



## **My Personal Leadership Story**

*“A true leader has the confidence to stand alone, the courage to make tough decisions, and the compassion to listen to the needs of others. He does not set out to be a leader, but becomes one by the equality of his actions and the integrity of his intent”.*

Douglas MacArthur

There are several definitions of leadership, but this one by Douglas MacArthur captures the essence of it all. The leadership journey is essentially a spiritual journey, nothing less, nothing more. At each step one needs to introspect, “Is this the right thing to do”? Different people want different things in life. But the most important thing that people want is acceptance and self-respect. We all strive to prove that we are better than others, little knowing that accepting ourselves and others *as we are* is the greatest skill that one can have in life. By accepting people as they are, one can influence them in a positive manner. Leadership is a plausible natural conclusion of this skill.

As a child I always dreamt of being a doctor as doctors were “good people, who saved people’s lives”, and they were looked up to in our society. I did my under-graduation in a government Medical college in Kerala, the southern-most state in India. Looking back now, I remember being part of the students' initiative to serve poor patients by helping our seniors with free consultations and distributing free medications collected from medical representatives. I can recall my sense of satisfaction and pride to be part of such a noble initiative. After my graduation, I had an opportunity to serve in the borders of India, as my husband was serving in the Indian Army. When my husband’s posting brought us to Bangalore, I joined my present institution as a post graduate in 1998.

## My Palliative Care journey

My Palliative Care story began in the first year of the millennium. My thesis topic for my post-graduation was on pain -- and that was when I had this great desire to do something more for people in pain. I knew that the then-Dean of my institution, Dr. Mary Ollapally, was going to set up a pain clinic. I approached her and asked whether I could join her and where could I get adequate training to join her team? She told me about Palliative Care and asked me, "Would you like to go to Calicut (in Kerala) and get trained in Palliative Care"?

I grabbed the opportunity and said, "Yes". I can still recall my excitement. "You will have to stay there for six weeks," she said. My daughter was six years old then and I had never stayed away from her. My heart was heavy, but there was no doubt that I wanted to do this course run by the Pain and Palliative Care Society at Calicut.

My husband and my daughter accompanied me to Calicut. We took an overnight bus from Bangalore and reached there in the morning. As we walked into a small building on the premises of Calicut Medical College, we saw a board that announced, "Pain and Palliative Care Society". There I met a wonderful group of people who were doing ordinary things in an extraordinary manner. It was just magical!

Many of the people in that wonderful group have already walked the corridors of the Leadership Development Initiative (LDI). It has been a privilege to be associated with Dr. M. R. Rajagopal, who is considered by so many of us as our Mentor because he has directly and indirectly influenced our professional lives. Dr. Gayatri Palat and Dr. Anil Paleri, both from LDI Cohort 1, and Dr. Chitra Venkateswaran from Cohort 2 were the other people that I met in that wonderful group. I also met Dr. Mhoira Leng, currently a Mentor for LDI Cohort 2, who was my examiner for the course at Calicut. I was so inspired by their work that I didn't want to do anything else but Palliative Care.

I returned from Calicut and joined my institution as a Lecturer in the Department of Pain and Palliative Care. I quickly realized that to be a good Palliative Care physician, one needed training in internal medicine. It was a challenge to take up another post-graduate training course in the United Kingdom.

I decided to go ahead and complete my training -- with additional training in Palliative Care -- in Aberdeen, Scotland, thanks to the advice and timely help from Dr. Mhoira Leng. Meanwhile, I also completed my Masters in Palliative Medicine from Perth, Australia, through a distance-learning program.

## Institutional level

I returned to work in the Department of Palliative Medicine at St. John's Medical College Hospital in 2008. Ever since then, it has been a rollercoaster ride. My institution is one of the ten best

teaching medical institutions in India. Our head of department, who also happened to be the chief of medical services at that time, gave me a chance to concentrate on non-malignant Palliative Care. In 2008, we started providing Palliative Care to HIV patients in a community-care centre that has a memorandum of understanding with my institution. We are continuing this service to date. Apart from providing clinical services, we have also trained doctors and nurses in the centre and conducted and published research papers.

Our head of department retired within a year of my joining the department. It was a huge challenge to convince management that Palliative Medicine had a future and that we needed doctors with post-graduate degrees and adequate training in Palliative Care to join the department. I was given an opportunity to take charge of the department and to build the department.

I took up this challenge -- as there was no one else to do it -- with great trepidation. I kept telling myself, "This is for a good cause and it will work." I convinced a Professor of Medicine from the same institution to join our department. I had to bring my negotiation skills to the fore to convince management of the need to add this senior Professor to the department. He joined the department last year.

Networking in the institution has helped our department to grow from strength-to-strength. Networking meant not just giving results with patient care. It also meant giving presentations to different departments and the nursing college. It meant ensuring we conduct undergraduate medical and nursing classes in Palliative Care. It meant carrying out research with both medical and nursing students, and offering regular short courses under the auspices of the Indian Association of Palliative Care -- of which I am a member and for whom I function as a national faculty member.

Today we can proudly say that we enjoy great support -- not only from management but also from our colleagues in the hospital. We will shortly be moving to our new outpatient department in the Oncology block.

## **National level**

Meanwhile, The Medical Council of India decided to set up a Specialty Board for Palliative Medicine and I was invited to be one of seven board members. The post-graduate course started in India last year at Tata Memorial Institute in Mumbai. Our institution is in the process of submitting an application to the University for starting the post-graduate course. The advantage that our institution will have over others is that we offer clinical services to both malignant and non-malignant patients, whereas most other centres in India provide Palliative Care only for cancer patients.

As a member of our national body, The Indian Association of Palliative Care, and also as the Honorary Secretary of the Karnataka chapter of the Association, I have had opportunities to work with many of my colleagues on projects of national importance. These include the National Palliative Care plan, the Narcotics Drugs Amendment document, and the National AIDS Control Organization's plan for Palliative Care, among others. These interactions have taught me that many things can be achieved when there is a group of like-minded people.

As a faculty member of the academic cell of the Indian Association of Palliative Care, I have had opportunities to travel the length and breadth of India to train doctors and nurses in Palliative Care. These have been exhilarating experiences in my life.

## **The Leadership Development Initiative**

My friend and LDI Cohort 1 Leader insisted that I apply for the second Cohort of LDI, and I am glad that I did -- and that I was selected to be part of this wonderful course. I came with a sense of wonder, and a little self-doubt as to what I could do or gain from this course.

Looking back, I can confidently say that over the past two years, I have grown spiritually. For me, that is essential for a true Leader. This initiative has brought a number of like-minded people together on the same platform, and it is heartening to know that you are not alone in your quest. This course gave a structure to what I knew, but had never yet practically applied. This program has given new dimensions to my professional and personal life. It has given me the confidence that even if things go wrong, they can be set right. It has helped me to focus on refining myself as a person and as a Leader.

The course design made sure that we read or heard different aspects of how to be an effective leader. It made us more confident in our negotiation and communication skills. The strategic planning workshop was so informative and well-conducted that the team activities were pure joy. This experience will help us consider strategies to make our own teams work better, thereby helping the team's initiative succeed.

## **Personal level**

Life is a spiritual journey. In my journey of life, I have been taught that leadership is a choice that we make. I used to think that I did certain things because there was no one else to do it. Now I understand that it is a choice that I make and it is because I want to make that choice.

Many people have asked me why I do Palliative Care and whether I get depressed by it. Yet others are in awe of my choice. I have learnt to take the brick-bats and the flowers without over-reacting. My leadership journey has given me even more strength to do the right things in the right measure. It has helped me bond with the people in my circle of influence, be it my family, my friends or my colleagues. It has given me a lot of angst, happiness and satisfaction at the same time.

## Future

No one knows what the future holds in store for us. I believe that in life we should have dreams and strive whole-heartedly to realize them. My biggest dream professionally is to make our Palliative Care Centre a centre for excellence in my country. I dream of continuing to teach and to influence young doctors and nurses -- who are the future generation of this planet -- to have a wholesome life and be leaders in their profession.

As Lord Krishna says to Prince Arjuna in the battlefield of Kurukshetra,  
**KARAMANYA VADHIKARASTHE MAA PHALESHU KADACHANA  
MAA KARMA PHALA HETUR BHURMA TE SANAGOSTVAKARMANI**

Bhagavat Gita – Chapter 2, Sloka 47, part1

*You have the right to work only*

*But never to its fruits.*

*Let not the fruits of action be your motive.*

*Nor let your attachment be to inaction.*

I hope and pray that I have the strength to do my work without expecting anything out of my work -- other than the satisfaction of knowing that I did my work to the best of my ability.

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