

Deepak Bagla

Director with 3i

'Those 40 hours were the most intense learning process'

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Deepak Bagla is a director with 3i, an international private equity firm. He spent 40 hours at the Oberoi after barely escaping the terrorists at the hotel's restaurant. He was freed around 2.30am on November 28.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I actually never thought of it, so this will be just off my mind... But I can say it is about something that suits the soul. And if I look at my daily routine, when I have had a good day's work, and I am reading a bedtime story to my two boys as I put them to bed, it is the highest level of spiritual satisfaction.

So spirituality that way is about a deep satisfaction that brings me peace and comfort, the sense that it has been a good day, well spent. If I look at my life, I guess I would also say it has mostly been well spent, but above all, it has been full of luck, like what happened to me at the Oberoi the week before.

Indeed, was it about luck, was there guidance and protection in that ordeal?

Absolutely. Without any doubt, I feel there was a guiding and protective force at play at every single stage. At every moment, I felt as if I knew exactly what to do and how to do it. It was a very clinical

process. It was not about panicking or thinking too much. That force simply somehow took care of me and guided everything in ways I could have never fathomed myself.

I was in Bombay for business and staying at the Oberoi. I usually eat at Tiffen but that evening, my colleague and I decided to leave the coffee shop and dine at Kandahar instead. Had we stayed, we would have not survived, like everyone else at Tiffen.

We booked a seaside table, which is always the one I have there. But just that night, they did not give us what was booked – I was upset by it, it was the first time it ever happened – and instead we were placed at the only available table, next to the kitchen door. Once we requested the bill, it took an unusually long time to come. Had it come as promptly as it usually does, we would have been in the corridor when the terrorists came. Instead, when the terrorists reached the place, we were still in the back. They first threw a grenade inside the atrium, and the whole place shook. They then started walking in the restaurant, spraying bullets, which first hit everybody by the seaside tables. None of those people made it alive.

Since we were next to the kitchen, we had a chance to rush out, and somehow we found the fire escape. There, in a split second, we had to decide: proceed up or down the stairs. Had we chosen to run downstairs, we would have actually met some terrorists, as we later understood. Instead, we ran back to my room on the 12th floor.

Then it was forty hours of agony. There were forty seven odd blasts, continuous gunshot firing, often right next to our room, fires in the hotel. It was a roller-coaster until Friday night at 2:30am, when we finally received a call from downstairs that the NSG was about to come and evacuate us. When they knocked at the door and introduced themselves by name, it was the final set of relief.

What was going on through your mind all along?

First of all, I felt responsible for my colleague, who was a foreigner.

Second, all I could do was to think extremely clinically to get the whole thing going. My mind was completely engrossed in trying to guess what those guys were planning, and what I could do to thwart it, or minimize its impact on the two of us. It included barricading the door in the strongest possible way, getting the towels wet, filling the tub with water, tying the sheets into a rope if we had to step out through the window, create a bunker for ourselves with the bed in case of a blast and so on. We barely slept and for forty hours I almost never felt the urge to eat. My mind was constantly thinking of what to do next.

Then there was that moment on Thursday evening when the second fire broke and I really thought it may be the end. Only then for a brief moment the fear and concern about those I would leave behind entered my mind. And again, my reaction was mostly about practical matters – sending a message to my wife about a file on my computer where she would get details about what to do in case I die, regretting not to have better prepared my family about those practical details.

But that's all. No flashbacks, no regrets about things I should have done and hadn't done, no desire to call someone and reiterate my love and so on. None of those kinds of thoughts crossed my mind. The only two times I felt a spot of emotion was when I called my mother, and then my father, telling them not to worry. Those brief five or ten seconds' conversations were the only moments I cracked a bit emotionally.

Apart from that, what really kept me going and alive, were the incessant messages from friends and families. I got more than seven hundred and eighty sms. So I was constantly distracted by them, I got updated about what was going on outside. And that way, I almost never felt I would not make it.

Will that experience be a turning point in your life?

It has actually completely redefined my life. I have tasted a sense of finality, not once, but multiple times, in a very short period of time. Those forty hours were the most intense learning process I have ever gone through and any individual could go through. If not for the collateral damage, I would strongly recommend it to everyone. Because the more you go through it, the more you realize a few crucial things.

First of all, I understood that the sense of being in control of our lives, the feeling that through our efforts and through the people we know we can control situations, things, people etc. — all of that is a complete fallacy, a complete and utter illusion. In those moments, nobody can do anything for you. Every individual I knew, even some I had not seen for thirty years tried everything they could to get me out of there. But frankly, it was about God and me, no one else.

Second, I realized how many people in the world deeply care for me. And how many people I never met were ready to stake their lives to save me — such as the five NSG commandos who came and picked us up in our room. I actually felt guilty to live in comfort during those forty hours — after all, we had a bed to lie on, some water to drink, biscuits to eat, whereas those guys out there were putting their lives in danger with nothing to eat, only to protect the life of individuals they never met. That kind of thing completely changes your life, and redefines the motivating factors of your life.

Has your sense of purpose in life therefore changed?

Definitely. As bankers we mostly think of our bonus at the end of the year and suddenly you realize how ridiculous and shallow it all is. I understood that there are so many more meaningful things in life, and how selfish I had been all along. It finally dawned on me that so many things I had been chasing and spending time on was completely futile. I had never sat down and designed my life; I had just flowed with whatever had come. I had never thought before in terms of purpose, or mission.

So it took me to go through that experience to realize that I wanted to give back, and do something for the people who saved me. I do not think that I was saved just by the law of probabilities, I do feel there was some force at play. But then it did not save others. So I must feel all the more blessed, and think that I may have been saved for a reason, that there must be another meaning to life than what I had been doing until now. And it has to do with giving back to society. How will I do it? It will take a bit of time to find all the answers to that question, but I know it will be the most important factor governing my mind and life from now on.

Do you feel anger about what happened?

Absolutely not. Not a drop of it. Neither against the perpetrators, nor against those who could have stopped it and didn't. I am surprised myself at this complete lack of anger. The only feeling I have is how can I help.

Then, how do you explain the anger of those who have not gone through this experience themselves?

It is driven out of helplessness. They were witnessing the whole attack second by second on their televisions and could not do anything, whereas I was inside, constantly doing something to help myself.

Do you think this anger will die down or be transformed into positive change?

I do not think it will die down, and I hope it will be transformed into something positive. I actually feel our society is at a tipping point. The financial crisis has also been a form of catharsis and this is adding to it.

We have had a financial system that worked well for a hundred years but the world has changed, and the underlying system has not adapted. So like for any transformation, you have to go through pain before you get a new system, and this is what the financial crisis is, the end of the old, and the beginning of the new.

Similarly, a number of anxieties and angers are being expressed in different forms – whether through terrorism or through the shock at those acts of terror. Both are the expression of some passion. And any passion is triggered by some reason; there is a reason for terrorism, even though it may be wrong or incorrectly imbibed. So I think it all is a painful transition process, a catharsis towards a new equilibrium.

How will that equilibrium take place?

Life, nature, all forces always yearn for balance, so somehow it will happen. It will not be imposed or enforced from outside or from the top. It has to be strongly felt and come from within all of us. When that realization genuinely occurs, there will be complete transformation.

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

What is the purpose of my existence?