

Meira Kumar

The Lok Sabha Speaker

'Praying is like coming home'

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Meira Kumar is the Lok Sabha Speaker.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It means there is a level at which my existence is not only physical or mental, it can transcend those barriers and reach out.

Was it a gradual discovery or were you always aware of it?

These are things that were told to me as a child. Maybe I was not able to comprehend it back then. But gradually it occurred to me.

Was it a religious home?

It was a very religious home but in a broad-minded sense, open to many different religions and traditions.

How does this awareness manifest in your daily life?

It is there all the time, whether I am conscious of it or not. I may think I am taking a decision consciously. But I realize later that I was influenced by this awareness subconsciously. And if I take a decision against it, then I feel bad afterwards.

Is it like an inner guidance?

Not that. But I know that when I later feel bad, it means I made the wrong decision, I didn't listen to my subconscious.

Life can be such a busy race, full of people and responsibilities, how do you manage to always be aware of it?

It's not something I have to listen to, or be aware of. It is just there, like air. I take it for granted, as much as the fact that I breathe air, that my blood circulates in my veins, that my heart is beating, that certain things happen in me unbeknownst to me.

As life evolves, is it all by chance or is there something as destiny?

This question has two sides to it. Sometimes things happen without investing efforts in it and you feel it was destined. Other times, you realize how much you have to put in your efforts for something to happen, so it couldn't only be destiny. So I can't say it's either my efforts or destiny alone. Basically, we are such a minute spec in the entire cosmos and there are so many things one doesn't and cannot think of as human beings. So many things are beyond our thinking and beyond our control.

Why did you choose to join the Foreign Service at first?

In those days, my father wanted to see me as an IAS officer. My husband was very supportive when I was preparing for the exams – he would even often make notes for me. My mother was also very keen that I should do something having had higher education. So I had a really supportive family, I sat for the exams and joined the IFS.

When you were a child, what did you dream of becoming when growing up?

You will laugh when I tell you. There were two things I wanted to be: a nanny, looking after little babies and a gardener. And I actually do both things.

Why politics then?

I guess it had to be, because my father was in politics. Rajiv Gandhi was Prime Minister at the time and he was keen I enter politics.

But was it something you were very keen on, having grown up in a political home?

I actually wasn't in the thick of it at home. My father never discussed it much with me. He was very interested in what I was doing, my health, my studies. But it was not about politics.

Once you entered it, was it very different from what you expected?

Yes, definitely, it was very different. First of all, the demands on you are too much. Not from others only – your constituents, your leader, your party – but more than that, from yourself. To fulfill all those expectations is really a challenge.

So where do you find the energy?

You need a lot of energy and a lot of integrity. When you have those demands on yourself, you are answerable to yourself and nothing can be hidden or faked to oneself.

So where is your anchor in confronting all those challenges?

In a sense of mission. A mission makes you look ahead. Integrity is a way to achieve it, a lifestyle. But it's not the aim.

Do you think that each one of us has a particular mission in life?

Maybe some people are not aware of it, but I believe we all have one. Even the humblest of humblest shall be useful in some way or another.

Do you see yourself as a role model for women for instance, as the first woman Speaker of the Lok Sabha?

Well, my example (among others) shows that women can be accepted in decision-making places, and I would think that it would encourage other women to break all sorts of glass ceilings. It would give them more confidence.

Do you see such a trend in the country?

There are two aspects to it, anywhere in the world. The struggle of women themselves is one aspect. And second is society's acceptability of women. I think that both have matured in India. But a lot of distance has yet to be covered, for sure.

Is there a place for prayers and rituals in your life?

Yes, I like to pray. And rituals? There are rituals and rituals. Some give lots of good energy and can be beautiful, with a beautiful message. Others can be extremely harmful, hurt or belittle others. Twice a year for instance, we worship the girl child as a goddess. I love it as it sends such a beautiful and important message. Feeding the poor is another beautiful ritual. But obviously, I shun those who are not of that nature.

What does prayer do for you?

I feel it's like a magnet. All the energy that gets scattered and dissolved, gets collected and focused when praying. So I pray in the morning, in the evening, and any time I feel I need to collect myself and regroup. When I have to regain my strength from within, I pray. It's like coming home.

And is the concept of God important?

I feel it as an energy, which exists everywhere and in us.

If there were one question you could ask God, what would you ask?

Why so much suffering? I can't see any rational or cause behind it.

When people mention karma, past life etc., what do you think?

I don't believe in it. I don't believe in past lives, or in the theory of karma. Those are only restrictions.

But if there were such a thing as reincarnation what would you choose?

I can't answer this since I don't believe in it.

What is your idea of happiness?

Happiness is a much misunderstood concept. It is very thought after yet it doesn't exist. It's some kind of a utopian concept. There is no such thing as being happy. It's a mixed bag, at every moment.

Some people see the pursuit of happiness as the objective of their lives though?

For me there is no such thing. It is an illusion. I am not saying it doesn't exist. It's simply always mixed with pain. And pain is actually appealing at a higher level. One should go through pain. Because it purges you, it prepares you, it helps you evolve, it helps you relate to so many people who are also suffering. Happiness is very restrictive. It closes you within yourself.

In what way does pain purge you?

You cleanse yourself as you are in pain, and you become a better person, because you can have more empathy, more understanding.

You can see this in all our literature, even going back to the Ramayana: it started with two birds sitting on a tree; a hunter came and killed one of them; the other one died out of sorrow and pain. When Valmiki saw it, he wrote the first verse of the Ramayana on a lotus leaf. So the first verse of our first ever written epic started from pain. That is why pain is so great. The heroine and the hero of that epic also constantly went through pain. That is how one can relate.

So what about contentment?

It is like coming to a grinding halt.

So that's not good either?

Life is a process of evolving. It should not stop.

You see, there are two ways of traveling in life. You can always be on the surface, or you can evolve, in a spiral manner. And that's your choice.