

Praful Patel

Civil Aviation Minister

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Praful Patel, Civil Aviation Minister.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is something deep in my subconscious that helps me believe in myself, and also to think about life in a positive way, beyond selfish interests.

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

I do believe there is a bit of a shield around me. As years have gone by, some things have taken place that I would have deemed impossible, reinforcing that feeling. At times of challenge, first I have to be confident and not show any sign of being scared to the outside world. Then there is that extra thing that makes me believe that there may indeed be a God, some force above guiding me.

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

I believe very strongly that life cannot be wasted and everybody in this world is here to do some job; there has to be a purpose to life. If you cannot make a difference first to yourself and then to others, why be here? Of course there are billions of people on earth and not everybody can make a substantial difference, but I guess some people are given that special opportunity and they'd better make good use of it. When I was a kid I had all sorts of ambitions but how would I know how to go

about it? That is where the belief in some kind of superpower comes into play and gives you the strength that you need.

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

It is first and foremost about an attitude, about being positive. I could wake up in the morning and dwell on all the problems, finding faults and worries everywhere; or I could try and get things done, get things moving. I try to do the latter. So it is not about sitting somewhere in the mountains meditating. Actually, I cannot be on my own. I need to do something all the time, especially as I feel there is this strong momentum to do something I really believe in.

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

It is about trying to make some positive difference, in whatever way works for you. In politics so many nice words are said all the time and, of course, most people do not believe in them. But in a country of more than a billion people, with 75 people sitting in the top seats of the government in Delhi, if you are given the opportunity to be part of them, you'd better use it; consider yourself very lucky and try to make a difference. Some people say that I push things hard because I have a personal agenda. But the reality is that in government if you do not push things hard, nothing moves.

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

My father's death. That day registered with me more strongly than any other event in my life. I remember when we took the body from Mumbai to his hometown. There was a sea of people crying. And why would people do it if that person had not made a difference to their lives? And that is ultimately what counts in life. So on the one hand that kind of event definitely shakes you up and makes you question the existence of a supreme protecting force; but on the other it made me realize what really matters.

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

I am not sure I believe in reincarnation. But if I come back, I would have to make a meaningful difference, no matter how. Otherwise, to just be one of the six and half billion people—why bother?

What is your idea of happiness?

I have been a happier person in the last 10 years because I made a conscious decision to be more positive. It does not come naturally. You have to work at it. Unhappiness comes from doing unpleasant things, like constantly scheming and plotting to fix the other guys. Instead, I have been trying to focus on my own stuff and get less distracted by my detractors. All the time people try to fix you and make you unhappy, especially as your involvement in the world grows. When I am in government for instance, there are necessarily more detractors. It is about ignoring them as much as possible, being strong to fight them if needed and remaining focused. So of course there are low moments, but on the whole, I have been positive.

The writer is a French traveller who has worked in international relations, classical music, journalism and psychology. But it is her particular interest in spiritual matters that has led her to devise this version of The Proust Questionnaire: "It helps us to see people who they really are inside."