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'Things happen because you need to learn from them'

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Rupika Chawla is a writer and art conservationist

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is a very difficult question. It is so difficult to define such a word. And ultimately whatever it is, spirituality is something very private. Perhaps it is not possible to talk about it, because the most unexpected and beautiful things in our lives are private.

I actually wouldn't know what is the difference between spirituality and how one handles life, how one handles challenges, how one handles relationships. I guess it is about the way you deal with all that comes your way. And perhaps one of the most important things is to find balance. There isn't ever a thing like perfection, but there is something like balance. To me, it all comes to that - challenges, relationships, what you feel when you wake up and when you go to sleep at night. It is how you are with yourself, with people, with the world. And then life has its own ways of sending you tests, challenges. You can see the contrast between what you are not and what this situation says you should be.

One more thing I would add about spirituality: it is not religion. It is much beyond. It doesn't mean I am not fascinated by religions, emotionally and intellectually. It dominates practically every human being, it is one of the very essential springboards of life. But somewhere you leave religion behind and go into spirituality. Spirituality talks about a certain oneness and universality.

Is it possible to ever achieve balance?

It is, and there are situations when you do. Somehow, it is about a capability to not be heavy, to move along with whatever happens. The good and the unpleasant can happen. But to be able not to let it pull you down...

When challenges and storms come, how do you keep your balance, where is your anchor?

It is about your attitude towards life. I do not believe in coincidences. Certain things just have to be and have to happen because you need to learn from them. And it is so in every life. I definitely believe in rebirth.

Is there a specific purpose to every birth?

Absolutely. And each one of us comes with specific capabilities in order to achieve it. Those are not random. The sum total of what you have is not an accident. It's a put together of all that you have been in other lives. That is what you have come with. That is your starting point. The rest is how you deal and how you cope with each day.

Talking about your tools, how did you find out what you should do about them?

Over the years, certain things attracted me and certain people told me "of course you can!" and then you allow yourself to do it. You do need people who would say "hey look at this! You can do it! Do it!" There are such people thrown in your way. Always actually. What you accept of it is up to you. Freewill and choice are always there. It's not at all preordained. You come with certain tools but then how you use them is a different question and that is where choice and freewill come in. You might be born destined to climb a mountain, but damn it you have to climb that mountain otherwise nothing will happen!

My time in Pondicherry for instance was very meaningful in that way. There, I met a lovely older woman who encouraged me to paint and told me "you just need eyes". So for that time I painted. I have not painted since then, but it gave me a certain perception, a certain wisdom. Pondicherry is also where I finally started what I had been dreaming of for years, and years – becoming a student of Bharatnatyam. And I never stopped. I still dance. In it, you also get a certain element of spirituality if I may call it so. When you dance Krishna or Shiva for instance, you are emoting the attributes of those gods and you are in it, it feels so beautiful. It is a passion that never went away. In the journey towards balance, dance actually became one of the important components.

You have to do things that make you happy and give you pleasure. I am lucky that I can do those things.

And I think it is also important to be grateful for it.

Grateful to whom?

I say thank you to God. With no face or name, just as an energy. You talk, you chat, you say thank you.

Art - was it a passion from childhood?

It was something that developed slowly. You slowly find that you are going in a certain direction, that you have an attraction for certain things. And the simple test is when doing certain things makes you feel energized, and happy.

Are there moments though when you revolt against that force, when it absolutely doesn't make sense?

I don't revolt. I generally feel it's a test and I have to deal with it. It's tiring, but I need to climb ten more steps. And somehow the energy comes.

Many artists feel they are a conduit for something beyond them – do you feel so at times?

Yes, absolutely. When I write. Because the work of restoration is more about a technique, a strategy. In writing sometimes you just don't know you would be writing something and it comes. For example when writing a biography such as Ravi Varma's: you know about certain facts and events in his life, but something else in you needs to be communicating with him to understand how he would have felt and been through them. Would he have done this, would he have done that? There is something else at work in you in those moments. A different kind of force takes over.

What was your experience like with Mother Theresa?

She had a very loving presence. And of course, there was both the physical person and the larger than life figure. She was functioning at a very simple level, with all her wrinkles and a most wonderful sense of humor, she had very childlike qualities. At the same time she had the strength to carry her vision.

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

Why did You make the world? Were You getting lonely and bored? Were You looking for a balance to Yourself?

As you believe there is such a thing as rebirth, what would you choose for the next one?

I wouldn't be able to choose in my conscious state here. It would be on another dimension. And I don't know if we are given the choice.

What is your idea of happiness?

Balance. It comes into so many things – when you do things you love, when you are with people you want to be with, when you are stimulated by being in the rhythm that is you, dancing that rhythm. It's wonderful! To be able to do that... That is actually the search.