

Choosing All Paths Simultaneously

by Scott Fotheringham (with additional notes by David Scott)



Raywat Deonandan

When you're the fifth child of an immigrant family, having moved from a relatively poor agrarian country to Canada's largest city, you learn that survival depends on succeeding on the terms of your adopted culture. It was in this milieu that Raywat Deonandan (PhD, Epidemiology & Biostatistics 2001) developed a worldview that has served him to this day. With wide-ranging interests and innate curiosity, he learned to pursue many interests at the same time and has developed wide knowledge and diverse skills, in effect creating his own safety net.

"I had a lot of fear growing up," Deonandan said. "I was discouraged from my artistic pursuits because they were considered unsafe."

(As an immigrant from a poor family, pursuing a career as a fiction writer would be considered "unsafe" because, frankly, it would not result in a well-paying job. In the "old country" ethos, an expensive education should lead to a financially profitable career).

"I learned that if I chose the wrong path I would be unemployable, poor, and unhappy, so I chose all paths simultaneously. I assumed something would pay off."

He has built a life putting that ethos into practice, whether as an academic, a consultant on global health issues, a black belt in karate, or an award-winning writer of fiction.

Deonandan is an epidemiologist and Assistant Professor in the faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Ottawa where he specializes in global health issues. He has served as the Chief Scientific Advisor at Assisted Human Reproduction Canada, a federal regulatory agency, and was the founding epidemiologist for the Centre of Excellence for Child/Youth Mental Health for the provincial government in Ontario. He has a consulting practice, advising NGOs and governments on reproductive health, epidemiology, and social policy.

"Our experience as a poor farming family, was to be thrown into a society that values education and professional achievement," Deonandan remembered. "Yet we had no examples in our family of people being educated to pursue a career. Without explicit direction about how to proceed, I was thrown to the wolves to figure it out on my own."

Born in Guyana in 1967, Deonandan moved to Toronto when he was four. He spent a lot of his childhood on his own, learning about the world through play as his parents strived to make a living. Although he always wanted to be a writer – he wrote a novel when he was seven and had his first published short story at 14 – Deonandan knew his aptitude for the sciences was a better career fit. He completed his undergrad in physics and physiology at U of T, then went on to a masters in neurophysiology, also in Toronto.

"I was doing darkness adaptation experiments," he said. "When I wasn't in the dark I wore red goggles to maintain my darkness adaptation. I was literally in the dark all the time."

(The dark adaptation condition was required for the research I was doing for my Master's degree in neurophysiology. Red goggles are worn to maintain dark adaptation when you are no longer in the dark. It's an old trick that WWII bomber pilots used to use, as well, to maintain their dark-adapted night vision while they waited in a lit room for their mission to begin. The results of those experiments were published in my Master's thesis. It's dry and technical, but the thrust of it was that we were hoping to measure a physiological function in the human retina -- called a "Ricco summation area" -- that could eventually be used for tumour detection....

Or for developing better military HUD displays for fighter planes!)

He was alone in the lab one night at three o'clock, unsuccessfully trying to pull in a ballgame on the radio, when he realized how miserable he was and that he needed to make a change.

Searching through a calendar of PhD programs, he looked for one that would fit his values and aspirations. His ideal field of study would allow him to travel and be social, and would be broad enough that he could change topics regularly. He found epidemiology, enrolled in the PhD program at Western, and ended up loving it.

At Western, Deonandan continued to explore multiple interests, joining the judo club, the Network of Indian professionals, attending lectures in other departments and even the business school, and writing for a campus literary magazine.

"My goal was not to just get a doctorate, but to get an education," he said. "University is a magical and unique time during which you have the opportunity to sample all of life's different flavours. As a grad student, I took advantage of the strength of the university even when it was in different departments."

The flexibility of his schedule allowed easy access to his professors, many of whom he has stayed in touch with. He was the best man at the wedding of his first stats professor (Neil Klar, PhD'94) and has since brought Dr. Klar to Ottawa to judge his students at a science contest.

"There is a lineage and an investment in scholarship and collaboration that is measurable and obvious at Western," he said. "I appreciated it then and I continue to take advantage of it now."

He was encouraged by his department to teach and, as a result, held seminars around campus on the nascent Internet. He also created the first official home page for the Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics. But it may be the magnificence of the Western campus that impressed him most.

"Natural beauty on a university campus has a particular effect on the state of mind of a young learner that allowed me to appreciate the connection of things and the importance of ecology," he said. "Western does this very well."

During his doctorate, Deonandan took a four-month break to study international health in India. While he was there, a little girl died in his arms.

(In an incident completely unrelated to the activities of the program I was pursuing, my group came upon a girl -- 2-4 years old -- who had been hit by a bus. Her leg had been completely torn off. She fell to our care to rush her to a medical station. The drive to the station was a story in and of itself, as her disembodied leg was rolling up and down the bus floor... and I was trying to reach for it, as the bus careened at crazy speeds around curves. Once we got there, she was in the sole care of myself and another student, as we waited for the doctors and nurses to get organized. She was unresponsive in my arms, and I learned she was declared dead after she was taken from me).

Upon his return to London, Deonandan needed time to heal from that and, instead of working on his thesis, he finished writing and then published his first volume of fiction, *Sweet Like Saltwater*. The book went on to win the national book award of Guyana in his native country. Publishing this fictional narrative of personal family history was in many ways cathartic.

"It was a form of therapy to deal with childhood racism and created an avenue of dialogue with my family and others," he said. "I got emails from strangers saying my book allowed them to talk to their loved ones about their similar experiences. It turned out to be a passport into greater acceptance by my community."

Deonandan has since written a novel (*Divine Elemental*), three academic textbooks on epidemiology and global health, a regular blog for the Huffington Post, and numerous articles about a wide range of topics as diverse as: the epidemiology of eye diseases among children in India; whether people's reluctance to fly after 9/11 led to an increase in traffic accidents (it did, but only slightly); and the ethics of surrogacy and reproductive tourism in the third world.

"It was important for me, particularly with stressors in my life like being an immigrant and a person of colour, to have an artistic outlet," he said. "Without that I could have turned my angst inward and created a lot of damage."

In fact, it is his first novel, *Divine Elemental*, that he considers his greatest professional achievement.

“That book is the product of my philosophical space,” he said. “I got to get out, on paper in narrative form, my opinion of the nature of the universe. That was a magical opportunity for me at that time of my life.”

These seemingly disparate interests – global health, teaching, writing fiction and journalism – allow Deonandan to explore the same set of questions he has about the nature of reality and our place in it.

“The true intellectual strives to investigate his questions using whatever methods are available, not just the methods available in any one discipline,” he explained. “All these paths answer the same questions about belonging, identity, and why things are the way they are. It doesn’t have to be from a scientific perspective, it can be from an artistic perspective.”

It seems that this desire and ability to choose all paths simultaneously has served Deonandan well.

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