

Aman Nath

Author

'God should do his job better'

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Aman Nath - author, art restorer and founder of the Neemrana chain of hotel.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is not about isolation, sitting alone on some mountaintop. It is under my skin. It always is with me. I can be in contact with it at any time. It is indestructibly packed within my body and soul.

I cannot take it out like a currency note from a pocket, nor flaunt it. But it can be depleted. It is an internal glowworm covered within my cocoon. It is that inner silence that can always speak silently, if I know how to consult it quietly.

But I also connect with it at the macro level, imagining the vast outer shell of the cocoon of the universe – which I guess isn't there. It's just comforting to be a cocoon within a cocoon; you can't have a boundless womb without frontiers. That would be an eternal winter without any spiritual summer.

Is there any role for religion in your approach?

I am a non-practicing Hindu, I am an atheist actually. Anyone who cares to look beyond the scum, can actually easily sense that our cosmos is the fountainhead of spirituality -- not religions. Religions are the myopia of mankind. With an incomplete scientific knowledge of the universe and of the natural phenomena, what was imagined for the people in different parts of the world, was only a part of the whole, but it was both understood and described as if it was The Whole. Essentially, all religions are territorial and thereby parochial. Over time, if they are not updated, revitalized and adapted, they are destined to become outmoded. Religions have served their purpose from darkness to light – because faith governed morals. But today, everyone defines and justifies their own morals. Globalization has certainly meant a widening – and loosening of morals. Today, more than ever people practice double standards: when they play, they play hard, party, sin, whatever. And when they meditate, they wash and clean slate what they have accumulated as anti-spirituality.

The holy books were written in another age and time. They need to be edited, rewritten, re-interpreted, not just followed by the word. If the new generations in all societies feel a generation gap between their parents and themselves, then how can centuries-old books be 100% unquestionable wisdom? Just because we were once told to keep it out of the realm of logic or beyond global wisdom and learning? I do agree, religious discourses by extraordinary people like our sages do help touch this nebulous thing we call spirituality. Gurus can give you a taste of it but they can't really put their finger on it forever, nor hold on to it for others. So when their fleeting glimpse of spirituality escapes their followers, they feel vacuous and bereft. That's why gurus are ringed by lost, rich people more than the rural poor, for whom the spirituality of the sunrise is at the end of their fields – not at the end of a flight away in Goa! But for both it must be a private search and path.

How has this private search unfolded for you?

I flit a lot between the city and the village. I enjoy the charpoy chats as much – if not more – as the pontifications of the glitterati and literati. Urban conversations are more predictable. They lack the simple, experimental authenticity of soul-searching. People spout their favorite theories or their current reading as the final answer. But spirituality for me lies in those unexpected transitional moments like surprise meetings or when I shift from one thing to another – in the acts of creation just as in the silences in between.

That search is also about busying myself – to create, travel, see, record my ignorance in books and continue to learn. I am always aware that I have hardly begun the journey – traveling, drinking the different waters that wash our planet's surface, diluting different minerals. I love water, literally. I have an image of being cleansed through, each time I drink. I see myself as a glass vial. Fizz and brew would tamper this transparence of my internal glass. I do not yearn the 'beaded bubbles winking at the brim', which Keats talked about. Intoxications to me seem like a false energisation of an otherwise dormant internal volcano. It is good to demonstrate that you are alive from within by loving, caring etc. – not by burping ! With age I now feel – if I may use the volcano analogy – that I can keep myself simmering and internally alive much longer, without the need to add borrowed energies or to erupt!

The planet is very important for me. I like to walk it – uphill usually. My treks to Mount Kailash, the Phuktal Monastery, the Basloi Pass and Chhota Kailash, were among my finer moments on this earth. Only our feet connect us to our planet. That is our equal gravitas among humans, instantly made unequal on our return to civilization by hierarchies, wealth, human posturing.

This search has also unfolded through my love for restoration and building. I love walls, the dead-end of wherever we are. Anything that reminds you that you are not as important in time or space-as human egos and thoughts can often mislead you into believing – is a welcome, humbling device. This can bring one to the doorstep of spirituality. Standing against a Neemrana wall raised 545 years ago by anonymous masons using two billion year old stones, teaches you of a lot about your status and your role. There is spirituality in restoration as a mantle of human responsibility, which you willfully take upon yourself. When people say "Don't" you feel like a Maharaja in your fort-palace?" one can only be discomforted by their ignorance and misunderstanding of the humans' march on this planet.

Actually, looking at all you have done, do you think there is such a thing as a purpose to one's life?

You have to find it, by constantly consulting yourself deeply. The existential questions should be asked early and dealt with. You keep discovering the answer of course. And as Gandhi said, first find the purpose, the means then follow. And this has been my story – I had one lakh rupee in my pocket and needed 30 Crores to renovate Neemrana. I had found the purpose, the means had to come – and indeed, they came.

How did you find the purpose?

When I was a kid I had the usual problems. I came from a business family, I was supposed to maybe grow up and run a factory. But my parents never pushed me in any direction. They saw that my taste always went to art, literature, languages. So I first went into copyrighting in advertising, and then things unfolded. Today, some people say "you are the chairman of a company". When I was a child, my image of a Chairman of a company was a stuffy old man, bossing around the world. Now that I have got to this point, I don't want to be stuffy, I don't want to be old, I want to be the opposite of what we were typecast to be.

What were your dreams as a child?

I wanted to be a cleaner boy in a truck, because I thought they had all the fun, traveling everywhere. Having read lots of fairy tales, I used to want to live in a room in some castle's tower. When I would see ruins, I always thought I would live in one room there. So I always had this special connection to restoration, and building.

How would you then define your purpose?

I studied history. The consciousness of time it taught me has helped me understand how short life is. So I became posterity minded. I am conscious that I am wasting my time when I am not doing something fruitful. It is about learning, it is about exposure. Time is running out. There is no stop-watch. So my purpose is to live every moment fully. Books and architecture are posterity-minded activities.

But you just talked about eternity, so isn't posterity an illusion?

By that logic we should do nothing. But I think that you have to shape things and change the world, if you have a chance to do it. And whoever you meet in your life, you must affect their lives and let them influence your life, positively.

Even rascals?

I am actually hugely attracted to rascals.

In the way your life unfolded, was there some guiding or protective force?

It would be arrogant to say I did it all alone. But in the end of course it is the case. I have always done what I wanted to do. To the believers, I would say, the harder I work, the more Shiva helps me – using his name for want of anything better for Energy, Light. When people go to a temple, or meditate, inviting spirituality upon themselves, they invite self-suggestion. What is reiki? You have to open yourself. If the gates are shut, you can't receive it. If you open them, it can flood. It is not God, or Yahve, or Allah doing it.

Einstein's definition of God is one I feel very close to: "the sea of ignorance beyond the fringes of human knowledge is God". What we don't know, we call it God.

It does not take much to know we are only a spec, a dot of a dot of a dot in the universe – part of a larger rhythm.

Were there synchronicities or odd events signaling something else at play?

I felt it very very very many times. If you tell people about it, they say you are stupid. I think of something and it happens, without any probability of it happening.

How do you explain it?

Because I am open to it. But it is not enough of course.

So what does God mean to you?

It does not mean anything. When I look at God's iconography, I see that God is actually a reflection of man. I believe in a force beyond. But if you give it a name, like God – who are we to give it a name? Who are we to make a house for God? God is everywhere. It would be so presumptuous to limit It to an edifice.

Also, if there were as many deities, gods, goddesses as our individual and collective imagination have created, wouldn't they do their work better? Orphans, famine, wars, natural calamities, inequalities, injustices – are these all being willfully created, directed and monitored by God, or the gods?

Shouldn't they all be sacked for their dismal performance? We need something universally communicative like the new god from cyberspace: Internet. It has no race, color, creed, or belief – though we have created private clubs in Facebooks – it seems to me to be a unifying force while religion has become divisive. But we can't so easily retire our gods, because we created them and we are much less wise than we think. Eventually we have to dump religions and graduate to spirituality.

Look even at Buddha. Buddha sat and starved under a tree doing tapasya, gaining what we value in India as tapas, body heat. It is the power attained from self-denial not what today's mall and luxury consumers aspire for – just self-aggrandizement. He preached anti-ritualism, moderation, and much

that is common sense, but today it is layered over and forgotten through a curious mixture of what our civilization believes we have gained in 'civilizing' ourselves.

Today wars, boundaries, religions divide even the uncharted and unbounded spiritual arena with their own limited versions. A part of the whole can never be The Whole. One bulb of the light can only be a first stage beyond darkness. We are bound to bring our myopia and megalomania if we cup the sea water in our hands and describe it to those in the arid regions as The Sea. What about the whole process of leaving the land first, wading, floating, being almost drowned by a giant wave, surviving, then swimming across to the other shore(s)? True spirituality is beyond a life's journey of self-understanding. I think it is a nebulous, endless search, but its beginnings can goad you further to the sahasrar chakra, the thousand petalled lotus of a wise awakening.

Back to Buddha, for Buddhism is so fashionable these days, Christians and Hindus are converting to it. The day Buddha died, or took samadhi – or whatever, his eight greatest followers brought in their armies in battle to fight for his relics. What had they learnt of non-violence? Soon, vast stupas were to guard Buddha's teeth, hair, bones. Was that Buddha's idea of simplifying the understanding of life, the universe etc.? All this proves that religion won't solve anything. Human beings are the issue and no text or rule will change it. Humans will never learn, for they have been designed to falter. We can try not to fall, but fall we will.

What does destiny mean to you?

In one minute everything can change for you. But without talking of good or bad times, destiny is something you shape yourself if you are not waiting for something to happen.

I am a huge optimist. Neeraj is one example of it. Mr. Oberoi had sent his engineers to study it, and with all his team and money he had concluded it was an impossible project. I, on the other hand, actually never see the problem. I see the solution and work towards it. That is destiny.

But in working at it are you alone?

As I said, the more I work, the more I help myself to achieve, succeed by positive and persistent off suggestion.

There is no such thing as preordained?

No. But you are asking for things by your power of asking, working, being open.

At times of difficult challenges where do you find your anchor and energy?

Within myself. And also, I draw from everybody. I give and take fully.

Have particular readings fed your spirituality?

Yes. Thomas Mann in *Death in Venice* wrote 'Solitude brings out the best in us – and the worst.' That is a first step to reading. So, reading is important – but even more so, thinking. Reading helps a quiet dialogue of a more distilled sort than talking at our distracting cocktail-dinners where many conversations are begun simultaneously, but all is eventually frittered like beer froth on a high wind. Reading both transports and transforms you. But for many it becomes a drug they can't do without.

They feel depressed without their constant dialogue with a good book. I think that this escapism from reality is an urban cover for closing-up to our immediate problems, surroundings and neighbors. Travel and conversations with strangers are very important to remain connected to one's core self. I think that pilgrimages performed this function of opening up to other realities which books also do – but only academically. The planet is all we have physically and it should be walked and 'possessed' without any sense of possessing it. Sharing knowledge often polishes your thoughts. Listening is far superior to monologues!

If one alerts and sensitizes the senses, then spirituality becomes universally omnipresent. Its not just the wind in the bamboos that makes flutes, it's the nostrils that have to be systematically pierced. Then you need trained fingertips to make up the sound. And for poets – there's the flute in the human voice and in the train from a tunnel too! If you look with new eyes, there's art in the skies – both installing and deconstructing itself over skyscrapers as well as the fields. And who hasn't noticed the dance of the waves or the toe of the quarter moon on the silhouette of a city skyline. A constant poetry of the senses is spirituality. If one cares to read only negativism in everything – it's not difficult to sulk into a diabolic darkness.

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

Why do You do Your work so badly? What is this business of orphans and widows... He should be sacked.

In Hinduism we reason very well. We forgive. But I do believe that if there were a God, He would have done things better.

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

To be a human again. Creative, socially more useful maybe.

There could be reincarnation. It is a comforting thought. I don't believe in it but it is better to pretend I do.

What is your idea of happiness?

I think it is to be in love with the changing seasons, and not hopelessly in love with spring. Because everything that has a power to make you happy holds the power to make you as unhappy. If your children give you much joy, they have that much power to make you miserable. Because you give them that power. You can't be in love with one idea, one thing, one man, one woman. You have to be in love with everything that you meet.