

Maneka Gandhi

Politician

'My meditation lies in planting trees'

Sun Jul 26 2009



Maneka Gandhi is a politician, animal rights activist and environmentalist.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is what allows me to find satisfaction from within, rather than needing reaffirmation from without. It brings the realization that I own nothing yet everything is mine—the air, the earth, trees, animals, you. For me, the essence of spirituality is the ability to recognize the oneness of all life. I know why I have been put on earth and I know I am protected by all the gods that reside in each stone and ant. So I feel no fear at all.

What do you mean by "the gods"?

All the live energies that exist in every animate and inanimate creation. Do you think I would have come through such a life of turbulence with all my values intact if I were not protected by them?

So is there such a thing as a guiding or protective force in your life?

I have felt blessed and protected all my life, with my mother intensely protected by the gods, with a guru constantly accompanying me, with leaves, grass, air and animals caressing me – all this protects me.

Besides, I have been given the greatest gift of all –the inability to recognize any form of danger until I am past it. I look back at my life and see lots of really frightening bits. I wonder how I came through them, without even recognizing them, or consciously navigating them. I simply bathed in them like one does in the ocean and when the waves reached the shore, I came out.

But what about all the setbacks? Did you never "revolt" against the gods?

Where would I go after revolting? I am not a temple-going person, so I cannot stop doing something I do not do anyway. I can stop talking to them but how does one stop talking to a lotus? If there have been setbacks in my life, look at its achievements.

Do you have a strong sense of purpose and destiny?

I have a very strong sense of why I was created and what is the job I have been given. There is no other way to explain my life. I grew up in a completely apolitical army family even though my maternal grandfather was advisor to the government and like a son to Mahatma Gandhi. Our summer holidays at the Bhopal family home were a haze of picnics, books and lakes.

There is nothing that can explain my meeting Sanjay (Gandhi) at a cousin's wedding and our instant recognition that this was meant to be. His integrity, strength and wisdom taught me courage and the ability to see beyond both flattery and criticism. Long after he is gone, I still draw upon his strength to see me through. Losing him killed a part of me but it also increased my compassion and understanding. Since then, I have felt impelled to reduce the suffering in this world to the maximum of my ability.

Would you say that all things are pre-ordained?

What happens to you is pre-ordained. How you react to it is perhaps your choice. Life after life you will be given the same sort of challenges until your responses are right. Then you get a 'get-out-of-jail' card!

As a child, what did you think you would become when you grew up?

I was always like this, perhaps the ultimate existentialist, because I absolutely never think of the future. Until I was 30, I used to think of the past, till I realized it was too heavy a burden for me to carry. So I put it away and carried on with my journey.

Does prayer or meditation play a particular role in your life?

Absolutely. I wake up thanking the gods, I thank them about a million times each day and I sleep thanking them. My meditation lies in planting trees.

What were your spiritual inspirations?

I have met so many gurus —just knowing they are there, knowing that India is so amazingly blessed with so much readily available magic and thousands of enlightened people fills me with joy.

Was religion part of your childhood?

My mother's family has always been close to gurus. But my childhood was simply going to gurudwaras. I am not sure I would call this religion but perhaps it gives one time to think in a harmonious, music-filled atmosphere.

If you could ask God one question, what would it be?

Not a question but a command —just keep Sanjay till I get there and extract an apology from him for checking out so early!

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you choose?

Reincarnation happens till you wear out all your attachments and desires, both of love and hate. I've reached a place where I do my duty, work for as much good for all creatures as possible but without any expectation of a reward or even attachment. My temper is legendary — but it has never manifested related to personal hurt or ego, only when I see pain being caused elsewhere. So, I want the ultimate gift from all the gods that look after me —not to be re-born.

What is your idea of happiness?

My heart lifts with the scent of raat ki rani, the koel and peacock's cry, the taste of a mango, my feet squishing into wet grass, the dolphin leaping, the dog nuzzling my hand, the bees hovering on the bhang plant's flowers, sunlight on a puddle, tamarind fruit, children shouting while they play, the hands of my guru when I kiss them, the diya on the puja table, the smile on my mother's and son's face...
What else is important?