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I grew up in South India, with my engineer father, my mother (a housewife) and my sister. We lived in steel plant townships, beautiful mountain villages, which exported iron ore to Iran. The houses had flat roofs and one of our favourite

games was climbing up the cashew nut tree onto our roof. My grandfather's village had a pond, and I remember people throwing me into it to learn to swim. I managed to splash about in it, but I still can't swim to this day!

Then I went to a very special medical school. It was a Catholic school and I was one of only five Hindus there. It was absolutely fantastic, an Oxbridge-type environment. For three months we would study like mad for our exams, then for the following three months we would have inter-class cultural competitions every evening after lectures: Western classical music, poetry, singing, Indian instrumental music. Each year would compete against the other. We'd play Just A Minute, Dumb Charades....I got interested in writing poetry, and in Greek and Indian mythology too.

I don't know if this broad cultural education makes one a better doctor, but it might make one a better person. I have travelled a lot, read a lot, come into contact with many local faiths and beliefs.

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For example, I once went to Cuba with my family for a holiday. While we were there, the volcano erupted in Iceland, so we had to stay a fourth week. It is an extraordinary country: you have an enormous history of indigenous people, whose

faith was completely destroyed. Then on top of that you have the African slaves brought by the Spanish, with their own gods, from many different places. On top of that you have the Spanish gods, and over all of that you have Castro banning Christmas! So anyway, we went to the bay where Hemingway used to live and wrote 'The Old Man and the Sea'. We sat in the bar in the village there and I read the book aloud to my children. While we sat there, a couple came along - the woman of African descent and the man white - carrying some ashes, presumably from a dead loved one. They threw the ash into the sea and made a little

stack of stones there. We thought to ourselves, "These people are creating their own rituals, their own religion."

It is a huge privilege to be a surgeon. Someone is trusting you to cut into him - and you can do him good. You are in a 'zone', with certain outcomes in your head - firstly, to get the patient through the operation; secondly, to make it as perfect as possible; thirdly, to make it as beautiful as possible. And while doing all this, to train junior surgeons and make sure the next generation has the same level of skill.

Hospitals contain a lot of altruism. For example, I

made a 57-minute video to help patients prepare for abdominal surgery. It took almost two years to make this video - I needed actors, producers, cameramen, and all these people gave their time for free. And regularly, people will come in and cover for sick colleagues, or forgo their lunch break - it just goes without saying. It isn't perfect, and people don't always see it, but the backbone of the hospital is altruism.



The hospital is also a microcosm of life: there is tragedy, there is goodness, there is disappointment. You get to see all of life here.

