

## Creativity and Personal Mastery (CPM) Application

Dr. Srikumar S. Rao

Answer each question separately

### **1. Tell me something about yourself, something that will make you come alive as a person. You get to decide what you reveal and at what length.**

I am a survivor.

One of my earlier memories is when I was not much more than five years of age. I was holding open a heavy wooden door at 51 Marshall St. in Paterson, N.J., as my mother was being carried out of the house on a stretcher to a waiting ambulance. She had suffered yet another miscarriage, another potential sibling deceased. I had a brother, James, who made it, only to die after a few hours of birth. This was followed by three miscarriages.

In the end, I was the only child who survived—and even my life had been threatened. At the age of seven, I had spent the better part of a year recovering from two major surgeries: one for the removal of a stomach cyst the size of a grapefruit, the other for complications from the surgery. More recently, at the age of 58, I was diagnosed with both kidney and prostate cancer, requiring the loss of one kidney and a “watchful surveillance” routine on the prostate.

So when I look back at my life and connect the dots, I often wonder how lucky I've been.

I grew up in a tired and declining city, a proverbial blue collar melting pot which at the time consisted of a population divided in thirds: a third Hispanic (primarily Puerto Rican), a third black, and a third white immigrants from Italy, Ireland, England, and Germany. I lived in a three-story house we shared with my Italian grandparents. My parents and I lived on the first floor with my grandparents on the top. We had no central heating, no shower or bathtub. I took gypsy baths at the kitchen sink. My parents were Irish (my father) and Italian (my mother) and our heritage played a big role in my life – especially the Italian focus on family. I fondly recall lingering suppers every Sunday sitting around the table enjoying the fresh pasta (ears) that my grandfather would make by hand each Sunday morning served with gravy (Italian for red sauce) made from the tomatoes he grew out back and the wine he made in the dirt-floor basement of the house. Loud voices and animated gestures were a standard part of the passionate conversations about politics and life around the table. Like all good Irish Catholics, I went to nearby parochial schools for both my elementary and high school education, attended mass every morning, and was an altar boy.

Neither of my parents had a college education. I would be the first in the family to gain both undergraduate and master's degrees. My parents were uncomplicated people who worked hard to provide a simple life. I was a latch key kid before anyone had invented the term. Both parents worked and were members of the garment and textile workers union. My father graduated high school and went to work in a nearby finishing mill and would come home each night with feet dyed different colors depending on what was used in the mill on the early evening shift. My mother never finished grammar school, having suffered an attack by a neighborhood dog that bit her near the throat and dragged her down a city street. The event was a defining moment in her life. Severely traumatized, she developed a debilitating stutter that led to the parish priest's suggestion that she be taken out of grammar school. He said she was a disruption to the class. (The upshot: my mother would never be able to read and could only write her name). Ultimately, the incident would haunt her for the rest of her life, as she went on to suffer years of anxiety attacks and depression. Before I entered high school, she was subjected to numerous shock treatments that left her relatively uncommunicative at our dinner table. No less important, she was in and out of the psychiatric wards of hospitals for most of her life. When I grew older and visited, she was more often than not languishing in bed.

I was very close to my father. We were each other's support system. My father, though legally blind, poured a lot of his time and energy into me. He encouraged my love of reading and the outdoors. We would walk a mile on Saturday nights to a newsstand near Paterson's railway station and he would treat me to a couple of magazines. He would bring me to the library to check out books. And he would subscribe to numerous magazines, ranging from *Life* and the *Saturday Evening Post* to *Business Week* and *Readers Digest*, to make sure I was exposed to the larger world outside our small apartment in a declining neighborhood where we had become a minority. Every year, we would take a separate vacation together—without my mother—a week in the country where we would fish, hike, listen to music, play cards, and read. Even during our family vacation—always in Atlantic City, New Jersey—my father would take me out for long bike rides on the boardwalk overlooking the ocean or even a full day away from my mother at the famous Steel Pier.

Frankly, I believe my father saved my life. He protected me from the madness of my mother's depression and its impact on all of us. One of the most searing memories I have is of my mother, sitting alone at the kitchen table in some catatonic despair, muttering the same phrase over and over again to no one as if in a trance, nervously rocking back and forth in perpetual motion. Several times, she threatened suicide, wanting to put her head in the gas oven. When she was hospitalized in psychiatric centers, she was so completely sedated and dazed that the staff would sometimes strap her to a chair to keep her upright. To my utter horror, I once visited her at a center where her lips were swollen to twice their normal size, her eyes were a cloudy pool of nothingness, and drool dripped from her nose and mouth. She would not respond to anything. Whatever could be said seemed unheard. This was the

absolute low point in a life defined by mental illness. Through it all, my father was completely devoted to her. He became her full-time caretaker and her protector, sacrificing most of his own life to her considerable needs without complaint or regret. For years, his only outings with my mother would invariably be visits to doctors and psychiatrists or hospitals and psychiatric centers.

Perhaps to protect myself, I created my own world. I went to work early, shining shoes for 15 cents a pair on city streets when I was not much more than 12 years of age. I had three newspaper routes, the city's morning newspaper, *The Morning Call*, the afternoon paper, *The Paterson Evening News*, and a weekend shopper that urged city dwellers into the suburbs to shop. I talked my way into *The Morning Call* as an office boy in the circulation department and there I often found myself in a little upstairs cubbyhole where the archives of the newspaper were stored. I'd often sit in that room which smelled of mold and newspaper print, reading the accounts of Charles Lindbergh's solo nonstop flight across the Atlantic, Hitler's march into Poland, the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and other events. I loved spending time in that room reading a mix of historic and inconsequential events recorded on yellowed and brittle newspaper clippings, some of which were already a half century old.

When I graduated from high school, I had no idea of what I wanted to do. I had no professional role models in my life. I vaguely thought I would join the Air Force. I applied to only one college largely due to my father's encouragement and support. I was accepted and decided to give it a try: William Paterson College, a place largely meant for first generation college kids, was a godsend. In my freshman year, I became the college weekly's rock critic, owing to my love of music and my keen interest in writing. It was here that I found my life's profession, my best friends, and my first wife. It was here that I really discovered my purpose in life.

Elected as editor in chief at the end of my sophomore year, I was one of the youngest to run the weekly newspaper. The job was usually held for only one year. I was asked to do it for two. I threw myself into the role, devoting 60 hours a week to it. I adopted as my mentor a newly arrived college professor who had been the salty city editor of *The Rochester Times Union*. Herb Jackson became the first male figure I ever really knew who had been a white collar professional. I invited him to be the faculty advisor for the newspaper. I took every class he taught. For two years of my life, there wasn't a week in which I failed to spend valuable time with him—often three or four times a week. With his help, I had turned the newspaper from a gathering place for a bunch of friends into a highly professional workplace that regularly pumped out provocative and relevant journalism. The staff of the paper soon became my family, and I had the time of my life. I loved being in the know, having a seat at the table besides professors and school board decision makers. I loved having a platform from which to share my thoughts. I loved feeling as though I was making a difference. I had a voice, and I was proud of it. For the first time in my life, I actually felt important.

When I graduated and gave up the editor's job, I had no grand vision of the future. If anything, I distinctly remember feeling as if I had just experienced what likely would be the peak of my lifetime. By then, I loved what I was doing. I was getting A's in every course. I had made great friends. I was in love for the first time with Sharon who I had met at the college newspaper. I had a terrific part-time job with The New York Daily News. At my graduation, I was not overjoyed. I was deeply saddened that I would soon leave this world that had become so comfortable and stable.

I married Sharon two months after graduation, and we trekked westward to Columbia, Missouri, to the School of Journalism where I had been accepted to study for my Master's in Journalism. I was still raw and unformed, though incredibly competitive and ambitious. Though it was a two-year program, I finished it early--in a year and a half by staying in class through the summer term. My first job was in Washington, D.C., as a correspondent for a group of trade newspapers, Fairchild Publications.

Within three years, I was promoted to London Bureau Chief. After spending nearly three years in Britain, I was hired by Forbes magazine in New York and, four years later, by Business Week. Over the next 17 and one-half years, I led a whirlwind life. I wrote a record 57 cover stories. I had three children, Jonathan, Katie, and Sarah. I coached Little League baseball for ten years. I bought a first and second home in the country. I wrote eight books, including two New York Times bestsellers. I took my family on vacations in Tuscany, in London, in California, and in Hawaii. I lived a pretty good life.

Oddly, in my most personal life, I felt lonely and unfulfilled. Sadly, my wife felt out of place and overmatched by my professional friends. I came to believe I lacked a partner who could keep up with my intellectual curiosity, who shared my passions, and who could be bridge my personal and professional lives. The more I seemed to achieve, the greater the unwanted distance between us grew.

I threw more of my energy into work, becoming editor-in-chief of Fast Company, succeeding the two founding editors. After helping to save the magazine by finding the only buyer who would keep it open, I decided to accept an offer to return to my "professional home" as executive editor of Business Week. I essentially traded the experience of leading a monthly with a staff of 24 people for the job of leading a weekly with a staff of 250 people and a \$50 million annual editorial budget. I spent four years there as executive editor of the magazine and my last two years as editor-in-chief of its online operations when two major events occurred that led to a dramatic rethinking at midlife.

The first event was falling in love again with a woman who lived 3,000 miles away. The second event was the sale of Business Week to Bloomberg. When I first met Kate, she was in charge of advertising sales for the West Coast for Fast Company. She was smart, creative, witty, and, to borrow a phrase used by one of my East Coast friends who met her, "absolutely adorable." I realized I had met my soulmate. We

quickly became friends and our friendship blossomed into something more: a profound and forever deepening romance and love.

Kate divorced. Then, after a long legal battle, I divorced. Kate and I became engaged. We then married. A song was played at the wedding that aptly captures how I truly feel: "I do not know a day I did not love you."

We were on our honeymoon on the Sonoma Coast when news arrived that Bloomberg had purchased Business Week. It seemed the perfect time to leave and do something new. I had no intention of staying in New York, while my new wife lived outside San Francisco with her two children. So on the day the deal for Business Week was concluded, I left my job as executive editor of the magazine and editor in chief of BusinessWeek.com.

In short, in 2009, at the age of 56, I upended every part of my life. After a 30-plus year marriage, I remarried. I packed a U-Haul truck and together with Kate, drove it 3,000 miles across the country to start a new life. I quit my high-powered job on the 41<sup>st</sup> floor of a skyscraper in New York to work alone from a room in our home in Corte Madera. I often cook dinner for Kate and our two children, Liza, now 16, and Abby, 12. I pick up the kids from school. I've also launched a digital media company called C-Change Media, and I've written two books and will soon take on a third.

I'm settled, in a way, and yet unsettled, in another way. I'm resolved in having found a magnificent woman who I intimately adore and cherish in every way. I'm unresolved in the sense that I still feel an unshakeable sense of fault and guilt at having caused hurt and pain in other lives. I'm at a crossroads with my business, trying to decide whether my idea is good enough to pour every ounce of me and every dollar I have into it. Or whether I should continue to hedge my bets, writing books and continuing to develop my web business as conservatively as I have. I wonder if I simply lack the courage and drive to pursue my entrepreneurial dream full out.

**2. Why do you want to take this course? Give me as much detail as possible. How did you learn about it? If someone recommended it, who and why did he/she do so? If any part of the syllabus spoke to you strongly, which part and why?**

I met Professor Rao when I was at Business Week. I instantly liked and admired him. When I found out that one of my employees at BusinessWeek was in his course, I grew interested in it. At first, I had no interest in taking it. I am not against introspection. I'm a naturally introspective person who has thought deeply about my life and the paths I've chosen. My wife is a more openly searching person and recently hit a crossroads herself. So I recommended the course to her from what little I knew about it. It hadn't honestly crossed my mind to take it myself until I had a telephone conversation with Professor Rao.

Truth is, I'm at a point where deeper introspective would be extremely helpful to me. I've left a big brand name in traditional journalism, a place that helped to define me, for the more uncertain world of entrepreneurship. My ambition is to create a new media alternative in business journalism. To do so, I need to get more comfortable trusting myself. After looking at the syllabus, I believe this course could be of great help in getting me there. I also believe it will make even more intimate my relationship with Kate who is also taking the course.

**3. What specific — list them — learning outcomes would you like to take away from this course? An example of such an outcome is “I would like to learn how to stop being bothered by what I think others are thinking about me.”**

I want to be a more successful husband, father and entrepreneur.

I want to better balance work and personal life.

I want to learn to operate at a sustainable pace, one where I feel alive and accomplishing what I want to accomplish, but not at the expense of my health.

**4. What hesitations do you have? Are you nervous or concerned about anything you read in the syllabus or heard from others?**

I have lived in the world of facts and figures. I look for certainties everywhere. I am, by my very nature as a journalist, tough-minded and skeptical. The course will give me the opportunity to review my faith and belief systems. I could see where this could potentially be uncomfortable at first, though in time will ease. I am excited at the prospect of what I will discover and how it impacts my work.

**5. How will other persons who take the course benefit from having you in it?**

My provocative nature will be sure to get everyone engaged. I'm not afraid to ask the hard questions. I love to stir things up and get to the root of an issue. I'm a very curious person and love to learn how people do what they do, why they think what they think, and how they got to where they are, and where they see themselves headed.

I don't take myself too seriously, which I think will help others feel comfortable and open up more.

I'm a thoughtful, compassionate soul and will be empathetic to those in the class.

**6. What really, really, really and truly matters to you? Why?**

That I live a productive, fulfilling and loving life that is worthy of my promise. That my life brings a certain level of respect and admiration from others. I do need approval. External validation is important to me.

**7. This course requires an enormous commitment of time as well as emotional and psychic energy. If your participation slacks off, you will be doing a disservice to yourself as well as other members of class. Are you fully prepared to take responsibility to make this class a resounding success for yourself as well as for others?**

Yes. This is one of the reasons I waited so long to apply as I have been essentially working three jobs and wanted to make sure that I got through at least two of them so that I could commit myself fully to the time required.