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The Magic of America: a Roller Coaster of Opportunities

By Manoj Chopra
UCF Forum columnist
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As an immigrant born in Delhi, India, I must stress that the United States has provided me with the opportunity to achieve most of my dreams.

It has never questioned what I look like, where I was from or what I wanted to achieve. In turn, I made a pact with it – to work hard and make my contribution to it. To play by the rules and treat everyone with respect.

That is the magic of the United States.

One's life is, after all, made up of a series of opportunities along the time continuum. These opportunities lead to choices that then culminate in a sequence of experiences.

I may be influenced a bit by an excellent book that I read recently called *Dark Matter* (Crouch, 2017), dealing with the human aspect of quantum coexisting states within the universe and the choices one makes. Was there a better life, a different path, different choice?

Who knows? But I grew up in a middle-class family in Calcutta (now known as Kolkata), and this life has been a roller coaster of wonderful opportunities and experiences. It has brought me to a myriad of surroundings and a wonderful collection of friends.

I want to lay out a small bouquet for you. I had:

Opportunity to spend my early childhood with my father, an electronic engineer who tinkered at home with radios and early versions of black and white television. This exposed me to the experience of listening to the Voice of America and BBC and, among the accented English commentary of cricket and Wimbledon tennis, hearing about the wonderful lives of people across the globe. Listening to the World Cup of soccer was somehow always in the middle of the night in India and I had to drag myself to school in a groggy haze.

Opportunity to study at a preeminent undergraduate university in India, which provided a holistic and comprehensive curriculum as opposed to just a strong technological

engineering background. This was a great blessing as it prepared me well when I moved into a more international setting.

Opportunity to come to the United States to pursue graduate education with great financial assistance and outstanding faculty mentors. It was quite a shock at first – both culture and temperature. After all, I had moved from tropical India to frigid Buffalo, New York. I did not realize I had so many bones that can be chilled no matter how many layers I wore.

Opportunity to meet my wife in Buffalo during my first year in graduate school. We married five years later after I finished my doctorate. She has been a blessing and is truly my best friend. We now have two sons who are in college and are making excellent choices of their own.

Opportunity to come to UCF and pursue my desire to influence young minds through teaching and mentoring. Of the many choices I have made, notwithstanding the choice of a life partner, this would rank among the top. UCF has offered a dynamic, exciting and rewarding life. I have many wonderful students who have influenced me, changed me, improved me. One advantage of social media is that I am now able to stay in touch with a large number of them and can proudly watch as they grow. UCF has also provided me the opportunity to make some wonderful friends and learn from some excellent mentors.

Opportunity to serve as a faculty leader first on UCF's Board of Trustees as the chair of the faculty senate and then on the state Board of Governors as a chair of the council of senates for all 12 state universities in Florida.

Opportunity to study one of the most interesting and frightening research areas that influences us in Central Florida: sinkholes! While I have also researched behavior of soils and the response of structures we build on soils, nothing has been as rewarding and noteworthy as my work on sinkholes. We continue to work on our ability to understand their mechanisms and progression underground with the ultimate goal, of course, of being able to predict their catastrophic collapse. Is there something we can see or measure that may provide us with a warning?

So, that is a brief snapshot of my journey – as an immigrant and someone who proudly became a U.S. citizen while living in Buffalo.

I have had the opportunity to follow my dreams of teaching and helping shape the world, if even in just a small way.

As I said: That is the magic of the United States.

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