

Anousheh Ansari

Entrepreneur

'I would want to come back as an advanced being'

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Anousheh Ansari, an Iranian-American technology serial entrepreneur who became an inspiration for millions around the world in 2006, when she became the first female private cosmonaut. She also sponsored the \$10million space X-Prize for the first non-government organization to launch a reusable manned spacecraft.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is the sense of relating and belonging to something greater than the individual, a sense of connectedness to something larger, deep-seated inside of me.

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

There is definitely some guidance, though I would not call it divine. The moment you involve the concept of God, it gives permission to people not to take responsibility for their actions. And I am convinced we are all completely responsible for our actions. Opportunities are out there to do the right or the wrong thing and we make our choices.

But there definitely is some sort of help.

I feel it is like a source of energy that we can tap into, and use to get where we want to get.

And the more we go onto that path, the more we can receive that energy and go further. You then realize things you thought you could have never accomplished. You gain confidence from it and get one step further the next time. Had someone interviewed me ten years ago, there is no way I would have ever fathomed I would have done what I did and be where I am. But as I look at what I accomplished, it feels good and gives me energy to do more.

Many times I do things and then wonder "why did I do that?" Some strong feelings and intuitions prompted me to do so, like a voice guiding me.

And if you really want something, the universe conspires to make it happen. We are all connected to that energy, and have it inside of us as well. So if we go after something, it reflects onto others and thus becomes greater than one person wanting something. And that is why it can happen in the end.

I still have a lot of questions though in my head about many things. And my understanding of things evolves as I grow and experience them.

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

I constantly think I have found it – and then discover something else, beyond it. It is like peeling an onion: you always discover another layer, another level of complexity. So I am still peeling! But on the other hand, I hope to peel all my life, because otherwise why live? Constantly challenging myself and learning something new, making something out of life is to me the purpose.

When I was a child, I thought I would become a scientist and invent something really meaningful for people. As I grew up, I became an engineer and ended up creating a number of companies with my husband and other relatives. The one we created two years ago for instance is part of something larger that we wish to do: provide certain basic communication capabilities for everyone.

And there is of course what happened after my journey into space. It became something much larger than just realizing my dream in the way it inspired so many people. I keep hearing of people explaining how it prompted them to do x or y, to accomplish a most precious dream of theirs. I get goose-bumps when I hear such things. Just the other day for instance, I read about an MIT student who was doing some genomics work which was then to be used by a number of other researchers. He named his work the Ansari program, because he had been inspired by what I did. So obviously this flight and everything that is to come thereafter are part of a larger purpose.

Today, among others, I see my purpose as connecting young people all over the world, and help them to see it for what it is. Only then we could establish a better basis and playground for a more peaceful world. My vision for humanity is a future when we all call ourselves citizens of the earth versus anything else. And the only way it can be accomplished is to work with younger generations, because everyone else is beyond hope. And I want to help them see the world with that vision, from the beginning. That is my ultimate dream. And I will do everything I can in my lifetime to get at least one step closer to that.

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

It is a source of energy. I do not reserve specific moments to connect with it, but it is like a backend process permanently running. It is an energy I tap into when facing a challenges or difficulties. I take a moment to breathe and reconnect with it.

What is the role of spirituality in your work?

First of all, I try to act towards other people the way I would want them to act towards me, with absolute respect and honesty.

There is then the larger purpose of my various activities. The X-Prize for instance: we got involved in it because I knew there are millions of people wishing to go into space like me but could not afford the many millions of dollars it entails. With the X-Prize Foundation, we hoped to create competition and got a lot of people thinking how to make it affordable. We were able to accomplish that task and demonstrate it is possible to bring the cost of flying down to a few hundreds of thousands of dollars, and in a few years, it will be down to tens of thousands.

But the purpose of all this goes well beyond "space tourism". The underlying objective it to truly make our lives on earth entirely integrated with the entire universe. People forget that our planet is so insignificant compared to the entire universe and sometimes we become so arrogant. We think we are the only beings in this entire, huge universe and that everything revolves around us. Instead, we should take some distance and think why would such a big universe exist and it would be just about us? It is not only about us, we are a tiny part of something much bigger.

Besides, when you see this, and connect with this reality, you also feel better, since you feel connected to something much bigger than what you can see with your eyes. I find that exciting, fascinating, exhilarating. So accessing space based solar energy, or resources on other planets, asteroids and so on – there are so many ways of doing it and I try to promote a lot of those activities.

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

Going into space was definitely a turning point.

The first time I saw earth, it was as if someone was grabbing and squeezing my heart. I thought "oh my god, this is earth! This is what everyone thinks is the whole world!"

At the same time I felt how special it is. I could almost sense the energy emanating from it, as if it was radiating. And you can see it more from up there.

When boarding, I thought it would simply be the accomplishment of a childhood dream. Yet, instead of a simple journey into space, it turned out to be a journey into the depths of my soul.

My family had insisted I keep a blog and so I wrote every day. But rather than a few friends and relatives reading it, millions of people turned out to be avid readers and I kept receiving the most amazing and touching feedback. As a cousin summarized it, many people felt I had "given them permission to dream again". The fact that I accomplished such a crazy childhood dream showed them they could do the same. And of course who am I to authorize anyone to dream? But my example inspired them.

So after this experience, I could never be the same.

Before the flight, for years, my husband kept challenging my desire to go into space, to make sure it was not just a fantasy. And I could always find logical answers, but in reality, it boiled down to an extremely strong conviction inside that I should go into space, otherwise I would feel very incomplete – and also, that I will go into space, no matter how crazy it used to sound.

So once I saw people's feedback, once I saw that this experience had connected so many people in ways I would have never ever fathomed, and how much meaning it had for them, I was sent back to myself. I had to ask myself why I so badly wanted to go into space in the first place, what is the deeper meaning and purpose of my life, what it is that I can and should accomplish.

It is a privilege to be in a position that people want to listen to what you have to say. And I should not waste this platform. It is an incredible power actually and one has to choose very carefully how to use it. So I constantly search for the reasons I have been granted that power and how to use it best. That is why I am calling this experience a journey back to my soul.

What are your spiritual inspirations?

I was born in Iran, to a Muslim family. My mother's side was fairly religious and we went through religious teaching in school like all children. But it was not concentrated teaching and it mostly felt like words, without much meaning.

Yet, questions about the origin and meaning of life kept popping in my mind, from my youngest years. And that is partly how my interest in space developed. I always looked to space for answers. I felt they were out there and not in books. Some people look at it and become atheist. For me, it has actually been a source of belief, increasingly stronger as I would learn about the origins of the universe, its expansion and so on. I feel that the singularity that started it all is by definition in us all, we are part of it, and that is what creation is all about.

I must say that Gandhi's quote "be the change you want to see in the world" has also been a tremendous inspiration in my life. It has been glued on my mirror for years and every morning I see it. So many people keep complaining about issues in the world but do not lift a finger to do anything about it. On the other hand, was everyone to take care of at least one person – themselves – what change would that be! So I really love that quote and how it sends us back to ourselves. I even wore it on my spacesuit's patch when I went into space.

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

What was the true beginning, the first moment of existence, when it went from nothingness to being? And will there be a moment of going back from being to nothingness again?

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

I guess I would want to come back as an advanced being, an alien, someone who has progressed through multiple stages of life and evolved to become a much more intelligent being.

As a child, I used to watch a lot of Star Trek. They had those aliens who could communicate telepathically without the need for words, and could travel the universe at the speed of thought. That is how I would want to come back and I could then explore the entire universe!

What is your idea of happiness?

I am truly happy right now. The core sources of happiness are there: I am healthy, I have a great family and a wonderful husband. Beyond that, if I feel I have truly found my purpose in life, if I can understand and accomplish it – that would also bring me happiness.