

Courage: The Indefinable Element

The lessons we can all learn from a young woman who overcame crippling adversity, finding joy and purpose in the most trying circumstances

A young, happy mother-to-be on holiday in Cambodia, living in the here and now that is unique to that wonderful age of late twenties/early thirties - and full of plans for the future. Struck by a strange bacterial disease that sees her lose all her limbs after a debilitating fever. Just like that. You would think that would destroy plans, destroy hope and destroy the person. Think again.

Shalini Saraswathi is a young woman like so many in our families, in our next generation. She still has dreams – they are perhaps just different from what they used to be. And perhaps they are just the same

Everything can – and must – change. Ella Maarum. You may not know it yet, but there is a plan, and that plan will take you to other things, to better things.



as they used to be. Disability, that too sudden, changes your lens of

looking at the world, but it does not change your core, if you are really in the mould you are meant to be in.

The disease that struck Shalini is extremely rare, and usually fatal. Shalini is, however, a rarer individual. She fought the disease through two years of confinement, immense pain – she said to the IMA Forum once, do you know what it might feel like to smell your own skin rotting? - and finally, amputation.

And yet, when you meet Shalini, you are struck overwhelmingly only by positivity, only by the gratitude she feels, although at all times, the honesty of owning up to anger on the sheer unfairness of life is



also clear - as is her subsequent acceptance of what the universe threw her way and what she has chosen to make of it by moving quite simply, beyond it.

Over the course of the past few weeks, IMA's CFO and CHRO Forums hosted Shalini Saraswathi. The conversation was a lesson in personal capability, it was a learning in strength of character and the power of the human spirit. It was also a session about the power of stable families, of friendship and of teamwork. And it was a call to action on how India's disabled - 70 million individuals according to the government - must be mainstreamed; the onus is on industry more than

Step into other people's shoes; see the world with their eyes. The difference in perspective is humbling, and enlightening.



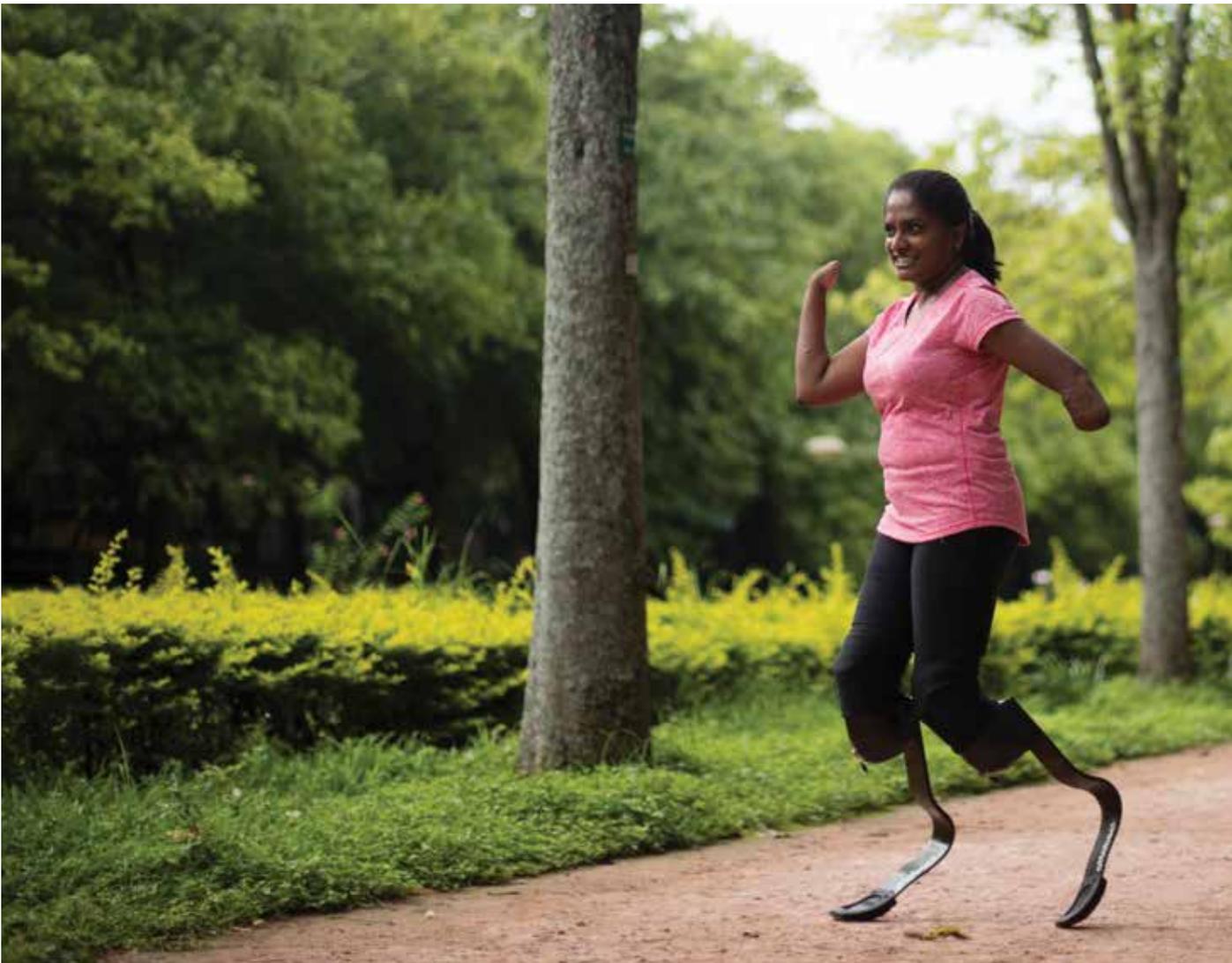
anything else, but it is also on all of us as individuals.

Shalini works, she runs - the 10 KM marathon in Bangalore for starters - and she loves, and is

loved, by her husband, her family and her friends. She is involved in multiple things, again like so many of her energetic generation. She volunteers for two wonderful institutions - one that works with disabled people and the other with families of sex workers. Most of all, she still has the utter Joie d'Vivre that we all strive for, and forget all too easily in the madness of our lives.

Some lessons from the opportunity of sharing Shalini's story...

Everything will - and must - change. Shalini spoke of this at two



levels. The first, when she outlined her life before 2012 where most immediate term dreams had been achieved - a good career, a house newly bought, some great vacations undertaken, a just-detected pregnancy. And then it all changed - she went on holiday, returned into ICU with a fever, and came out of a coma 6 days later to find everything collapsing and her life written off. So, don't bet on permanence, and never be complacent or worse, arrogant. But she also outlined the fact of everything changing in the words of her Ayurveda guru - Ella Maarum (in malyali) - that even the worst will pass. Things will change, and they will get better.

Any stage in life is a chance to make things better. Everything changes depending on how you choose to view life from here on. From here on.



Everything happens for a reason she said. Even if you do not know it yet, there is a plan and that

plan is meant to take you to other things, to better things. You have to just remain open to it. Her own life, as she said on more than one occasion, is today full of elements that she never ever dreamed would be possible. She has lost so much, but as she says, she has gained so much more and in ways and areas you would never think of.

And that leads you to the next learning. **The power of positivity.** Shalini is so positive that an already strong spirit is almost indomitable. You can see it in her eyes, in her stride, in her categorical outreach to you to give you a hug, to shake your hand, in her plans to run the next marathon. What can I do rather than what can I NOT do. Focus on the former, always on the former.

Try to step into another's shoes as often as you can. The difference in perspective is key to balance, key to harmony. Robin Williams' character made all his students climb up on a table to view the classroom in the movie, The Dead Poets' Society. The difference is in perspective. Today, as a part of India's millions disabled, Shalini's perspective is so, so different. Do we have to go through a radical, life altering experience to come out of it with the ability to have a different perspective that enables you to see life and instances from another's point of view? Perhaps not. Could we just try, occasionally, to climb on a table, or drop down to the ground, actually and metaphorically.

Make something out of any curve ball life throws your way. If it was prosthetics - and Shalini is forever grateful because she can afford it when millions cannot - then take it to another level by trying running. Not to win, but simply to be.

Gratitude - everyone talks of the importance of gratitude, but with



Shalini, you see so much gratitude instead of bitterness. There will always be someone so, so much worse off than you. In her case, a quadriplegic, she talks of a friend who has muscular dystrophy and over a decade has regressed to not even being able to hold up her own head without help. If that is not a wise, grateful perspective, I do not know what is.

Own your sadness, find a vent and express yourself. She does, with poetry that she may or may not share with the world, but it helps, she says.

Teach your children, and especially your girl children, the power of independence. For Shalini her mother's advice to ensure you are independent, in perspective, in finances, is what enabled her to pick herself up when it would have been all too easy to let go, to become utterly dependent.

The value of teams, of families, and friends like family. Your network of love is everything. Shalini is fortunate in the power of her friends, who did not, for over two years, ever let her be alone for even a day, even an evening. Her family - parents, husband - everyone rallied to her. And because she was strong, so were they. And vice versa. Virtuous cycles are more powerful than we realise. Develop yours, and protect yours, and invest in yours.

You must have a passion. It was running for Shalini, and it was also music. Today, she runs for the sense of purpose it gives her, the kind of control it gives her over mind and body and the belief it gives her in herself. It takes a LOT out of her, physically and mentally, but the discipline is key to her.

Scars are good. Wear them with pride because they are your life's experiences. Shalini chose not to hide her disability, not to opt for cosmetic surgery. Not because she

Integrate the disabled. There is little more important than facilitating India's 70 million disabled individuals, who at their core, want the same things others do – a good life, financial independence, the ability to create some value and love. They have visible disabilities, others may have invisible ones.



does not want to look beautiful - she is incredibly lovely - but because she believes this reminds her of where she has been, and keeps her centred.

In your final days, you will remember the special things, the small things. Often, they will not relate to money. A friend's laughter, the wildflowers along a road, happy memories of school. **Build those memories, take note of the beauty all around you.** In people, in your environment.

That has nothing to do with wanting to do well, trying your very best at whatever you do, and **ensuring financial independence.** That, for Shalini, is important. But it cannot be the reason for your life. It must contribute to it but your experiences must give you pleasure, must give you satisfaction. This again does not mean that we only do things that we enjoy, but also

perhaps, that we look for the joy in the things that do come our way - as responsibilities, as circumstances. Then you are the controller of the circumstance and not the other way round.

Everything depends on what you make of life from now on. From now on. There is no time for regret; there can be no looking back. You can be destroyed in spirit, but like Po in Kung Fu Panda, Shalini's favourite movie for its profundity despite its simplicity, what really matters is what you choose to make of yourself from now on. This is applicable in every phase of our life, applicable to every day of our lives.

Please focus on the disabled. India has over 70 million and society forgets them, families shun them. Corporates do so almost to the man - or firm. They shrink into themselves and we forget that at our base, all individuals want the same things - a certain quality of life, economic independence, time with loved ones, a vacation every once in a while, a movie, time to see a bit of the world, or the country. Just that some have visible disabilities and others don't - or in Shalini's words, have invisible disabilities that exist. There is no infrastructure sensitivity to the disabled in the country. But in our corporations, can we develop that by creating physical infrastructure for the disabled, by giving job opportunities to the disabled - they won't lack in competence and they might well exceed your expectations on commitment and loyalty. Can we however build organisations and teams that are mature enough to integrate them, do we have the power to believe in others, do we have the power to trust because it is the right thing to do, not because it is a favour. ■

This article is based on discussions of IMA's Forums with Shalini Saraswathi