Welcoming a Partner

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Just as childhood was becoming adolescence, I was introduced to a fantasy world called Xanth, created by the novelist Piers Anthony. In Xanth, each person has one unique magical talent. These talents range from the trivial—the ability to turn a yellow flower red—to "magician"-level talents of great generality and great power.

I've worked with Shanti Nayak—with a couple of intermissions—for almost 19 years, since she joined us at Katzenbach Partners after completing her M.P.P. at Harvard's Kennedy School. It was evident from the beginning that she possessed magic; it took many years to pinpoint just what her Xanthian power might be, what spell could manifest in such disparate ways in such a multitude of contexts. Shanti's "spell" as I have come to know it is simply this: the capability, amidst whatever circumstances—complexity, conflict, confusion, great unknowns—to listen carefully, make everyone feel heard, and arrive after deliberation at a wise step forward. Simply that.

At Katzenbach Partners, after a few years on the client side, Shanti became our Chief People Officer and was the leader responsible for stewarding the most distinctive elements of the firm: the talent we recruited, the way we developed people, our culture. When we sold Katzenbach to Booz, she helped navigate an unusual integration, in which many of our people practices were elevated to become the practices of the larger firm. She then fulfilled a longstanding resolution to work in the social sector (as Chief of Staff at Roosevelt Institute) and in the public sector (as Chief Operating Officer for the New York State Office of the Attorney General), before joining me just as

Incandescent was turning three, to help build the firm to the next level.

While a natural center of gravity for Shanti upon joining the firm would have been to focus on what had been her area of greatest experience—working on organization, culture, and talent with large enterprises and earlier-stage ventures—she decided to undertake a bolder adventure. Beginning with a multi-year arc of work in partnership with Rockefeller to address youth unemployment and with work on national service that led to a merger that formed the Service Year Alliance, Shanti has built a practice focused on systems change, which has grown to encompass work with many of the world's leading foundations and a wide range of non-profits focused on tackling some of the world's most important and difficult problems, from the Partnership for Public Service to the Mailman School of Public Health.

As this year began, Shanti formally became what she has long been in spirit, an equity partner in Incandescent. She and I have in recent years made together every decision of consequence in the building of the firm, so in a way, this will represent very little change—but it formalizes a stage in our collective journey that we'll now undertake together, to gradually shape a diverse partnership that can build the firm through its second decade—we'll turn 10 in 2023—and beyond. Shanti will continue to lead the firm's work in Systems Change, and she and I will together build to the next level the firm's work with corporations on organization, culture, and talent, which has been a central part of Incandescent's work since the firm's inception.

It is difficult to find words to express well my appreciation for a friend and colleague who has played such a central role in my own development as a founder and leader, and who has been a partner in such an array of extraordinary work for the largest share of both of our careers. Trying to find those right words, I found myself turning the pages of Stephen Hall's book on Wisdom, and came upon this passage:

> Decision making lies at the heart of wisdom, but it's not the whole story. Making those decisions, in turn, draws on a subtle weave of intellectual, emotional, and social gifts—gathering information, discerning the reality behind artifice (especially when it comes to human nature), evaluating and editing that accumulated knowledge, listening to one's heart and one's head about what is morally right and socially just, thinking not only of oneself but for others, thinking not only in the here and now but about the future…

Thank you, Shanti, for how you exemplify this balance, and for the gift you've made to bring these qualities into our shared endeavor. The hundreds of readers of this blog who have had the pleasure to know Shanti in her capacities as an advisor, mentor, colleague, and friend will immediately recognize her in these words—and for those who haven't yet, I hope there will be opportunities for your paths to cross.