

Ruskin Bond

Author

'I can live with myself'

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Ruskin Bond has written over 100 short stories, essays, novels and more than 30 books for children. He received the Padma Shri in 1999 and the Sahitya Akademi award in 1992.

What does spirituality mean to you?

All my life I have had to struggle to make a living, trying to use whatever my talents are in order to make ends meet, looking at the practical aspects of writing and selling my work. I may not have done it very successfully but at least I survived. So there wasn't so much time to go too deeply into philosophical questions or religion, it was more about survival than spirituality.

Yet, I always had a place for introspection and contemplation, especially within nature. So I would equate spirituality with solitude in the mountains, or in a forest, or by some mountain stream. I am then one with my surroundings, communing with the elements. And if feeling that strong affinity with nature can be called spiritual, then I am so.

Do you believe you are guided and protected by a superior force?

I am very human, so of course when I am in trouble, I call for God's help. That simply is human nature. Sometimes I get some help, sometimes I don't. It depends on the mood He is in. But I do not hold grudges against Him. First of all I would need to fully believe in Him, which is not the case. I am just not sure about it. But it would be nice to think that life does not stop here and that there is more to it, that there is something beyond.

Besides, I have had instances of feeling an inspiring force at crucial moments of my life. And I could put it down to a greater force. It always happened in nature. For instance when things would not go well, and I was on the brink of abandoning my career as a writer, ready to take some dull and mundane job. Then something would happen, would be triggered in me, like a burst and renewal of creative energy, a turning point, and I would decide to write more stories – never mind if no one would read them.

One more thing: my father died in 1944 when I was ten years old and sometimes I feel he might be around protecting me, looking after me. But I do not want him to look after me all the time, because you see, I want to make a good impression...

Do you believe you have a special mission or purpose in this life?

Well, from very early on I was a book lover and felt I would need to spend my life with books, whether as a writer or anything else. My father encouraged me to read and write before school. By the time I was twelve I was reading and writing a lot. I wanted to emulate my favourite writers and heroes. Dickens' David Copperfield for instance became a writer but fled home before then. So one day I ran away as well, but as I was short of money, I came back the next day demanding lunch! In school, I was put in charge of the library which was so wonderful because I could escape everything and spend my time in all those worlds.

What is spirituality for you in your day to day life?

Introspection and contemplation, particularly in nature are part of my daily life. I love walking up the hills and sitting under a tree -- until a chestnut falls on my head! There is always an impractical side to contemplation... Last summer I spent time relaxing on the grass, only to come back home and find insects in my clothes. Also, nature is very impersonal. I might like a tree or the grass but I cannot expect things in return that are specifically meant for me. One of my regrets though is that I never had enough space for a garden. It may be just as well because I would have spent my time gardening instead of writing, which is more fun. Though writing is a form of gardening...

What is the role of spirituality in your life as a writer?

I have always had a rather optimistic outlook, in the sense that many of my stories end on an uplifting note. So I have what you may call an innate spiritual belief in the essential decency and goodness of people.

I mostly write about people I like though, often from the weaker sections of society, the disadvantaged, on the margins, or the eccentric, the comical. The human comedy is at the bottom of my work. And if I do not like a character, I can always have a mean-eating tiger take care of him.

Nature of course also plays a central role in my writing, especially since I have come back to live in the mountains.

And at times I do feel some guiding force in writing, as if coming from somewhere else. Kipling wrote that occasionally "a demon would come to him" and he would get carried away writing in a powerful streak. Others call it a muse, like a spirit visiting as one writes. It can happen.

There is also the role of the supernatural in my writing. I grew up reading a lot of books on spirits and the supernatural. And when I run out of people, I write about ghosts. To me, they are just people living on another dimension. So one can write about human nature while writing about ghosts.

I have not really seen any, but at times at night, when my blanket falls aside, I feel a woman spirit pulling the blanket back on me. I cannot see anyone if I switch on the light but I feel that gentle care. I also used to have a second hand chair that would rock and creak on its own at night. I later discovered that an old Maharani had died sitting in it. So I guess she would sometimes feel like visiting it again. Ghosts to me are people from the past whose presence is still manifest.

Can you tell us about a unique experience that changed or shaped your spiritual beliefs?

Just as I completed high school in Shimla, I went to Jersey, on the English Channel, to live with relatives who had moved to the island. I felt very lonely there. Somehow I knew I had to become a writer but I was not getting any encouragement. I went one day for a walk on the seafront. And there I had a sudden and powerful moment of inspiration. I felt I would become a writer and nothing else. No one would be able to stop me. From that moment on, I felt directed in becoming so. It all flowed in that direction and despite the many moments of doubt, of financial hardship, there was always something keeping me from abandoning the path of writing.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

There was very little religion in my childhood. I went once to church with my mother and we were turned away because she was not wearing a hat. We went and had lunch somewhere else instead. That was the end of it. My father was more contemplative. He kept a Bible and a prayer book but he was not church going. At school we had to listen to sermons by the principal but the main objective was not to fall asleep. There was no inspiration in it. Instead, it came over time from people I encountered and observed, and of course from nature.

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

As a human, I would like to be me, but with a few improvements! Like being a better lover, or a better football player. Otherwise, I would be a migratory bird, traveling the world with an intelligent and observing mind—not only caring about food—so I could really appreciate it. In fact, I have often dreamt I could fly, just opening the window, gliding over the mountains and valleys—and later on coming back and returning to bed.

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

Why did You snatch my father away before he could complete his stamp collection?

What is your idea of happiness?

I would say it is about the ability to follow my vocation, to do what I'd wish to do in life and make a living out of it. And I have been quite fortunate in that respect. Also, I am relatively at peace with myself because I know my shortcomings and weaknesses. I can live with myself.