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Practically speaking

Sanjay K Bose

I am supposed to be the insomniac of the Bose family, waking up early, while my wife and daughter slumber peacefully as long as possible. I was therefore, very surprised to see my daughter roaming around the house early in the morning. Not it was not a case of sleepwalking, as I had originally suspected. She was actually up early because she was nervous about the chemistry practical exams that she was supposed to take that day.

I really cannot fault my daughter for her nervousness. When the annals of the Bose' finally do get written, no one will credit us as being the practical, "do-it-yourself type" of family. We are great on theory but the actual practical issues often elude us. Armchair philosophy and abstract calculations are more of our forte, leaving others to be the movers and shakers of this world.

My own experiences with the practical aspects of engineering are not exactly the type to inspire confidence either. When asked to measure the height and location of the faculty building in a course on surveying, the results that I got surprised everybody, including me! The instructor was shocked speechless, as my numbers would have made it one of the tallest buildings in the world. He finally did regain his powers of speech when he saw the second part of my efforts. My triangulation had put the much-abused building somewhere in the middle of the Tibetan plateau.

Leaving surveying behind as a lost cause, I moved onto other things to hone my practical skills. I usually did try my best to spread sweetness and light in a Wodehousian fashion but the results were generally disastrous. Take the time when, as a student in the US I tried to save a friend a few dollars by volunteering to give him a haircut.

Not that I had ever done that before but having been through a lifetime of haircuts, the basic principles looked simple enough.

I still think I did a fair job and can never quite figure out why my friend insisted on wearing a sports-cap for classes for a couple of months after that? He would venture out cap-less only under the cover of darkness and would make it a point to come and threaten me with dire consequences, if he ever saw me with a pair of scissors in my hand. The fact that I had paid for the sports-cap out of my meager finances did not seem to cut much ice with him either.

Wandering around Delhi one night with my wife and a friend, my friend's car refused to go any further. With a string of engineering degrees after my name, it was not too surprising that both of them looked up to me trustingly to fix the problem and get the car moving again. With my survival skills now honed to perfection by teaching generations of rowdy students, my approach was a simple one.

I decided that the best solution to the problem was to get a taxi and escort my friend home, leaving the car for professionals to attend to in the morning.



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