Indian restaurant in the neighbourhood, which served South Indian delicacies: dosa and idli. Don Larkin had often mentioned to me his love for dosa, a taste he developed when he was in Madurai learning Tamil. I invited him for a lunch at the Indian restaurant that I would host. We had a great time having a dosa meal together. He asked how things were with me. I told him all was fine, adding that, after all, I was leading a life in a jail. He looked at me, surprised and perplexed by my reference to being in a jail. I told him that I would continue to feel like I was in a jail as long as I was away from my family back in India.

Within a short period of time, I found a roommate, an undergraduate white American lad. His name was Ernie, majoring in a business-related area. Given that our academic pursuits were miles apart, we did not develop any close relationship and led a businesslike life. Once he settled down as my roommate, I remember on one occasion he asked me

what my thoughts were about American involvement in the Vietnam War. I told him that, while I was saddened by the destruction and massive loss of life on both sides, I was very grateful for America's intervention in the war, driven by the fear that communism might reach the shores of India. To me, such a future was simply unthinkable. From his reaction, I could sense that it was not the response he expected.

He had an unsettling poster of a Black teenage girl in his bedroom. The picture was decent, but the language was suggestively provocative. On another occasion, I found him lying in the bathroom near the toilet. I was not alarmed. I knew Americans drink, so maybe he had had too much. I dragged him—a stout fellow—to his bed, not an easy task.

Almost a year passed. Ernie told me that he was planning to leave at the end of the academic year, so I placed an ad on the GWU housing notice board for a roommate. There was a phone call which Ernie picked up, from a woman student in response to the ad I had placed. I could hear the conversation. She identified herself as a student from Paris and said that she needed a place to stay to pursue her education. Not wanting to waste her time or give any false hope, Ernie was very straightforward and made it abundantly clear to her that I would not accept her as a roommate. She insisted on speaking to me, but Ernie politely declined. This episode lingered in my mind for a while. While this kind of situation would be unthinkable in my native land, I had empathy for her. I could relate to her desperate plight in seeking a place to stay to pursue her education. International student offices could do a better job in assisting foreign students. Soon I found a

roommate, Amir Maleki from Iran, also a Ph.D. student in mathematics at GWU, a fellow deeply committed to excellence.

A little digression: almost three years into Carter's presidency, unrest developed in Iran, with Iranians marching in the streets opposing the Shah of Iran's regime. There was an ugly story of how the Shah came to power. In 1953, a democratically elected government in Iran was removed by a coup orchestrated by the British and U.S. governments, and the Shah of Iran was put in power. As I understood, the Shah ruled Iran ruthlessly, moving the country away from Islamic principles. The people of Iran revolted; the American Embassy diplomats and staff were captured and held as hostages, and the Shah of Iran was ousted from power. He fled the country, and the exiled religious leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, returned triumphantly to Iran, and it became an Islamic country.

As I watched these events unfolded, I began to think of India and asked myself what impact this revolution would have on India's secular spirit. India was a nation of almost 700 million people, predominantly Hindu (about 82%). There were about 85 million Muslims (about 12%) in India, the second or third largest Muslim population in the world, next to Indonesia and Pakistan. Indians spoke hundreds and hundreds of languages and embraced many religions, including Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism. I read somewhere that India was the only country in the world which did not persecute Jews. Despite its dominant Hindu population, India remained a secular country in the sense that it accepted and respected all religions. My worst fear was that this kind of revolution might one day lead

some Indians to ask why India should not become a Hindu country. I hoped that day would never come.

A block from my apartment, there was a church—United Church, a merger of the United Church of Christ and the United Methodist Church. Back in South India, there were no denominations. Protestant Christians, except Lutherans, were under one umbrella called the Church of South India (CSI). They were by and large fundamentalists, typical characteristics of converted Christians. On occasion, I attended Sunday services at the church. I found something interesting and attractive: the congregation gathered in the basement after every service to greet and chat over coffee. I enjoyed people, their company, and their conversations so much that I started attending the church services regularly.

Some of the members of the church became good friends of mine; among them were Dan Lozier, a scientist at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), John Sanford, a scientist at the World Bank, and George Walser, a generalist at the Library of Congress. There was something common in our academic interests. John once went to Calcutta, India, to attend a World Bank conference. I asked him whether he would be interested in giving a talk to my faculty at the American College, Madurai, in Tamil Nadu. He said he would be delighted to do so. I wrote to Prof. P.T. Chellappa, then Principal of the American College. All went well, and upon his return, John was jubilant about his trip to Madurai and his talk to the faculty of the American College.

Seeing so many cars on the road in Washington, D.C. was totally astonishing for me. Hundreds of them ran smoothly over clean concrete-asphalt roads, religiously following traffic

rules while crisscrossing the city. It was delightful to watch how the traffic lights were programmed to regulate traffic. That said, I was terrified of a potential head-on collision if the traffic signals malfunctioned, turning the lights green in all directions. Speaking of cars, I was dumbfounded when I saw for the first time a multistoried building, kitty-corner from the GWU library, dedicated just to parking cars.

I was not used to buildings with no windows or no circulation of free air. As I literally lived in the mathematics department, which was in the GWU main library building—a large building with air regulated by a sophisticated HVAC system—I had headaches almost every day for a few months. Apart from that, the mathematics department was a very welcoming place. The department had a good group of graduate students sharing a large office, which fostered comradeship. Additionally, there was Dr. Murli Gupta, who had just joined the faculty of the mathematics department that year as an assistant professor of mathematics. Seeing a fellow Indian in the mix naturally added a tinge of happiness in me. Ms. Brown, the department secretary, was very kind and understanding. She was nearing her retirement age and had tremendous working knowledge of the department. There was a running joke that she was the de facto department chair. The chair was Prof. T.P.G. Liverman, a pipe-smoking gentleman with a lovely British accent. I liked everything about him.

Everyone in the department called Ms. Brown “Mary,” her first name, but for the life of me I could not call her Mary. She addressed me as Mr. Pandian. When I asked her to call me Dev (Devadoss truncated), my nickname in the department, she said emphatically no, unless I called her Mary—an extremely

uncomfortable task for me, but gradually I yielded to local customs.

For two years, I lived and breathed mathematics. All coursework was intense and demanding, but I enjoyed my work thoroughly. I completed all the coursework and sat for the qualifying examinations. My research interest was broadly under the umbrella of analysis, a subject that was always intriguing, challenging, and enjoyable to me. I had taken courses with Professor Hugo Junghenn, a serious scholar in this area and a brilliant teacher with a great sense of humour. I was pleased to have him as my thesis advisor.

It was the end of the academic year. There was an interesting development. I think it was George Walser from the church who spoke to me regarding a situation in the church building. They had a custodian, Ray, a Black man taking care of the church building, but the issue was that he had a drinking problem. They did not want to replace him, as he had no place to go – the church had become his sanctuary – and he would be lost in society. The church, I was told, had a full-fledged apartment with all amenities, probably once used by a resident pastor. George asked me whether I would be interested in moving to the apartment with no charge, while the church would continue to keep Ray as custodian. The primary responsibilities would be to make sure that at the end of the day the lights were off and the doors were closed. My guess was that the church believed my presence in the building would also have some positive impact on Ray. I thought it was a mutually beneficial arrangement. I agreed and moved.

It was the summer of 1980, two years since I left Madurai in 1978. Teaching many extra courses, tutoring numerous

students, and saving scrupulously, I managed to save enough money to visit Oli and the children. I wanted to take a month off, but I was not sure how Professor Junghenn would react, as I had just started my research under his guidance. He was very understanding and, in fact, encouraged me to take a month off to “recharge my batteries.” It was pure joy to be back in Madurai with my family. Oli, on a leave of absence from Lady Doak College, had just finished one year of doctoral work at Madurai Kamaraj University. She was wondering whether she should pursue Ph.D. work in the States along with me. I told her that joining a Ph.D. programme in any place other than Washington, D.C. made no sense and that the probability of her getting admission and a fellowship in one of the three universities in Washington, D.C.—Georgetown University, George Washington University, and Catholic University—was close to zero. I said that if, by God’s grace, she got admission to and a fellowship from one of the universities, then, of course, she should gladly accept it and come to the States. She sent in applications to all three universities. After a month’s break, I was back at GWU.

To my astonishment, Oli got admission to Georgetown University (GU)—a prestigious university in the country—for a Ph.D. programme in biology. They did not have funding for her in the first year but suggested that her thesis advisor might have some grant money to support her. She was also admitted to Catholic University’s master’s programme with no fellowship in the first year. GWU said it had no openings that year in her area of interest. With the savings I had, I was confident that I could take care of her tuition for one year at Georgetown. I did the necessary paperwork through the GWU

international program director—a tough lady who had no empathy for international students—showing that I had enough resources, as defined by the State Department, to bring Oli as my dependent under an F-2 visa. My plan was for Oli to leave our children with her sister, Hannah, who was a professor of biology at the American College, with a Ph.D. in biochemistry from Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai. Oli got her visa and arrived in New York sometime in September. We took a bus from New York to Washington, D.C., where we started our new life in the church apartment.

I remember that the very next day, I took her to Georgetown University to begin her fall semester. She took very little time to acclimatize to the new environment. Unfortunately, as F-2 visa holders cannot work, she could not start working under her thesis advisor to earn grant money. In contrast to GWU, the international program director at Georgetown University was very understanding of foreign students. He provided all the paperwork needed to change Oli's status from a dependent F-2 to an independent student visa, F-1. It was a painful ordeal to go through the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) office in Washington, D.C.; the staff at the desk, mostly Black, who dealt with paperwork had nothing but contempt for foreigners (aliens) and treated them with little respect. From the second semester, Oli, with her F-1 visa in hand, began her work under her thesis advisor with a meagre but very helpful stipend of \$250 a month.

It was the presidential election season. I did not know much about primaries and national conventions, where parties chose candidates for the general election in November 1980. I assumed President Carter would be the nominee for the

Democratic Party but learned that Sen. Edward Kennedy was challenging the nomination. I watched the Democratic National Convention held in New York in August 1980. President Carter won the candidacy, beating Kennedy, but what I remember was the speech given by Sen. Kennedy. His speech moved me to tears, and his eloquence enthralled me. I immediately thought of an eloquent speaker in Tamil, Mr. M. Karunanidhi, leader of the Dravidian Movement and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. For those readers who did not know M. Karunanidhi, it is a huge compliment to Sen. Kennedy.

Governor Reagan was the candidate of the Republican Party. I watched the debate between President Carter and Governor Reagan sometime in October. During the debate, I understood their broad positions on major issues, but some of the issues related to the economy were challenging for me to follow. Reagan's arguments made Carter look weak in the debate. Given the Iranian hostage crisis debacle and high inflation, I thought Carter would lose the general election, and he did.

It was January 1981. Reagan was going to be inaugurated as president; Oli and I knew that, after being sworn in, there would be a parade of the president and his entourage on Pennsylvania Avenue. To have a strategic view of the parade and see the president, we walked to the avenue, and no one was there. Apparently, we went there too soon. We returned to our apartment and made another attempt, but this time it was so crowded we could not find a place to watch. We watched the whole parade on our TV.

I was not a fan of President Reagan, as I had great concern about his economic policy: increasing the defense budget and

decreasing the growth of domestic spending, especially money spent on the poor. He was not against helping the poor, but he had a different approach to doing so: the so-called trickle-down economy. He also advocated for private citizens to volunteer and praised the role of organizations, such as churches, in nation-building.

I remember it was the spring or fall semester of 1981. Following President Reagan's push on voluntarism, a government agency organized a conference on voluntarism at the GWU student center. I was there. After some presentations, the floor was open for questions. I was recognized as I raised my hand. Instead of asking a question, using the opportunity, I gave a speech. While I appreciated voluntarism, I denounced it in this context, as it put the downtrodden in the hands of "good Samaritans," hoping for the best. I told the crowd that we should not go back to the jungle days, where the fittest survived.

Surprising news came from Hannah that she had received a postdoctoral appointment under Dr. Lehninger at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore—an hour-long drive from Washington, D.C.—effective from the beginning of the 1981 academic year. This, of course, meant the children would join us. Immediately, working through the GWU International Programs Office, I mailed all the documents to Hannah that showed that we had the resources to take care of our children. I assumed visas for Hannah and the children would be a routine affair, but I got the news that Hannah ran into severe hurdles at the Consulate office in Madras. First, a local official at the Consulate said that they needed proof of a visa change for Oli from F-2 to F-1. I did the necessary paperwork, and Hannah submitted it to the Consulate office. Then they added

a new demand that Oli's visa must be valid for at least one year. I knew the request was absolute nonsense, as the local official in Madras had no clue how the INS in Washington, D.C. operated with regard to student visas. Hannah asked for an appointment with the Consulate officer to explain her situation, but she was denied on the ground that she did not have the authority to speak on behalf of the children. Now Hannah and the children were in limbo. I could sense that the situation was becoming rather dire, and for the first time, I began to feel concerned and worried. I needed help.

One person I could think of was my friend George Walser, a remarkable human being who was radically kind and extremely helpful. He introduced me to Dr. John Cooper, another member of the church whom I knew, but I did not know that he was a retired United States ambassador. He took me to the State Department, where I explained the situation to an officer in charge of immigration issues. The officer said they would send a telegram to the Madras Consulate. The very next day, I received word that Hannah and the children got their visas.

Johns Hopkins had arranged for a university-owned apartment for Hannah, a visiting scholar, within walking distance of her lab. The church where we were living made the decision that its apartment was not large enough for us—a family of four. So, I had a big challenge in finding an apartment elsewhere that was inexpensive, located in an area with a public school system for the children, and with decent access to bus and metro lines for commuting to GWU and GU. It was again George who went into action, spending numerous hours in search of a place with so many constraints. I did my level best with my own handicap of ignorance of the region. Some of

the advertisements I read were shockingly revealing: no children allowed, but pets were all right. We were so happy and relieved that George found an apartment, a two-bedroom apartment in Arlington, Virginia, just across the Potomac River, satisfying all the criteria, but there was a hitch. We could not sign the contract, as our income did not meet the standards for renting the apartment. Without any hesitation, George signed it, a magnanimous act, and we got the apartment.

Satyan and Divya went to a nearby school called Francis Scott Key School. I wanted to place them in the 4th and 3rd grades—they had already finished the 3rd and 2nd grades in Madurai—but the school refused, stating that they could only be placed in the 3rd and 2nd grades based on their age. It was shocking news for me: the criterion for placing a student in a class was based on age, not on academic background. I was very disappointed, but within a month the school called me to say that the children had been moved one class up, as they were very bright.

There was a cafeteria in the school, and Satyan and Divya were given hot lunch every day, free of charge. Surprised, I enquired about this practice and found that the government provided free lunch for those students who were living below the poverty line. I thought it was not a good use of government resources. Apparently, from my perspective, the government had drawn the poverty line too high.

One day, Satyan fell sick, running a temperature of over 100 degrees. George had given me the name and address of a doctor who charged a nominal fee. I did not think we had insurance. The downside was that his office was a long way from my apartment, in a Black neighbourhood. I called the

doctor's office. As Satyan would be a new patient, the receptionist wanted to register his name with some details. First, she asked for his mother's name, which I did not expect. When I additionally offered my name, she said she would ask for the mother's name only. Rather strange. I told her I would like to bring my son to see the doctor, as he was running a temperature. There was a pause; I could hear her turning some pages of a book. She told me the date when the next opening to see the doctor was available, and it was almost a month away. Shocked, I told her that my son was running a temperature and that we needed to see the doctor now. She told me that I should take my son to an emergency ward. I was baffled; I was used to the practice back in Madurai, where you could take a patient to any doctor and they would find the time to treat the patient. I did not know what we did, but we did not take Satyan to an emergency ward.

Having the children with us, I felt the need for a car. Amir Maleki, my former roommate, recommended his friend, a used-car dealer. I did not know what was involved in buying a car. I took a bus to the car dealer's place. I walked around and found a compact Mazda car, with the price listed as \$2,300. The dealer asked me whether I would like to test-drive it. I did not know what it was, but I could guess. I told him that I did not know driving and that I needed a car to learn to drive. Not realizing that I could negotiate, I started writing a cheque for \$2,300, when he reduced the price to \$2,000. Graciously, he delivered the car to me by sending two of his employees with their car to my apartment. I thanked him profusely. Despite having a car, Oli and I commuted to our respective universities by bus and Metro. Often, Oli would walk across the Potomac River on the

Key Bridge to reach Rosslyn and then take a bus or Metro to our apartment, thus saving a dollar or two. Taking an Amtrak train, Hannah would come home every weekend from Baltimore. After two years of postdoctoral work at Dr. Lehninger's laboratory, she left the States for India for good in May 1983.

By June 1983, I obtained my Ph.D. degree, but Oli had at least two more years to go to complete her work. As my study leave from the American College was ending, I decided to extend my study leave by two more years for postdoctoral work with Prof. Junghenn, my thesis advisor. One day I chatted with Murli Gupta, sharing my thoughts and plans for the next two years. He said it was the right time for me to apply for a green card, officially known as the Permanent Resident Card, which would allow one to live and work permanently in the USA. I did not want to give him a big speech, but politely told him that we did not have any intention of staying in this country. He laughed. He said that, given my academic record, it would be easier to get a Green Card, adding that if I decided to go back to India after two years, I could throw the card away. I did not say anything. I knew applying for a Green Card would be blasphemous.

I left for India in the summer of 1983, leaving Divya, Satyan, and Oli in the States. I visited Ayya, who was leading a comfortable retired life with the help of my younger brother Varadan. I met Hannah in Madurai; she did not have a job yet. I vaguely remember meeting Shanthi Manuel, principal of Lady Doak College, regarding Hannah's situation. I knew Shanthi well while I was at the American College. She had visited me in Washington, D.C., before Oli arrived. Hannah got

a job at Lady Doak College, effective at the beginning of the academic year in 1983. I did all the paperwork necessary to extend my study leave from the American College for two more years. With the mathematics department's recommendation and Principal P.T. Chellapa's strong support, I got my leave approved.

With significant progress made, Oli was confident that she would finish her Ph.D. work, write her dissertation, and defend it before May 1985, which meant we both would be able to join duty at our colleges at the beginning of the academic year 1985. Oli had applied for an extension of her leave for one more year; that would be her sixth year of leave, including one year she spent at Madurai Kamaraj University. Meanwhile, we got news from Hannah that she was getting married. All these years, Hannah had been an integral part of our life—like an extended family—but now she would have her own life, an independent life. While Oli and I were celebrating this great news, Oli got a letter from Lady Doak College, attached to which was a government notification that her application for an extension of leave for the sixth year was denied and that she was dismissed from her confirmed position as professor of botany. She was dismissed because, we assumed, she was absent from the college without prior government-approved leave for the academic year 1984. Now Oli had no job.

We sat and talked for hours, evaluating different options we had. It would be unfathomable for me to stay in the USA even for a day beyond the summer of 1985. It was the opposite for Oli; with Hannah married and comfortably settled down, and no job for Oli, she did not want to go back now. That would mean I had to resign my position from the American College

and look for a job here, an unthinkable proposition. Applying Murli Gupta's theory, we both could get jobs, get green cards, stay for a while, and go back to India at the right time. The problem was that once a family stayed in the States for a few years, they got hooked and addicted to its new way of life. If the family stayed for a few more years, their children would become adults, and arranged marriage would be out. The family would eventually pull out the one leg they had in India and plant both legs firmly in the USA. They would become American citizens. They would then, taking advantage of a generous immigration law, sponsor their parents and siblings to come to the United States, a practice Oli and I did not believe was right. India would slowly recede from their memory. I was terrified.

Oli's sense was that we could make all kinds of plans, but God has his own plans for us, and his purpose would prevail. Our destiny was not in our hands, Oli argued, adding that we did not plan Hannah's marriage, nor did we anticipate Oli's dismissal from the college. For her, God was showing his hand and leading us in a different direction, a path we should follow. I was not convinced.

One day, after this intense conversation with Oli, I spoke to my friend, Charlie Ryerson, and shared how deeply uncomfortable I felt about staying in this country, even for a few years. Knowing he was a sensitive and patriotic American, I could almost hear what was running through his mind: "What's wrong with my country that you don't even want to stay here for a short time?" I explained to him that most people coming to America from Tamil Nadu planned to spend a few years in the States, make some money, and then return home.

The problem was that once they arrived, America felt like a carnival. They began to enjoy the wealth, fun, and excitement. They became addicted to the new way of life, and never returned to their motherland. Charlie understood where I was going with my argument. He told me that the scenario didn't apply to me because I was uniquely different. "You're like a banyan tree," he said, "so deeply rooted in Tamil Nadu that you could never truly take root in the States."

I decided to apply for tenure-track faculty positions. For a couple of reasons, I made a decision to apply only to colleges and universities in the regions of Washington, D.C., New York, and Chicago. One was that in these big metropolitan areas, there would be ample job opportunities for Oli, with her Ph.D. in biology. The other reason was that I knew we would fly home every year and, I thought, strategically these were the best airports to fly from.

The application process for a faculty position in a college or a university in the USA was vastly different from what was in practice in Tamil Nadu, perhaps in the whole of India. Committed to hiring the best possible candidate for a position, institutions would advertise nationally and draw candidates from all over the country. Typically, a search was a year-long process, starting from the time a position was advertised until it was filled.

The American Mathematical Society (AMS) and the Mathematical Association of America (MAA) held their combined annual meetings every year in January in different parts of the country. Interestingly, aided by a sophisticated computer algorithm, they facilitated a match-making process to connect a potential employer with a suitable candidate. All

colleges and universities seeking applicants and all candidates seeking positions gathered at these annual meetings. There would be a huge hall with hundreds of tables set for short, 15–20-minute interviews. In January 1985, their meeting was held in Anaheim, California. I was there. I got several interviews; one of them was with Illinois Benedictine College (IBC) at Lisle, a suburb of Chicago. As the interview began, Dr. Phyllis Kittel, the chair of the department of mathematics, quickly realized her mistake—she thought I was a computer scientist—and pointed me to a different table in the hall and told me that North Central College (NCC) in Naperville, another suburb of Chicago, was searching for a mathematician. The next day, my request to match with NCC was honored by the algorithm, and I met with Dr. Rich Wilders, chair of the department of mathematics. He was fun and interesting, and lovely to engage in conversation. I could easily imagine being a member of the mathematics department with Wilders as my colleague.

Back from the January meeting, I applied for several positions. I was not called for interviews for some weeks. My guess would be that institutions would like to give preference to American citizens first, particularly when there was a glut of applications for a position. Also, I came to know later that institutions, especially small colleges where the primary focus was teaching, would be understandably reluctant to consider foreign candidates because of their concern about candidates' proficiency in English, in particular their accent, worrying about how the hire would affect student learning. Finally, I got day-long interviews at four places: two in the D.C. area, one in the New York area, and one in the Chicago area (NCC). It was standard practice that schools covered all the expenses for

interviews: flights, rooms, meals, ground transportation, etc. Typically, the candidates met with committee members on a one-on-one basis and made presentations. The process included lunch with a few members of the committee and a campus tour. They also had one-on-one interviews with deans and provosts; the whole day would be exhausting for the candidates. I got calls from two schools offering me the job that I had applied for, while the other two schools sent regret letters. If I were to guess about the regret letters, I would say one school determined that I was more of a teacher than a scholar, and the other thought I would not stay at the school longer. It was sometime in April that James Taylor, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty at North Central College, called me to offer the job.

Recognizing my years of teaching experience in college and university settings, I was offered the rank of Associate Professor of Mathematics, with a salary commensurate with the rank. I readily accepted the offer. I did not know that I could have asked for some time—a week or two—to evaluate the offer in the context of other offers. Also, I did not know that I could have negotiated my salary. It did not matter. I had a signed contract in April for the job that would begin in September.

I knew that when students completed their Ph.D. work and were in the job market, colleagues and professors in the department would be anxious to know how successful they were in their search for employment. I shared my story with my colleagues and professors. Apparently, Professor Irwin Glick knew about Naperville and told me that it was a good place to bring up my children. He added that it was a rich city,

pumping in a lot of money into its school system, so its public schools were at par with prestigious private schools. I couldn't imagine better news than this, as I was thinking about moving to Naperville.

I contacted the department chair, Rich Wilders, seeking his help in finding an apartment in Naperville. He said he would be delighted to help me and told me that the college would reimburse all my expenses for my house-hunting trip, adding that it was standard practice in the hiring process among all institutions. I met him in his office. He had already done some work and showed me two apartment complexes on a map worth pursuing. He gave me phone numbers and asked me to call each complex. I told him about my experience in Washington, D.C., a metropolitan city, where units would hang up on me upon hearing my voice. Given that Naperville was a small, conservative Midwestern town, I wasn't sure how well my phone calls would be received, so I asked Rich Wilders to make the calls. He understood my predicament and made the calls. Both complexes had units available, and we looked at both places. I liked the one at 510 E. Bailey Street, a good location with a middle school within walking distance, a small shopping center for groceries nearby, and the college just a 10-minute drive away. I signed the contract.

We had lived in the Arlington apartment for four years. Satyan would be finishing 7th grade at Thomas Jefferson Middle School, while Divya would be finishing 6th grade at Key School. They both would be joining Madison Junior High School in Naperville this coming year. It was time to plan for our trip to Naperville, about 750 miles away, which meant roughly 13 hours of driving. There were no cell phones or

Google Maps, but there was AAA TripTik, a graphic aid with sheets of notes on routes, lodging, restaurants, gas stations, tolls, and many more details. Aided by this marvelous tool, I planned my trip meticulously, marking gas stations, restaurants, rest areas, and a motel to stay at on the way. I did not know much about cars, so I was not sure whether I could rely on my old subcompact Mazda, a two-door, non-AC car, for the long journey to Naperville. I had no choice. There was not much in our apartment to dispose of. Four years ago, when we moved, George gave us a bunk bed and a few other items, and we returned them to him. We shipped pots and pans, a table, and a couple of chairs. There was an old broken sofa, which we trashed. It was around July 1985. Loading a few plants, we said goodbye to Washington, D.C., my beloved city, and drove to Naperville, leaving behind so many great memories.

The drive to Naperville was fun, with the AAA TripTik guiding us all the way. I had never driven such a distance, almost 750 miles. We stayed in a motel on the way; I would guess somewhere in Indiana. The next day, as we drove through Indiana and Illinois, one thing that struck me was the sheer flatness of the land as far as the eye could see, with no mountains. Having lived in areas adjacent to Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, it was rather depressing to see no trees or hills. As we drove by Gary, Indiana, and the south side of Chicago, a terrain with abandoned manufacturing units and smoke-emitting industrial facilities, Oli, visibly unhappy, demurely asked me to make a U-turn and drive her back to Washington, D.C.

Having never studied in depth the history of the USA, we assumed that, like in India, the topography, population

density, and demographics were roughly the same in all 50 states. So wrong! We didn't know until years later that, historically, the East Coast was the most populated and well developed, with elitism running through its veins. The Midwest, America's Heartland, was the epicenter of the manufacturing and farming sectors. Many states in the West, vast in area, such as Nebraska, Idaho, Wyoming, and North and South Dakota, were sparsely populated, in a few cases with populations just in the thousands. We learned—a hard-to-believe fact—that while America was three times larger than India in land area, India was almost four times larger than America in population.

I missed Washington, D.C., a vibrant political city, its energy radiating throughout the Beltway. With foreign embassies from all over the world housed in Washington, D.C., employing thousands of diplomats and support staff, the city looked like a mini world. Back in Madurai, where there was no radio station or TV, newspapers—delivered once every 24 hours—were the only source of information. In contrast, my thirst for world news—especially political—was quenched by constant news broadcasts on TV channels and multiple radio stations. I relished the continuous news bombardment and never tired of it. I was so fortunate to have spent seven years at GWU, a private research university with close ties to the federal government, located a heartbeat away from the White House, the State Department, and the Capitol. Capitalizing on its proximity to the Capitol, GWU organized numerous talks and seminars involving politicians, public officials, senators, and members of Congress. Sadly, as I was very busy with my research, I could not take full advantage of all the events.

However, I did manage to attend a few, but I don't remember the presenters except for a couple: Senator Edward Kennedy and the Mayor of D.C., Marion Barry.

My church friend George and others had introduced me to American football: the Redskins. The physicality of football, especially when teams ran the ball, was overwhelming, but the mathematics involved in passing games—distance, slope, gravity, trajectory, velocity—fascinated me. I remember Terry Bradshaw of the Steelers throwing long balls that left me spellbound. The Steelers won the Super Bowl in 1979, my first year at GWU. Later, the Redskins, the home team, started playing dominant games under coach Joe Gibbs, with Theismann as quarterback and a talented corps of receivers led by Art Monk. They won the Super Bowl in 1982. When a game was over, I usually turned off the TV, but in one case—I don't remember which Super Bowl—I watched until the Lombardi Trophy was given. I was curious to see which player—the QB, the MVP, or a captain—would receive the trophy, and I almost had a heart attack when the Commissioner gave the trophy to the owner of the team. I could not fathom the logic behind the owner receiving the trophy, not the players who played the game with blood and sweat. I was appalled. It was obscene. There was another aspect of football that baffled me: scantily clad attractive women, called cheerleaders, dancing on the sidelines, entertaining but supposedly helping build team spirit and morale.

I came to the States halfway through Carter's presidency. Indians liked Carter. He was a Democrat. His mother, Lillian Carter, a Peace Corps volunteer, had worked as a nurse in a small clinic in a neighborhood of Bombay in the late 1960s at

the age of 68, which had a tremendous impact on people's opinion of Carter. My memory was that Carter's foreign policy was anchored in human rights. Sadly, Carter's presidency went through a very difficult period: the energy crisis, the hostage crisis, and high inflation. After some soul-searching, Carter gave a televised speech—a make-or-break speech—from the Oval Office, mainly addressing the energy crisis. I liked his speech; it was a little preachy. He spoke of a “crisis of confidence.” My sense was that Beltway pundits did not like the speech, which was labeled the “malaise” speech. Carter lost the 1980 presidential election to Reagan.

Reagan won the election big—a landslide—receiving 489 Electoral College votes to Carter's 49 and thus, he had the mandate to implement whatever policies he espoused during his campaign. Though I did not have any stake in them, Reagan's far-right positions on issues such as defense and the economy were unsettling for me. Big on military buildup, he proposed a Strategic Defense Initiative, a massive enterprise derisively called “Star Wars.” He wanted to give huge tax breaks to companies and corporations, confident that it would grow the economy unboundedly, benefiting everyone, an ideology that was branded as “trickle-down economics.”

After a very successful four years, Reagan was getting ready to throw his hat in the ring for another four-year term. Walter Mondale, who was vice president under Carter, was the Democratic nominee. Reagan was 73. There were rumblings that he was old. I had watched him be forgetful and ramble at times. In the first debate between Reagan and Mondale, Reagan fumbled, rambling and mumbling. The age factor started creeping up again, but he came back roaring in his second

debate. Reagan won with an even bigger margin than in 1980. He defeated Walter Mondale with 525 electoral votes out of 538.

What I remember of Reagan's second term is the "Reagan Doctrine," which argued for aiding anti-communist insurgents in pro-communist governments to deter Soviet influence. In principle, I liked his doctrine. Nicaragua, one of the countries in Central America, was ruled by a ruthless dictator, Somoza — supported by the USA — with scant respect for human rights. The Cuban Revolution inspired the people of Nicaragua to rebel against the Somoza government, and a movement was born, called the Sandinista movement. It succeeded in throwing Somoza out of power. Over the years, within the left-leaning Sandinista government in Nicaragua, a rebel group called the "Contras," Somoza sympathizers, emerged, and Reagan decided to support the Contras to curb communist influence in the region. I understood Reagan's deep aversion to the Marxist-oriented government in Nicaragua, in his own backyard. However, supporting the Contras—he called them freedom fighters—to bring back the brutal Somoza regime was, for me, morally indefensible.

All said, although I found some of his policies morally troubling, I admired his steadfast commitment to his ideology, his unwavering opposition to communism, and the clarity of his convictions.

AN ACADEMIC JOURNEY: A GLIMPSE INTO AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

“This account of my years at North Central College is not intended to be a comprehensive record of my 30-year association with the institution. It does not cover all the faculty and staff I knew, nor all the events I participated in. Rather, it is a memoir that focuses on selected experiences from which I learned a great deal about the College, higher education, and America more broadly.”

We settled into our apartment smoothly and got used to the Naperville way of life rather quickly. My routine was to drive to North Central College (NCC) every morning to teach my 8:00 a.m. class. Satyan and Divya walked to school every day. Oli started looking for a job, preferably a postdoctoral position.

At the College, I was struck by how the students came to class in casual outfits— perhaps too casual. Students back in Madurai would come to class neatly dressed, going through a ritual of taking a shower in the morning and dressing up as though they were going to church. Another aspect that was a cultural norm back in Madurai: students would rise as a mark of respect when a professor walked into a classroom; this was not so here in the States. Rising for anyone as a mark of respect was not part of American culture, I thought, underlining the tenet that there were no kings or queens in the States. That said, what surprised me was that presspersons would rise as a mark

of respect when POTUS, the President of the United States, walked in for a press conference. I never understood why.

I found my students here, compared to my students back in Madurai, to be very motivated to learn, which made teaching more fun and enjoyable. For almost all students, a bachelor's degree was their terminal degree. In colleges and universities, commencement—the graduation ceremony—was the most significant event, celebrated with lots of fanfare on a scale that was unimaginable to me. The event was choreographed with fine detail, rehearsed, and celebrated with thousands in attendance: graduates, their parents, grandparents, siblings, uncles, aunts, and friends. With graduates and faculty processing in caps and gowns, and the marching band playing music, the atmosphere would be electric and majestic. I wondered why there was such a big fuss; after all, the students had just earned a bachelor's degree.

In Tamil Nadu, India, parents took their children under their wings until they finished their education with a bachelor's, master's, or Ph.D. degree and found a decent job. Taking care of everything needed for their education—tuition, room and board, books, travel, pocket money, etc.—was second nature to parents. Poor families with meagre incomes might sell every possession they had to educate their children. Typically, by the age of 24 or 25, children would have finished their education and settled into a job. At this stage, these fledgling young adults began to lead independent lives and, in turn, started supporting their parents.

What I found in the USA was that parents expected their children to become independent when they finished high school at the age of 18. Also, children sought independence

from their parents and chose schools away from their hometowns, sometimes in a different state, even if there were colleges or universities in their hometown. Given that tuition, room and board, and other fees were exorbitantly high, especially in private colleges and universities, students would borrow money for their education, which accumulated over a period of four years. Burdened with heavy loan debts, students wanted to enter the job market as early as possible, which meant immediately after earning their bachelor's degree. The loan burden was also the reason why even a small minority of students who wanted to pursue a master's degree would work for a few years before venturing into their postgraduate education.

Commencing a new life with the immense satisfaction of graduating with a bachelor's degree might explain why there was such a fuss about commencement ceremonies. Also worth noting: Americans were generally fond of, and extremely good at, celebrating events with extravagant pomp and splendor.

All full-time professors had their own offices, a standard practice in colleges and universities in the States, so I had my own. Back in India, all members of a department except the department chair shared a big office. While I took full advantage of having a private office, I did most of my work – preparing for classes, grading papers, engaging in scholarly activities – all at home. Perhaps old habits die hard.

North Central College, a private, Methodist-Church-affiliated institution, was governed by a council – the Board of Trustees – which had broad powers to provide strategic direction for the college. The Board had the ultimate responsibility to ensure that the college fulfills its mission and

safeguards the welfare of the college. For the day-to-day operations of the college, the Board appointed a president, who formed a Cabinet by appointing a few associates, called vice presidents, to assist in the areas of student enrollment, finance, fundraising, student life, buildings, and properties. The president, working with the faculty, also appointed a vice president for academic affairs (VPAA) and dean of faculty through a national search.

Administratively, the college undergraduate programs were divided into four divisions: Division of Arts and Letters, Division of Economics and Business Administration, Division of Human Thought and Behaviour, and Division of Science. Each division comprised its own departments. For example, the Division of Science was composed of the departments of Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Mathematics, and Physics. Each division was led by a division chair appointed by the VPAA and Dean of Faculty. Likewise, each department had a chair, also appointed by the VPAA and Dean of Faculty. In addition, the college also had adult and continuing education, also known as Weekend College, and graduate programs, both under the broad umbrella of academic affairs. When I joined the college, Mr. Gael Swing was the president and Dr. James Taylor was the VPAA and Dean of Faculty. Dr. Carol Brown was the dean of adult and continuing education, and she reported to the VPAA and Dean of Faculty. Oddly, she was a member of the president's cabinet.

Mandated to carry out the mission of the college, the president, at the helm, drove the administrative engine of the college. While the president had ultimate authority over all aspects of the college, academic affairs—the kernel of the

institution—was under the stewardship of the VPAA and Dean of Faculty, who worked closely with the faculty—huge stakeholders in the enterprise—in advancing the academic mission of the college. The primary responsibilities of the faculty were teaching, scholarship, advising students, and citizenship, broadly defined as a contribution to the life of the college. The faculty had several major standing committees: Graduate Studies Committee, Undergraduate Studies Committee, and Faculty Personnel Committee, also known as the Promotion and Tenure Committee, to list a few. Members were elected to serve on these committees. These committees were the vehicles through which the faculty made their recommendations to the administration. Faculty meetings were held three times a year, chaired by the Faculty Speaker, who was elected by the faculty for a two-year term. The speaker set the agenda for the meetings in consultation with the VPAA and Dean of Faculty, dealing with broader institutional issues that did not fall under the purview of major committees.

North Central College, historically a small liberal arts college, began to struggle financially when President Swing initiated graduate programs and the weekend college, primarily as an additional source of income. There was some unrest among faculty, I learned, regarding the president's push for graduate programs. The tension was borne out of fear that graduate programs would completely change the liberal arts character of the institution.

Hardly a week had passed since the new academic year began, and I was slowly settling into my new office when Dr. Don Johnson, professor of mathematics and computer science, dropped in and asked me whether I would be willing to serve

as secretary of the Graduate Studies Committee. I did not know anything about the role of secretary—I could only guess—but no sooner had he asked me than I said yes. The reason was simple: I thought it would be a great opportunity for me to learn firsthand the perspectives of the president and the faculty regarding the introduction of graduate programs, how it would affect the direction of the college, and why it mattered to the faculty. In my role as secretary, I guessed that I would attend all meetings, listen and take notes but not participate in the discussions, prepare minutes, and present them to the committee at their subsequent meetings.

I had a rocky start as secretary. During my first couple of meetings, without the context, most of what the members of the committee were discussing was Greek to me. So, the first thing I did was buy a tape recorder to record the discussions; I spent hours at home playing the recordings over and over again until I got the content right. I would meet with one of the members of the committee privately, asking him to verify my minutes before sending them to the committee members as a final draft. Slowly, I weaned myself off the practice of meeting with a committee member for verification of my first draft. Being the secretary for the committee was an extremely challenging task, consuming innumerable hours of my time. However, I learned so much about the faculty, the president, and the college during my one-year stint as secretary for the Graduate Studies Committee.

While most colleges and universities ran on a semester system, some on a quarter system, very few colleges ran on a term system—North Central College was one of them—where an academic year was divided into three terms: Fall Term,

Winter Term, and Spring Term, each term lasting 10 weeks. Fall Term classes began after Labor Day, and Spring Term ended in June. On the first day of classes, professors were expected to provide students with a detailed syllabus of the course they were teaching that included: the title of the course, textbook for the course; office hours; what would be covered each week; dates for quizzes, tests; exams and their weightings; grading scale for the letter grades A, B, C, D, and F; policies on plagiarism and late submission of assignments; and much more. Committing to what would be taught each week and when quizzes, tests, and exams would be given takes away the flexibility a professor would need to be an imaginative, creative, and effective teacher. For me, a syllabus looked like a legal document prepared by an attorney. I thought it was overkill, and I had no choice but to fall in line with this deep-rooted academic practice. I liked the concept of office hours, wherein professors set aside certain hours each week when students could drop in to get help with lectures or assignments on a one-on-one basis in an informal setup.

Rich Wilders, chair of the math department, was an easygoing and extremely pleasant human being, whose personality imbued the department with a collegial spirit. My sense was that the math department was the most collegial department in the college. Every morning, I went to the campus mailroom, where each faculty member was assigned a mailbox, to collect my mail. A small group of faculty – the group varied from term to term – gathered near the campus mailroom around a certain time of the day to collect their mail and then linger to chat about events of the week at the college. It was fascinating for me to observe how this group used these

unplanned, impromptu gatherings as mini faculty meetings to engage in vigorous conversations about issues of importance to the faculty. The topic that dominated the water-cooler conversation was the initiation of graduate programs by President Swing.

Though I was a brand-new faculty member at the college, I did not hesitate to voice my opinion on this topic. I took the position that the introduction of master's programs would not affect the liberal arts ethos of the college, one that was deeply ingrained in its academic culture for more than one hundred years. Moreover, I argued that graduate programs, which were expected to bring additional financial resources, would not only boost undergraduate programs but also enhance the prestige of the college.

As I settled into the department, I quietly began looking into the department's characteristics, primarily its curriculum and faculty. It had a modest curriculum suited for preparing elementary and high school teachers as well as for immediate employment after graduation, but not for students who would like to pursue graduate studies. It appeared to me that the department was content with that outcome, which did not surprise me based on the composition of the math faculty: not all math faculty had doctorates, and their scholarly engagement was rather minimal. Furthermore, some faculty were not full-time, teaching on a per-course basis. I had thought all faculty in small liberal arts colleges in the USA were full-time faculty with a Ph.D. in their discipline. Not true. Small liberal arts colleges with modest endowments could not afford to have all faculty full-time. Regardless of the size of the endowment, all liberal arts colleges, having a strong commitment to the liberal arts

ethos, offer general education courses—the core of liberal arts education—as well as a good number of electives, providing multiple choices for students to suit their interests. Only rich colleges with healthy endowments could afford to hire all full-time faculty.

I reviewed the math curriculum carefully and thought adding an elementary course in Topology would strengthen the curriculum. My senior colleagues in the department were supportive of this curricular change. I drafted a proposal. For the course to become officially part of the math curriculum, it had to go through several approval processes. The department reviewed the course and gave approval. It then went to the Science Division, which, after careful deliberations, gave its approval. The proposal finally went to the college-wide curriculum committee, the supreme body, which consisted of the Dean of Faculty, four divisional representatives elected by their respective divisions, and an at-large faculty member elected by all faculty. The committee was scheduled to meet at a time when there were no classes, and the meeting was open to all faculty. Typically, the deliberations at this level were very intense as the committee would look at the relevance of the course in the context of the mission of the institution, cost-benefit analysis, including how this would affect the full-time-part-time faculty ratio, etc. The committee would meet at least twice to have two readings of the proposal before the final vote was taken. My proposal went through this process and received final approval.

The Board of Trustees met three times a year, the last one in May, when they considered the president's recommendations for promotion and tenure. The tenure process was very

different from what I experienced at American College, Madurai. Back at American College, after two years of probationary appointment, I was confirmed (tenured) by the Governing Council (Board of Trustees) on the recommendations of the department chair and the principal of the college. I did not think anyone was ever denied confirmation. It was so routine. There were no specific written criteria for successfully completing the two-year probationary period. Once appointed, you just did what you were asked to do: teach the assigned courses to the best you could and attend committee-faculty meetings.

The so-called probationary period at North Central College, like other colleges in the USA, was for six years. The criteria for tenure were spelled out in detail in the faculty handbook: excellence in teaching, scholarship, advising, and campus citizenship. Evaluation of faculty during their first, third, and fifth years of the tenure clock was at the department-division level, while the second, fourth, and sixth years of evaluation were done by the Faculty Personnel Committee (FPC), a committee that consisted of four elected members from the four divisions, a junior and a senior faculty member elected at large by the faculty. The Dean of the Faculty was a non-voting member of the committee. The FPC evaluations were strictly confidential, and the meetings were held in closed sessions. The faculty member received detailed feedback every year. I was very impressed by this systematic evaluation process, one with a lot of checks and balances guaranteeing a very clean and fair evaluation. The six-year evaluation was not confined to North Central College—it was a national standard; however, I thought that the whole process could be easily condensed to

four years without loss of rigor in the evaluation, especially in small colleges where the primary criterion for tenure was excellence in teaching.

At the end of each semester, faculty were required to have student evaluations done for each course they taught, using a questionnaire carefully crafted and approved by the faculty at large. These student evaluations were part of the file a faculty member would submit for retention, tenure, and promotion, indicating the significance of student input in the evaluation of a faculty member's quality of teaching. Apparently, faculty believed that students had enough maturity to assess a faculty member's teaching ability without bias or prejudice.

It was spring 1986. My first year at the college was drawing to a close, a time when the Board of Trustees met to decide on the recommendations of the president for promotion and tenure, and a time when the college community celebrated faculty and staff accomplishments with much fanfare.

A much-awaited announcement came from Dean Taylor regarding promotion and tenure of faculty approved by the board. There was a feeling of gloom in the math department as one of its members, who had been with the department for the past six years, was denied tenure. One could easily surmise that a critical factor in the tenure denial decision was his teaching, and that the student evaluations played a significant role in this process. The department knew that tenure decisions are irrevocable. Regardless, to give moral support and to express solidarity with the faculty member, the department chair drafted a letter to the dean to be signed by all members of the department, talking about the faculty member's contributions to the department as well as to the college, his collegiality, his

teaching caliber, etc., and pleading with the dean to reconsider the decision of the college.

The chair had left a copy of the letter he had drafted, signed by all members of the department, on my table for my signature. I read the letter. I was not here during the last six years, so I could not vouch for its content. However, dismissing it as just platitudes, I decided I would sign the letter. However, on a closer read of the letter, I found a sentence very troubling—a sentence that subtly criticized the Faculty Personnel Committee. No one knew what was said, who said what, what was discussed, or how the vote went in the Faculty Personnel Committee, so I thought it was very wrong even to obliquely mention the Faculty Personnel Committee in the letter. Taking objection to that sentence, I expressed my reservation to my department chair about signing the letter. He agreed with me, struck off the sentence, and I signed the letter.

There were a lot of end-of-year activities, of which two special events stood out for me: the Honors Convocation celebrating students' achievements and the Science Division meeting where elections were held to elect divisional representatives for various committees for the following year. With faculty processing in caps and gowns, the Honors Convocation possessed a certain majesty, beauty, and splendor. While the primacy of the Honors Convocation was students, faculty were also recognized for their performance in teaching and scholarship. I received the Dissinger Award for Development of Teaching for a first-year faculty member, a recognition of my teaching as well as my contribution to curriculum development by successfully integrating topology into the mathematics curriculum.

To my surprise, the Science Division elected me as its representative to the Graduate Studies Committee, a major committee at a critical juncture when the faculty were not at ease with the introduction of graduate programs at the insistence of the president. In other news, after a national search, the College appointed Dr. Tom McFaul as the director of Graduate Programs, reporting to the VPAA and Dean of Faculty. Further, it was announced that Dr. McFaul would be a member of the president's cabinet, a very odd decision.

I came to know that major committees were expected to meet before the end of the academic year to elect the committee chairs for the following year so that the chairs would be ready to hit the ground running. The Graduate Studies Committee had eight members, of whom six were elected faculty representatives and two were administrators—Dean Taylor and Dr. McFaul, director of graduate programmes. I was the junior-most, completing my first year of service at the college. The committee met to elect the new chair for the Graduate Studies Committee (GSC). Dean Taylor proposed the name of McFaul for the position of chair of the GSC. Allen Vander Meulen, professor of economics, a well-respected senior faculty member and elected representative of the Division of Economics and Business, objected to the dean's proposal, saying that the GSC was a faculty committee and should not be chaired by an administrator. He then proceeded to propose my name for the position. With two nominations on the table, members voted, and McFaul was elected, as other members of the committee acquiesced to the dean's wish.

As for the College, I was deeply impressed by the faculty culture, which exemplified excellent teaching and active

engagement in the life of the institution. Apparently, I arrived at a time when the College was at an inflection point: the president had introduced graduate programs with minimal faculty input—an initiative many faculty members perceived as a threat to the ethos of the College’s liberal arts core. Following faculty governance as stipulated in the faculty handbook, the faculty gently pushed back through the faculty committee structure. I was very pleased that the Science Division faculty entrusted me to represent them on the Graduate Studies Committee at such a critical moment.

Overall, I had a good feeling about my first-year experience at North Central College, a small academic institution in the little town of Naperville. I learned a great deal about higher education in the United States and also saw a slice of American life. If my experience at the College was any indication, excellence seemed to run through the veins of American life.

I was not that happy in my home department—the mathematics department. As I wrote earlier, I found it disappointing that the mathematics curriculum was primarily job-oriented, focused on preparing students to become elementary and high school teachers; it lacked the depth necessary to prepare them for advanced graduate study. Evidently, the department had been content with this curricular structure. Besides, with the exception of a couple of faculty members, the makeup of the mathematics faculty seemed to reflect and reinforce the curriculum—a closed loop that I feared would simply sustain the status quo for years to come.

I knew I wouldn’t be happy in such an environment. I wrestled with a difficult choice: should I leave for a college

more aligned with my academic interests, or stay and try to change the department's culture from within? After weighing the pros and cons of making such a move, I ultimately decided to remain at North Central College.

It was the academic year 1988–1989, my fourth year at the College. The Graduate Studies Committee elected me chair for a two-year term, at a time when the graduate program was facing some challenges. I was pleased and ready to take on the leadership role.

The academic year soon turned turbulent, particularly on the administrative front. According to the College bylaws, the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty – the chief academic officer who reported directly to the president – oversaw Undergraduate Studies, Graduate Studies, and Adult and Continuing Education, all integrated under a single, holistic framework. President Swing was not happy with this administrative structure, as he thought it was limiting his authority to advance his agenda, especially related to graduate programs and adult and continuing education. So, he proposed a new organizational chart that would eliminate the position of VPAA and Dean of Faculty and replace it with three deans – one for each program—who would report directly to the president.

A major fallout from the proposal was the resignation of James Taylor from his position as VPAA and Dean of Faculty. Understandably, the faculty were deeply upset and strongly opposed to the proposed three-dean system for a variety of reasons. I agreed with the faculty sentiment. The biggest issue for me was that, by default, the president would become the

chief academic officer of the College, which I thought would be a travesty. The president was unrelenting.

The faculty had a closed-door meeting without the administrators. I was highly impressed by the way the faculty speaker conducted the meeting—with professionalism, thoughtfulness, a democratic spirit, and openness to different points of view. There were several resolutions, including one that stated that the faculty would hold a vote of no confidence in the president's leadership if he did not rescind his proposal. The faculty overwhelmingly—with only one dissenting vote—voted in favor of the resolutions and instructed the faculty speaker to communicate the message to the president.

Within a week, the president signaled his decision that he was dropping his idea of the three-dean system by giving approval to fill the position of VPAA and Dean of Faculty, the position left vacant by James Taylor's resignation. The faculty sent the president a note expressing their deep appreciation for the decision he had taken, addressing one of the central concerns of the faculty. I witnessed the search process with interest and great admiration; it opened a window through which I caught a glimpse of an America where excellence is revered. A search committee was formed, and the College launched a national search for the best and most suitable person for the position, drawing, I believe, over 100 applications from across the country. After going through a rigorous process, the search committee whittled down the applications to three and recommended that those three applicants be invited for on-campus interviews. Each candidate had a separate visit—an elaborate one that spanned two days—during which they addressed the faculty and interviewed with

various constituents, including the president. The process ended with the selection of William G. Berberet as the next VPAA and Dean of Faculty, and he assumed his new role sometime in the summer of 1989. Meanwhile, President Swing informed the college community that he was going to the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, MD, to undergo treatment for cancer—sobering news that deeply affected the College community.

On a different topic, tenure and promotion announcements were typically made after the May board meetings. In the announcement following the May 1989 board meeting, I was listed as having been promoted to the rank of full professor. I was somewhat surprised to have been promoted to full professor before being tenured—something I thought was quite exceptional. I learned that the science division chair initiated the process for promotion and presented my case to the Faculty Personnel Committee, as was the practice at the time.

Satyan would be graduating from Naperville Central High School at the end of the 1989–1990 academic year. We applied to many colleges and universities, including two prestigious ones: the University of Chicago and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign—one private and the other public. He was admitted to both. While the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, with its low in-state tuition and wide selection of majors, including engineering, was attractive, I found myself increasingly drawn to the University of Chicago, a school renowned for its strong emphasis on critical thinking and analytical skills. It also offered a decent fellowship. North Central College was also an option. It offered a generous

scholarship, but that was irrelevant since the college provided free tuition for faculty children. After evaluating all the options, I somewhat reluctantly decided to enroll Satyan at North Central. He would commute to school from home. He was only 16 years old.

For me, the 1989–1990 academic year began with a lot of optimism. Jerry, the new VPAA and Dean of Faculty, had found his footing. I liked him. His priorities aligned closely with what I believed the college needed. He seemed eager to strengthen faculty hiring, revamp the evaluation process, and promote greater scholarly engagement. During the Honors Convocation, I received an award—the Burlington Award for Faculty Scholarship.

Near the end of the academic year, the College received the shocking news that President Swing had passed away. He had served the College for 16 years. I gathered that the College had been in a dire financial situation when he was hired, and that he was brought in primarily to save the institution from collapse. Furthermore, I learned that he was instrumental in securing the College's financial stability, increasing student enrollment, establishing the Professional Term (Sabbatical Leave), building a healthy endowment, and constructing and upgrading facilities, including a library building.

The Board of Trustees swiftly approved filling the vacant position of president; following this, a search committee, composed of trustees, was formed. Responsible for hiring the new president, the board engaged an executive search firm to help identify strong candidates for the position. Additionally, an advisory committee consisting of faculty, administrators, staff, students, and alumni was established to represent all

stakeholders and provide input. I was very appreciative of and deeply impressed by this elaborate and comprehensive search process, planned with care and transparency, reflecting the college's strong commitment to hiring the best. My sense was that such a process, grounded in integrity, was not unique to North Central College; institutions across the country, which striving for excellence, operated in much the same way. After all, it is America.

The search was in full swing during the fall of 1990. The advisory committee was fully engaged in the process and was consulted as the search committee narrowed the pool to two or three finalists. At the beginning of the winter term in 1991, the board announced the appointment of Hal Wilde as the next president. The faculty seemed pleased with the selection, as Wilde was in many ways the opposite of Gael Swing. Wilde held a Ph.D. in government from Harvard and had served as vice president for advancement at a similar small liberal arts college in Wisconsin.

Wilde assumed office at the start of the spring term in 1991, and began carrying out his responsibilities. I was told that, later, there would be an inauguration ceremony, at which he would be formally installed as the 16th president of the College. And indeed, there was. The invitation looked very fancy to me. It was sent to many colleges and universities, inviting their presidents to attend the ceremony. The day came. The faculty, trustees, and visiting dignitaries were all in caps and gowns, marching in a procession. There were many greetings and speeches. Then came the formal investiture, when the chair of the Board of Trustees presented the president with a medallion. Afterward, the president gave a speech outlining his vision for

the College. There was a lot of pomp, and the event felt grandiose and theatrical. The president was treated like a king; I was flabbergasted. I could not understand why there was all this fuss. I knew that, in reality, college presidents acted like ordinary employees. They were not pretentious. This whole event felt completely out of step with what I had understood American culture to be: by and large, a non-hierarchical society, especially in academic settings.

In the 1990-1991 academic year, Satyan would be a freshman at North Central College, and Divya would be a senior at Naperville Central High School. I thought it was the right time to buy a house. Since Divya would be in her final year, Naperville City would allow her to continue her education at Naperville Central regardless of where we lived. If our new home was within the school district's attendance boundaries, she could continue using the school bus; otherwise, she would need her own transportation.

I decided to tour some neighborhoods to look for houses for sale. Packing Oli and our children into our compact, two-door car, we drove around looking for houses with "For Sale" signs. On our way back to the apartment, a police officer stopped us and asked what we were doing in these neighborhoods. I told him we were looking for a house to purchase. He asked where our realtor was. I had no idea what he was talking about. I was perplexed. The officer looked inside the car and saw the two children. Without saying anything more, he told us we could go.

I talked to one of my colleagues about the process of buying a house. Knowing how ignorant I was, she explained the process in detail, including making a down payment and

borrowing money from a bank, which one typically repays over a period of 30 years. She also recommended a realtor. Carefully following her instructions and working closely with the realtor, we bought a house on Massachusetts Avenue in Naperville and moved in during the summer of 1990. Out of curiosity, I checked and discovered that the house was within the Neuqua Valley High School attendance boundary, not Naperville Central High School. Living in our own house felt very different. It was a ranch-style house with three bedrooms—ideal for our family. Naperville Central HS was on the way to North Central, so it worked well: I would drop Divya first at her school and then take Satyan to North Central. We made an easy decision that Divya would also enroll in North Central and therefore would not apply to any other colleges or universities.

The 1990–1991 academic year was my sixth at the College, a time to apply for tenure. To me, tenure is a partnership in which the College and the faculty member commit to working together to enrich the life of the institution. Having already made a firm decision to stay and do my best to advance the College, I found it meaningful to apply for tenure. Filled with great anticipation for a long and rich partnership with the College, I applied for tenure, and the May 1991 board meeting announcement stated that I had been granted tenure. I was pleased.

North Central College had a policy of offering Professional Term (sabbatical leave) to tenured faculty after six years of full-time service at the College, and once every four years thereafter. Anticipating this, I had already planned my sabbatical: a period during which I would be at George Washington University working on a book project, *Calculus for*

the Curious, with my former colleague, Professor T. P. G. Liverman. The mathematics department had graciously agreed to provide me with office space, which would be of immense help for my work. With my sabbatical application approved, I left Oli and the children and spent the fall semester in the mathematics department at George Washington University, staying with a family I knew from church.

Looking back, I realize that I forgot to mention some moments in our life that were not so pleasant. When we had already settled in our apartment, a few troubling incidents occurred in our complex. One day, we found a scented plastic tube wedged into our apartment door—a gesture implying that the food we cooked smelled offensive. This happened just days after a young couple moved into the apartment across from ours. On another occasion, while I was standing on our small balcony, the couple stepped onto their balcony with their German Shepherd, an intimidating large dog. The man said something, and the dog jumped over to my balcony with a menacing look. I barely had time to retreat inside and close the door. On yet another day, I discovered that all four tires of my car had been slashed. To my dismay, I also noticed that another car, belonging to an Indian family, had suffered the same fate. I never shared this story with anyone; only my wife knew what had happened. She was deeply troubled by these incidents.

These actions were blatantly overt, but there were also moments when things were more subtle, particularly in the service industry. For example, a cashier at a grocery store might greet every other customer but remain silent when it was my turn. That said, I knew in my heart that these encounters did not reflect the true spirit of America. Of all the incidents,

slashing the tires and instigating a dog to attack were extreme acts tied to this particular couple. At the time, I told myself that these were aberrations and that I would never again encounter incidents of this nature. I was neither surprised nor troubled by the subtle forms of discrimination; I accepted them as part of human nature. On multiple occasions, I had told my colleagues that occasional discriminatory encounters were inevitable in any country's culture.

My first six years at the College were a little chaotic, marked by presidential decrees to add graduate programs, the president's attempt to fundamentally change the college bylaws, the dean's resignation, a faculty threat of a no-confidence motion, and the president's death after a serious illness. With the arrival of Jerry Berberet, VPAA and Dean of Faculty, and Hal Wilde, president, campus life returned to normal, and the College began to experience a revival of its old spirit. It soon became apparent that both were determined to move the college from a mom-and-pop operation to a level consistent with well-established liberal arts colleges in terms of faculty excellence, academic programs, and facilities. I felt good about the direction of the college with Jerry and Hal at the helm.

On a personal note, regarding scholarship, North Central College did not expect its faculty to publish in top-tier, peer-reviewed journals. However, I had a strong interest in continuing my research and writing papers for publication in high-level journals, which would require a large amount of time. In the new environment—teaching many courses, committing to help every single student, and participating fully in the life of the College—I was left with barely any time to

pursue my scholarly work. Still, I pushed hard to continue my scholarly endeavors, often sleeping barely five hours a night.

I ran in an at-large election at the College to represent the Science Division on the Faculty Personnel Committee. I was running against another faculty member in the Science Division, a well-respected senior colleague. My interest in serving on the committee stemmed from my long-term goal of advancing faculty excellence at the College. Besides promotion and tenure, the committee also handled faculty personnel issues. The dean was expected to bring any such issue to the committee to hear its perspective before the administration took action—a structure I liked very much. The faculty elected me to serve on the committee, which was a three-year commitment.

As a member of the Faculty Personnel Committee, my responsibility was to read all the faculty files that came up for evaluation for retention, promotion, and tenure, and to participate in the committee's deliberations before it voted on each case. Even though the files I read represented only a small sample, they gave me a good sense of the faculty's strengths as teachers and scholars.

Each year, the College conducted several faculty searches to fill vacancies resulting from retirements and to staff new positions necessitated by student enrollment growth. Whenever a department set up a search committee to hire a faculty member in its discipline, college policy required the inclusion of at least one faculty member from outside the field. This was intended to ensure that the new hire not only met the standards of the discipline but also fit well within the broader college community. I had served on several search committees

in other disciplines, which gave me the opportunity to better understand the strengths and aspirations of those departments.

Satyan began as a freshman at North Central College in 1990–1991, with Divya joining him the following year. Both commuted to the College from home. They declared mathematics as their major, which did not surprise me—they had been strong in mathematics since early childhood. Each ended up taking a couple of my classes, as the tight course schedule in a small department left them with few options. Since I was the only one teaching a course in Topology, they ultimately had no choice but to take it with me.

In our household, it was understood that a bachelor's degree was not a terminal degree and that they were expected to pursue a Ph.D. in their chosen field—in this case, mathematics. So, they took as many mathematics classes as possible to prepare them for advanced study. Satyan had taken a number of AP examinations in high school, earning high scores that allowed him to receive college credits for those courses. Additionally, by taking the maximum number of courses the College permitted, he graduated in just three years with a perfect GPA of 4.0.

During his final year, he applied to several universities for his doctoral studies. After narrowing down the options, we focused on two universities: Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, which had a large mathematics department conducting research in multiple branches of mathematics. Both waived tuition and provided a decent teaching-research fellowship. Since Satyan did not have a strong preference, I made the decision for him to go to Johns Hopkins, as I believed at that

time that Johns Hopkins, a private, elite university, was more prestigious than the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Every year during the fall term, the four divisions met to elect faculty to fill positions that would take effect in the following academic year. Professor Paul Sutton, the chair of the science division, was stepping down from his role at the end of the academic year, so the division needed to recommend a name to the VPAA and Dean of Faculty, the appointing authority for this renewable three-year position. At the formal division meeting, Paul Sutton, as chair, called for nominations from the floor. One faculty member nominated a senior professor of mathematics and computer science; another nominated me. I was surprised by the nomination. The chair of the science division—known in many other institutions as the “dean”—played a significant college-wide leadership role. The person in this position served on the Dean’s Council, which consisted of the VPAA and Dean of Faculty and the four division chairs, to advise the VPAA and Dean of Faculty on campus-wide issues. The chair also played a critical role in faculty hiring, promotion, and tenure and was instrumental in strengthening the science division. I was surprised, but I knew that if appointed, I would gladly take on these responsibilities and do my utmost to lead the science division to new heights. With no further nominations forthcoming, the chair asked both of us to leave the room so the remaining faculty could freely discuss the merits of the two candidates and select one. After several minutes, we were invited back in, and the chair announced that I had been elected by the science faculty to be the next division chair.

I was in my seventh year at the College, still relatively junior, yet the science faculty had entrusted me with such a major responsibility. I felt good and was ready for the challenges ahead. A few days later, the VPAA and Dean of Faculty sent a letter to the science faculty announcing my appointment as the next chair of the division. Ironically, I had been elected to serve a three-year term on the Faculty Personnel Committee as the science division's representative and had only just begun my service. I would relinquish my role on the committee at the end of the academic year, and the faculty would elect a new science representative to serve the remaining two years.

The departments of mathematics and computer science were housed in two separate buildings, while the departments of biology, chemistry, and physics shared a single building called the Kroehler Science Building. My office was in the mathematics building. There was a general sense among the science faculty that, as chair of the science division, I should continue working from my mathematics office, with the science division secretary assisting me from her office in the science building, which was just across from the mathematics building, primarily to avoid the disruption of office moves. I was not in favor of this idea. I wanted to be with the faculty of biology, chemistry, and physics—the core of the science division. I told the administration that I didn't care about the size of my office—it could be a closet; I just wanted to be in the Kroehler Science Building. Understanding the spirit of my request, the administration arranged for me to move to the science building, with the secretary's office adjacent to mine.

I continued to enjoy teaching and research, which I had been doing for more than 25 years. Serving as chair of the science division, while still partially continuing my teaching and research, was somewhat a digression from my chosen path. However, I soon found that I liked it, as it gave me a vehicle for advancing my ambitions for the college. The Dean's Council, made up of the VPAA and Dean of Faculty and the four division chairs, served as a critical body for listening to the faculty's concerns on policy matters and for communicating the administration's positions on various issues back to the faculty. It met every week, and in the first few meetings, I came to know that the Dean's Council had been discussing a proposal for over 18 months to address release time for various administrative responsibilities undertaken by faculty members, with the intention of implementing it in the 1994–1995 academic year.

In one of the meetings, Jerry, the VPAA and Dean of Faculty, informed us almost matter-of-factly that the president did not support the proposal and wanted it to be a “zero-sum game,” adding that the division chairs should consider cutting their own release time to make up the deficit. He expressed no regret for his debacle. The Dean's Council was deeply upset. They had been led to believe all along that all was well, only to have a wrench thrown into the process at the last minute — collapsing the entire proposal, which had been built over 18 months of hard work. The division chairs privately briefed me on other issues they had experienced with the dean over the past couple of years, as well as his lack of respect for this body. I knew the dean had blundered. I wished he had simply expressed regret for his colossal failure and asked the division chairs for their help in moving forward. I had already heard a

lot of rumblings among faculty about Jerry's leadership, and the most common one was that they did not trust his words. It did not bode well, since Jerry, in his role as the VPAA and Dean of Faculty, was the primary liaison between the faculty and the administration. Prompted by the release-time fiasco, we, the division chairs, sent a memo to the dean outlining several concrete issues concerning his leadership and expressing our eagerness to work with him to advance the academic affairs agenda.

While my introduction to the Dean's Council was eventful, I did not allow it to affect my teaching or my scholarly work. I submitted an abstract of my recent work to the International Congress of Mathematicians (ICM), to be held in August 1994. The ICM is held once every four years in different parts of the world, and this time it was in Zurich, Switzerland. North Central College had a faculty grant program that provided money to qualified applicants for their research expenses. I was philosophically opposed to giving money to faculty for their time spent doing research; I understood giving money for expenses, but not for time. I applied successfully for grant money to meet my expenses, and I had a great experience at ICM94 in Zurich, Switzerland.

I was now in my second year as division chair, and Divya was in her fourth year at the college. She followed the traditional route, taking four years to complete her degree program. She majored in mathematics and chemistry and took several courses in computer science, falling just short of the number of courses required to earn a major in that field as well. She applied to several universities for her Ph.D., and the decision was easy for us because she was admitted to

Northwestern University in Evanston, another prestigious institution. Her tuition was waived, and she was awarded a decent fellowship. Oli and I were very happy that Divya would be in Evanston, just about a one-and-a-half-hour drive from Naperville.

There was a growing resentment among the faculty toward Hal and Jerry, the president and vice president. I still believed that both were good people, strongly committed to the welfare of the college, but they seemed too obsessed with their goals and paid little attention to the means. They should have known better; such an approach would not work in the academic arena, where faculty serve as powerful gatekeepers.

It was May 1995. Frustrated by the lack of improvement, the teaching faculty finally decided to hold a closed-door meeting to discuss the dire situation. The meeting was chaired by the faculty speaker, Dr. Francine Navakas, professor of English, who conducted it with extreme professionalism. She presented the topic in a very balanced way—neither biased nor prejudiced. The speaker monitored the discussion that followed, making sure that differing points of view were heard. It was a wonderful experience for me, one that reaffirmed my admiration for how things work in America. At the end, the faculty voted on a motion of no confidence in Jerry Berberet, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty. Paper ballots were used. The motion passed overwhelmingly, with a couple of “no” votes and a couple of abstentions.

The faculty speaker was instructed to communicate this information to the president. Preparing a memorandum outlining in detail the events that culminated in the no-confidence motion in Jerry Berberet’s leadership, the faculty

speaker met with the president and briefed him on the sad development. Two days later, Jerry Berberet submitted his resignation to the president. The following day, on May 25, at the last faculty meeting, the president announced the resignation of Jerry Berberet, which would be effective September 1, 1995.

Announcing the resignation of Jerry Berberet, President Wilde asked the faculty leaders—the incoming and outgoing faculty speakers, the division chairs, and four elected faculty representatives—to recommend three names for his consideration for acting VPAA and Dean of Faculty. There was, I felt, a unanimous sense among the faculty that Howard Mueller, Professor of Religious Studies, the most senior faculty member on campus and a man of reason, would be the obvious choice for the one-year acting role. The faculty leaders met, and as one of the division chairs, I participated in the group. No sooner had the chair called for nominations than the names of Professor Howard Mueller and Pierre Lebeau, Professor of French, were put forward. At that point, someone suggested that deciding on a third name and adding it to the list would be a waste of time, because they felt confident the president would choose one of the two: Mueller or Lebeau. That argument was countered, however, with the concern that the president might return the list and ask for three names. While everyone hesitated and looked around the room, the outgoing faculty speaker, Fran Navakas, proposed that my name be included on the list. Somewhat surprised, they all turned to me, watching to see if I would accept or decline the nomination. While I had not expected this turn of events—not in the least—I told the group that I had no objection to including my name, adding

that if the president asked me to serve as acting VPAA and Dean of Faculty, I would gladly accept his invitation and do my utmost in the role. Once the decision was made to send the three names to the president, the meeting of the faculty leaders ended quickly.

The president wasted no time in starting the interviewing process. My memory fails me here, as I do not recall the details of my conversation with him as a candidate. But, I do remember one thing clearly: I told him I would give my opinion on the three candidates while separating myself from the candidate "Pandian." If he appointed Howard Mueller—an exceptionally well-respected colleague with tremendous experience at the College—it would be a safe choice where he would be taking no risk at all. On the other hand, going with Pandian would be a bold decision, one that carried some risk. A few days later, I was invited to meet with the president again. He told me that he had decided to ask me to serve as acting VPAA and Dean of Faculty until a new vice president and dean was selected and in place. I was surprised but absolutely happy about the opportunity to serve the college in this capacity. I knew I could get things done well.

I knew that Naperville was a largely white and heavily conservative city. I also knew that North Central College was not an isolated institution within Naperville; it was an integral part of the city. The presidents of North Central College had always maintained a strong rapport with the city's leadership. So, I asked the president whether he had any concerns about the city's potential reaction to appointing "a foreigner, a man of color" as the college's chief academic officer. He said, "No."

A few days later, the president sent a memorandum to the faculty and staff, reporting that I had agreed to serve as Acting Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty for the academic year 1995–1996, beginning September 1, 1995, and that I would serve in that position until a new vice president and dean was selected and in place. He added that the wisdom and insight of Professors Howard Mueller and Pierre Lebeau could be best used in the most important academic affairs challenge North Central faced in 1995–1996: choosing a new vice president and dean. I was scheduled to take my second sabbatical in the fall of 1995, which I agreed to postpone.

The work as VPAA and Dean of Faculty was intense, but I enjoyed it. On the administrative side, the president's cabinet meetings were held every week, typically on Monday mornings, and often ran for about three hours. The cabinet consisted of vice presidents representing different areas: academic affairs, finance, student enrollment and management, and institutional advancement (primarily fundraising). The Vice President for Academic Affairs was considered first among equals and would assume the presidency if the president were unable to serve temporarily for any reason. The vice presidents participated in all board meetings, which were held three times a year. The board was kept apprised of developments at the college through reports prepared and presented by the vice presidents to their respective committees. For example, the VPAA and Dean of Faculty prepared reports on academic initiatives, curricular proposals, as well as promotion and tenure matter for the board's Academic Affairs Committee.

Having been at the college for about 10 years, served on almost all major committees and as division chair, I had a pretty good understanding of the role of the VPAA and Dean of Faculty at the College. What was new to me was how the cabinet operated, the president's working relationship with the VPAA in dealing with issues pertaining to academic affairs, and the interaction of the VPAA with the board.

As I was immersed in my work, the college was abuzz with news about the ongoing search to permanently fill the position of VPAA and Dean of Faculty. At Monday-morning cabinet meetings, President Wilde provided regular updates on the search. Also, *The NCC Chronicle*, the student newspaper, reported periodically on the search. Professor Howard Mueller chaired the nine-member search committee, which was composed of administrators, faculty, students, and a member of the Board of Trustees. In addition to advertisements placed in several publications and online, the president sent out letters to approximately 90 deans and vice presidents of colleges and universities in an effort to expand the pool of candidates.

The committee received more than 130 applications from across the nation. After going through a rigorous process, the committee shortlisted two candidates for on-campus interviews. My memory was that the committee shortlisted three, but one candidate withdrew from further consideration. Each candidate spent two or three days on campus meeting with administrators, faculty, staff, and students. They also met with me, the purpose of which was to gain my perspective on the position of VPAA and Dean of Faculty.

Apparently, the feedback to the search committee from the College community about the two candidates was mixed.

Professor Howard Mueller wrote to the faculty that, after careful consideration, the committee rejected both finalists, concluding that there was insufficient faculty consensus overall in favor of either candidate. I did not know what was going on as I was completely removed from the search process.

While this news was unfolding, I received feelers encouraging me to apply for the position. I said I was not seeking the position and had no intention of applying. Time has blurred some of the details, but a couple of days later, a committee member met with me and asked if I would accept the position if there were strong endorsement from the faculty; I said I would. Later, I read in *The NCC Chronicle* that the committee “began to consider installing the acting Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty, R. Devadoss Pandian, as the permanent administrator.” A faculty forum was arranged where I would make a public presentation to the faculty, followed by roundtable discussions focused on my stance on various issues.

After all these intense activities, President Wilde met with me. Then, at a faculty meeting in April 1996, he announced that I had accepted the position of Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty. In a letter distributed to the North Central community, the president said that Pandian’s most important qualification for the job was his character. He added: “His understanding of and commitment to the values and standards which embody North Central at its best are second to none in this institution; he is a man of unquestioned integrity, strong intellect, and incredible energy...deeply loyal to this college.”

This episode marked another turning point in my life — one I had not anticipated. As I absorbed what had happened, I found myself thinking: only in America.

With President Wilde's announcement to the faculty, my role as Acting Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty officially ended, and I began serving as Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty, effective immediately. Dropping the word "Acting" from my title did not change my approach to the new role. During the roughly one-year period when I was Acting VPAA and Dean of Faculty, I did not simply manage academic affairs — as is often expected in an acting role — but was diligent in the pursuit of excellence in faculty hiring, promotion, and tenure.

Oli, after a stint as a postdoctoral fellow, taught in a community college, driving about 40 minutes each way, mostly at night. I thought it was enough, and I asked her to retire. On another personal note, Satyan, in his third year at Johns Hopkins, one day told us that he had found someone very special — Doris, a Chinese American girl, who was doing her master's in public health there. They were clearly devoted to each other, and my paternal instinct was that they should get married at the earliest. Her parents agreed, and the marriage was solemnized in a church in Baltimore that year.

As a faculty member, I had always asked the question, "Who owns the college?" Put differently: "Who was at the helm, setting the sails and navigating this ship in a vast ocean?" I knew the board had fiduciary responsibility for the college and, as such, was accountable for its overall welfare. However, I also knew that the board was not equipped to be at the helm, driving the engine. Following the college bylaws, they

delegated that responsibility to the president of the college, whom they had hired—and that made sense. The soul of a college was not its buildings or endowment—though they are critically important—it was the academic wing of the college, encompassing the faculty, curriculum, and students. Therefore, the president, while navigating the ship, had the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty by his side on the bridge, assisting him in steering the course.

While the three units—the Board of Trustees, the president and cabinet, and the faculty—had distinct responsibilities, the faculty expected that the Board and the president would not use their authority unilaterally to manage college affairs—though they had the legal right to do so—but would instead consult with the faculty on all major matters, essentially sharing governance. Likewise, while the faculty had primary responsibility for the curriculum, this did not mean they held final authority over it. The board, though generally deferential to the faculty because it was their area of expertise, had the ultimate say. In small liberal arts colleges, this concept was known as “shared governance.” I was a strong proponent of shared governance, partly because I believed that the college “belonged” to the faculty as much as it did to the administration. I also believed that consulting with the faculty would lead to better outcomes. However, I had heard that, in general, administrations were not enthusiastic about embracing this model, as they feared it would slow down decision-making and introduce perspectives that were often quite different from their own. The notion of shared governance was often a source of friction between the faculty and the administration. In such institutions, the Vice President

for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty—who served as the primary liaison between the two—often faced significant challenges in navigating this tension.

Over the past ten years, I have learned a great deal about higher education in general, particularly about the roles of the president, faculty, and board in shaping a college's future. I knew my faculty well. While there might have been a few exceptions, collectively the faculty were good: rational, thoughtful, and engaging partners. I had firsthand knowledge of the interplay among the president, faculty, and board as they worked toward the betterment of the college—sometimes in competing fashion. Having worked with President Wilde and interacted with the board for a year, I was confident that I could work effectively with all parties to advance the college's agenda, including my own ambitions for the College.

I quickly settled into my routine. The cabinet met every Monday morning for more than three hours. As the liaison between the president and the faculty, I kept the president and his cabinet informed of all academic matters and communicated the Cabinet's reactions back to the faculty through multiple channels, including the Academic Advisory Council, the Dean's Council, and various standing committees. The Dean's Council, composed of me and the four division chairs, functioned as my "cabinet," a body that met weekly to discuss matters related to the divisions. The division chairs served as liaisons between me and the faculty in their respective divisions. As I had previously served as a division chair, the Dean's Council was a familiar entity.

There was the Faculty Personnel Committee, an exclusive faculty body that also met weekly and carried the primary

responsibility for evaluating and recommending faculty for retention, promotion, and tenure. The Committee made its recommendations to me, and I, in turn, made my own recommendations to the president—independent of the committee's. I was a member of this committee, but a non-voting member, which made sense. My role was very limited: I simply observed the discussions and ensured that the committee applied the criteria for retention, promotion, and tenure rigorously, while staying within the established parameters. By sitting on the committee, I had the benefit of hearing the faculty's perspective in each case. Having served as an elected member of the Faculty Personnel Committee, I had personal knowledge of how this body operated, which helped.

I told the faculty, in every forum possible, that our top priority should be building an excellent faculty—a process that began with the hiring of new members. As a faculty member, I had served on several search committees, so I had a good sense of how the process worked. I believed we could significantly improve the search process—one that would attract a strong pool of highly qualified applicants and help us hire the best possible candidate. That meant not only refining our hiring practices but also offering a competitive benefits package to make our positions more attractive.

North Central College had an excellent teaching faculty, with some of them pursuing strong scholarly agendas. Recognizing that a renewed emphasis on scholarship would not only enhance teaching but also have a trickle-down effect on student research, the college began placing more emphasis on scholarship than before. I also believed this would have a positive effect in our effort to attract strong candidates.

The search process had been routinized for years. Search committees always included one outside member and two students, who were mostly deferential to the department in the final selection of a candidate. Typically, departments were keen on selecting candidates who would be “best fits,” integrating smoothly into the collegial and professional culture of the department. My concern was that the “best fit” approach could lead to increased homogeneity, causing departments to become stagnant. That was indeed the case in some departments.

The faculty search process was a year-long, large-scale operation in which faculty, students, division chairs, and the dean ended up spending a lot of money, time, and energy. Sometimes in the past, even when a search drew more than 100 applications, it would end without finding the right candidate. In such cases, departments had often hired the next best person—someone who was not an ideal candidate for the position—partly because of the enormous resources invested in the search. Taking a different approach, I told the search committees that, since we were searching for tenure-track positions—a lifelong appointment—we should close the search, fill the position for one year, and begin the search again the following year.

My sense was that most faculty at North Central College were liberals, both fiscally and socially. In fact, my observation was that most faculty in higher education—at both colleges and universities—were liberals. My concern was that the views of a very small number of conservative faculty—especially those who were socially conservative—were being smothered by the dominant liberal perspective. I wanted to ensure that

ideological bias—whether aligned with liberal values or otherwise—did not creep into faculty searches.

I had settled into a routine. I arrived at my office around 7:30 a.m. each morning, took about ten minutes for lunch—rice and yogurt always brought from home—and usually left around 7:00 p.m. I came in on Saturdays too, though only until noon. When the clock struck 5:00 p.m., I would tell my office assistants, including my administrative assistant, to close up and go home. I was aware that academic affairs vice presidents had a reputation for keeping their administrative assistants late to “get things done” in the quiet of the evening. I didn’t subscribe to that practice.

In some ways, my situation was somewhat unique. My administrative assistant, Sue Rickert, was exceptionally efficient and well organized, so there was no need for her to stay beyond 5:00 p.m. At the same time, I made a conscious effort to organize my work so that it did not require her to stay late.

Once I left the office, I left everything behind—including the emotions the work stirred up that day. After dinner, I would watch some TV, mostly old sitcoms—*The Jeffersons*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Sanford and Son*, *All in the Family*, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Cosby Show*, *The Odd Couple*, *I Love Lucy*, *The Golden Girls*, and others from that golden era. Of course, they were entertaining, but my deeper interest was in understanding the evolution of American social culture. By 9:00 or 9:30 p.m., I was so tired that I was a dead animal, who slept deeply for eight or nine hours every day.

In carrying out my responsibilities as VPAA and Dean of Faculty, I was assisted by an Associate Dean for Academic

Affairs, a full-time administrative position typically occupied by a faculty member. I chose Dr. Marti Bogart, Associate Professor of Economics, who had previously served as chair of the Division of Economics and Business. A no-nonsense person, Marti was a highly effective and versatile administrator with exceptional interpersonal skills, who was capable of dealing with issues across all aspects of the college. We worked well together and she served in that role throughout my tenure.

When I took on the role of Acting VPAA and Dean of Faculty, I began wearing full suits—something I didn't particularly enjoy. What really bothered me was the tie. Jackets I could live with, but the tie was a nuisance. Still, over time, I got used to it. I wore the suit and tie because I felt it was appropriate for the office I held.

From my own experience at North Central—and from conversations with faculty at other institutions—I came to expect that deans were often late to their appointments. The usual explanation was that they had been held up at some other event. I never bought that excuse. To me, it was simply a matter of discipline. In all my years, I never made anyone wait—not even for a minute.

While the faculty appreciated the respect I showed by being on time for all their appointments, they were frustrated that I was too slow in making decisions—even on simple requests—especially those involving long-range projects. I did not think I was slow. Slowness is inherent in the principle of shared governance. I told the faculty that this institution had been here for more than 150 years and would be here for at least another 150. In that perspective, a few months—or even a year—was an insignificant amount of time, especially when dealing with

long-term projects. I often reminded myself of a Tamil proverb: *பதறாத காரியம் சிதறாது*, which translates to “A task not rushed won’t fall apart.”

When a faculty member sent me an email with a request, I responded by email if my reply was brief. Otherwise, I would leave a voicemail, where I could explain my decision in more detail and in a measured tone, outlining the pros and cons. Sometimes, depending on the nature of the request, my response would be lengthy—perhaps too lengthy at times. I had heard from faculty that they were terrified to listen to my voicemails because I went on and on forever. However, there was a reason my messages were long: I tried to provide a comprehensive response—not a quick yes or no—anticipating the faculty member’s follow-up questions or reactions.

Here is an interesting story of a Tamil king. There are many variations of the story, and here is one. The king wanted to add an advisor to his court from among his warriors. Two warriors were recommended. On the day of a religious festival, both were sequestered, and the king asked the first warrior to find out where the noise was coming from. The warrior left the court, returned, and said that people were frolicking at a festival. The king then asked for an estimate of the crowd. The warrior went out again and came back to say there were about 300 people. The king asked when the ceremony would end. The warrior stepped out once more and returned with the answer: by 8:00 p.m.

Then the king asked the second warrior the same initial question: where the noise was coming from. The second warrior left, returned, and said that people were frolicking at a religious festival. Then he added politely that about 300 people

were in the crowd and that the ceremony would conclude by 8:00 p.m. Knowing the kind of follow-up questions the king was likely to ask, he came prepared – with all the answers.

Anytime I saw that a faculty member had made an appointment to meet with me, I looked forward to the conversation. Why would I look forward to a meeting that, in all likelihood, would involve someone bringing an issue to my attention and seeking a solution? For one thing, I wanted to know what the issue was and address it as soon as possible. Just as important, I knew that such issues were not isolated – they often pointed to broader concerns or underlying tensions within a department, a division, or among the faculty as a whole. When there was a meeting in my office, to protect privacy, the door would be closed. I listened very intently and with empathy to what was being said. To me, listening is a virtue.

I had always believed that good listening not only comforted the faculty member but was often half the solution. While responding to concerns raised in a meeting, the temptation would be to say something simply to appease the faculty member. I avoided that at all costs. In fact, during such conversations – it might sound strange – I would imagine as though the other party were sitting just outside my office, listening to what was being said inside.

A little digression. It was sometime in July 2002 when Satyan called to inform me that he and Doris would be out of town for a few days. He asked whether Amma (mother) and I could stay with our grandchildren, Judah (5) and Jalyn (1), in Columbus, and take care of them until they returned. At the time, Satyan was completing his third and final year of

postdoctoral work at The Ohio State University. He would be joining the Williams College in Williamstown—the number-one ranked small liberal arts college in the country—in a tenure-track position as assistant professor of mathematics. After going through a national search and receiving multiple offers, Williams College was an easy choice for him.

I told him that, given the nature of my work, I could not afford to be away from my desk for that long. I suggested that the best option would be for Amma and me to drive to Columbus and bring the children back to our house in Naperville so I could continue attending to my work. That is what we did: we drove to Columbus, stayed overnight, and then drove back to Naperville with our little grandchildren. On the way, we took Interstate 70. After a three-hour drive, at about 11:30 a.m., we got hungry. I knew we were a little east of Indianapolis, and I started looking for food signs along the road. I noticed a restaurant, but I didn't recognize the name—it wasn't a national chain. We were so hungry that it didn't matter what kind of restaurant it was. I took the exit and began looking for it. Typically, gas stations and restaurants were just a few minutes from the highway, but even after driving several minutes, I still couldn't find it. Instead of turning back to the highway, I kept going until, several miles away, I finally found the restaurant.

The area was rural, and the restaurant looked like a house. We walked in, and a server took us—not to the main dining area, but to the porch, where there was no one else. We were by ourselves, and I kind of liked it. He said he would be back and left. We sat there for more than 10 minutes, waiting for someone to show up to take our orders. The children were

hungry. I went to the main desk and reminded them that we were seated on the porch and had been waiting for more than 10 minutes, but the server had not returned to take our orders. Yet another 10 minutes passed—still no movement. I’m sure the reader can guess what was going on. Again, I went back to the main desk. Suspecting something was wrong, another server whispered something to a man—perhaps the manager—who then came to the porch and took our orders. From that point, things moved very quickly, and we were served with lightning speed. When I asked for the bill, the manager apologized for what had happened and told me the food was on him. While the money was not a big deal—either for me or for the restaurant—his gesture erased any hard feelings the situation had created. This incident did not in any way diminish my opinion of America; in fact, the way the matter was handled only reinforced my appreciation for the country. With that, we were back on our way to Naperville.

Colleges and universities were always learning from one another. National organizations such as the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), and the New American Colleges and Universities (NACU) provided platforms for the exchange of ideas. North Central College was a founding member of NACU, originally called the Associated New American Colleges (ANAC). North Central was also a member of a regional organization—the Associated Colleges of the Chicago Area (ACCA)—which consisted of 14 colleges and universities in the Chicago area.

Historically, there were two types of higher education institutions: traditional liberal arts colleges and large research

universities. Perhaps out of financial or other necessities, new types of colleges or universities emerged, offering a wide range of undergraduate programs, master's programs, professional programs, and even doctoral programs. The Carnegie Foundation classified these institutions as "comprehensive" colleges and universities. Unfortunately, these comprehensive institutions were often simply a potpourri of programs—"ugly ducklings of higher education"—not tied coherently to any academic vision. Ernest Boyer, an influential American educator, proposed a "New American College" that would purposefully integrate liberal, professional, and civic education. Answering this call, a group of chief academic officers from comprehensive private colleges and universities joined hands and founded an organization: the Associated New American Colleges (ANAC), later renamed New American Colleges and Universities.

Interestingly, this development took place when Jerry Berberet was at North Central College. He was part of the small group of chief academic officers who founded the Associated New American Colleges. North Central College was not a comprehensive institution; it was a traditional liberal arts college with a few graduate programs. I called it "Liberal Arts Plus" and I would say it never embraced the integration of liberal arts with professional education. Most faculty were not comfortable with the college being identified as a New American College.

While Jerry was VPAA and Dean of Faculty, there was a debate at a faculty meeting about integrating liberal arts with professional programs. I took a strong position that liberal education should not be "polluted" by the happenings around

us. I argued that, for a true liberal education, we should put all our incoming students in a space shuttle and be gone for a year—removed from the “norms” of the earth that would influence their thinking.

That said, in all my years as the chief academic officer of North Central College, I attended all ANAC-NACU meetings regularly. The college did its best to host ANAC-NACU conferences periodically. We were keenly aware that being associated with somewhat similar institutions had its own benefits.

On a side note, more and more comprehensive colleges were changing their names from “colleges” to “universities.” For example, in the ACCA group, Aurora College, Concordia College, and Elmhurst College—to list a few—all became universities. Vice Presidents for Academic Affairs and Deans of Faculty became provosts; administrative divisions with division chairs became schools with deans.

On a personal note, Divya completed her Ph.D. in applied mathematics at Northwestern, where she met Franck, a French student finishing his Ph.D. in engineering. We soon learned of their mutual affection. After welcoming Franck into our circle and seeing their commitment to one another, we gave our blessings and arranged their marriage. With his parents flying in from France, the ceremony was solemnized in a church in Evanston.

The following year, they were both on the job market. Franck looked for positions at R1 universities—which prioritize candidates with strong research records, significant funding potential, and top-tier pedigrees. Divya focused on institutions where teaching excellence was the highest priority. As we say

in higher education, they had a two-body problem. Franck received multiple offers from top-tier institutions and ultimately chose the University of Colorado Boulder, where Divya secured an appointment as a lecturer in the Department of Mathematics.

What I regretted most during my deanship was the lack of personal connection with students. They were placed in a separate silo under the leadership of the vice president for student affairs and the dean of students. While I understood the need for such an arrangement—given the monumental responsibility of serving thousands of students—I missed having a direct way to engage with them. That absence left a gap I felt throughout my tenure.

I recognized that I had opportunities to connect with students. Every year, I gave a talk to first-year students at their opening convocation—a standard speech in which I told them that their academic journey could best be described by the motto of my alma mater which read in Latin, *“Purificatus Nonconsumptus.”* This meant “to purify, not to consume,” and referred to the power of fire.

In this speech, I also shared a personal story that I found fascinating. When I was a little boy, my father had taken me to jewelry stores where he bought jewels for my mother. He would typically sell 4 or 5-year-old 22-carat jewelry and buy new pieces. He would take me behind the showroom, where the goldsmiths were working. We knew that 22-carat gold was not pure—it contained impurities. As a young boy, I stood in awe and shock as I watched the goldsmiths throw 22-carat jewelry into a fire to remove those impurities. Fire did not destroy gold; it purified it. I told the first-year students that

they would face heat and light and the metaphysical fire throughout their academic journey, and that this fire would help shape and build their character.

A higher education ritual was that during the commencement ceremony, deans of schools would read the names of the graduating seniors in their division as they walked across the stage receiving their diplomas. At North Central, it was the VPAA and Dean of Faculty reading the names of all graduating seniors. I had heard of horror stories of a name not being read perfectly and the upset parents bitterly complaining about this to the administration later. I never quite understood the fuss.

Now, I had to read the names of almost 400 graduating seniors. It was a big challenge. I had a young Registrar, Jonathan Pickering, a native English speaker. He taught me the pronunciation of every single name. In difficult names – most were difficult for me – I wrote down the names phonetically in Tamil. I practiced several times with Jonathan until he declared that I was ready for the big day.

The day before commencement, we had a rehearsal. Each student would walk to the podium, and I would read their name to them. With the exception of a few cases, they walked away satisfied with the way I pronounced their names. I was not sure how students with complex, non-phonetic names would react to my pronunciation. Invariably, in every single case, they were the ones who openly expressed delight in my pronunciation – perhaps because they did not expect this level of “perfection” from a non-native speaker. Some of the challenges came from simple names such as John or Paul. I remembered one time I read ‘John,’ and he said it was not

‘John,’ but ‘John.’ I told him that was exactly what I had said, but he insisted it was not. I was sure that there were some nuances I was missing. After a couple of attempts, he left the podium somewhat satisfied.

I knew reading names at the commencement ceremony was part of my responsibilities. It should have been an easy and fun exercise, but it was not for me. I spent hours and hours practicing the names, painfully aware that I could not afford to make even the slightest mistake in pronouncing a name.

After continuing this exercise for ten years, I learned that colleges followed different practices, with some making the reading of names almost “professional.” I met with President Wilde and raised the matter. Without any hesitation, he said that I no longer needed to do it. We then chatted for a while about who would be a good choice and quickly settled on one.

We had a celebratory event every year for all the students who made the Dean’s List by securing a GPA of 3.6 or above (on a 4.0 scale). I hosted a lunch with a few key faculty members in attendance. Each student received a t-shirt with text appropriate for that year printed on it. I gave a talk congratulating them on their accomplishments, urging them not to treat the bachelor’s degree as a terminal achievement, and exhorting them to consider pursuing advanced degrees. I invited faculty members and students to share their reflections on the occasion. This was the only gathering where I had the chance to meet and interact with students personally.

Then there was the Rall Symposium, an annual event where students presented their scholarly work and the whole campus brimmed with energy. Student scholarship was always valued and celebrated at North Central College. Active student

chapters—Beta Beta Beta, the American Chemical Society, and the Pre-Health Organization—promoted scholarship among their members. Student scholars presented their work at regional and national conferences. As we hired new faculty with a stronger appetite for scholarship, they created more opportunities for students to pursue research. President Wilde and I decided to establish a research symposium at the College and named it the Rall Symposium in honor of Joseph E. Rall, a 1940 alumnus and former deputy director of intramural research at the National Institutes of Health. Working with the faculty at large and the three student organizations, the Rall Symposium was established in 1998. The symposium received a tremendous boost when Ed Rall brought Nobel laureates and other eminent scientists as keynote speakers. This gave a real fillip to the culture of scholarship, and the Rall Symposium emerged as a centerpiece of the college's celebration of student research.

The college had an official student governing body—the Student Governing Council (SGA)—run by elected student leaders representing various student interests. The SGA had representation on several college committees as well as on the Board of Trustees. It managed an annual budget of nearly \$400,000, funded through student activity fees. I was deeply impressed by its partnership with the college administration. In addressing issues, the members were thoughtful, deliberate, and democratic. They also organized many campus-wide activities that were both educational and entertaining.

Among the many activities they organized, one was inviting public figures to give speeches at important student events on campus. I was shocked to learn that these speakers

often had agents and were paid thousands of dollars for a one-hour speech. I felt revulsion. It was unbelievable to me that speakers would collect such exorbitant fees when addressing students; it should have been a privilege. Paying them a reasonable honorarium to cover expenses would have made sense. Consider the Rall Symposium, a prestigious student event, where Nobel laureates, eminent scientists, and distinguished academicians gave keynote speeches. They received, at most, a modest honorarium to cover their expenses. All said, I could never understand why the SGA student leaders would spend such large sums to hear someone speak.

Fortunately, I had the pleasure of interacting with hundreds of students for over 10 years while in the mathematics department, teaching mathematics. Those were wonderful years. I relished teaching—working with students on individual research projects, meeting with them in my office and sometimes in residence halls. I found students cheerful and enjoying their lives. Yet, over time, I gathered—from news media, colleagues, friends, and even students themselves—that life could be quite challenging for them on the personal side.

I come from a place where students typically did not leave their parents' nests until they had finished higher education, found a job, and got married. Parents covered all expenses—tuition, room and board, and other miscellaneous costs. If parents were poor, they would sell whatever small property they might have or borrow money to meet the expenses of their children's education. This was how it worked: if the parents were well off, then once the children found jobs and married, they would begin independent lives. If the parents were poor,

the children, after settling into their lives, would start sending money to their parents so they could recover from debts.

Apparently, that was not the case here. Once children entered college, around the age of 18, parents treated them as independent adults and expected them to take care of themselves with minimal support, which placed considerable pressure on them. As a result, many ended up borrowing money. I had lived in this country for nearly 50 years and had gained a fair understanding of family life here. In relative terms, many parents were well off, though the family culture was quite different. I had often wondered why parents did not adjust their lifestyles—perhaps by making some sacrifices, even borrowing if necessary—to support their children’s education. I also wondered why such a rich country, the richest in the world, could not prioritize education over many other things and provide free education.

I recognized that college education was expensive in absolute terms, but not when compared with other things on which people spent their money. A bachelor’s degree typically took four years, and there was a certain level of excess that nevertheless made undergraduate liberal education the envy of the world. I would venture that the program could be compressed into three years without sacrificing essential outcomes by reducing elective and general education requirements.

I think it was around the year 2010. After having served for more than 15 years as the VPAA and Dean of Faculty, I began thinking about retiring and returning to India. My children had settled down permanently here in the States. Both had become American citizens a long time ago. They were established

academicians, married, and raising their own families. This would be their country for generations to come. I was 68. I still had a good 15 to 20 years left in me to be actively involved in some kind of public life in Tamil Nadu.

Ironically for me, around the same time, I came to know that President Wilde, who had been president for 19 years, was also contemplating retirement. The simultaneous retirement of a president and a vice president for academic affairs would pose its own challenges for any college. Colleges would tread carefully in such situations for the simple reason that newly appointed presidents would like to select their own vice presidents, particularly the vice president for academic affairs. This meant that both Wilde and I could not retire at the same time; moreover, I could not retire before he did.

We discussed the situation and agreed that I would delay my retirement. What this arrangement meant was that I would be with the new president for a couple of years, providing time for the president to settle in and search for a new vice president for academic affairs and dean of faculty.

President Wilde decided to retire at the end of the 2012 calendar year and announced his intention during the Winter Term of 2012. I knew the College would miss him. He was an exemplary administrator. While I admired his administrative acumen, what I liked most about him was his humanity; he showed empathy even when making difficult decisions involving employees, not an easy task for a president.

The Board formed a search committee, chaired by a trustee and made up of trustees, faculty, staff, students, and alumni. Following a national search, the Board selected Dr. Troy

Hammond as the next president, with his term beginning January 1, 2013.

I enjoyed working with Hammond, whose style of leadership was very different from Wilde's. As originally planned, I decided to retire at the end of the academic year 2014–2015, which meant I would have two years alongside Hammond as VPAA and Dean of Faculty. After discussing it with him, I announced to the faculty and the board in the Spring Term of 2014 that I would step down from my position at the end of the 2014–2015 academic year. I told them I had just completed my “third quarter” and that my plan was to return to India for my “fourth quarter” —to spend 10 to 15 years in public life. The college conducted a successful national search to fill the position that would be vacant upon my retirement and announced the appointment of Dr. Abiódún “G-P” Gòkè-Pariolá as the next VPAA and Dean of Faculty. My last day as dean would be June 30, 2015, and G-P would assume office on July 1, 2015.

As the academic year 2014–2015 was drawing to a close, I knew that the faculty planned to give me a farewell party. That did not surprise me. After all, I had served the College in my position as VPAA and Dean of Faculty for 20 years, while the national average was only 3 to 5 years. There were multiple reasons for this high turnover: stepping up to a presidency, presidential transitions, faculty pushback, and the high-pressure nature of balancing faculty and administration. Serving in this position for 20 years was rare and exceptional, and it turned out that I was the longest-serving dean in the history of North Central College.

On the day of the celebration, we gathered in Meily Swallow Hall for a formal faculty meeting—the last one I would attend as dean. Professor Steve Renk, the faculty speaker, presided over the meeting. Oli, Divya, Angelene, and Joy were guests, along with former president Hal Wilde and several trustees. By happy coincidence, Divya happened to be visiting us with her children that week. President Hammond and the cabinet members were also in attendance. Three faculty members—Professors Jennifer Keys, Jack Shindler, and Nancy Peterson—together with Tom Love, professor emeritus of economics, spoke briefly, each reflecting on different aspects of my contributions to the College during my tenure as dean.

They spoke of: my deep commitment to shared governance and my extraordinary respect for faculty as stakeholders in that process; my dedication to building an outstanding faculty as well as rigorous tenure, promotion, and post-tenure system; my work with a range of faculty development initiatives that fostered excellence in teaching and scholarship; my undertaking of initiatives such as undergraduate research, the Rall Symposium, one-on-one student engagement, and the distinctive verandah program that enriched student learning outside the formal classroom; and finally my role in setting in motion program initiatives that dramatically enhanced the college's academic reputation.

The faculty then passed a resolution of appreciation, capturing the essence of the speakers' remarks and expressing gratitude for thirty years of leadership, integrity, initiative, and wisdom as well as the profound impact of my deanship on the academic life of the college.

The faculty showered me with gifts, including a fountain pen and an Apple Watch. For me, the most touching announcement was that they were planting a maple tree on campus as a testament to my legacy. I wondered why a maple tree. I learned that the choice was deeply meaningful. Strong and enduring, I was told, this tree symbolized the lasting impact of my work at the College. As the faculty speaker remarked in his address, in time, its wide branches would offer shade and shelter, creating a verandah-like space for faculty and students.

After the faculty meeting was adjourned, we moved to the lobby of the Wentz Fine Arts Center for a reception. President Hammond introduced the trustees, former staff members, and faculty emeriti who had joined us for the occasion. President Emeritus Wilde then spoke. Having worked together for eighteen years, he knew me better than anyone else. He spoke eloquently about our shared years of service, reflecting on what those years had meant to him personally and to the College. I appreciated the symbolism of having President Emeritus Wilde deliver the farewell speech and toast at this year-end faculty gathering.

Then came the June 2015 commencement exercises, my last commencement as VPAA and Dean of Faculty. It was also the last academic event in which I would participate after fifty years in higher education. The atmosphere was festive, with the usual fanfare: faculty and graduates in caps and gowns and parents and grandparents filling the arena, awaiting their children and grandchildren as they marched across the stage to receive their degrees.

On this occasion, in recognition of my thirty years of service as professor, scholar, dean, and vice president, the Board of Trustees conferred upon me the honorary title of Professor of Mathematics and Dean of Faculty Emeritus.

As was customary at many colleges and universities, North Central College also awarded honorary degrees to recognize individuals of distinction for their achievements and contributions. What happened next was something exceptional. The Board awarded me the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters. The citation spoke of an esteemed career at North Central College, one that represented a model of inspired academic leadership and nurtured a culture of inquiry. It described a distinguished career in higher education marked by deep commitment to teaching and scholarship, and by distinguished academic leadership and service to the larger academic community.

With that, a fifty-year academic journey that began in 1965 at The American College in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, ended at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois.

Fourth Quarter

The fourth quarter would begin in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. In the midst of the many activities during my last year of service at the college, Oli and I talked about our future. We were both eager to return to India, though for different reasons. For Priscilla, it was the joy of going back to Madurai after a long sojourn in the States; for me, it was the deeply rooted dream of returning to my motherland to engage in public life.

The bigger question was whether we would miss our children and grandchildren, who were living in the States –

Satyan and his family in Williamstown, and Divya and her family in Boulder. We didn't think so. After all, during our life in Naperville, we visited them perhaps once a year, only for a couple of weeks at most. But if we moved to Madurai, we reasoned, we could still visit them for longer stretches—a month or two each year.

Then an interesting idea crossed our minds. All these years, our primary home had been in the States and our secondary in Madurai, which served as our abode whenever we visited India. What if we flipped the arrangement—making the Madurai house our primary residence and buying a house in the States as our secondary?

The decision of where to buy a house was simple. We knew Satyan didn't need our help; his children were grown, save for the youngest, and since Doris was a homemaker, assisting them wasn't a priority. Divya's situation, however, was quite different. As a full-time faculty member at the University of Colorado Boulder with two young daughters, ages five and six, she needed more support. Ultimately, we decided to buy a house in Boulder to be near her. Fortuitously, Divya was selling her house to move into a bigger one in Boulder. Her new house was at an ideal distance from her old house—about a ten-minute drive, not too close and not too far. We bought the house, just the right size for the two of us.

My last day of work at the college was June 30, 2015. We put our Naperville home on the market and drove to Boulder on July 1, arriving on July 2. It took hardly a month for us to settle into the new environment. It was wonderful to be with our granddaughters. When school began in August, I had the pure joy of picking up Deepa from her preschool and Priya

from her elementary school, where she had just started first grade.

We never imagined we would have such an unbelievable and amazing time with our granddaughters. Perhaps there was something particularly precious about being maternal grandparents—especially to little girls. Besides, the girls developed a special bond with their grandma, whom they affectionately called “Autchi,” the Tamil word for maternal grandmother.

Having been at Williams College for 14 years, Satyan accepted a tenured position as the Fletcher Jones Professor of Applied Mathematics at the University of San Diego, effective the 2016–2017 academic year. It did not come as a surprise, as he had been contemplating a transition to the West Coast for its warmer climate. I liked the move, as he was now conveniently closer to Boulder.

Our original, resolute plan was to go to India, settle there permanently, and visit our children and their families periodically. But after spending a few months in Boulder, we were caught in our granddaughters’ web of love, affection, and smiles, and our resolve began to waver a little, just a little. Still, we decided to go to Madurai, spend several months there scoping out the landscape of public life, and shuttle between Madurai and Boulder for a year or two before making a final decision.

That November we went to Madurai—a very useful trip for me. As I began to venture into my new endeavor, Mr. Suriyakumar, a retired professor and head of the Department of Zoology at the American College, Madurai, and a former student of mine, became my chief associate. At my request, he

arranged a gathering of individuals interested in public life, mostly current and former American College professors and other academicians. I hosted this group, and we met over a cup of coffee for an hour or so each week. The discussions were freewheeling, centered on public life. Unfortunately, after a few months I had to leave for the States.

I returned to Madurai the following year with the same goal and, again with Suriyakumar's assistance, the group gathered. However, I could not sustain its interest, as it saw no clear purpose behind the meetings. Lacking vision, the group's enthusiasm gradually dwindled and eventually fizzled out. So, I knew that this door was closing.

On the other end of the spectrum, life in Boulder was invigorating – my granddaughters filled my days with pure joy and purpose. Gradually, we were drawn more and more toward the idea of making life in Boulder primary and Madurai secondary. This would leave, I feared, much of what I had hoped to accomplish during my fourth quarter largely unfulfilled.

In my daily routine of reading Indian newspapers online, including *The Hindu* and *The Indian Express*, I came across an article about the federal government at the Center drafting a National Education Policy (NEP 2016). For me, “national education” was an oxymoron. Further, given Prime Minister Modi's “One Nation” policy, I feared that the draft might contain many elements I would not like. I downloaded the NEP 2016 draft – over 200 pages long – and studied it closely. It was a depressing document for me, but I comforted myself by saying it was only a draft and that the government seemed genuinely interested in obtaining feedback from all the states.

I expected swift and strong reactions from Tamil Nadu, especially from academicians—both faculty and administrators. Unfortunately, however, the reactions from the higher education institutions were muted. There were some sporadic responses from politicians and other public intellectuals. Interestingly, the Tamil Nadu Bishops' Council responded to NEP 2016 by releasing a book on alternative education policy. Dravidar Kazhagam had a strong reaction to the document: "The BJP was keen to bring it's (sic) ideologies into the country and tried to do so under the label of a new education policy. In a State like Tamil Nadu, education will not be saffronised. It will never happen." In addition, the DMK came out strongly against the Sanskrit policy.

It bothered me deeply that an education policy would be developed by the Center and that the states, including Tamil Nadu, would be required to follow suit. Having a deep interest in education and its role in the development of Tamil Nadu, I wanted to write my own reflections on the subject—both as feedback on the NEP 2016 draft and as a way to energize stakeholders. With this in mind, paying much closer attention to the draft, I wrote my response and sent it to the appropriate ministries at the federal and state levels. Knowing how the bureaucracy works, I suspected they might not even open it, let alone read it. I also sent it to the opinion page of *The Hindu*, hoping that, if published, it would open the door for me to engage with the general public and leading academics through my writings and speeches. I felt that while one door was closing, another was about to open.

My optimism was hinged on the assumption that my NEP article would be published in *The Hindu*. To my utter

disappointment, the paper chose not to publish it. When I called, they told me that they do not publish opinions from unsolicited contributors—a rather strange policy.

Undeterred, I continued to visit Madurai every year, spending a couple of months there—meeting friends and relatives, giving talks at colleges, and occasionally at Rotary clubs. In essence, I narrowed my focus to college education in Tamil Nadu—another area of deep interest and one of my strong suits. Simply put, I decided to engage in what I call Academic Evangelism.

My long-held view was that education in Tamil Nadu had done well in terms of producing skill-based technocrats. However, it had, disappointingly, failed to instill in young minds the capacity to think critically, reason rationally, ask ethical questions, challenge an entrenched and institutionalized caste system, and develop the courage to challenge authority when warranted.

When I visited Madurai, I saw firsthand the social ills of society up close. Corruption had become pervasive. One form—often described as functional corruption—amounts to bribery to expedite processes or secure services that should already be available through standard procedures. This sad reality had grown deeply ingrained and normalized in everyday life.

More disturbing still, corruption had seeped into our academic institutions. Reports spoke of candidates paying lakhs of rupees for teaching posts, and, more shockingly, crores for the appointment of vice-chancellors. Of all our institutions—corporations, businesses, government bodies, and academic establishments—colleges and universities

should have remained above such decay, steadfast in their mission, their integrity, and their ethical leadership. Instead, the guardian of truth had become its betrayer. I was depressed that education had failed to inculcate ethical values.

Beyond corruption, irrationality and superstition continued to hold sway, while prejudices and biases remained deeply entrenched. On the social front, we had sought to redress caste-based inequalities through affirmative action and legal safeguards. We had prohibited caste-based slurs, encouraged inter-caste marriages, and implemented reservations to uplift disadvantaged communities. Yet, none of these measures had fully achieved their purpose; caste divisions persisted and, shamefully, Tamil Nadu was still mired in caste politics.

In the 1950s, many were drawn to the ideology of the Justice Party—including my father, who was born in 1901—from which the Self-Respect Movement emerged. Broadly, the movement fought to unshackle society from Brahmin supremacy in the political and social spheres. For example, at the time, marriages consecrated by Brahmins chanting Sanskrit mantras in exotic rituals were the norm and regarded as valid and binding. The Dravidian movement, led by E.V.R. Periyar, challenged this tradition and promoted Self-Respect marriages, in which no Brahmin priest was involved. That was what my father chose for my brothers' marriages: no Brahmins present.

Now, as the new generations—my father's grandchildren and great-grandchildren—were getting married, I found that Brahminism was back in marriage ceremonies with Brahmins chanting elaborate mantras in Sanskrit. They had even become part of simple rituals such as naming a newborn child or piercing a child's ears. What I gathered was that families

believed the presence of Brahmins—and their chanting—would invoke divine protection and prosperity for the couple. I would venture that even if some families did not fully believe in Brahminism, they were unwilling to take risks, regarding the ritual as a kind of “insurance policy,” just in case. So much for rationalism. Just to be clear, we were talking not about Brahmins, but about Brahminism. I lamented that education had not done enough to nurture citizens as critical thinkers.

The hard-to-miss irony: in the homeland, the principles of Self-Respect marriages had largely fallen by the wayside and Brahmin-led ceremonies once again dominated; meanwhile, Stalin—a stalwart of the Dravidian movement and Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu—unveiled a portrait of E.V.R. Periyar at Oxford University in the United Kingdom, marking 100 years of the Self-Respect Movement.

I developed two lectures addressing the inadequacies of higher education in Tamil Nadu. One was titled “College Education: Joys and Challenges,” and the other, “The Purpose of Education: Are We Living Up to It? Building Responsible, Ethical, and Engaged Citizens.” I presented these lectures to the faculty of small colleges during my visits to Madurai and was pleased that they were well received. Though my fourth quarter did not go as I had originally envisioned, it allowed me, in a modest way, to continue my academic evangelism.

Regardless of how the fourth quarter was shaping up, one thing was clear in my mind: a day would come when Oli and I would return to Madurai permanently. Part of the reason was our emotional attachment to the city—a place where we had kept our house all these years, straddling life between India

and the USA, essentially keeping one foot in India and one in the States.

There was another big reason. We knew that one day my granddaughters would finish high school and move on to universities for higher education. The University of Colorado Boulder (CU) is an excellent school, but like most boys and girls in this country, they might want to attend universities away from their hometown. Even if they decided to study at CU, it would be only for four years – and who could know where they might go for their Ph.D. studies? If and when the children left Boulder, there would be little left for Oli and me that would give us a reason to stay in the States. Divya and Franck would continue their professional lives as professors at CU. Satyan was well anchored in San Diego.

Oli, Satyan and Divya became American citizens a long time ago, but I held on to my Indian citizenship with the comfort of my green card. The reason was my lingering hope that my fourth quarter might open the door to opportunities in Tamil Nadu, including elected office, something that would require me to remain an Indian citizen. However, I knew that if I returned to Madurai permanently, I would become a “permanent resident” of India. Yet, to visit my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren in the States, I would need to hold on to my green card and maintain my “permanent residency” in the United States – a serious dilemma.

There was, however, an elegant solution to this problem: become an American citizen and obtain an OCI (Overseas Citizen of India) card issued by the Indian government. I was greatly appreciative of the Indian government for introducing the OCI card, a program that grants people of Indian origin

who become citizens of other countries almost all the privileges of an Indian citizen, except the right to stand for elected office and the right to vote.

If I chose this path, I would, for all practical purposes, have dual citizenship – without the eligibility to contest elections or vote in India. I could live in India indefinitely and continue to play what is left in my fourth quarter to the fullest extent possible. Most importantly, I could travel to the States at will to visit my family. I decided to apply for American citizenship.

It was 2018, the second year of President Donald Trump's first term. There was much talk about immigration, and among Indian immigrants there was a sense of unease: Trump was so unpredictable that anything could happen. Some even speculated that he might deny citizenship to green card holders who had not applied for it within, say, ten years of obtaining their green cards. I had lived in this country for more than thirty years as a permanent resident, and I did not want to take any risk.

I applied for citizenship. It was a fairly simple process, and I became an American citizen on August 14, 2019. In India, it was already August 15, when the whole country celebrated Independence Day. In a week, I got my American passport, and in about a month and a half I received my OCI through the Indian Embassy in Houston. These two documents brought peace of mind. They offered an ideal solution to a unique situation: my family is in the States, but my heart is in Madurai, where I hope to remain engaged in public life for as long as possible.

REFLECTIONS ON THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY: FROM DWIGHT EISENHOWER TO DONALD TRUMP

I grew up in a family and an environment where political discourse was welcomed. Discussions about politics—big or small—were a regular part of our lives. When I entered college, I slowly began paying attention to American politics, especially presidential politics.

My earliest memory of American presidential politics goes back to the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower. It was connected to PL-480, the American program through which wheat was shipped to countries such as India. India was still a poor country then and often struggled to feed its people. I remember hearing about PL-480 in newspapers and in conversations at home, though I did not know the details at the time. It is somewhat strange that when I think back to the 1950s today, what comes to mind is simply “PL-480,” a law passed by the American Congress. The phrase PL-480 got stuck in my mind forever, reminding me of my motherland’s struggling past.

My next clear memory of American presidential politics was connected to John F. Kennedy. India woke up on the morning of November 23, 1963, to the shocking news that President Kennedy had been assassinated in the United States. The news spread quickly through newspapers and radio broadcasts, and the whole country seemed stunned beyond words. At the time, I was in my first year as a master’s student

at The Madura College in Madurai. I distinctly remember that on the following Monday morning, our teacher set aside the regular routine and spoke to the class about Kennedy's assassination. The moment itself was so moving that it brought the whole class to tears.

The tragic part of his death was that he was killed so brutally. Had he died, say, in a plane crash—still, a loss is a loss—the reaction might have been less devastating. Also, we had not heard of this kind of killing of an elected leader in America. I had always thought America was immune to this.

Kennedy was young, stylish, and charismatic, and widely admired in India. Only a year earlier, India had fought a brief but painful war with China during the Sino-Indian War of 1962. China had won several early battles, and the situation looked grim for India. The administration of John F. Kennedy strongly condemned what it called Chinese Communist aggression against India and rushed arms and other supplies to support the Indian military. My memory from that time is that the climax came when the United States sent the aircraft carrier USS Kitty Hawk to the region. This show of American support helped change the situation completely, forcing China to end the war by declaring a unilateral ceasefire and withdrawing its troops.

Kennedy became something of a hero in India. It may sound hard to believe today, but even in small villages portraits of Kennedy could be seen hanging in thatched houses, including in my own village.

On the same day, the newspapers reported that Lyndon B. Johnson, the vice president, had been sworn in as the next president within two hours of Kennedy's death. I realized that,

compared to India, the transfer of power in the United States was very different. According to the U.S. Constitution, the vice president automatically becomes president upon the death of the incumbent. In India, if the prime minister died in office, the president—typically on the advice of the cabinet—would appoint a caretaker prime minister until the ruling party recommended a new leader. Seeing the picture of the oath ceremony—inside the presidential plane, Air Force One—I had the impression that the ceremony had taken place while the plane was in the air. I later learned that the plane was still on the ground, ready to take off.

I did not know much about Lyndon Johnson during his time as vice president. I later read that he had previously been a senator and a brilliant political leader. When I think of Johnson's presidency, what comes to my mind immediately is the Vietnam War, which expanded dramatically during his years in office. While reading about the war in India, I had mixed feelings. The staggering loss of lives on both sides was painful to read. At times, I wondered what right the Americans had to go to another country to wage a war. That said, I had a deep-seated aversion to communism—a social and political framework to which I could never reconcile myself. In that sense, I was grateful that the Americans were fighting the war in Vietnam, because I feared, selfishly, that one day communism might reach the shores of India.

Next, Nixon became president, and I do not remember a lot about his presidency. What I remember most vividly is the Watergate scandal. For a long time, the news cycle seemed to be dominated exclusively by it. I sometimes felt that the scandal, and his eventual resignation, eclipsed many of his

accomplishments. As I read about the scandal in those years, I had my own rather fanciful image of the Watergate building – a modest-sized hotel where two rooms were used by the Republican and Democratic parties as their election headquarters.

Years later, in 1978, I came to Washington, D.C., to attend George Washington University for my Ph.D. in mathematics. I was housed in a university-run apartment on campus. The first thing I had to do was buy some groceries. I was told that there was a Safeway, a grocery store, within walking distance. When I got there, I noticed that the store was inside a massive, multistoried, beautiful semicircular building. Only then did it dawn on me that I was looking at the Watergate complex – the very place that had so dominated the news during the Nixon years. For a moment, it felt surreal.

Despite all the noise surrounding Watergate scandal, I remember a few things about Nixon's presidency: bringing the Vietnam war to an end; his historic visit to People's Republic of China; and his role in the Bangladesh Liberation War where he supported Pakistan, not India, which strained the relationship between India and the United States. Nixon resigned during the middle of his second term in office, necessitating Gerald Ford, his vice president, to be sworn in as the next president. After completing the remainder of Nixon's term, Ford threw his hat in the ring as a candidate for president. After a grueling primary – the other candidate was Ronald Reagan – Ford became the Republican Party's nominee, facing Jimmy Carter.

I remember that Carter became a household name in India, in part, because he was a humble peanut farmer. The bigger reason, however, was that he was the son of Lillian Carter, who

a decade earlier, under the Peace Corps program, had served as a nurse in a place near Bombay.

The year was 1976, and Jimmy Carter had won the election. Two years later, in 1978, I arrived in the United States as a Ph.D. student in mathematics at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. For a political animal with a keen interest in presidential politics, there was no better place to be than Washington, D.C.—the political capital of the world, where all three branches of government converged. I was elated beyond words.

I was awed by life in Washington, D.C., with its 24-hour news cycle on radio and television, much of it devoted to national politics, and I immersed myself in it. Even though my Ph.D. work was demanding and consumed enormous amounts of time, I was drawn to the relentless political conversation in the nation's capital. I followed Jimmy Carter's presidency closely, including the challenge he faced from Senator Edward Kennedy during the Democratic primary. I experienced my first national political conventions, Ronald Reagan's landslide victory in the 1980 election, and the eight years of his presidency that followed. I have written about the Carter and Reagan presidencies in earlier chapters, so my story now moves forward to the next phase of American politics—the administration of George H. W. Bush (1989-1993).

After Reagan's two terms, the presidential election was between his Vice President, George H.W. Bush, and Democratic Governor of Massachusetts, Michael Dukakis. I liked Dukakis, in part, because I did not want another Republican presidency after eight years of Reagan at the helm. I wanted a change.

Dukakis was doing very well in the polls, and it seemed he would easily win the general election—until his campaign fumbled the ball. I remember an advertisement, a photo opportunity, and a debate debacle—all flipping upside down what appeared to be an irrevocable lead in the polls.

Massachusetts had a prison furlough program, which allowed inmates, including those serving life sentences for murder, to take temporary leaves from prison. It was a well-intended, humane program, and I am sure it helped inmates gain new perspectives on life. Unfortunately, a convicted murderer named Willie Horton committed armed robbery and sexual assault while on weekend furlough. In the famous “Willie Horton” ad, the Bush campaign successfully painted Dukakis as a Massachusetts liberal, out of touch with mainstream American values. The other episode I remember was a photo-op that went belly up. In an attempt to look strong on national defense and counter the “soft” image, Dukakis rode in a military tank, wearing a large, ill-fitting helmet and grinning while waving from the turret. He looked silly.

Now to the debate debacle. Dukakis believed that capital punishment did not deter crime, and he remained a consistent opponent of the death penalty. This stance became a major issue in the presidential race. In one of the debates, a moderator asked him whether, if his wife were raped and murdered, he would support an irrevocable death penalty for the killer. Dukakis responded in a measured, almost academic, and policy-driven manner, reiterating his opposition. I saw it as a deeply principled and mature response; he was, in effect, telling the world that even in the most personal and painful circumstances, his position would not change. My sense was

that the public saw this differently; many felt he failed to display the “human” emotion they expected in response to such a horrific scenario.

His lead evaporated, and Bush won the election—decisively.

I never took the Kuwait route when I traveled to India. In the summer of 1990, I took a flight that had a stopover in Kuwait. When I landed in Chennai, I was told that my flight was the last one to leave Kuwait before the airport was closed because of Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait.

I later read that the invasion was swift and overwhelming; within just two days, the Iraqi military had largely defeated the Kuwaiti forces and occupied the entire country. What followed was a textbook military campaign led by President Bush—disciplined, methodical, and, in many ways, a model for modern coalition warfare. First and foremost, he built a coalition of 35 nations, including several Arab states, to reclaim Kuwait. He went to the United Nations Security Council, which passed a resolution giving Iraq a deadline to withdraw or face military force. He then went to Congress, which passed the Authorization for Use of Military Force, approving military action. He imposed economic sanctions on Iraq. When Saddam Hussein ignored the UN deadline, the coalition launched Operation Desert Storm, beginning with an intense aerial bombardment. The Iraqi army, once considered the fourth largest in the world, collapsed rapidly, and Kuwait was liberated.

Given this sweeping success, there was, I felt, an almost irresistible pressure on President Bush to march on Baghdad and topple Saddam Hussein. Many believed that stopping

short would leave the job unfinished. Yet Bush resisted. He and his advisers argued that the UN mandate was clear and limited: to liberate Kuwait, not to occupy Iraq. In that restraint, I saw a deliberate adherence to international legitimacy and defined objectives—something I thought would serve as a model for future wars.

To me, George H. W. Bush always looked presidential. He spoke well, in a calm and measured manner. He carried himself like a senior statesman; world leaders liked and respected him. He was widely regarded as a skilled, experienced, and “old-school” diplomat, having previously served as Director of the CIA, Ambassador to the United Nations, and envoy to China. He was often described as a “class act,” a man of “personal kindness,” warm and generous with his time—indeed, as someone said, “one of the most deep-down decent people” they had known. I liked him.

On the domestic front, I do not remember much. Perhaps, his Operation Desert Storm success overshadowed his domestic accomplishments.

Now we were in the next election cycle. In the previous election, George H. W. Bush had famously said, “Read my lips: no new taxes.” However, he ended up raising taxes to secure a bipartisan budget deal with Democrats who controlled Congress. There was a backlash from conservative voting blocs, and his primary challengers exploited the issue. After some initial hiccups, Bush became the Republican Party nominee.

On the Democratic side, it was Bill Clinton—a new-generation candidate: articulate, youthful, and a moderate Democrat. He had his own challenges, at times thought to be insurmountable, particularly questions about his personal life.

Clinton was the front-runner, and I thought he would run away with the nomination when a woman dropped a bombshell, claiming a 12-year affair with him. It was just before the first New Hampshire primary. I had a sense that Clinton would weather the storm—and he did. I never quite understood why, in American politics—especially in American politics—an affair could generate such uproar, almost to the point of disqualifying a candidate. Of course, intentionally or not, we project ourselves as a nation with strong moral expectations, but I do not fully subscribe to that view. The media played a larger role, amplifying such issues and drawing us into what was, in many ways, an entertainment-driven environment.

Also, I knew that presidential candidates had been routinely scrutinized over their use of drugs through a moral lens. Most candidates had said they tried drugs while they were young, almost invariably in high school or college. Again, I never understood the purpose of this line of questioning.

One of the debates between Bush and Clinton took place in a town hall format, where the candidates took questions directly from uncommitted voters. I watched it. When a woman was about to ask a question, Bush had a quick glance at his watch. The question was a little unclear to him, and he asked her to repeat it. I thought he answered it perfectly well. But the next day, the press was all over him, suggesting that he was bored, impatient, elitist, and uncomfortable sitting with a room full of “common people.” The press, meanwhile, praised Clinton for his warm demeanor and his “I feel your pain” response. Some even predicted that this episode would sink Bush’s campaign.

While writing this, I watched the video again. It still struck me as humbug. Should I blame the media? After all, the media, to a large extent, reflects public sentiment. Yet I often find myself at a loss when it comes to public opinion on such glitzy political issues.

Clinton was expected to win. His entry into presidential politics marked a generational turning point. A moderate Democrat, Clinton was young, energetic, and, in many ways, a departure from the leaders who had dominated American politics for decades. In contrast, Bush represented an earlier generation, one defined by duty, hierarchy, and a more formal style of leadership. A seasoned statesman, Bush stayed in his lane and made little effort to connect with the new generation of voters.

When Bill Clinton stepped onto the stage of *The Arsenio Hall Show*, sporting dark sunglasses and playing his saxophone, he signaled a seismic shift in American politics. This moment stood in stark contrast to Bush's more traditional, buttoned-down style. He seemed to belong to a different time—and Clinton won.

My memory was that Bill Clinton (1993-2001) had a rollercoaster ride during his first four-year term. For his most ambitious goal—universal healthcare—Clinton created a task force and appointed First Lady Hillary Clinton to lead it. I remember the famous Health Security Card—resembling a credit card—that Clinton pulled out of his pocket during his address to a Joint Session of Congress. He promised that with this card, every American would be guaranteed a comprehensive package of benefits that could never be taken

away, regardless of job loss or a pre-existing condition. I loved it.

Unfortunately, the final bill—the Health Security Act—running to several hundred pages, collapsed under its own weight, without even reaching the floor of the House or Senate for a vote. My reading of the situation was that an enormous amount of work was done, almost secretly, without including Republicans in the drafting process. The bill was too big and too complex to comprehend. In fact, Clinton’s first major bill was the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which allowed workers to take unpaid leave for family or medical emergencies without losing their jobs. He got it through Congress successfully. I never understood why America did not have such a simple, family-oriented policy earlier.

I do not remember the details of the Oslo Accords, but it was a historic peace agreement between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), signed on the White House lawn. I vividly remember the picture of President Clinton, Prime Minister Rabin of Israel, and Chairman Arafat of the PLO—all three on the stage, with Clinton standing between them, his arms outstretched.

Another fact was that, in the midterm elections, the Democratic Party lost its majority in both houses, and Newt Gingrich became the new Speaker of the House. Losing the majority in both houses brought enormous challenges for Bill Clinton. Perhaps emboldened by their newly acquired power, Gingrich and the Republicans threatened to shut down the government unless Clinton agreed to deep cuts in Medicare, Medicaid, and education. A politically astute Clinton refused to budge. When the government shut down, the public largely

blamed the Republicans for the gridlock. Positioning himself as the protector of the elderly and the environment, Clinton successfully transformed his image from a failed liberal into a steady centrist.

He passed the Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993, which resulted in the annual deficit dropping every year, eventually leading to the first federal budget surplus in decades. Also, he signed the Welfare Reform Act, overhauling the social safety net in a way no other Democratic president had dared to touch. During his 1996 State of the Union address, he famously declared that “the era of big government is over.”

He defeated Bob Dole easily in the 1996 presidential election.

There is much to write about Clinton’s second term—a period of remarkable economic prosperity, significant domestic achievement, and key foreign policy accomplishments, including: the Kosovo War, the Good Friday Agreement, NATO expansion, and trade relations with China. However, that will not be my focus here. Ironically, I was drawn instead to his personal failure—and even more to my reaction to how the country responded to it.

When it came to matters of sex, the United States—an open, liberal, and permissive society—behaved in a peculiar way. When sex was involved, a personal failing became a public scandal. It was then quickly transformed into a national spectacle, framed in the language of rule of law and institutional integrity.

This was precisely what happened during the scandal involving Bill Clinton and a 22-year-old White House intern. The relationship itself was wrong—terribly wrong. However,

what followed seemed to take on a life of its own. Politicians seized upon it. The press immersed itself in it. And the public, drawn into the unfolding drama, consumed it with an intensity that was hard to ignore.

I had seen this pattern before. It surfaced during Senate confirmation hearings, when deeply personal matters were brought into the open and examined in a highly charged atmosphere. It appeared again in presidential campaigns, when allegations of a sexual nature could come to dominate the narrative. Each time, the process took on a familiar rhythm—intense scrutiny, moral posturing, and prolonged public attention.

What troubled me here was not simply Clinton's misconduct, but the way it was handled. There was an air of performance to it all—solemn declarations about decency, about the dignity of the presidency, about moral standards that had supposedly been violated. Yet beneath it, one could sense calculation, positioning, and, at times, a kind of opportunism.

Clinton, once cornered, had little room to maneuver. Any response he gave—however measured or evasive—would be dissected, scrutinized, and used against him. It became less about the act itself and more about constructing a case—a narrative that could sustain legal and political consequences. In that sense, he was drawn into a process that was as much about law as it was about power.

That was, in fact, how it unfolded. In the end, he was not impeached for the relationship itself, but on charges of perjury and obstruction of justice. For over a year, the machinery of government—both the executive branch and Congress—was

consumed by the scandal and a great deal of time and energy was devoted to sustaining and prosecuting the case.

Yet, when the matter reached the Senate, the outcome was more measured. On the charge of perjury, several Republican senators joined Democrats in voting not guilty; the same occurred on the obstruction of justice charge. The result was an acquittal, bringing to a close a prolonged and deeply consuming episode in American public life.

In the end, what stayed with me was not just the failure of a president, but the unsettling way a society chose to confront it—turning a deeply personal lapse into an all-consuming public spectacle, driven by both appetite and principle.

Al Gore became the Democratic Party's nominee for the presidency, while George W. Bush was his Republican counterpart. I had the opportunity to learn about Gore and his political philosophy during his service as vice president in Bill Clinton's two-term presidency. I did not know much about Bush, but two things about him stood out: his "compassionate conservative" slogan, with its softer tone on social issues, and his response to persistent media questions about his past drug use. He adamantly refused to answer yes or no, essentially telling the hounding press that he would not discuss or dwell on alleged past mistakes. He admitted that he had made mistakes in his youth, and that people should judge him on who he was now, not decades earlier. I greatly appreciated his stand. That is how every candidate should answer such a question.

As I followed the campaign, I came to know more about Bush. He chose Dick Cheney as his vice-presidential candidate. Cheney had served as Secretary of Defense under his father,

George H. W. Bush. He was very experienced, steady, and deeply connected to Washington. I thought Bush made a very smart choice. I knew that in the public mind, fair or not, Bush seemed to lack intellectual depth, and Cheney's experience helped offset that perception. Gore selected Joe Lieberman, a United States senator from Connecticut and the first Jewish candidate on a major party ticket.

The presidential debates were routine. Aside from a couple of trivial moments, there was nothing out of the ordinary that stayed with me. However, I was surprised that Gore made the strategic choice not to use Clinton in his campaign, keeping him at a distance. I could guess why, given the circumstances. Still, the economy was strong, Clinton's approval rating was very high, and he was a gifted and skilled politician, so I was kind of puzzled that Gore arrived at a different calculation.

Bush won the presidency (2001-2009), but only after a month-long drama over the counting of ballots—something I did not recall witnessing on this scale before. Everything came down to Florida. Gore had 266 electoral votes to Bush's 246, and Florida's 25 electoral votes—under a winner-take-all system—would decide the election. The initial count put Bush ahead by approximately 1800 votes, a margin so small out of roughly six million cast that it triggered an automatic recount. As the numbers shifted and narrowed to only a few hundred votes, the process grew increasingly contentious, drawing national attention and legal challenges. What had begun as a routine count turned into a prolonged and uncertain struggle, eventually reaching the U.S. Supreme Court, which, in a 5-4 decision, halted the recount and effectively awarded Florida to Bush.

I expected Gore to win. However, when he lost Tennessee, his home state—by a margin of approximately 80,000 votes—I lost confidence in his candidacy. Yet, when the national popular vote was announced—which he won by a margin of approximately 545,000 votes—I could not help but feel some sympathy for him.

A few months later, events of an entirely different magnitude unfolded. It was September 11, 2001. I was in my weekly Dean's Council meeting when someone knocked on my door, alerting us that one of the World Trade Center towers had been hit by an aeroplane. While we watched the devastation caused by the strike on the north tower, another flight struck the south tower. Reports also came in that another plane had hit the Pentagon while a fourth crashed in Pennsylvania.

Later, I learned that altogether there were 19 hijackers involved in this abominable crime, most of them from Saudi Arabia (15), and others from the UAE (2), Egypt (1), and Lebanon (1). They entered the United States legally and received pilot training at a flight school in Florida. In that sense, they took advantage of the very openness that allowed them in—a grave violation that is hard to forgive.

Almost 3,000 people lost their lives that day—passengers on the planes, those inside the buildings, and more than 400 first responders who entered the towers to save others. In the aftermath, the Bush administration launched a military campaign in Afghanistan, called "Operation Enduring Freedom," to dismantle Al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban regime that had harbored Osama bin Laden, the mastermind behind the attacks. Perhaps I missed it, but I did not know much about Al-Qaeda—until this tragedy. This organization

was founded in the late 1980s by Osama bin Laden with the primary goal of overthrowing apostate regimes in the Muslim world and drive Western influence out of the Middle East.

To strengthen national security, the federal government underwent a major reorganization, resulting in the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). One consequence was the heightened security checks at airports, which I found completely overblown. My frustration was so strong that I often thought of it as using a machine gun to kill a mosquito. The analogy might sound hyperbolic, but even today I still find the steps required to pass security checks incredibly annoying.

Claiming that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and that his government could provide Al-Qaeda with such weapons, Bush began building a case for invading Iraq and toppling Hussein's government. He went to Congress to seek authorization for the use of military force against Iraq, and Colin Powell, Secretary of State, presented the case for war to the United Nations. With the "Shock and Awe" aerial bombardment, the Iraq War began.

As the war unfolded, I could not bear the sight of destruction—both material and human. I read somewhere that close to 200,000 Iraqi people were killed. Some estimates of casualties were significantly higher—the vast majority of them civilians, including children. More than 4,400 U.S. service members lost their lives. That period of the Iraq invasion was among my worst days in the United States, in part, because it was an egregiously wrong decision.

I found myself missing another super power. When the Soviet Union collapsed, my friends in Washington, D.C.—I was

at George Washington University on sabbatical — asked for my opinion. I told them I was not happy that the Soviet Union collapsed, saying that there should always be two superpowers, not one. I argued this provided balance in the global arena — much like the two-party system in the United States, where each serves as a check on the other. To me, the downfall of the Soviet Union was not a good outcome for global politics.

In the next election, John Kerry, a senator from Massachusetts, became the Democratic Party nominee for president, while Bush secured the Republican Party nomination almost unopposed. Given the Iraq War, I hoped Kerry would win, but that was not to be the case. Bush won.

Bush's second term was not momentous. There were a couple of events that stayed in my mind, both related to his picking people for key positions where loyalty seemed to trump experience. The most damaging was his nomination of Harriet Miers to the Supreme Court to replace the retiring Sandra Day O'Connor. The president's own political base attacked the nomination, expressing concerns about her qualifications, her judicial philosophy, and the appearance of cronyism. Forced to withdraw her nomination, George W. Bush instead successfully nominated Samuel Alito, who had many years of experience as a federal appeals judge.

The second case was related to Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the Gulf Coast, particularly New Orleans. I was struck by the slow and ineffective response of the federal government, led by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). I knew America could do better. FEMA was headed by its director, Michael Brown, who fumbled the ball.

Bush appeared completely out of touch with the suffering on the ground, as evidenced by his infamous remark to Brown: “Brownie, you’re doing a heck of a job.” The press pounded him for this comment.

Barack Obama became the next President of the United States (2009-2017). America celebrated his elevation to the presidency as the first African American to hold the position in the nation’s history. I would admit that I had difficulty seeing him as an African American. His mother was white, and his father was an African from Kenya. Apparently, Obama saw himself as an African American and chose to embrace that identity for social and political purposes. My guess was that biracial children with one black parent—given the social history—would naturally gravitate toward a black identity.

I would like to digress a little. It was February 2005. I was the vice president for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois. We had invited Barack Obama to give a talk in celebration of Black History Month. He was then a newly minted U.S. Senator. Typically, the president of the College would meet the senator in the green room, along with his aide, before he was taken to the stage. Since the president had a prior commitment, I was asked to meet him in the green room. It was a strange few minutes. He was our guest, so I expected him to exchange pleasantries with me, the chief host. There were none. He seemed distant, which surprised me.

His ascension to the presidency was not an easy affair. He had a grueling primary with a formidable candidate, Hillary Clinton, former First Lady and Senator from New York. He did not clinch the nomination until the final moment, when the

superdelegates cast their votes. McCain had to fend off Mitt Romney, Mike Huckabee, and Rudy Giuliani—all strong candidates, but I thought the divided field helped McCain, who eventually won the Republican nomination. Obama chose Joe Biden, a consummate veteran politician, as his vice-presidential candidate. In a surprise move, McCain selected Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his. I never understood the logic behind McCain's choice. Palin did not strike me as a particularly strong vice-presidential candidate—let alone as a potential president.

My recollection was that, with Obama at the helm, the White House operated in a highly methodical manner. With little to no drama, he remained true to the “No Drama Obama” slogan that defined his presidential campaign. In an era of high-intensity political drama, he dealt with every issue calmly, and, I thought, the public viewed this as a sign of his intellectual rigor and emotional stability.

There was a great deal of legislative activity during his first term, but what I remembered most were the speeches he delivered at various international venues. To me, the most memorable speech was perhaps the one he gave at Cairo University, addressing a Muslim world, which had a long, strained relationship with the United States. In that speech, delivered against the backdrop of the Iraq War, he acknowledged past American errors.

He spoke about how, around the world, the Jewish people had been persecuted for centuries, and how anti-Semitism in Europe culminated in the unprecedented horror of the Holocaust. He added that denying that fact was baseless, ignorant, and hateful. He went on to speak of the Jewish

people's aspiration for a homeland, and then connected it to the plight of Palestinians, who had suffered in their own pursuit of one. They had endured the pain of dislocation and the daily humiliations – large and small – that came with occupation.

He also spoke at other international forums – like a town hall meeting in Strasbourg, at the Summit of the Americas in Port of Spain. Before parliament in Ankara, for example, Obama acknowledged that the United States had, at times, shown arrogance, been dismissive of its allies, or even sought to dictate terms, while also reflecting on the darker chapters of its own history and its ongoing struggle to live up to its founding ideals.

I had my own view of America on many fronts, shaped by my perspective as someone from India. The speeches delivered by Obama were refreshing. I never dreamt that I would hear such soothing words from an American official, let alone from a president.

Republicans derided his speeches, suggesting that the U.S. was being portrayed as a “moral equal” to its enemies. The entire set of international speeches was branded an “Apology Tour.” Yet the overall reaction from the American public was not negative, reflecting what I saw as the true character of America.

On the legislative front, the significant piece, from my perspective, was the Affordable Care Act (ACA), nicknamed “Obamacare.” The bill – the most comprehensive healthcare reform in decades – passed after a grueling year of debate. Its key provisions included mandating coverage for pre-existing conditions, significantly expanding Medicaid, and allowing

young adults to remain on their parents' health insurance plans until the age of 26.

The DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act) was a piece of proposed U.S. legislation aimed at addressing the status of certain undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children. My sense was that the general public had a sympathetic view of the bill as it dealt with children who were here on no fault of their own. However, this bill languished in the Congress and the prospect of its passage was close to nil.

So, Obama, bypassing Congress, established the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program via executive action to protect young undocumented immigrants from deportation. This had been challenged in the courts. I was hoping that some form of DACA would survive to save the beneficiaries, who, I believe, had already integrated into American life.

The period also included the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, the operation that led to the killing of Osama bin Laden, and two Supreme Court appointments. By simply listing these events, I am not relegating them to mere footnotes. On the contrary, the withdrawal from Iraq marked the end of a defining era of American foreign policy, and the operation that led to the killing of Osama bin Laden was a monumental decision—one that could have seriously damaged his presidency had it gone awry.

As for the Supreme Court appointments, the retirement of Justices David Souter and John Paul Stevens provided an opportunity for Obama to fill the positions with two liberal justices. He chose Sonia Sotomayor, the first Hispanic justice, to

replace David Souter, and Elena Kagan to replace John Paul Stevens. The retiring justices were liberal justices, so from a purely ideological standpoint, these appointments did not reshape the Court.

As his first term neared its end, the reelection campaign began in full swing. Obama faced virtually no challenge, so his nomination was relatively smooth. On the Republican side, it was Mitt Romney, former governor of Massachusetts and a successful businessman, along with his running mate, Paul Ryan, a conservative congressman from Wisconsin. The polls suggested a tight race, but the Obama-Biden team won reelection by a comfortable margin.

Obama's second term was relatively uneventful, in line with his "No Drama Obama" watchword. While there was less legislative action, it was defined by the full implementation of the Affordable Care Act and the legalization of same-sex marriage nationwide through a Supreme Court ruling. Obama became the first sitting president to openly support same-sex marriage, which helped shift public opinion and normalize the issue politically.

Initially, I had difficulty understanding the concept of same-sex marriage. Later, I learned that it refers to two individuals of the same sex entering into a legally recognized partnership, with the same rights as any traditionally married couple. I had always wondered why a same-sex partnership should be called a marriage, where the partners were often referred to as husband and wife. I am very much in favor of equal legal rights for same-sex couples, but I question whether the same traditional terminology should apply, and whether a distinct linguistic category might better preserve the original

meaning of “marriage, husband and wife.” Regardless, it seems that the linguistic evolution in this area has already taken its course.

On the international front, placing emphasis on diplomacy and wide-ranging international cooperation, Barack Obama played a central and decisive role in the Iran Nuclear Deal. In many ways, it was one of the signature foreign policy initiatives of his presidency. Flexing his diplomatic muscle and working with nearly every country in the world, including China, Obama was instrumental in making the Paris Agreement happen—an international accord adopted under the umbrella of the United Nations to limit global warming. While these two developments felt somewhat distant to me, I found myself particularly pleased that the United States, under Obama, restored diplomatic relations with Cuba after decades of estrangement.

After Barack Obama’s two terms, the contest for the presidency was between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Trump, initially considered a so-so candidate, turned out to be a dark horse in the primaries, eventually winning the Republican Party nomination. On the Democratic side, Bernie Sanders put up a strong fight before conceding to Clinton.

As a candidate, Trump was unorthodox. He was his own man—following his instincts and speaking his mind. He did not try to be politically correct. He was highly unconventional, rarely measuring his tone, words, or mannerisms. That was his strength. People liked that. I was intrigued.

There are many examples of his behavior that fit this pattern, but one thing I remember distinctly was his tweets and retweets. His advisers thought they were impulsive and too

combative. His Twitter account became a running subject of discussion on talk radio. Even right-leaning commentators wondered aloud whether a man who could not restrain himself on social media could be entrusted with the responsibilities of the presidency. But, he kept on tweeting.

I thought I understood Trump. He seemed unwilling to yield to the pressures of well-intentioned advisers, especially from conservative media. I was reminded of the story of David and Goliath. David was a young shepherd; Goliath, a giant of a man. David was armed by King Saul with heavy military gear—a bronze helmet, a coat of mail, and a sword. But David found himself uncomfortable in this armor and refused to fight that way. Instead, he cast it aside and chose the simple sling he knew how to use. Trump, it seemed to me, was doing something similar—rejecting the armor others thought necessary and relying instead on instincts that were entirely his own. The comparison, of course, was only in this respect, but it stayed with me. We know the rest of the story.

There were a couple of other incidents to which I found myself reacting differently from most people. One was the controversy involving the Gold Star family—the Khan family. The Khans were the grieving parents of an Army captain killed in the Iraq War. I understood that the American public treated Gold Star families with a certain deference; they were, in a sense, beyond criticism. Khizr Khan, with his wife by his side, spoke at the Democratic convention, sharply criticizing Trump and his policies. Trump did not take the attack lightly. In interviews the next day, he responded by saying Khan had no right to attack him and questioned why his wife did not speak, suggesting she might not have been allowed to—remarks that

drew widespread criticism. I did not share that reaction. I remembered thinking that once they chose to appear on a political stage—the Democratic convention—and to speak directly about a presidential candidate, they entered the arena. In doing so, they had, in my view, set aside the special immunity ordinarily accorded to them.

The other event was the release of the Access Hollywood tape. When it surfaced, the reaction in the press was understandably immediate and severe; the content was deeply distasteful. Many believed it would end Trump's candidacy. I did not think so. Trump said it was crude locker-room talk, and I thought many women would go along with his characterization. Ours was, after all, a permissive and liberal society, and I believed many men would see a bit of themselves in Trump. It was no surprise to me that he weathered the political storm.

Media and political pundits were fixated on his conduct, his unorthodox campaign, and his provocative tweets, branding him as erratic, unhinged, and unpresidential. Of course, he was breaking all presidential norms. I thought Clinton's team also focused more on his "character" than on his policies, while Trump was hitting hard on border security, illegal immigration, free trade agreements, and globalization. He lambasted career politicians, bureaucrats, and Washington insiders, portraying them as corrupt, self-serving, and part of an entrenched establishment dominated by the left. For him, the whole bureaucracy was a swamp that had formed over time, and he wanted to drain it. His "Drain the swamp" slogan gained momentum among the Make America Great Again (MAGA) base.

As the campaign went on, almost all forecasting models predicted that Clinton would win, putting her chances anywhere between 85% and 98%. My Democratic friends were gloating. I told them that my reading of the situation was different and that they should not be surprised if Trump won, but it surprised them nonetheless. Trump won the election (2017-2021).

Trump's first term as president was eventful: COVID-19, immigration crackdowns, the border wall, two impeachments, the appointment of three Supreme Court justices, and the January 6 Capitol Attack. Of these events, I will highlight a few that stuck in my mind.

The first was COVID-19 and how the Trump administration handled this massive global crisis. It was interesting, sometimes disturbing, for me to watch the tension between the president and Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) and the chief medical advisor to the president. The science advocated by Fauci often conflicted with the administration's goals, creating a science-versus-public-policy divide that dominated the news cycle for months. Fauci's statements carried an aura of authority, as they were grounded in scientific findings. As a result, it became a challenge for the administration, I thought, to question even relatively moderate policies on wearing face masks, school closures, six-foot social distancing rule, and restrictions on businesses.

Science is useful, but not perfect. I was sympathetic to the administration's position. What I read about Florida Governor Ron DeSantis's handling of COVID-19 in his state appealed to me. He lifted most state-level restrictions on the economy and

reopened schools much earlier than science warranted. He prohibited local governments and school districts from requiring masks or proof of vaccination. Trump succeeded in his primary goal of delivering vaccines in record time and his Operation Warp Speed was a massive success. However, his push for states to reopen the businesses to revive the economy had mixed results.

On the immigration front, Trump's administration introduced the "zero tolerance" policy, which meant that every adult crossing illegally would be criminally prosecuted that included parents traveling with children. Adults were sent to federal jail. I understood that children could not legally be jailed with them, so they were taken away—some very young, even toddlers—and placed in separate custody. Photos of children crying in cage-like detention areas, and stories of parents not knowing where their children were, were all over the news, sparking widespread public outrage. While I understood the intensity of the reaction, I did not see Trump's policy as inherently cruel or inhumane. To me, it seemed that he had chosen to deal with the border crisis on a war footing.

If one looks back at actual wars—Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, to name a few—children were killed, maimed, orphaned, and separated from their parents. In those contexts, such tragedies, however painful, we often absorbed with a certain numbness.

I did not know whether the administration's goal with the "zero tolerance" policy was to use it as a deterrent. However, I thought the threat of criminal prosecution and family separation did have its intended effect—discouraging migrants from making the arduous journey.

Another event etched in my memory was the Senate confirmation hearing of Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. I understand that Senate hearings, in general, served a valuable purpose. Yet, after watching many over the years, I developed a certain aversion to them—not because of the institution itself, but because of the tone some senators brought to the proceedings. At times, the hearings seemed overtaken by unnecessary drama, with some senators on their pedestals, directing questions at nominees as though they were subordinates.

Judge Brett Kavanaugh’s hearing was, for me, a real drama. While several names surfaced, one woman—a psychology professor—provided the most detailed and high-profile account, testifying at a nationally televised hearing. She told the senators that in the early 1980s, when they were in high school, a visibly drunk Kavanaugh—I would rather not put into writing all that she said—had done something very bad to her.

The whole country, it seemed to me, was fixated on this—parsing every word she said and Kavanaugh’s response, wondering whom to believe. I had a totally different reaction. Was a drunk high school boy misbehaving with a girl shocking? Was a drunk college student behaving badly at a dormitory party unthinkable? I did not understand what all the fuss about the Kavanaugh episode was. Even if everything the woman alleged were true, my question was: “So what?” It had all happened nearly forty years earlier, while he was a youth. The Senate hearing, to me, was difficult to fully comprehend.

Watching the January 6 Capitol attack, I was not alarmed. This is a country that had practiced democratic principles and upheld the rule of law for nearly 250 years. I believed the law

would take its own course. The election of Biden was certified, and power was transferred peacefully. There was, of course, a great deal of noise, but in the end, the rule of law prevailed.

It was the year 2020. I watched Biden's video announcing his candidacy for President of the United States. His brief message carried what would become his battle cry: *the Battle for the Soul of the Nation*. Given the state of the country during Trump's presidency, I thought it resonated well with the American public. Personally, it was very compelling. I sensed a deep desire among the public to make a course correction. So, it did not surprise me when he won the Democratic nomination and eventually the presidency, defeating Trump.

The early part of Biden's presidency (2021-2025) was dominated by the news of Trump's refusal to accept the result. He alleged that the election was stolen, citing widespread mail-in ballot fraud, manipulation of voting machines, and illegal votes cast by non-citizens and even "deceased persons." I knew that elections were run by the states, and my understanding was that some had, through a legislative process, adjusted their laws to accommodate the unique circumstances created by COVID-19. Dozens of lawsuits were filed by Trump and his allies, and the courts dismissed or rejected the cases.

For about 250 years, we had taken pride in telling the world that America was different—that it lived by democratic principles and the rule of law. So, for me, whether there was fraud or not, the ultimate arbiter—the courts—had spoken. That was it. So, when Trump continued to talk about election fraud and refused to accept the result, I thought he was undermining public faith in the principles of democracy and

the rule of law. He appeared diminished in the eyes of the world.

Biden's presidency began like a sailboat that finally steadied after stormy weather. When he took office, NATO was adrift in uncertainty, with allies unsure of U.S. commitments and priorities. His stewardship strengthened the alliance and restored its cohesion. When Russia invaded Ukraine, his leadership helped rally international support and coordinate Western sanctions on Russia, bolstering Ukraine's resistance. The U.S. also responded with massive military and financial aid to Ukraine. I told myself that, had the Russian invasion occurred during Trump's presidency, Ukraine's sovereignty might have been lost.

At home, the Supreme Court of the United States overturned *Roe v. Wade* and returned abortion laws to the states. Biden's biggest issue was immigration, particularly the persistent surge at the southern border. He was facing record-high migrant encounters and needed more funding and authority to manage the situation. A bipartisan border security bill had enough Republican support to cross the 60-vote threshold, and Biden was looking forward to its passage in the Senate. Donald Trump, a shrewd and bold politician and the presumptive Republican nominee, strongly opposed it, and the effort to advance the bill collapsed. Trump's position was that no new laws were needed and that the president already had the authority to close the border. He also argued that the bill would be a "gift" to Democrats during the presidential election. He wanted immigration to remain front and center in the election.

I watched the first general election debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden. Biden fumbled badly. At one point during the debate, he appeared unwell—perhaps suffering emotionally, mentally, or physically. It was troubling to watch. The press focused on his poor performance, but to me, it was not about performance. I felt that Biden was afflicted by something beyond his control. Following this debacle, the pressure from party leadership became so intense that he had no option but to drop out of the race. Eventually, Kamala Harris, his vice president, was chosen as the nominee; she, in turn, chose Tim Walz, the Governor of Minnesota, as her running mate.

I watched the debate between Walz and Vance, the Republican vice-presidential candidate, with great interest. I was blown away by Vance's performance. He was articulate, and his mastery of the issues was impressive. With energy and enthusiasm, he dominated the debate. I came away thinking: here was MAGA's next leader.

As electioneering gained momentum, Trump's team pushed several issues to the forefront: DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), the use of pronouns (e.g., she/her, he/him), the promotion of gender ideology that rejected binary biological sex, and education about gender identity and sexual orientation in schools, especially in elementary schools.

Recently, I was browsing the website of a traditional four-year liberal arts college when I stumbled upon a page where every employee was asked to identify their gender. I was absolutely flabbergasted by the eight or nine choices listed. Beyond "male" and "female," I could make little sense of the rest.

Over the years, as I observed social and cultural trends, I developed a growing sense that the left had gone too far. I knew that, sooner or later, this excess would become a political issue. And it did. The election was tight between Harris and Trump, and a few swing states would determine the outcome. While immigration had been a topic for years, the push on gender issues was relatively new. The Democrats did not see this coming and when they did, it was too late. Trump won (2025-2029).

During the first few days of Trump's presidency, it seemed to me that a political storm was sweeping through the capital. Trump signed dozens of executive orders that, taken together, would fundamentally shift the federal landscape and, at least in part, drain the swamp. My memory does not allow me to recall everything, but a few measures have stayed with me.

He established the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), installing Elon Musk to lead a deregulatory "strike force." At the same time, he froze federal hiring and required that for every new regulation proposed, ten existing ones be eliminated. He signed orders to fast-track permits for oil and gas drilling, citing a "national energy emergency," and withdrew the United States from international climate agreements—again. On immigration, he signed an order instructing agencies to stop issuing citizenship documentation to children born in the United States if neither parent was a citizen or legal permanent resident. Alongside this came an "Extreme Vetting" order and the commencement of what the administration called the "largest mass deportation operation in history."

On social and cultural issues, he moved just as quickly. He signed an order defining “sex” strictly as male or female for all federal purposes, thereby stripping “gender identity” from federal protections. He revoked all Biden-era diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives across federal agencies and government contractors, framing them as “un-American indoctrination.” Orders were also signed to “end radical indoctrination” in K-12 schools.

It was almost like a mini revolution — not led by an autocrat but initiated by a democratically elected president who believed he was leading it under the authority and within the framework of the rule of law. While MAGA supporters might have been celebrating these seismic changes, there was a growing unease among the general public, particularly about the role of Musk leading DOGE. Pledging to cut \$2 trillion from the federal budget, he seemed to intrude into departments run by Senate-confirmed secretaries, identifying areas to trim.

One of the agencies affected by these cuts was the National Science Foundation (NSF). Because mine is a family of academics, cuts in NSF Foundation grants for research hit too close to home. I consoled myself by saying that perhaps it was time for some belt-tightening. It was often the case that as government agencies grew, they rarely shed monetary waste or bloated bureaucracy.

All these executive orders, and more, unsettled my Democratic friends. They fretted and fumed over what they perceived as Trump’s overreach—actions beyond his constitutional authority. I did not worry; the courts would decide whether he had exceeded his authority or not.

Elon Musk, theatrically brandishing a chainsaw to symbolize his cutting power, appearing at cabinet meetings, and trying to rein in departmental budgets without the secretaries' input—all of this, understandably, only deepened their unease. I was confident that this was only a passing phase and that no secretary, worthy of the position, would allow a third party to meddle in their department. The secretaries rebelled, and Musk pulled back from slashing their budgets. He had pledged to cut \$2 trillion from the federal budget but ended up with a more modest \$200 billion. He cut several federal agencies and reduced the federal workforce by hundreds of thousands.

He eventually had a falling-out with the public. Disenchanted with the political environment, Elon Musk stepped aside from his position at the end of his 130-day appointment as a Special Government Employee.

I realize that Trump's executive order to deny citizenship to children born in the United States if neither parent is a citizen or legal permanent resident may be unconstitutional. But to me, it makes sense that a child born to parents who are here illegally, or on temporary visas for work, travel, school, or humanitarian reasons should not be granted U.S. citizenship.

The many executive orders that Trump issued on social and cultural issues incensed people on the left. As I wrote earlier, I felt all along that the left had gone too far and that, sooner or later, a correction would take place, tilting the balance to the right. Trump successfully closed the border. One might recall that Biden did try to get a bipartisan border security bill passed in the Senate with enough Republican support. The presumptive Republican nominee Trump had other ideas and

thwarted his attempt by cajoling the senators not to vote for it. In his presidential address to a joint session of the congress, president Trump famously said: "The media and our friends in the Democrat Party kept saying we needed new legislation to secure the border. But it turned out that all we really needed was a new president."

We have a new president and he is aggressively moving forward with his agenda. What this will mean for the country remains to be seen.

