

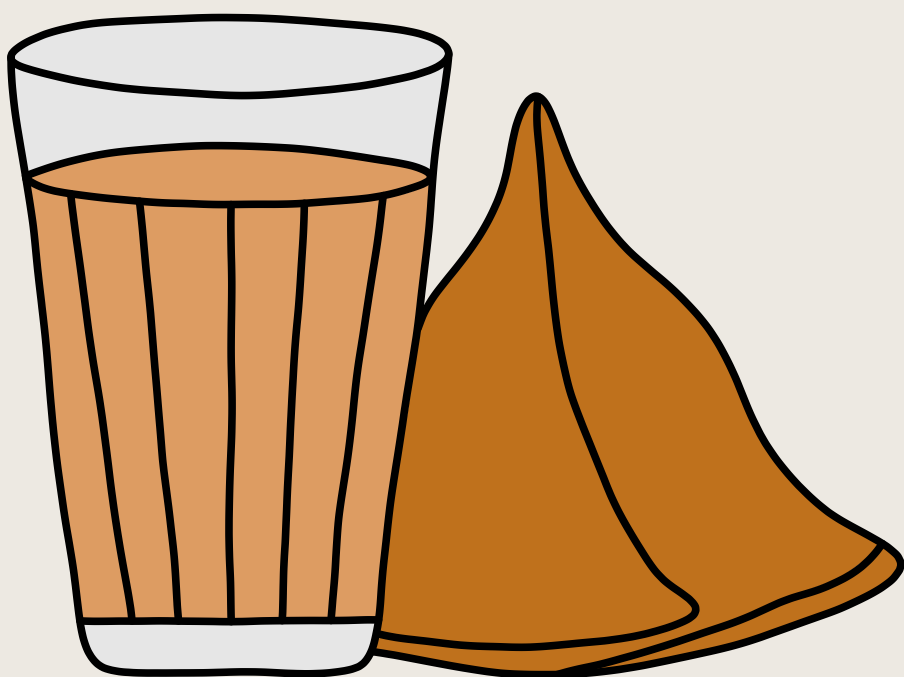
USELESS FELLOW

by Arun Rajappa (@appa), 21.04.2025

Growing up in Bangalore, one of the epithets flung at young boys by uncles and neighbors was "Useless Fellow".

It meant someone who was feckless, frivolous, someone who whiled away their time. It would be used in sentences like "*Ayy useless fellow, bring me a cup of water*", or "*You, useless fellow, get me the morning newspaper*". Burdening useless fellows with menial chores was the purpose of uncles.

As I grew up, this became my dream: to become a useless fellow. To not have to do anything useful, to be purposeless and wandering from one interesting diversion to another, that seemed to be the good life. If one could just have enough to eat and a place to stay, and then spend all of ones time being a useless fellow: what joy! Not only would this be personal success, but a way to stick it to those capitalist buggers (*usefulness* being the cornerstone of capitalism).



In college, in Delhi, I learnt the word "*vela*", imbibed its spirit, and lived the *vela* life. My attendance in class hovered around the double-digit, and I spent my days a jobless idler, roaming from one place to another, doing whatever caught my fancy: playing basketball, spending time in the computer lab, playing scrabble, and riding busses from one college to another. But most of all, I spent my time in *adda*.

Adda was a term I learnt from my Bengali friends. "*Adda!*" - what a wonderful thing, to sit with friends, have lengthy, wide-ranging, and often pointless conversations over cups of tea (sometimes accompanied by samosas) in the college canteen. And then to do the same thing the next day, again.

Like the 3 corners of the pyramidal samosa, "*useless fellow*", "*vela*", and "*adda*" was the foundation upon which I wished to build my life.



THE FOOL.

About ten years after graduating from college, when I was in Microsoft in Seattle...

*("Wait a minute", you say, "how did **you** get to Microsoft in Seattle?!". I tell you, friend, that it was by being a useless fellow, vela, and having lots of adda. In America they call those things following your passion and chasing your dreams.)*

Back to the story, about ten years after graduating from college, when I was in Microsoft in Seattle, I came across in the Microsoft library (while doing some "important research") a book about Tarot. Flipping through the pages, I landed on a page about "The Fool".

It was as if lightning had struck. This was me – who I longed to be – captured on page in a book on Tarot.

The Fool, Tarot Card 0: Infinite potential, new beginnings, optimistic, and creative. The Fool, Tarot Card 0: Naivety, avoidance, disruptive, and disconnected from reality.

The Fool, a wanderer, never in one place, with a few good friends and many acquaintances in every city.

The Fool, useless in a capitalistic sense, useless to The King, but essential in a mythic sense, to the beginning of journeys, the spark of all stories.

The Fool, jobless as a sunrise, useless as a rain-cloud. Someone who walks away from systems, possessions, expectations, money. Irresponsible, whimsical. Not motivated – impossible to motivate – with wealth, success, or power.

This is what I yearned to become, to be – "Foolish". Now in my 50th year, I can say that I've tried to live this foolish life. Life has tried to get me many times, and to tie me down with responsibilities and with shackles disguised as dreams. I feel at least here, in this essay, I can give a truthful answer to puzzled friends and curious job interviewers to their questions, "Why did you have your daughter in India?", "Why did you move back from the US?", "Why did you leave Microsoft, why Google?", and so on – it was pure Foolishness. There is no other answer, and no further justification required.

But before this seem like some sage decision making, let me catch myself.

In none of these decisions did I exercise conscious choice; foolishness was my fate, and a strong gust of wind could direct my next move. I – my conscious self – grappled with self-doubt, self-deprecation, and neuroses, berating myself for lack of discipline, cursing my character, and wishing for a stronger will. I often tried to resist, but ended up with constipation and a moody disposition, clouds of worldly wants casting shadows on the clear water of foolishness that lay underneath.

What I wish for myself as I grow older is gentle acceptance that this me. I am the Fool, the person I wished to be – and like wishes in the stories, it comes with the curse of comparison. If I could let go of comparison, and flow with the currents of foolishness, I know I'll be ~~happy~~ happier.

As an aside, believe it or not, this essay started off as a piece on artificial intelligence (my current diversion). The nub of it was to argue that the age of intelligent machines will give us all time to be Useless Fellows, in the best possible meaning of the phrase: people who can sing, dance, write, woodwork, or code because it gives them joy to do so, because they enjoy the craft, and not because they have to do a "job" for "money". I recognize that this is coming from a position of privilege, and that I haven't thought through the economics of how this all plays out. But I also know that my first job, in 1998, was the useful and dehumanizing one of looking through source code files and adding TODO: comments wherever I saw a year 2000 date format so that a senior developer could later fix the code.



This was the useful job a 23-year old man was given: a man who had studied Eliot and Whitman in school, who listened to Dylan and Grateful Dead in college, who wrote bad poetry and sometimes good code, and who dreamed of a life of love and courage.

So, spare me the sentimentality. Let AI take those jobs, and let us live our lives fearless, wasting our time in ways that we like, having deep conversations with friends over cups of tea (sometimes accompanied by samosas), and doing things that we enjoy, that give us meaning.

Let us all become Useless Fellows.