

Anjali Gopalan

Founder of NAZ

'I would love to be an inanimate thing, like a mountain'

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Anjali Gopalan is the founder and head of NAZ, a New Delhi- based NGO working on HIV/AIDS and sexual health.

What does spirituality mean to you?

Love for all life forms.

How does it manifest in your life?

My love for animals, for children, for human beings is very integral to who I am and I draw a lot of my energy from them all. It is central to my being.

Has it always been so?

Yes. Besides, spirituality never had anything to do with religion. I actually can't ever remember being a religious person.

One incident marked me much as a child and symbolized a lot to me, even though I was only in the first standard when it happened. My father was posted in Mathiran. We had gone to a huge temple where I was struck by the sight of a number of Rajasthani women, removing their jewellery to offer it.

The priest did not even give them prasad. But because my father was in the air force, a huge basket of sweets was sent to us from the temple in the evening. No matter how young I was, it was clear to me that something was wrong and unfair.

To this day, I do not go to temples, or mosques or any other religious place. I do not feel the urge to visit such institutions. And I really have a problem with organized religion.

Some friends, especially one who is a priest, get upset at me for not bringing up the children in this home with religion, with God. But I do not think it is a valid objection. I try to bring them up as good human beings and that is what all religions are supposed to be about. Of course as they grow up they can choose a religion or another.

The idea of a protective, guiding force talks to you?

Not really, though I would not be honest if I were not telling you that at times of crisis, I do think occasionally of some divine force. Whatever that force is though, I guess I do not have much faith in it! On the other hand, there has to be something like destiny. Why would certain forces come into play in your life? Why did I choose to do the work I am doing? I do not have answers to any of this. But I do know I have a very strong sense of commitment, from within. That's me.

So what is destiny?

Why should a certain dog needing help come into my life and I end up caring for him? Why should those [HIV] children –who in normal circumstances should have died– be brought here and be saved? What is allowing me to do what I do? Why are so many people supporting our work and the lives of those children? Why is it all happening the way it is? Sometimes I think of those things and wonder.

But whatever it is, I am so glad I can do it: I do not think many are half as lucky as I am, getting up every day and not feeling like "oh my God, another day of work"...

The fact that I can see these children come as toddlers and blossom into beautiful human beings is incredible. With so much goodwill, so much love surrounding all of us. We really float around with it. Without really trying too hard, things are happening. So I am forced to believe in destiny sometimes.

As a child, did you always know what you would do?

I always had this tremendous love for animals and plants. From the time I can remember, all my memories are about connecting with cows, cats, goats. It's crazy! And maybe that is what translated into my love for children. Because I never ever was a maternal person. Growing up, I was extremely clear that I would never want children. I could not imagine having a child. I was not cut out to being a mother. So now I am a mother of 37 kids and many more. Maybe that is actually what allowed me to become a mother to all these children. Because had I children of my own, it would have been very difficult to do what I am doing today.

Do you feel revolted sometimes against the way things are?

Yes, very often. I am not a saint. And there is so much negativity around. There are days when I stop and wonder why I am doing all this. Why bother. It happens so often. In those moments, I think I should get over this and go somewhere in the hills, take care of animals, do my readings, listen to

music – why am I dealing with human beings at all? But then because of my commitment to those children and their lives, I cannot walk away from it. No parent can walk away from his or her child.

So you are committed to them and to this place for the rest of your life?

Yes. And it is a scary thought. Sometimes I fear some of those children will not turn out to be good human beings. But I try and bring them up with a very strong value base, respecting all life forms, respecting diversity. I am convinced that half the problems of this country would actually be solved if children were taught to respect difference. So I am hoping that at least the kids who are part of our family will be like that.

Where do you find the energy at times of really difficult challenges?

A lot of it comes from very mundane stuff, like gardening. I can spend hours gardening. Or listening to music. Plus, I have incredible friends. I give them a very tight hug and get so much energy from it. I am so lucky to have them. If I just need something, they are there. And of course, my parents – I cannot tell you how much they have done for me. I could have gone mad at times. But they were there. My friends and family are incredible stabilizing forces in my life, I receive so much love from them, without expectations. I am sure many people have those kinds of relationships, but it definitely is what allowed me to do what I am doing.

How did NAZ happen?

I first got involved into matters related to HIV in a very random way. I was in the US, doing my Masters and had to do an internship. I ended up with an NGO doing community work out of Brooklyn. I was sent for some counseling training. This was New York in the eighties. HIV was devastating the gay world in particular. And I ended up working with many of them.

After ten years in the US I wanted to come back to India, especially to be with my aging parents. At the time, there was almost nothing in India related to HIV and I felt I had enough experience to share.

I was observing what the wives and children of gay men have to go through and felt a lot of it was very wrong. But I did not think it was fair to blame the men either. Their circumstances were also very difficult. The pressure they face to marry, even though they clearly prefer relationships with other men – nobody talks about it. The lack of community for men having sex with other men was so huge.

Younger boys especially would always come to me and ask: "give me a medicine to make it right". And that always broke my heart. That is why I felt it is so crucial to create a community for them to understand that it is alright to love and care for someone of the same sex, that it does not need to only be about sex, but there is also a loving, caring aspect to that relationship.

I always had a very strong sense of right and wrong and felt very strongly for anyone marginalized, anyone who does not have a voice. Besides, I always felt it is important to create spaces for those voices to be heard. That is also why I feel so strongly for children and animals, both do not have a voice. And that is what led me to this journey and to NAZ.

And on your way, you found people who helped make it happen?

Definitely. This home would not be possible without the level of love and care that people have showered on us. It is indescribable. That is why when people say "people don't give" I say, some people don't give, but most do. They just need to know that what they are giving is actually being used. We have been very lucky with the kind of energies coming into our lives.

So you have not despaired about human nature?

No, not at all. Though I must admit there are moments when I feel I do not want to deal with human beings at all. And given a choice between animals and humans, I would rather spend my life with animals. I want to take care of animals that are hurting. Because I cannot think of anything worse than what human beings do to animals. Think of that elephant on the road, cows eating plastic, dogs being bitten up. It makes me so angry.

What in human beings lead them to do such things?

They just do not care. And cruelty is somehow an integral part of human nature. It is the only species that kills for pleasure. The way we slaughter animals, the pain we create in other lives... Animals don't kill or torture with such cruelty for pleasure. Or how can someone take a child to prostitution? I know all the stories about poverty, but to me nothing can justify any of those cruelties.

The potential for cruelty in us. I often want to murder someone. I clearly have the potential in me. If I could, I would. I just do not have the guts!

Did you get those values from childhood?

Yes, especially from my father, he was very clear about not discriminating others.

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

Why did You make human beings in this way?

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you like to be reincarnated as?

I would love to be an inanimate thing like a mountain. I cannot deal anymore with the pain human beings have to go through. Mountains give so much pleasure to so many, without having to do anything wrong.

Do you believe in reincarnation?

I am not sure. No human being wants to think that this is it. We are too scared to think there is nothing before or after. Maybe that's why we are tempted to believe in it. Also, sometimes, I wonder why I make such instantaneous and intense connections with certain people. Why do I feel so good or so wrong about someone? Why have certain people come into my life the way they did and at the time they did? So it makes me wonder...

What is your idea of happiness?

Absence of pain —both emotional and physical— would be my idea of happiness. Just, No, Pain.