

How I played the Long Game and Achieved My Goals in Life

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First, I have published a few motivational articles about my work and have also given interviews to various groups about my life and career. One such interview is the recent one I gave to IEEE Computer Society as a result of the prestigious Taylor L. Booth award I received in 2023. Several of my students, especially those from South Asia have asked me what is the “Secret to my Success”. I have been thinking a lot about it. I was one of many daughters to parents who were not college educated. While they worked hard to give us a good education and we were comfortable, we lived a lower middle-class life. I went to school in a man-drawn rickshaw, lost my father at 16 and lived a life that was very ordinary and unremarkable. Then more recently I read an article in Psychology Today about “Playing the Long Game” by Allison McWilliams. I have heard this phrase quite a few times in recent years times and never thought much of it. But after reading this article and a few more, it all came together for me.

Before I provide my view of my long game, here is the link to the interview I gave to IEEE Computer Society to set the stage.

<https://www.computer.org/publications/tech-news/insider-membership-news/bhavani-thuraisingham-interview>

This article first discusses what is meant by playing the long game. In particular, I provide a summary of two of the articles that I read about playing the long game. Next I discuss why I think I played the long game. Finally, some advice to my students and the next generation (i.e., the Gen Z) on playing the long game.

What is “Playing the Long Game”?

Recently I have read some very good articles on Playing the Long Game. One article that I found quite interesting is by Allison McWilliams published in Psychology Today. She talks about focusing on things that matter, not to expect immediate rewards, taking small steps and achieve something big at the end. In other words don’t go after the shiny new object. Go after something that is really solid and long lasting.

Another interesting article is by Steli Efti published in Forbes. This article states that playing the long game can be to one’s competitive advantage. It emphasizes not to look for short term gains and focus on long term gains that really matter. The article also states that playing the long game is important for work as well as one’s personal life

Based on what I have learnt from reading the articles, I have examined my life for the past 50 plus years since I was 14 and have selected examples where I have won playing the long game. I will discuss these examples next.

Why do I think I Played the Long Game?

I will provide my answer through five examples.

Example 1: I will start with the year 1969 when I was 14 and switched from the Biosciences track to the Physical sciences track. Several of my relatives thought I was doomed as I was moving away from a career as a medical doctor. I chose the Physical sciences track as I did not care for Botany and Zoology and really liked Math and Physics. I have a very good memory (and still do) and so would likely have done well in medicine. But I did not have a passion for medicine. I believed that I must love what I do and learn what I am studying. It's not about getting A grades. It's about understanding the subject thoroughly and developing a passion. Perhaps because of that I may not have aced my exams but I did well enough to pursue my education in the physical sciences. While I did not think about playing the long game at that time, as I had never even heard of the term, this is exactly what I did. Spent a lot of time in understanding the subjects I studied and took small steps towards achieving my goals – this is the main point in playing the long game. That is, do not think about the short term benefits, think of the prize at the end. Of course you don't want to dream about the future and fail the exams. Its all about enjoying every step you take in your life.

Example 2: So, now we are in 1975 and I was finishing my undergrad degree in Math and Physics. I wanted to go to the UK or the US for grad school. But as a 20 yr. old woman it was not considered proper to get my graduate education abroad before marriage. Since my father passed away in 1971, my maternal uncles arranged my marriage to my husband who was 8 yrs. older and finishing his PhD at the University of Cambridge in Physics. I was very happy and we got married. However, marriage was not easy. We were both different and my husband went to boarding school in England and then got his entire university education there. So, it was like we were from different cultures. Also, I had no experience with men as I never had a boyfriend. My husband was also extremely organized and particular about cleanliness, and every item in our home had to be in place. We had to follow a strict routine (getting to bed and waking up at certain times). While I was organized to some extent, I found it difficult to cope with the rules. Also, I was in grad school and had lot of studying to do. So I did not want to start arguing with my husband and did the best I could. My thinking was, let me get a high paying job and then I can make my demands. That high paying job came in 1983 and that's when I put forward my rules. In the end we arrived at a compromise. So, here is another example of where I played the long game. Had I started arguing with him back in the mid to late 1970s while having a lot of studying to do, I might not have finished my PhD. I waited patiently and was able to have both a strong marriage and a career.

Example 3: We are now in the Fall of 1980 and just moved to the US. Our first home was in Socorro New Mexico. My husband worked at the Petroleum Research Center and I was offered a tenure track asst. prof. position in Computer Science at New Mexico Tech. I thought about it and declined the offer as my son was a baby at that time. So, I took a position as visiting faculty, My dream was to be a tenured professor but I knew that by giving up this opportunity I may never achieve my dream. However, I felt that I would never be able to cope being a mother and working on my tenure. To some extent I am a very organized and cannot juggle multiple tasks at the same time. I am intensely focused on what I do. So I worked as visiting faculty for a few years in Socorro and later in Minneapolis, after that joined the commercial industry for 6 yrs. first at Control Data Corp as a Senior Software developer and then at Honeywell as a Principal Research Scientist. But all the while I was publishing papers

in well reputed journals even though publishing was not part of my job. From Minneapolis, we moved to Boston as my husband got a job at MIT and I joined MITRE Corp, a federal lab. Even though I took these jobs as I did not have much choice, I really took lot of pride and pleasure in what I did. Every project I took on, it was with lot of joy, and excellence in almost everything what I did. From MITRE I was on leave to the NSF as a Program Director. That's when academia approached me and I chose the University of Texas at Dallas as it offered the best opportunity for me for both my career and personal life, and commuting between Boston, Dallas, New York City, and London was very convenient. Finally, after 24 years from the days in Socorro, I was now a tenured full professor at a research university. So, again I played the long game. I could have been despondent after giving up the opportunity at New Mexico Tech. Instead I enjoyed every moment of my work for the next 24 years and achieved my dream.

Example 4: Lets go back to the early to mid-1990s when I was in my late 30s. I was really thriving in my work and enjoying what I was doing. This made one or two colleagues, I believe, extremely envious and they tried to throw every obstacle they could in front of me to derail me. Sometimes I would get dejected and then my husband would tell me "Only your enemies would benefit from your downfall". I would cheer up immediately and make a strong resolve not to let these nasty people affect me. They tried to stop my publications as that gave me visibility in the global community but I was always one step ahead of them and got my papers published and continued to thrive. They said such vicious things about me to sabotage my career. However, I did have some strong supporters including my mentor Prof. CV Ram at UC Berkeley. I followed their advice and continued to thrive. My detractors failed in thwarting me. In fact one of them (I would say the worst person), in my opinion, has failed miserably in his/her life. And today I have received the most prestigious awards that could be given to a Computer Scientist and continue to thrive in my career. Again it was because I was patient, did not fight with them openly, carried on with my plan with the advice of my mentor, played the long game and won.

Example 5: I will give one more example, although this is not as strong an example as the previous ones I have given. So, when I joined the University of Texas at Dallas in October 2004, I heard that some of the faculty did not want me there as I did not fit the mold of a professor as I did not go through the tenure process as an asst. prof. That is, I was given a tenured full prof. right away. So, they placed obstacles to hiring me. However, I had some allies and they convinced the dept head that I should be hired. Because of this, it was not easy for me in the beginning. I believe that the department shortchanged me regarding my summer support as the wording in the offer letter was somewhat ambiguous. Nevertheless, the Dean at that time was decent and we arrived at some compromise to pay me. Now, I could have fought with the department about this, but I did not. At times I wanted to look for another position and then I said to myself those people who were resentful of me would then win. I waited patiently, worked really hard, built a strong team, generated millions of dollars in research funding (and still do after 19 yrs.) and that quietened these resentful people. Even more, I became the first person in the department to become an ACM Fellow which is a huge deal in Computer Science; and some in the dept were not pleased as their hopes were on someone else who never made it. However, thankfully I got a very supportive department

head five years after I joined, and together with the wonderful senior administration who recognized my talent and contributions and gave me a lucrative chaired professorship. So, here again I played the long game and won in the end.

My Advice to My Students and the Younger Generation

So what have I learnt over the years? Never to act on impulse. Do not lose your temper and argue with people. Do what you are passionate about, And, if you are not excited about something and you have no choice, then develop a passion for it. I am very good at it. That is, if I take on something by choice or otherwise, I always develop a love for what I do. I am fortunate to have this trait. But I believe that one can train oneself to develop this trait. Always believe in taking small steps and there will be a huge reward at the end. That does not mean you develop false hopes. Once you start taking these steps you would get some idea of how it might end. If you arrive at a dead-end then you need a course correction and that's the hard part. I cannot say what to do at that time as every situation/person is different. However, I have changed direction quite a few times such as moving departments, switching companies, and sometimes not making a change but developing a passion for what I am doing.

So, this is what I tell my students. You cannot have everything you want immediately. You have to play the long game and take small steps. Learn to love what you are doing. It will all work out in the end. I also stress, never give up. Lifelong learning is a must. Do not allow others to dictate your life, but it's very important to compromise with others. Develop a support network. And most important have mentors and learn from them. Today, after a 43+ year career I look forward to every day of my life and career and continue to play the long game as I enter the next phase of my life dividing my time between Dallas and New York City.