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'If you can't discover a purpose, you just make it up for yourself'

Sun Feb 15 2009



Mohammed Hanif is the author of A Case of Exploding Mangoes.

What does spirituality mean to you?

The meaning has changed very recently, actually just a few weeks ago. I used to associate it with words like unorthodoxy, something which would never be part of the establishment, always challenging the order whatever it is, whether good or bad.

Then I read a phrase in a novel about Arabic poetry, explaining that spirituality is nothing but heavy breathing. And today I see it as the desire to create, whether a joke, or a chair, or a book. Anything.

How does it manifest in your day to day life?

It doesn't. It doesn't figure in my day to day life. More mundane things usually clog my life so there generally is no room for spirituality. Therefore there is not much room for creativity, and it is a daily battle. Most days I avoid that battle. I always think that tomorrow I will fight this fight. I keep delaying, procrastinating. I am very good at that.

Spirituality was never connected to a religious or metaphysical quest?

I used to read and listen to a lot of Sufi poetry and Sufi rituals, as they are practiced in Pakistan, in Punjab and Sindh mostly. I picked up from it some lessons about life which have stayed with me. There is a Sindhi poet by the name of Sachal Sarmast, who said "what is, is", which sounds really banal when translated, but it is strong for me. He is talking about himself. There is also a brilliant episode in Shah Hussain's poetry: he was being taught at some madrasa, where he came across this line in one of the religious texts: "life is a game". He threw the book down the well and started saying "life is not a game, game is life" – game, in the sense of playing. All this informed my way of seeing life.

In that play, is there room for a divine force?

Those Sufi poets always had an intimate relationship with the divine, and always tried to find the divine in themselves, and in their beloved, whether that was a human being or an abstract divine force called God.

What about in your own life, is there a guiding or protective force?

I wish there was. But no, there isn't...

Did you always feel that way?

I grew up in Okara, about 80km outside of Lahore, in a small, oppressed, fairly religious village of farmers, where nobody ever went to college. Education was for the sissies.

Growing up, my father wanted me to learn the Koran by heart. And I became quite a religious zealot. One day, one of the teachers decided to test me. He gave me a big bowl of milk to drink. I used to hate milk, so I only finished half of it. He said "he'll never finish doing what he is doing". And it seemed indeed like a prophecy!

So later on, I went on another path, as a part of my family was into Sufism. I went from shrine to shrine, hanging out with those people.

What triggered the change?

It was too literal, too dull of a teaching. And you could not question anything. So in fact, I wasn't zealous enough. And I was always distracted by things that teenagers get distracted by.

Basically, it was one of those things when you know that life is more complex than adult people are trying to make it sound like. They are not telling you the whole truth, and even scarier, they don't know the whole truth. So you have to find it for yourself. You may very well not find it either. But you have to do it for yourself.

In my late twenties I also went a lot to shrines, because I would feel connected there, I had this sense of belonging with all those hanging out around them. Then I began wondering if what I enjoyed was really about spirituality, or more about the music, or all the dope that people smoke in shrines.

Besides, as time went by, I moved to London, got a family, and responsibilities, so I could not do any of it anymore. Today, I'd rather not go back to shrines, as I am afraid it won't be as nice as I remember it.

Is there such a thing as a purpose, a general reason to be here?

If there is, nobody told me. I have tried to figure it out and have not managed. So I made it up for myself – it is about making up stories and jokes. I don't think that's why I was sent here. But if you are not lucky enough to discover a purpose, then you just make it up for yourself.

And really, writing is for me a form of spiritual quest. Of course it's mostly work. You struggle and don't know where you are going. But once every few months, there is one sentence, which you know was given to you. You don't know from where. But you feel you have slightly risen above yourself. That does not happen very often. If you sit long enough, it might happen. But again, I don't sit long enough...

Writing is a desire or a need?

It is a desire. Though "the case of exploding mangos" actually was an urge. And you can call it spiritual if you will. When I start writing, I have an image but I have no idea what is going to happen next. It reveals itself to me, it unfolds. It is a way of amusing myself, it is the play I mentioned. Playing with thoughts, words, and you don't know what will come. You just know when you're done, when you cannot write anymore.

At times of challenge and difficulty, where do you find the energy, the anchor?

In my son. It is quite basic. Before that, I used to find it in drugs and sex I suppose, and poetry, music. Now it is my son.

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

Why are You doing this?

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

As my son I suppose, because I think he is much happier than I ever was at that age.

So what is your idea of happiness?

It is playing table tennis with someone who is as good as I am, and beat him by one point.