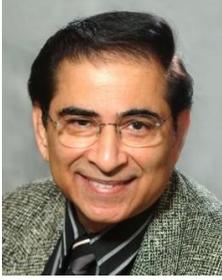


## *The Pickpocket Becomes Honest*



Harish Malhotra

Harish Malhotra, MD, is a diplomat of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology, a Distinguished Life Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association, and a clinical associate professor of psychiatry at Rutgers Medical School in Newark, New Jersey. He is the past chair of department of psychiatry of Overlook hospital, Summit. He has been practicing psychiatry since 1977. His book [Metaphors of Healing](#) is available on Amazon.

In 1955, I was 13 years old, studying in the eighth grade. We lived in Aligarh.

I had become an expert in taking out things from other's pockets without being noticed. I would pick someone's pocket, and then I would return what I had taken out. I liked to see an expression of surprise and admiration for my expertise from the 'victims'.

My ability to swipe things gave me a good haul during Diwali, when the shopkeepers were inundated with throngs of customers. The shopkeepers would cover their *charpai* (string cot) with a white bed sheet, to use it as a table, on which they would lay out their merchandise. There were screaming customers all around them, and that made the shopkeepers vulnerable. I could easily walk away with firecrackers every time the shopkeeper looked to the other side.

Similarly, my friends and I would go to the stamp and coin hobby shop, and right under the watchful eye of the shopkeeper, I would walk away with the merchandise. I was the hero of a couple of my friends. I called it *haath ki safai* (sleight of hands). My brother was proud of my magic hands.

This went on for a while.

We lived on the third floor of a building on the Railway road. It was a tall, three storied building.

(However, it looked like tiny to me when I visited it as an adult. Things that looked big in childhood sometimes look very small when you see them in adulthood. Dr. Salman Akhtar has written a couplet, which says it more eloquently.

दीवार पे जो ताक था, ऊंचा नहीं रहा,  
दो चार साल बाद जो मैं अपने घर गया। )

The Central Bank of India, where my father worked as a manager, was located on the second floor. There were shops on the ground floor. One day, I was standing at the counter of a bicycle parts store on the ground floor of our building. The shop, about 12 feet by 12 feet, was filled with multiple wooden boxes full of cycle parts. The floor of the shop was about 4 feet above the street level. We used to stand on the road outside the shop, put our elbows on the projection in front of the shop, and chat with the shop owner while he waited for his customers.

While we were all chatting, I did my usual trick of taking a pencil out of the pocket of someone standing there. I put my hand on his shoulders like a pal. My left hand went on the top of his left

shirt pocket. It was easy to hold the pencil with my two fingers and lift my hand, bring it to his back, transfer the pencil into my right hand, and then put it in my right pocket.

By the time I was ready to return the pencil, the victim of my prank had already left. So, the pencil stayed with me, until the shopkeeper, who was like a friend to us, said “Ok, half of that pencil should be mine.” I broke the pencil into two, and gave one-half to him.

As it happened, a bank customer, who was sitting on the balcony of the second floor of our building, had seen the whole incident. He said to the bank guard, standing right next to him, “Look at that kid. He is a thief. He stole a pencil out of a person’s pocket and gave half of it to that man.”

The bank guard recognized me, and said, “Oh, that kid is our manager’s son.” Later the guard relayed the incident to my father. “Sir, *chote sahib* (your son) was taking out a pencil out of a person pocket, and he split it with someone. A bank customer called *chote sahib* a thief.”

That night when my father came home, he asked me, “Why did you steal a pencil today?”

The word “steal” was kind of foreign to me. I said, “I did not steal it. I was just having fun.”

My father said, “Ok, if you were having fun, why didn’t you return it to the owner? Why did you break it and gave half of it to the shopkeeper? You stole it. The guard told our customer that the boy, the thief, was the manager’s son.”

I had a hazy memory of exactly what he said after that but I still remember his mood. My father was a dark complexioned man, and looked lofty to me. He had small pox marks on his face. His eyes were small and set deep on his face behind dark rimmed glasses. He had a Hitler style moustache. He looked angry. His eyes were wide. He stared at me, and his upper lip trembled, moving his moustache. That was one of the most blood curdling sights of my childhood,

My father was very angry and said in a hurt voice, “The bank manager’s son is a thief!”

I felt very ashamed. My eyes were stuck to the floor, my head was bent, and my neck was as stiff as a dry bamboo. My face was feeling hot, and I felt ashamed of myself. I felt sorry for disappointing and shaming my father.

That was the first time I recognized that my pranks were not a sort of game. Other people would see it as stealing. My father’s disappointed and angry looks made me take a decision about stealing.

An honest Harish was born that day.❖

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