My name is Venkatesh Kini and I go by Venky. I come from very humble beginnings back in India. I grew up in Western India, and then eventually in Delhi, and I happened to grow up in socialist India, which basically means an environment where we didn't have any exposure to the west. We had only one government controlled television station, government controlled radio, and because it was socialist India, just about every single thing that we had to buy was rationed by the government. It could take us 10 to 15 years to get a telephone connection, 10 years to buy a car, if you could afford one, and even growing up, I remember having to stand in line to buy bread and sugar and stuff like that.

That's where I started, and the interesting thing is that I never knew growing up what I was missing, because I had no exposure to the west. I thought I grew up privileged. I grew up privileged because our family was much better off than many of the others around. We could, growing up, we could afford to stay in reasonably large apartments. Many of my cousins and friends would stay in much smaller places. We could afford a car. My father could afford a car when I went and I got into high school. We had a car at home, which was a big deal.

I thought I was privileged, and the only good thing about my childhood that I could say that had been good stead for the rest of my life is that we had a very good education. My parents invested in my education by sending me to private schools, which of course, made a big dent. They're a very meager pocket, but it allowed me to get a very good grounding in English education, which is why I speak English as well as I do. Because growing up, you could only get an English speaking education in private schools in India.

Towards the end of my college years, that's when India opened up and 1991 is when India suddenly liberalized, and we suddenly discovered that there was a world out there. Before 1991, all I could do was see smuggled newspapers or smuggled magazines, even TIME magazine and stuff like that had to be smuggled into the country. Even Hollywood films used to come to India five years later in the form of smuggled VHS tapes. I discovered there was a world out there only in the 1990s, and although we had a very good education, most of it was book knowledge and most of it was knowledge based on I mean, and I was very curious as a child, so I used to learn from encyclopedias and stuff like that. I was passionately curious about many things.

Most of my curiosity was about the world around us, about science, about astronomy and about stuff, but growing up in India, again, there were not too many opportunities to explore your passions. Once you went to college, the only career paths that would get you a decent job in our youth were engineering, a medical degree or an MBA. Since I didn't have the aptitude or the discipline to be an engineer, and I used to faint at the sight of blood, I ended up doing a liberal arts degree in college and finally made it into an MBA Institute in India, which is considered a pretty good institute. That's how I managed to get my first job.

My first job getting out of business school, and that was India's best business school in those days. The pay was less than $100 a month. After you do a business school, an MBA degree straight out of college, you have no idea what the business world is all about. When I started my career, the first job that I was sent out to do was to travel into the hinterland of western India, into the villages of India and sell paint. I joined the paints company out of my business school, and my first job was a salesperson for paint, which meant that I have to spend two to four hours in a local state run bus, usually standing because it was only standing room in those buses, and go to a neighboring city, which is about four to five hours from the city of Bombay, and start selling paints to distributors and dealers out there, book orders, come back, and then submit the orders back to the head office of the branch that I was in.

My grounding, getting out of school and college was actually in sales. That's where I developed this huge respect for sales as a profession and I realized that no matter what you do in life, the most important thing or skill that you need to have is sales because ultimately, you're always selling something. You're selling your skills, you're selling a product, you're selling a service, or you're selling your talent to somebody. The other thing that sales taught me was humility, because when you walk into a customer's office or a customer's shop, you are the supplicant, you are essentially out there effectively at their mercy and you have to figure out how to sell what you have and convince them to your point of view.

You cannot have an ego when you're in sales. The first few years of post MBA were spent in sales. I also happened to have to live in Mumbai, which used to be called Bombay in those days. That happened to be one of the world's most expensive real estates. Even in those days, Bombay real estate was so expensive that most people couldn't afford to buy a property even if they spent a lifetime of earnings. We could only afford to rent one room and two people share a room in kind of very low end apartments in Bombay. My commute used to be about an hour and a half, would take a bus to a train station, get onto a train, spend 30 minutes on a commuter train and then spend another 15, 20 minutes taking another mode of transportation to get to an office and we thought we were really fortunate because in those days, that was the dream. You had a job that paid you enough that you could have a roof over your head and you could enjoy at least some basic, nice food and stuff like that.

That's my background, I grew up in an environment like that, and I remember after my first job and when I got my first promotion and things like that, I'd never thought that I would ever one day leave the country work, somewhere else or even make it very big in life. The only goal in those days was just do a good job, make sure that you have a roof over your head and you can earn enough to pay your way. Of course, there was no internet and there was no exposure to cable TV and things like that, so one's aspirations also are not very large.

Again, the only thing that kept me going in those days was a very strong work ethic, which was inculcated in me by my parents and the culture in which I was brought up. Just work hard, be diligent, be ethical and honest and good things will happen.

My first job out of business school was in a paints company. It was India's leading paints company, great learning environment, a tough learning environment, and also not a very well paying environment in those days.

From there I went and joined, I happened to get married towards the end of my first three years of work and I married my college sweetheart, which required me to move back to the city of Delhi, because she was based there, she had a job over there, which happened to be a better paying job than what I had so it made sense to move over to Delhi, and that led me to join my first multinational company, which is British American Tobacco. I joined their foods business and in their foods business, I was again back in sales. A couple of years in Delhi gave me exposure to how multinationals operate, gave me exposure to a more professional, I guess more international management environment, and that also gave me a taste of consumer product marketing.

I don't think I could ever look back after that, because consumer product marketing or fast moving consumer product marketing I realized was the most interesting, most challenging and most exciting form of marketing. Within British American Tobacco, I moved into the brand marketing space and then discovered what advertising is all about and what it means to create marketing campaigns and how brands are built. That's where the brand marketing bug bit me. I spent four years there, moved a couple of locations but at the end of those four years, I think I knew that that was going to be my profession because that's where I excelled, that's where I learned that I had a talent and a passion for it.

I got an opportunity to work for Coca Cola, which happened even those days to be the biggest brand in the world, and interestingly, in those days, Coca Cola was nascent in India because Coke had not been allowed into the country during its socialist years. I joined Coke at its early years. My favorite experience of Coca Cola is joining in 1998 in Coca Cola in India, and having the pleasure of launching Coca Cola in many parts of the country and giving many people in India their first taste of Coca Cola and discovering the power of the product and the brand where we had in the peak of summer, we'd land up in a city with crates of Coca Cola chilled and we'd have a line of people half a mile long wanting to get their first taste of Coke.

To me, that I think cemented the passion and the belief in Coca Cola the company and Coca Cola the brand, and that's what kept me in that company for 20 years. Joining Coca Cola in 1998 was a new experience because it also gave me my first opportunity to travel international. I still remember my first international trip from India, boarding a flight, getting a passport made, boarding a flight. I even had an interesting experience getting a passport made. I had no idea of how passports were made and what needed to be done. I was missing an important endorsement on a passport, and my first international trip, my first business trip in Coca Cola, I was turned back from the airport with a passport that was invalid because I hadn't got an important endorsement done.

Anyway, made it to Hong Kong for my first international trip, and that's when I suddenly realized that the country that I'd grown up was actually up in those days considered a third world country and it was definitely an eye opener for me. I realized what a modern world and country looked like, and that's when I started to reflect back on what my home country was like and what we could and should be doing differently in India, so much so that when I landed at the airport, a colleague of mine, and I, who were the only two first time travelers, we got off at the airport and still before immigration, we just stood awestruck, looking around at the modern steel and glass airport and all the shops and everything else. After a while, we were accosted by the immigration authorities who thought that we were illegal immigrants trying to get into the country because we were so lost and and awestruck. We had to of course show our Coca Cola invitation letters and things like that.

That's also where I realized that sometimes, just a visiting card from a very well respected brand can operate as a second passport. I used to call the Coca Cola visiting card my red passport. It opened doors everywhere, including at immigration in every country that I've been to. Many immigration authorities asked why are you here. I just have to say I worked for Coca Cola, and I would never be asked a second question. That's another thing I learned is that's probably the best ambassador that American culture has. I mean, the brands that the U.S. has exported worldwide are probably the best ambassadors, and they create such love and warmth amongst users and people all over the world that it opens doors much more easily than a U.S. passport does.

That's where I also believe that the best learning you can ever have is travel, and travel not just domestically, but travel internationally, experience different cultures, experience different environments, and that's when my travel bug bit me. Since then, I've traveled to 55 countries and I continue to explore new countries and I spend time trying to learn about cultures that I go to.

Coca Cola exposed me to the world. It exposed me to new and different cultures, and it also, I think, made me into a global citizen, which I think is probably the best gift I could have got from the company. I've worked with probably 20 or 30 different nationalities in the course of my career in the company. I traveled to 55 countries, many of them on work, many on pleasure, and it also exposed me to the fact that people all over the world are the same. There's no difference. I mean, regardless of race, nationality, ethnicity or whatever, people genuinely all over the world are the same, which is why Coca Cola as a product and a brand can appeal to 100 countries and 200 cultures. It's because it appeals to the most basic human aspect of everyone. Everyone wants to be connected, everyone wants to be loved, everyone wants to have friends, and everyone just wants to enjoy the daily pressures of life.

Anyway, I traveled to Hong Kong, I traveled then to various places, including the U.S. and I had the opportunity towards my first couple of years at Coca Cola in India to launch a brand in India called Sprite, which is very familiar to the U.S. but in India, it was unknown. It hadn't been launched ever before, and in India, no one ever drank clear lemon drinks. I was given the challenge of, can you launch this brand and try to make something out of it. It's interesting that in the absence of experience, so you could call it foolish inexperience or youthful ignorance, I didn't know what a challenge meant. I just was told launch this brand and make it succeed, so I went and did whatever I could to make it succeed, including, even though my role was brand manager of Sprite, and in my mind, my boss at that time, who was the marketing head of the country of Coca Cola in India, had told me you have six months' time, start now and you need to launch it before the end of the year, and this is 1999.

I traveled to the suppliers to supervise production of glass bottles for the launch. I traveled to suppliers to supervise or to coax them and cajole them into making concentrates, the flavor concentrates. I traveled to sales centers to convince sales heads to launch the product, because everyone is saying, no one's going to drink clear lemon in India. In India, it's a cola market or an orange market or there was a cloudy lemon drink. No one's going to drink this product. I finally found one person in one city in India, who was the head of sales for that city who decided to take a chance on me and said, I'll give it a shot. I'll be your first launch market. I was kind of the Lone Ranger in India, trying to promote this brand and of course, the global headquarters, there was a brand team that was keenly watching the India launch because they wanted to make sure that the brand succeeded in India but the way Coca Cola was structured, the local team had all the authority so it was all up to me to make it succeed and granting, giving me whatever support they could.

Then in those days, I had to create a new ad campaign for this brand launch, and the initial ad campaign that we got done by an ad agency was okay, was not great. It was presented to me, I took it to my boss, and I said this is the campaign that's come. It looks good. Shall we go with it? That's when I learned one of my most valuable lessons. It is don't settle for average. My boss literally threw me out of the room and said, is this great? I said, it's good. He said, is it great? I said, no, it's not great, but it's good. He said, then go back and rework it. I said, we don't have time. The launch is coming up. He says, well, the launch date is not negotiable. You have to get a new campaign ready in time for the launch. Go figure it out.

Two lessons, one is don't settle for average, just because you don't have time. Second is that you can turn things around much faster than you think if you just motivate, put enough pressure and motivate people, and if you make it clear that you're not going to settle for anything but the best within the time constraint. I went back to the agency, spent a few days brainstorming with them, and we came up with an ad campaign that turned out to be brilliant.

I say this because it won plenty of awards and it also became iconic. It created a whole new style of advertising in India, which was self deprecating humor, that is, and that also used a combination of Hindi and English, which is called Hinglish, and it really appealed to the youth. We came back with an ad campaign. We turned around the ad campaign within a month, and we launched with the new ad campaign a new product in a new city. It was so successful that within a year, it became the number one selling lemon drink in that city, and it went on to grow by leaps and bounds. The ad campaign became so successful that it got noticed by the global brand team in Atlanta and about three months later, I got a call from my boss saying that he got a call from Atlanta, saying that there was an open position for a brand manager in Atlanta and they were wondering if I would be willing to apply for it.

A sequence of events that I had no idea where it was going to lead, getting an almost impossible task of launching a brand, then launching it with a campaign that worked very well and I also collaborated very well with the international team. It was actually me getting noticed and I finally got an opportunity to apply for a position in Atlanta with the team that was responsible for new product development. I flew to Atlanta, I interviewed with the team and I got a lot of advice from people who told me that the position you're applying for, it's a very bad role. This is not clearly defined, the guy you can report to is not very well regarded, and you're taking a big risk. Why do you want to take that job? You're doing very well in India.

That's where I learned another lesson, which is when an opportunity comes knocking, it's better to jump at it and grasp it, regardless of where it's headed because you can always make whatever you can or whatever you want out of an opportunity, because what's presented is what is. It's not what could be and what could be is in your hands. What it is is not in your hands. I took the opportunity, I moved to Atlanta, and I started that position, and this was in the end of 1999, early 2000. Unfortunately, when I reached Atlanta within a month of reaching Atlanta, there was a major announcement of, there's a change of leadership. The previous CEO Doug Ivester was asked to step down and he was replaced by Doug Daft, who was a new CEO who'd come from the regions from Asia.

Doug Daft's first task on taking over was that he wanted to cut the Atlanta head office down by half, and so they went through a process of literally putting everybody on a two month evaluation process. Everyone was told at the end of two months, you'll find out if you have a job or not, so we were told in the first week of December, that you're on probation or whatever, there was a term they used, which essentially meant that you may or may not have a job after two months, but continue working hard, and we'll let you know at the end of two months.

Sure enough, the entire office ended up becoming dysfunctional. Everyone is out with their resumes in the market. People spent most of their time at the water cooler debating and gossiping about what's going to happen, who's going to stay, who's going to leave. Meanwhile, I moved my wife and two young kids by then to Atlanta, my first international move, and my shipment from India had not arrived in Atlanta, and when I called my ex-boss in India, that hey, I might be losing my job over here. He said, look, but your old job's gone, so if you do lose your job, I don't know where I'm going to absorb you back. I had two of the toughest months of my life in an alien country, in a completely new environment with I knew nobody other than a few people.

Then I took another decision that I think has helped me for the rest of my life and that is I just put my head down and continued to work. I spent those two months ,while most of my colleagues were essentially waiting for the ax to fall or not, I spent those two months developing new approach to new product management, and before the two months were up, I went and presented it to the leadership of the company, to my boss, who then was so excited and so impressed that he took it to the leadership of the company, and they liked it so much, that when the time came for the layoffs, I was one of the 50% that survived, even though I was the newest and least experienced, and at the end of which, I got a pretty good position in the company when all the dust had settled.

That actually set my career on a fast track over there. Another lesson learned is when there's chaos all around you, keeping a cool head, staying focused and delivering on what you're supposed to deliver, that will always hold you in good stead. There's nothing you can do about the environment, but you can at least focus on your work.

That 2001 to 2003, I was working on new products, I was working on bottled water. In fact, during my experience in new products, I remember once telling the company about this new product that was emerging in Europe that no one had heard of but because I was in new product development, I had my antenna up. There's this product that is very popular with young people mostly at the edge. It sells in rave parties and underground music and nightclubs. It's a carbonated drink and it's doing very well and it's highly caffeinated. The product was called Red Bull. In 2001, well 2000, most of the people in the company had not really heard much about Red Bull and it was this lesson on brand that was out there and I remember campaigning hard to launch our own version of an energy drink and pushing and promoting to the point they finally started with launching an energy drink globally, but because it was such a small market, such a nascent category, it got no attention from the company anywhere in the world.

Meanwhile, Red Bull went on to make history, and it's now what, billions of dollars and it's a worldwide phenomenon. That's where I realized and the lesson learned was that large companies do a terrible job of promoting small innovations and scaling small innovations. Coke was great at managing big brands like Coca Cola, Sprite and things like that, things that were within its wheelhouse, but the moment you look at small little innovations, if you're a small junior brand manager trying to promote an innovation within a large company, it was very, very difficult.

I moved on, I joined the bottled water team. Again, I became an expert in bottled water in Coca Cola, and I helped grow the bottled water business worldwide over the next four years, five years, even though it was the least profitable and had the lowest investments on the company side, I happened to develop an expertise in that category that ended up in me being the go to person for bottled water for everybody in the company. I was the brand and I got promoted to brand director, so I was a brand director with the smallest budgets, the smallest team, the least amount of support, but because I managed a product category that not too many people knew much about in those days, even the chairman would ask for my opinion about bottled water.

That got me noticed a lot, even though it was the least glamorous of the roles in the company. The other thing that happened was I spent nearly five years in that role, of which four years, I was in the same level in the same role. A lot of people had written me off, as his career is finished, he's stuck in this position, and he's not progressed and he's in a category that no one cares about. I remember towards the end getting very anxious and pushing on my leadership team and saying, hey, what's going to happen to me, what's happening to my career, and that's when one of my bosses gave me very good advice and he said, don't worry about your designation or your destination. Just focus on your job and good things will happen. He kept counseling me to be patient. Sure enough, at the end of those five years, I got an opportunity to move into the U.S. business back into Sprite and Fanta and flavored brands in a good role as Vice President of the sparkling category.

Again, one year there, great experience, but at the end of that one year, I was told that the India business that I had left six years earlier was in trouble. They had gone through crises, they had gone through a lot of ethical issues, the leadership had been completely replaced and they were looking to build a whole new team, leadership team and they wanted me to go back and head marketing for India. This is at a time when the reputation of Coca Cola in India had fallen to a complete low. The company was accused of having pesticides in its product. The company was accused of depleting the water table in India, and all kinds of other problems are happening, and most people that worked at Coca Cola in India were either leaving the company or were demoralized or were under investigation for ethics violations.

Everyone told me are you crazy? You got a great job in Coke North America. We were living in Atlanta, which was a great city to live in, and I was contemplating a move back into the middle of a complete maelstrom. In fact, to the extent that my mother called me from India, and she said, why are you coming back? Do you realize that Coke is in the newspapers for all the wrong reasons all the time? Are you sure you know what you're doing? My wife and my kids were well settled in Atlanta. My wife and I had just bought a new home. We'd barely unpacked our things and barged into the new home and I had to take one of the toughest decisions in my career, my second most tough decision. I said, well, let's take the challenge. Let's take up the challenge.

We packed our bags and moved back to India, put our kids in the American School in Delhi and since we were from, we'd grown up in that city, we knew it very well, we could adjust well, but I had probably the most challenging few months of my career where business was declining at double digit rates, in fact, 30%, 40% declines in business, confidence in our brands was low. Morale of the team was absolutely low, and I had come into a turnaround situation. The next three years was spent in possibly my most exciting turnaround situation, most exciting years of strategy setting, new ad campaigns, completely new approach to managing a team, and we went from being the worst performing business unit in the company in 2006, which was when I moved back to India, to the time when I left India, it was 2009, it became one of the best performing businesses.

The team morale was at an all-time high. We went from huge double digit declines in sales to double digit growth rates. We gained market share, and all thanks to an excellent teamwork between me and my peers, a leader who was very inspirational, motivating, and just this sheer dedication and focus on doing the right thing on a daily basis and making things happen. I then moved back to India at the time. Sprite as a brand had grown in my absence, but in those years, I was able to take Sprite from from the number three brand to become the number one brand of the country to the point where it became not just a number one beverage brand, but also number one brand across all categories. It's a billion dollar brand in India. It was gratifying to see something I had started 10 years earlier becoming a success under my watch 10 years later.

Another lesson learned there is that life always comes full circle. What you sow, so you reap. I was, I think fortunate that I planted a good seed and then my successes nourished it. Finally, when I came back, I was able to harvest the fruits of what I planted 10 years earlier, which is a gratifying experience and also a great learning experience that you never know where life will take you and life always comes full circle, so plant good seeds, you will reap the fruits at some stage in your life.

Going back to India twice in the last 10 years, especially the most recent experience, I see a lot of wasted potential and wasted opportunity. I also see a country that has, I think the best way to describe it is that a snapshot looks terrible, but if you look at the movie over a period of time, it looks great. There's been tremendous improvement in the country since my childhood days, and now all the shortages that one grew up with and the lack of opportunities, that's gone. It's a land of opportunity. There's no abject starvation of poverty as there used to be. There is upward mobility. The infrastructure has improved dramatically. In fact, the airports in India now rival those in the U.S. in quality.

Some of the telecom infrastructure things is actually equally good, if not better. The country's progressed tremendously. People that are living in India will still feel like we've got a long way to go, and people that are living in India also struggle with day to day inconveniences that would be unthinkable in the U.S. or in other developed nations, but it's still a whole lot better than it used to be.

One big change that's happened is that there's a new sense of pride and a new sense of comfort that people have in being Indian. Growing up, we always looked at the West and everyone wanted to emulate the West and everyone wanted to, the country lacked cultural confidence but we see a new cultural confidence in India, I see people in India being proud to be Indians even if economically, the country is not comparable to many parts of the world, including China, culturally, there's a sense of comfort in India-ness.

I spent three years back in India as head of marketing for India, and we had a great turnaround story, which got me noticed back in Atlanta, where there was an opening as Global Head of Marketing for Juice and I was hired back in Atlanta as Global Head of Marketing and it was a promotion for me, spent four years doing that. Again, the company was just beginning to focus on juice as a category and I spearheaded a global expansion and juice, including promoting Minute Maid across many parts of the world, shaping the company's strategy, creating a global brand over Minute Maid, and also getting multiple brands all over the world to adopt a Minute Maid look and feel, so I created a global brand identity.

That experience was great because it also taught me how to manage a vast network of people that did not report to me, but whom I had to influence and use the power of persuasion, the power of collaboration, and also the power that comes by letting the credit go to the people that do the work and not taking any of the credit for oneself, which then showcased and helped showcase a lot of the people in the field and make them feel good about what they were doing.

Those four years as head of global marketing for juice were great for me. I learned a lot and I contributed a lot. It also got me exposed to the chairman of the company, who was a personal champion of the juice category and he saw my work. One day I got called and told, well we want somebody to take over the India Business as the President of the India business. We're not promising you the job. We want you to go there as the VP of Operations, which was kind of like a parallel move to what I was four years earlier in India, because I was VP of Marketing, go back as VP of Operations. If you do, well, then we might give you the job.

Again, I got a lot of advice from a lot of people, most of it saying that's a big risk for you to take. What if it doesn't work out? You're giving up a good, cushy job in Atlanta for an uncertain future. At the same time, I had my kids, my son was graduating from school and going into college but my daughter had two more years to finish of school. We had to take a tough decision because when we went back to India, my daughter was not able to adjust back because the last two years of high school were difficult for her to adjust, so we had to take a decision that my wife and daughter would stay back in Atlanta, and I would move to India, but kind of do a 24 hour commute.

The company was very good. They allowed me to spend a week of every month back in Atlanta, and so I got plenty of opportunity to come back but it was a tough two years where I had to go back, prove myself as a VP of Operations, prove that I was worthy of being the successor, and so 2012 to 2014 was spent essentially transitioning into proving myself ready to be President, and in 2014, I became the president of the business over there, spent three years as the president of the business at the time when the country was going through a lot of change, including political change and a new government that was hostile to Coca Cola and hostile to multinationals, which resulted in massive increases in taxes and all kinds of regulations that made life very difficult for us. I had to steer the company through a very tough period, which is great because I learned a lot and I was able to, I learned a lot of lessons but I think towards the end, the work pressure, time commitments and the approaching milestone of 50 years of age made me start questioning, okay, is this what I want to do for the rest of my life and why am I doing this?

Once the question of why came up, I realized that well, I'm not doing it for the money because we had been financially frugal so we had enough savings to be able to not work for a living anymore. I wasn't doing it for the status because I'd achieved, I was president of the business, which in Coca Cola was amongst the top 20 people in the company. I was doing better than I'd ever imagined I would do when I started my career, and while I loved Coca Cola the company, I had always been an environmentalist and a health and fitness freak, you could say, a very health conscious person. Around that time, I'd started to question well, is it good for us to be promoting so much sugar? Is it good for us to be promoting so much plastic? Is it good for us to be, not that there was anything wrong with the product itself. It's just that when done at scale, the impact on environment and society can be massive, and despite the best intentions of the company, there was no plan in place for the company to mitigate its impact on the environment and society.

That's when my conscience started to kind of ask me some tough questions as to yeah, you've been successful career wise, but is this your calling? There was an opportunity at the age of 50, after you've completed 10 years in the company to opt for a package. I talked to my boss and I said, look, you know, if you find somebody else to run this business, I'd be more than happy to step down because I think I'd like to do something different with my life, and I don't think they took it seriously at that time. My position was a highly coveted one and when they realized that there were plenty of takers, they offered me the package and I took it without a plan for the future because by then, I had spent so many years working and so much time at work and so much of my mind space was at work, I think I realized I needed a break, to start to figure out what I wanted to do next.

I spent the next six months really exploring my motivations, what I'm really good at, what I really want to do, there's a term called ikigai. I explored my ikigai, which is the Japanese way of finding your calling. That exploration took me on a journey to the Himalayas, where I went for a seven day primitive camping expedition with a group of friends from my school days, and about 10, 15 other people that I had never met I didn't know at all. That's when I realized that I had more fun in those seven days than I'd had in the last few years in Coca Cola. I was more myself than I'd ever been. I also realized that you can be happy in six foot square, six by six tent under the stars than in a five star hotel in the most luxurious resort in the world, as long as you're surrounded by friends, and as long as you don't have constant pressure and worry and tension on your head. That to me was an eye opener and the other revelation was once you give up that visiting card, the one that I talked about, the Coca Cola visiting card, the red passport, I mean, once you have that, it's like a crutch.

It's almost like it's like a tiger. You're riding the tiger and you think that the world is staring at you, but they're actually sitting at the tiger. You're just riding it. Once I got off the tiger, I realized that I needed to do something myself in order to have a sense of accomplishment and self worth, and not bask in the reflected glory of a brand that others have treated, and which I played a role in helping to grow. I think that's the first time in 20 years, in fact, the first time in 30 years ever since I started my career that I started to look at my identity beyond the visiting card I carried and that was a very big revelation for me.

In our careers, we tend to see career growth within an organization as an end in itself, and we see ourselves, our identities as almost intertwined with the identity of the organization, and so that's when I decided that I could not go back to working for another large organization. I had to go out and forge an identity for myself that was truer to what I believed in myself, to what I believed the change I wanted to create in the world or the legacy I wanted to leave behind, a long winded way of saying that I found my calling on the mountain and then I went diving in the oceans. I also confronted a few fears of mine, which is I had a fear of heights so I climbed very steep hills in the Himalayas with thousand foot drops, and I overcame that fear. I had a fear of going underwater, never scuba dived in my life. I went scuba diving and I overcame that fear.

That I think, kind of freed me up to take on another fear, which is the fear of unemployment and the fear of starting your own business. Because after 30 years of corporate life, I had no idea what starting your own business looks like and in your over 50 years of age, going back to being a startup, bootstrapping and doing things on your own, re-learning a lot of skills that you'd forgotten or never learned, that was scary but I decided to start up something on my own and partnered with a former colleague of mine from Coca Cola, who I knew very well. We both decided that whatever we do, it's going to be for the benefit of humanity and the planet and not just another business.

We decided to start up a social enterprise that would promote solutions to environmental problems and address the issue that we faced when we were at Coca Cola, which is that a big company has all the right intentions, but has no idea how to execute those intentions, how to convert those intentions into action on the ground that changes the way they do business. We decided that we would set up a business that would help big companies like Coke actually become more environmentally conscious and change their business practices, change the technologies and change the supply chains to reduce that environmental footprint and to do it through a business that would pay for itself, not an NGO, but more of a social enterprise that earns its income.

Our current focus, the first focus area for my business right now is plastic waste, so we really focused on how to reduce plastic waste and pollution and reverse logistics actually comes in a big way over there, because plastic being an extremely lightweight material, when it's brought back from the point of consumption in any form, the logistics cost can far outweigh the scrap value of the plastic. What tends to happen is the best innovations that we've been able to unearth are the ones that are able to efficiently collect the waste plastic and process it in a distributed fashion, segregated and processed in a distributed fashion and do it at a very low cost so that it converts them back into a usable feedstock, whether recycled plastic for reuse in industry or upcycling into other things like furniture or other things or converted back into its base raw material, which is crude oil through pyrolysis.

Today, the technologies exist that are able to overcome that reverse logistics challenge. It's just making sure that they are widely known and widely implemented, and there does need to be, two things need to happen which are not happening, especially in the U.S. is one is government policies have to be more in favor of reducing waste, which today, since the cost of disposal in landfill is so low, there's no incentive for the entire system to reduce landfills, the flow of materials to landfills.

That's one thing that needs to be addressed. In many other parts of the world, dumping in landfills are an expensive or impossible proposition. In the U.S., we still have that. The second thing is that consumer behavior has to change. Today, it costs the consumers the same to have garbage disposal in their home, whether they dispose of 10 bags of trash a week, or one bag of trash a month, and so there's no disincentive to consumers to generate waste. Again, there needs to be some way of measuring how much waste they're generating and then pay for the waste to produce so that people that recycle more, that reduce the waste are rewarded with lower costs.

Those two things need to happen. The reverse logistics, the economics of reverse logistics are actually now taken care of through business models, technologies and really innovative, smart wins that are all over the place now. It's been a two year journey now, and we've only begun, but it's been the most amazing two years of learning, most importantly rediscovering what it's like to start from scratch, rediscovering what it's like to be someone without a visiting card that anyone recognizes. If earlier those that opened because they'd heard your Coca Cola, now, like knock on doors, say my company's Ubuntoo and they say Ubuntoosh, and no one wants to answer the door.

I'm learning again the skills I learned when I started my career as a salesperson, to not have an ego, to go visit a customer and wait patiently for the customer to give you some time, and then go and make a pitch and one day at a time, one sale at a time, build a new business from scratch. If I were to say three things that come to mind that I would give as advice to graduating students that are entering the workforce for the first time. The first is constantly improve yourself. Excel. Too often we get into a situation where we think we have to compete in the world. You're actually only competing with yourself. Whatever you are today, be better tomorrow, and if you keep bettering yourself, you will eventually achieve whatever goal you set out to do, so excel at whatever you do.

The second is perseverance. Often, the best opportunities or the best results come after your deepest valleys. I've been through many situations in life where I was counseled to give up or I was asked, I was told that things are not going well for me, but I persevered through them and the light at the end of the tunnel turned out to be really bright and really warm and welcoming, so perseverance is the second thing that I would do.

The third is take people along with you. People, relationships, networks, reputation, all of it is all, I would back that manage your personal relationships and people, networks well, because one, it's the right thing to do but also, in the long run for any career, your reputation is the one thing no one can take away from you, and if you have a great reputation, if you have a lot of well wishes, you'll see success in life. That's it, it's people skills. It's perseverance, and it's constant improvement, self improvement. That's my story.