

Devdutt Pattanaik

Mythologist, author and speaker

'Stories give me complete comfort'

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For mythologist, author and speaker Devdutt Pattanaik, divinity is the possibility of the human being.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It's the search for what is the point of life, the discovery of the meaning of life. There is more than what is tangible, there is more than what I can see. The search for it is spirituality.

How do you go about it?

For me, it is through my writing. The more I write, the more I discover it.

I write on mythology. As I reflect on those stories, spirituality manifests itself, right in front of me. It's very simple really. Mythology is like a puzzle that people in the past gave us.

If you solve the puzzle, you get the spiritual. It's like a game. They won't tell you. You have to figure out the meaning. You can say it is meaningless, or it is a work of art, or you can say it is meaningful. It is up to us, we are the ones giving meaning to the story or the image.

For instance, I can look at the image of a man on a dog and say it is just a man on a dog. Or I can say it is the image of Bhairava. Bhaya means fear. Bhairava means 'he who removes fear'. And why the dog? Because the love of the dog for his master is not real love, it is fear – the dog is afraid that his

master, who is the source of his survival, would go away. So his affection is actually attachment. Bhaya leads to attachment. That is the image of Bhayrava on a dog.

And that is the puzzle created by the ancestors. Look at it, decode it, and discover spirituality.

How did you get into this process, were you fascinated by mythology since you were a child?

Not really. I had read all those stories like any Indian child. It really started post my medical studies. I wasn't happy studying to be a doctor, and writing those stories was my liberation. There are so many stories and I realized that most of my friends didn't know them. Initially I was writing only to document them. Then I realized you can join the dots, which reveals something completely different. Stories are like stars. Decoding them is like joining the stars and creating a constellation.

That is what I gradually figured I could do, especially since nobody was writing about it and doing it. People loved my writing and gradually it became bigger.

Did you have a religious upbringing?

Absolutely not. And my parents were mad at me for doing this. They couldn't understand why a student of medicine would go into this. They thought it was a waste of time and that I should just be a doctor, making money. Being a doctor is serious ! But I was naturally drawn to the subject. It was my escape, it was my cave. And I emerged as a mythologist.

Now it has become big so my parents are fine with it.

And looking at your journey, do you feel there is a specific purpose to it all?

Humans are the only animals with a neo-frontal cortex. Which means we are the only animals who can imagine. So I asked myself, why was I given a brain to imagine ? Nature won't give you an answer, you have to figure out your own answers over time. Including about the purpose of life.

If you look at a world without humans, it is a world of predators and preys. Can I create a world without predators and preys ? If I succeed, I create heaven. We are all so trapped in a fear-based way of being. We need to outgrow it. So the purpose of life, if there is one, is the search for a world without predators and preys; it is to reach that level where fear does not affect you.

But yet, the moment I exist, I destroy – when I eat I destroy, when I take a car or a plane I pollute, there is no way I can be alive and not destroy, isn't it?

Sure. So creating a world without violence is only an aspiration. Therefore the image of the hermit in the forest: he does not eat, he does not have sex so he doesn't produce more life, he does not breathe. You are imagining this creature who does not engage with nature because when you do not engage with nature, you get atma. It is an idea, an aspiration, a yearning and of course it is a struggle. But aspirations make you a better person. So it's all about the journey to the atma, a back and forth between those aspirations and regressions to being an animal, a predator, with all our fears.

But many could argue something very different : why be alive if not to learn all sorts of teachings within human reality and society, why be alive and miss all those teachings by escaping into the forest?

Well, the image of the forest is only metaphorical. It's there to encourage reflection. You can go on and be alive, just acting. Or you can become aware of each decision and each act as a conscious choice. When you eat, you do destroy something, but you do it out of conscious choice. The image of the forest is about an inner journey of withdrawal and reflection to make certain choices and decisions. Being able to do so is a uniquely human trait and potential. So if you are human, reflect! But we don't. Because it is frightening, because it would reveal how cruel we are. It would tell us how responsible we are for our lives.

There are no prescriptions. There are only individual reflections and each person with their own way. Different cultures prescribe different ways. But ultimately the individual has to break free from the tyranny of his culture. That's the journey of the individual.

In your belief system, is there a larger orchestrator or God?

I need to explain the forest, I need to explain my existence. So I create a functional entity. Is it real or not ? Everyone has their own answer. For me, ultimately, divinity is the possibility of the human being. It is infinity. In my imagination, I can be infinitely loving and kind, but I cannot be so in reality. That is divinity. I cannot be as generous as my imaginary being can be. So for me that is the journey. You know what is possible. And you yearn for it, you aspire to it.

What about the idea of destiny and preordained events in life?

There are certain events in life that one cannot explain. You walk in the street and a car hits you. The idea of preordained helps me cope with that situation. I can say it is random or preordained. If I make it random, life is difficult to accept. If I make it preordained, I give meaning to the event. As a person, I am the meaning giver. I choose.

At times of major challenges, where do you find your energy?

In the gods and goddesses. I go back to the stories. Always. It gives me complete comfort. When you go back to the stories, you see the wisdom.

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

Why didn't You give me more strength?

To do what?

To be You!

If there were such a thing as rebirth, what would you choose for the next round?

Of course there is such a thing as rebirth ! I would want to be a human being, and do more of the same, take this learning to the next level.

What is your idea of happiness?

The ability to love and be loved unconditionally.