

FT WEEKEND

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COMMENT PAGE 9

John Gapper

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MAN IN THE NEWS PAGE 9

Bob Diamond

The Barclays Capital banker pounces on stricken Lehman



'The pull of the city was gravitational'

Descended from a renowned Bengali artistic and literary family, Sundaram Tagore was born and raised in Calcutta. In his late teens he briefly moved near to Vancouver, later studying art history at the College of Wooster, Ohio, and the University of Oxford and museology at the Peggy Guggenheim Museum in Venice. He first lived in New York in the mid-1980s and has since made the city his base. He owns galleries in Hong Kong, Los Angeles and New York.

Because of exchange control and the value of the rupee, it used to be hard for Indians to travel abroad. So when I was a child my parents had lots of guests. People came from all over the world; from France, England and the US. That's how our family was exposed to new ideas. But Indians have always welcomed people. You meet someone at the train station and invite them home.

My parents didn't care if I lived in India or abroad; they didn't care who I married or if they were from another caste. They were liberal in that respect. There was no restriction in terms of ideology or politics. Bengalis are deeply rooted to their culture but tend to be internationalists. However, my parents were strict about manners.

When I was in my late teens I moved to a small island called Denman near Vancouver. My sister, an artist, had a cabin there. The island was spectacular. Just imagine: I came from Calcutta, a city of at least 10m people jostling for space. Then I moved to a place with a few hundred people where you see killer whales and other wildlife. We literally lived on the beach and I entertained myself by salmon fishing. Denman had a hippyish feeling and nearby was Hornby Island, where lots of famous Canadian artists and writers lived.

When I first entered the US I arrived through New York. I was mesmerised. I knew immediately that this was home for me and that I would eventually return.

At the College of Wooster I started taking art history courses. I was inspired by a wonderful man called Arn Lewis. Wooster was like a country club with old world architecture, all shiny and spiffy. A few times friends and I drove from Ohio to New York to visit museums or galleries. The pull of the city was gravitational.

In Wooster I read a lot of literature and was effected by W. Somerset Maugham, Thomas Mann and Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. I was attracted to the idea of self-exploration.



Like a lot of new college graduates, I wanted some grand experiences. After graduation I criss-crossed the country by car. I liked the idea of the open road, which is sort of an American rite of passage. I wanted to see the open spaces and dramatic landscapes I'd read about.

In the south, especially in small towns, people would stare at me. At that time I was considered pretty exotic, although I thought all the blue-eyed blonds in the Midwest were exotic. I landed up in Bozeman [Montana] and visited the classrooms where Pirsig taught and later got to Oregon. The vastness of the American landscape and the warmth of the people were moving.

After that I went back to Vancouver. My father had passed away and funds had

dried up. I was meant to go to the University of Pennsylvania but I got a full scholarship to the University of Oregon. I met my wife, Kelly, an American, in Oregon.

We first lived in New York City from 1985 to 1989. I worked selling Russian art and did other art-related projects. We were living in SoHo. The energy was unbelievable. At night we used to go to Bradley's to listen to jazz. In SoHo you rubbed shoulders with some of the most influential artists in the world. We didn't live far from Little Italy and it was common to see people like Martin Scorsese. I walked everywhere and would go to museums like the Museum of Modern Art or the Met every day. New York was dangerous then. I was held up in

Energetic
Sundaram Tagore enjoys the buzz of SoHo
Alamy



my last week in the city. Someone put a gun to my neck and took my wallet. New York is mellower now, more middle-class.

In 1989 I moved to Venice and worked at the Peggy Guggenheim Museum while on an Italian Ministry of Culture scholarship. We had a beautiful home overlooking the canals, with views to the Italian Alps. I always had very strong dreams in Venice. It had a medieval pace, not the fast-paced life you encounter in other cities. I was studying museology, learning how to run every aspect of a museum.

In 1990 I went to Oxford. Coming from a country with so much colonial influence, I found the rituals familiar. I'd grown up around British people all my life but I was initially struck by

the reserve I encountered. Having moved from the US, where people are generally gregarious and casual, it was a real contrast. I did end up meeting wonderful, warm people, however, and made several life-long friends. It's too bad I never finished my PhD. I had moved back to New York to write up my dissertation when the gallery Pace Wildenstein offered me a job.

Even during my time in Europe I kept coming back to New York, either because of the great retrospective shows or because of the lure of the city. Whenever I returned I was full of excitement and hope but also angst. I would stay with friends but always wondered if I could resettle in the city. New York is very fluid; if you are away for five years a lot of your friends and connections have moved on.

I like New York. It's a global city in the making; a post-modern experiment. You can be taking a subway and simultaneously be with an Israeli, a Palestinian, someone from Australia, a Vietnamese. Then there's the interest in art. Probably more people here are making a living from art than in any other city in the world.

It's impossible to have a favourite place in New York. When we lived in SoHo we used to go to all these little restaurants. I would go to a cafe on Spring Street called Dimitri. Now its name has changed. The Spring Street Cafe has gone too. The city is being built all the time. The places you loved no longer exist and the crowd changes.

I think Kelly being an American has influenced me. I'm a lot straighter with people. I don't waste any time or couch issues. I come directly to the point. Now, if I feel I am not able to help someone, I'll say: "No, I'm sorry, I can't do that for you."

I left India when my identity was fairly formed. I don't have an identity issue. I travel a lot and I try to adapt myself to whichever culture I am in. I was in China recently and a group of UCLA students introduced me as an American. I thought: "Yes, I'm an American but that's not the complete story."

These days I like coming home to New York because my wife and child are here. But home isn't about geography; it's more about feeling. If you have friends somewhere you have a home. I don't know where I'll end up. I was in Patagonia recently. It was breathtaking. I'm not moving there soon but you never know.

Ian Driscoll