

Dear friend,

We saw you yesterday, again. We are watching you for months – going through your routine life, a drill. We have seen you going in ‘pursuit of happiness ‘(no, Microsoft caught this mistake, we are deliberate), talking emotionally, gesticulating in anger, sometimes sorrowful, serene at other times and getting solitary more often than naught. Nah! We aren’t secret service agents, we don’t even know your identity (let Neelkeni work on that), but we watch you and others like you. Actually, even we aren’t exactly much unlike you. In the physical world, may be. But when it comes to the torrents of emotions, inner conflicts, confused thoughts, we are all alike. Rather, were. For our lives took a curious turn last summer. Till then, getting a degree, getting an out of the box job was all that we dreamt of. Teaching was the dream job- for both of us, though at different levels. But soon, we realised this wasn’t it. Simply put, if education ruined us, should we help it ruin others too? Nah! And what were the rewards? Some money? Good for what? Soon enough, life completely overtook us (By the way, we didn’t know about each other back then.) and we lost focus. Life was a waste, a spent force. There was a constant itch. And we could do nothing but suffer, muted. Sometimes, we tried to throw in the towel – giving up all that suffocated us.

We were disturbed, unsatisfied with our lives, we couldn’t find happiness (again, intentional). Could we set out in its pursuit, breaking out of the routine, the mockery of a free spirit? Who would guide us? How would we find it? Surely, even you think of these, and stay restless at times. The prime question is how to get out of this all; instead of throwing in the towel, keep fighting? And live a fulfilling life while at it. As Robert Frost once said,

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

But today, one can instead stare down at three of the one. Confused? Well, the first one is the path well grimed – submit to your fate, live on like an insect. The second is being headless chickens, try anything, live on the edge – throw away this precious life. But no, you are a responsible, free, intelligent being, you scorn these paths and would rather choose the third one – get educated, land in a job, rake in the moolah, grow bank balance, buy a house, Chevrolet, Persian rugs, Chinaware, you name it. Then get bored and go in for the kill – Mercedes, penthouse, home-theatre ... all of it all over again. How long? 15-20 years? But then what? Like you are others who have realised that such a life has no meaning. Though, the Global Meltdown was just a catalyst for few Our lifestyles, ever changing world, competition, artificial standards of success and preconceptions have all brought us at the eye of a storm. We can spend the whole life fighting it, trying to get out of the turbulent waters. But what would you prefer? Turn your eyes away from all this and walk on unexplored roads? Would you rather not, be a free spirit, break away from all the earthly bondages and traverse the heaven? Don’t your wings have that power? Or don’t you believe in yourself?

May be it’s a bit too direct. Don’t feel bad, but we would rather shake you out of this slumber, before it’s too late. We spoke with a few of our friends before writing to you, trying to understand their unease; the why behind it and what they do to ease it. Some have found their vents, or let’s say exhausts for built up steam, in daily life. Helping old people cross the road, letting the kids at signal who clean your car and leave the windshield dirtier, nonetheless giving them a smile and a few bucks; earning self-satisfaction anywhere that it can be found. When a friend cares or gives them a hug, their hearts overwhelm. When mom appreciates help in kitchen, they wear a

smile like a batch for the rest of the day. We have observed all these. We would accede all this is fine for a time. Then, as it happened with us, you grow over this. There's a need to create your own path. Go out in the uncharted seas. It needs daring and dedication. It's important to check whether you are ready. We wanted to test if we were.

There's a friend of ours, "Shastri", in Pune. Hopefully you will meet him someday. He was extremely irritable, always debating. He needed an exit. He attempted different things, never finding what he wanted. Then there's Sayali, a teacher now at an experimental school in Wai. Having earned more than she could imagine spending, she was sick of the corporate life. Always, she wanted to do something that would keep her happy. College's Art-circle, friends, social organisation were the canvas for expressing inner feelings. Anand from Akola, who thought no one took notice his of opinion and thus forced his views with all his strength, aggressively. Mahesh Puri, training to be a doctor wondered if a multi-speciality hospital qualifies as social service. Weekend social work beckoned him. Neeraja from Virar, tried to search the way through life's maze by playing Blindfold. "i was never so sensitive before ..." and we could hear her voice crack. There are examples by dozens, many carrying a dead albatross around their neck. Then they decided to choose the other path. The one less travelled by. Not accepting the full platter served to them by the society, shrugging away all ties, rising over the mundane to make the world fit into their ways, rather than fit into a niche in a world that constrained them. Striving to change the world, make it the way they want it to be, is a family of over hundred youths across Maharashtra.

It's about this family that we want to speak with you; we want you to join us, cast away any albatross you might be lugging. You will get a new lease of life, you will be cared for, helped, understood, while the worm in your head becomes a beautiful butterfly and you are able to fly. Here, you can search within yourself, look at others, find solace in their company, get the answers to questions you were afraid of asking yourself. And one day, your Ureka moment will come and you will realise how beautiful this life is, how wonderful the word is and you will be blissfully happy. We got the chance to become its family member and we wish you to join us. As we noted earlier, there's something similar between you and us and that's where we get connected in this family. Many individuals come together and become one. Something beyond simple friendship, neither of us can express it in words. It's best if you experience it. While these relationships flower, fragrances unique to each person also pour out, each one's unique colours deepening. Everyone supplements and complements the others. Bliss and harmony descend upon all. Although life has no meaning to begin with, you can find it. Yeah, but what does that mean? How to find it? What to pursue? These questions will answer themselves here. (Ofcourse, if these questions *do* trouble you ...) Whist we were on the right turn of our meandering journey through life, this curious little thing happened to us, and we bumped into each other (that's where we met last summer, for the first time) while becoming a part of this NIRMAN family.

Drs. Rani (Amma) and Abhay (Nayna) Bang, two humans with hearts big enough to fit in the whole world. You must have read about their work in Gadchiroli district to prevent infant mortality and admired them, wishing to catch a glimpse some day. Also, you know about MSCIT (you don't? Did your spacecraft just land on Earth?), a project started by MKCL for computer literacy throughout the state, spearheaded by Mr. Vivek Sawant. These giants came together and created a platform for youth across Maharashtra in 2006, giving us an opportunity to see further, standing on their shoulders. The aim being, to convert the massive, intellectual but ineffective masses of the middle class into a power that empathises with the weaker sections of the society. If and when we break out of the selfish circle of me-mine-we-ours, we can connect with the larger sphere of life. Nirman is

an attempt to create youth which can do this. Today, the world is fast becoming a desert for humanity. Here, we are nurturing an oasis with hard, kind-hearted efforts. It doesn't have glamour, page 3 coverage and no degrees are doled out here. But this is a gathering of sensitive, proud and worthy youth across Maharashtra. This oasis is full of beautiful trees; we are its ripening fruits. Amma-Nayna, VIVEK KAKA are the caretakers and experts and known people across the state tend it. To allow wayfarers like you some shade.

We can talk about Nirman for hours, boring you, dampening your spirit which has been aroused. If you ask either of us, tell us what Nirman *is*, we will keep mum. But we are going through the process, and we are better off for it. If at all, we will mumble "it's different". We sit within four walls for the practical benefit of having a shelter, but it ain't no school. Senior people share their experiences once in a while, but that isn't lecturing. These people who have actually toiled in the sun walk amongst us, folding open their life with every deed, teaching us priceless little things that no university can. We don't call them sirs or madams. A simple heartfelt kaka, mama, maushi or tai suffices. These relations are strengthened when they wrap you in the blanket of their care; hold you in their arms, letting all your tensions melt away. All the choked up feelings come out naturally, opening up the heart. This is the beginning of cleansing of the character. And then there is complete freedom to be you. Not feeling like you can sit with legs folded anymore? Stretch them during the lectures. Need to catch a nap? Do it between the lectures. Is it too hot? Make yourself comfortable. Only one thing, don't sit with the walls for support. When you are getting ready for life's challenges, isn't it impertinent to be spineless?

Most days start with Bhupali (Morning Prayer); a group amongst us does the service. These friends transcend all friendships for these few minutes when they are doing their 'job', so that we all wake up in time to reach the fields with Nayna, who is already there with a sickle in his hand. This bread-labour keeps you fresh for the rest of the day. Watching sweat glistening faces is a pleasure. Come to experience it. Suffering Vaibhav's comprehensible and Rajas' stupid PJs, Ramya's thunderous laughter following them, few slaps and claps ... all this makes the steaming tea feel like nectar. The energy charged up in this time lasts for the rest of the day, spent in singing, playing games, pondering, discussions, questions, serious talks, laughter, tears and all that follows. This tumult of thoughts alleviates during the evening prayer. In five minutes of silence, the internal storms are calmed and conflicts resolved. Regularly, PD (Priyadarshan, Btech from IIT Bombay) or some one else trying to end his monopoly sings a (few) song(s). Then light chats and fun making follows. Poems, stories, anecdotes all flow freely from everyone sitting in the hall. The heart keeps going back to the silence though, trying to anchor thoughts, eyes closed, attempting to look deep within. This time makes one marvel, is this bliss? The nights generally start after the dinner, by nights we are mean free-carting, fun-filled, unrestricted activities, ranging from singing at top of the voice, playing in the darkness, comedies, talks. Talks on any topic, about what happened in the day, what one felt, make-ups and breakups, tensions at home, ghosts in the mind or scary ghost stories. Anything. Everyone is excited and speaks, convinced that here are people who will listen to them ...

Once every six months, these camps lighten up our life; albeit just for ten days, charge us enough to last till the next camp. Making us face the questions we have been shunning all the time, running away from. Very cleverly, interestingly, these questions are put forth, sometimes bluntly if you feign to be too thick. Many things we have been planning to, trying to, but not being able to do, trouble us. But then, as Anand said the other day, snoozing the alarm clock again and again, he gets up finally at 0830, and all resolutions vanish in the thin air, because there's no Bhupali ringing in daily life to arouse us. Here, in the camps, chords in the heart are strung. Nah, English can't capture

the beauty of “Dil ki ghanti bajayee jatee hai!. Bolane-sunane ka time gaya ... ab *karke dekho!*” which loosely means, the heart is stirred, the time for talks is past, it’s about time to start working. This is the theme of Nirman. And as examples, many live models move amongst us all the time, to talk to, to look at and to emulate.

The three camps that we have gone through revolved around some specific theme. *Who am i?* Though we’ve learnt about the body and the self from all possible sources, here our mother guided us through – Amma. That’s the first camp for you. The second one grows our outlook to the rest of the society, putting forth the question *whose am i?* How am i related to the society, to Nature? What are my responsibilities? Arun Deshpande, Kumar Ketkar, Anil Avachat, Ramesh Panse, Girish Sohoni, Suresh Sawant, Abhay Bang et al, each one a compendium on multiple issues, guided us through. But this wasn’t as easy as we are making it sound. Nandakaka (Nanda Khare) was always there with his question “are you serious?” One day, Nayna, going into his fatherly role, put up a few hard questions. The very questions that we keep avoiding: “are you taking your life seriously enough? If not, why are you alive? Are you suffering from stony heart and mental leprosy?” A lot many tears were shed that night, but next day, we all woke up determined, changed from within. In the third camp, he guided us through, to find answers to the very questions which had started haunting us now. Why to live? Is it mandatory? What is the *purpose of life?* Each one of us stayed in a village, all on our own, in an unknown family. Tried to be one of them, live like them. Hardships, sorrows, poverty, dirt, backwardness ... we faced all of these, together. Getting wet in rain by choice and by compulsion are different. And that difference hit us like a gale, imbuing a completely different viewpoint. Now, we are eagerly waiting for the fourth and final camp.

Actually, we would all love to delay this last camp. At least, extend it. For with it, the formal process of the camps will come to an end. All the time we have spent together starts whooshing by as the words ‘last camp’ are uttered and it saddens the heart. As Mukta (Pune, a Nirman fellow now) said, “It’s only after the third camp that i can comprehend what the first two were all about ...” With Nirman, we are maturing, life is now taking a new, decisive turn. This process churns emotions first and once the heart is receptive, humanity is ingrained on it. Something impossible in any other education system, Nirman unfolds life’s little facets, to spur us on to live life, on our own terms, making this world, a new experience. It nudges our hot-headed Shastri to spend an entire day with a scrap-dealer, on the roads, collect scrap and while at it, understand his life. Abhishek – Mahesh can now identify with the labourers at Deonar butchery. After ditching a job which gave her Rs. 50,000 p.m. as compensation, Sayali is happy earning 5,000 now, and spreading this happiness to others too. Neeraja runs to help a helpless girl, leaving exam tensions aside for a moment. And there are others, talk to any of these and you will understand a bit more about what Nirman is, everytime. But,

“Amma, i think i am a gay. Nature has made me like this. It isn’t my mistake at all. I know this. I want hide this identity further or fret over it now.” When some one says this out in the open, where does strength come from? “Though we decided to go hungry yesterday, i couldn’t, and ate a bit. I couldn’t tolerate the hunger. I made a mistake Nayna, please forgive me ...” When Sonali (a doctor, from Amravati) confesses, she can’t hold back tears. With the tears, her heart flowed out, cleansing her. It was now pure, like water. Baba’s (Anil Avachat) words still ring in our ears --Be pure like water, unyielding like the earth, Bright like the sun and cool like the moon at heart ...

Today, we are confident that we can achieve this and more, in this lifetime. Nirman gives us the required training. It is that way. The hangover lasts for weeks after we are back from the camp. Nudging us to think at every step, every incident; giving us the strength to act upon it. You must be

excited by now and interested in being a part of this family. So, giving here a few important points that will ease your way. Nirman 3 is starting in January 2010; four camps will take place, each six months apart, at 'Shodhgram', SEARCH head office in Gadchiroli. The admission process has already started, forgive us, we are a bit late to write to you. Anyone who can understand Marathi can join, as it's the primary language used in the camps. Though there's an age limit (18 - 26) there isn't any educational qualification required. Unluckily, the last date is close, for sending in the application – 30th August. The form can be downloaded from our website – nirman.mkcl.org along with all other technical details, information, useful articles, some nice photos etc. The form seems to be intimidating to fill up, but if you remain true to yourself, rather than trying to impress anyone, chances are, you will make it to the interview round of these camps, which aren't meant for personality development or extra-credits or certificate. You won't get any of these here (well, now don't say we didn't warn you!).

If you need, call any phone number given on the website, or either of us. We will all help you. With this, we will end; already this letter has been quite long. Once we get going about Nirman, it's hard to stop. It's nice to share this all with someone, thanks for reading through, which will be gratified with a bear-hug when you meet us. All the Best for your life. Say hello to your family and friends, tell them about us. Stay in touch.

Yours,

YD and KT

(Also named as Yatin RS Diwakar and Kalyan Tanksale, respectively, in official documents)

PS- our contacts –

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PPS – contacts of a few people mentioned in this letter:

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PPPS – KTya wrote this in Marathi and put me to rewrite it, as he wanted to talk with you as well. – YD.