

My Brilliant Friend Ashok: A 75-year Friendship Memories – by Pravin M. Shah April 20, 2020

Life is filled with serendipity. Some call it karma, some call it God's will. I favor the term serendipity as it defies rational explanation.

Serendipity #1:

In June 1944, Ashok and I enrolled as freshmen in Bai Kabibai Hindu High School (BKHHS) in the fourth standard. It is unclear as to why his father, an up and coming attorney, and my father, an up and coming physician chose this school for us bypassing other, more elite institutions. Ashok and I attended each other's twelfth birthday party and seeds of lasting friendship were sown. Another seminal event was the arrival of Suresh Mehta to the school in 1945, when he transferred from South Africa. Suresh and I were the only two students to opt for French as our second language, while the rest of the class, including Ashok, chose Sanskrit. On several occasions, our special teacher assigned to instruct us in French would be a no-show. We would see Ashok outside his Sanskrit class for disrupting his class by asking impertinent questions! The three of us then would sneak out of the school and generally visited USIS (United States International Service) library located a short distance from the school. These truant forays cemented the friendship of us three amigos (Ashok, Suresh, and I).

Serendipity #2:

Following matriculation in 1948 we followed divergent career paths, Suresh enrolled in Commerce College, Ashok in Arts College and I chose Science College. My matriculation grade was high, and I became overconfident of admission to the premier Elphinstone College and did not apply to any other college in Bombay. Just a few days before the start of the academic year, I realized that I did not make the cut and it was too late to apply at any other institution. My uncle, who had attended Fergusson College in Poona (aka Pune) suggested that we travel to

Poona and meet with the principal to explore the possibility of admission. The principal reviewed my score, realized my predicament, and enrolled me on the spot. My uncle and I were walking through the campus in an effort to look for a boarding house for me, when I ran into Ashok! He was enrolled in the Arts College at the Fergusson campus and we were both surprised. Since we were the only two students from BKHHS at the Fergusson College, our connection as friends was cemented throughout the 1948-49 academic years. In 1950, I enrolled in Medical College in Bombay, Ashok in Law College and Suresh in Commerce College.

Serendipity #3:

Suresh's parents, who lived in South Africa had a flat on Nepean Sea Road with Suresh in charge, at a mature age of 18 years! Suresh hosted frequent mixed parties with Ashok, and I was in attendance quite often. This provided a reason for the three of us to stay connected throughout the early and mid-1950s, despite our divergent professional tracts – Law, Medicine, Commerce. The three of us shared interests in books (P. G. Wodehouse series comes to mind among others) and Indian as well as Western classical music. Ashok and I also shared a common interest in star gazing in the night, to identify constellations. While Ashok was dating Suverna, we were at a common friend's party one evening and noticed Orion in the night sky and I observed that no doubt Ashok must be impressing Suverna by pointing out constellations in the night sky over Bombay. Suverna's spontaneous laughter at discovering our attempts to impress our dates still rings fresh in my ears. After the three friends got married in the early 1960s, we pursued our professions and were physically separated. Ashok practiced law in Bombay before settling in Delhi, specializing in Constitutional Law. Suresh was appointed as a marketing executive for Time-Life International in Singapore and later in Tokyo. I pursued my post-doctoral studies in cardiology in the U.S., U.K., and Canada before starting an academic career at the University of Rochester in upstate New York. As we pursued our family and professional lives on different continents, we remained friends despite the sporadic nature of our contact. The strands of friendship established in childhood and nurtured through common interests tend to remain strong despite physical separation.

Serendipity #4:

As my career advancement took me from upstate New York to California, Suresh emigrated to Canada. Ashok and Suverna's daughter Ami settled in Seattle, Washington and their younger son Jay, in Denver, Colorado. Ashok and Suverna now had grandchildren in the United States, and thus began their yearly visits during the summer recess of the Indian Supreme Court. In the year 2000, Ashok, Suverna, Suresh, Katherine, and I (Suresh being single then) travelled to Scotland to spend four days at Culzean Castle, located in the country's southwest corner and full of interesting history. The top floor was a penthouse with four bedrooms, a large library functioning as a gathering place and kitchen and dining room. The penthouse was named after Dwight Eisenhower to honor his role as Allied Force Commander in World War II. It was further stipulated that the Eisenhowers could stay there whenever they wished. When not occupied by them, it functions as a vacation rental. The five of us spent a glorious four days at the castle. After that memorable visit we agreed to meet at least once a year. Thus began our BKHHS reunion generally in June every year. In no particular order, we met at Quebec City, Montreal, Ottawa, Vancouver, Victoria, and Tofino, Seattle, Missoula, Ashland, Lake Arrowhead, Santa Fe and Taos, Napa, and the last one being in Post Falls, Idaho in 2015. Each of these gatherings created lasting memories and deeper friendship. Ashok, Suverna, my present wife Iris and I met in Seattle area in June of 2017, 2018, and 2019.

Ashok was a renaissance man with broad interests in literature, in music, in arts, in food and in life itself. He had a deep intellect, a sense of humor and ample humility. I shall dearly miss my brilliant friend of 75 years. There are so many memories that flood my mind. I will be, forever grateful that serendipity provided the connections for a lasting friendship.