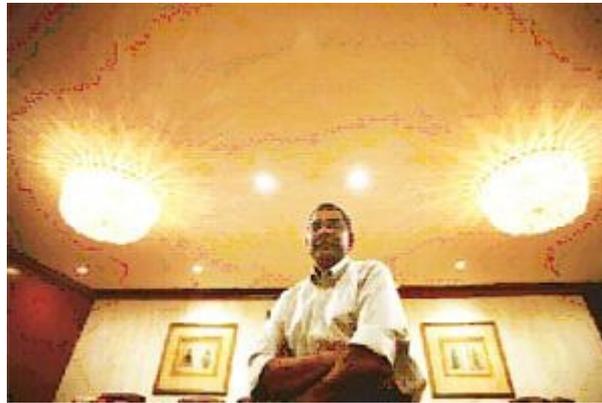


David Davidar

“Writing can take you to places”

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David Davidar is a firm believer in the fact that we are responsible for our actions. He says that one should pick themselves and move on, without putting the blame for any of their misfortunes on some other force.

What does the word spirituality mean to you?

I would classify myself as an agnostic, and for someone like me, spirituality is what lies beyond my sense of perception. There is some kind of power. I don't know it yet, and I'd like to know what it is. It could be God, or a God-like concept. I am very interested in the way religions approach it. But at this point I would simply say I have a sense there is a higher plane than the one we live on. And that is spirituality.

Why do you have that sense?

Because there are so many inexplicable things in life. Good or bad things happen, people behave in certain ways that go beyond cause and effect. Why? And then of course there are the big questions – what drives humans? Where do we come from? Where are we going? Why were we born? Is there a life after death?

A very prosaic answer would be that we are simply being recycled. And that is true. There is only a finite amount of matter in the world. Today some matter might be you, tomorrow it might be this table, or a rock. It's all recycled. That could be a scientific way to look at the world. But then, who set this in motion? Why does it work in this way?

Fundamentally, I believe none of us are really in control of our lives. We might strive to impose some order in all this because otherwise we would go crazy. And there is a semblance of control. But we actually are not in control. Things come out of nowhere and can knock us off balance. Why does it happen in this way? Since there is no rational explanation, there must be a higher plane on which those things take place.

Does it mean that things are preordained and there is such a thing as destiny?

I think that destiny was invented to explain something that is ultimately unknown. It is one of the ways to say that we are not in control of our lives.

How do you go about knowing more about that higher plane?

Mostly through reading. I don't go to gurus, to temples or to churches. I read a lot of philosophy and poetry, especially some with its origins in spirituality like Rilke's. And then the religious texts - I am Christian so I read the Bible, I have always been interested in Hinduism so I read the Vedas and the Gita, also I am interested in Buddhism and Islam and their texts. It is definitely something I am drawn to. I just wish I had more time for it all.

Did you have a religious upbringing?

My parents were religious and I grew up Christian, but they did not raise me in a way that made me a fundamentalist. Today, I do not have much time for formal religion. It is something very personal.

At times of major challenges, where is your anchor, where do you find your energy?

There is prayer since, as I said, I am not a non believer. Prayer works. No matter if it is Christian or Sikh or something else. But most importantly, I am a very firm believer in the fact that we are responsible for our actions. We have to pick ourselves up and go on. We cannot just put the blame on some other force. Especially if we believe something has happened unfairly, we may just sit and moan about how unfair life is. Or instead, we could say 'yes, things happen, now time to move on'. I have always been like that actually. When good things happen I don't get that high, when bad things happen I also move on. Is that kind of balance spirituality? Maybe.

Many traditions and philosophies say that crises are an opportunity, a teaching to actually get us closer to who we are truly meant to be. Do you feel that way?

I think it is a great idea. Yes, crises definitely reorient you. When things go well, why would you spend much time thinking about anything? You are just having a good time. But when things go badly you have time to reflect. It is so unproductive to just spend that time in bitterness, or anger, or 'why me - I am such a good person!' and 'poor me' thoughts. It doesn't work for me. There have been many highs in my life, and a number of lows - the lowest one being losing my parents. At times things have come out of nowhere. But ultimately the only person responsible for yourself is you.

Many schools of thought also insist on the fact that ultimately what matters in life is to find its meaning. Would you agree?

I would say that all of us look for fulfillment. Fulfillment goes way beyond things like achievement, love, sex, etc. If for instance I write a book which is exactly the kind of book I want to write, or if I publish a book which is exactly the kind of book I want to publish, then I am fulfilled.

I have been quite fortunate in the way I have led my life. I never had to worry too much about the kind of things most people worry about - will I get a promotion, will I find a

good job or a girlfriend etc. The unfortunate thing about it is that I get bored very quickly. So as a consequence, much of my life has been an effort to avoid boredom. And to my great good fortune, I have found enormous fulfillment both in my personal and professional lives.

So for me life is all about the search for fulfillment.

What about publishing, how did it come in your life?

Accidentally. And that is the other thing – everything in my life has come by accident. I was bored with journalism in Bombay –

How did you get into journalism in the first place?

Well, I had studied botany as I wanted to be a tea planter like my dad. But he insisted that if a person has a brain, he should not become a planter. I had always been a reader. And I admired certain war correspondents so I wanted to become one. I joined a magazine in Bombay. But after a while, I got bored with it. A colleague had done a publishing course at Harvard and suggested I do the same. So I went there.

One day, the chairman of Penguin came as a keynote speaker. We talked. He mentioned they were planning to launch Penguin in India. He suggested I do it. I was 26 years' old. I had never worked in publishing in my life and suddenly I was given this opportunity. I came here, I went around, I met writers and asked them to write books for me, I made my mistakes. And then for the next 25 years of my life I was with that company.

What about the meaning of publishing – the idea of transforming or touching people thanks to those books?

For me, I just wanted to publish the greatest books on the planet. No book is perfect. No book is completely all there. There is no absolute measurement of what perfection would be for a book. There are degrees of perfection. I would say that especially when you work for a large company, about 10 or 15% of books are great. The rest you do because you need to generate income. So for me, the joy of being in publishing was to publish those 10 to 15%. And publishing close to perfection is a spiritual activity. That is actually what I hope to do with Aleph, the new company I am launching. And here it should be 100% of great books.

So publishing is one thing you never got bored by?

True. Maybe that is destiny, I was simply meant to do this.

What about writing – do you feel at times like a conduit, pages being written without you knowing exactly where they came from?

Absolutely. I feel it at times. It is the feeling every creative person is looking for and does not always find. Basically when you write, it is like priming the pump – you take your conscious efforts, your ideas about characters and plot to a certain degree. And then at some point, when you are deep into it, something else takes over and may take you to places you did not envisage before you started writing.

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

I would really want to know why people do what they do, what are people's motivations. I like to think of myself as someone very open, I carry my emotions and thoughts on my sleeve, which gets me at times into trouble. Then I get flabbergasted when others don't behave the same way. Why do people I thought were good do awful things? I would like to know that, because 'cause and effect' is not enough to explain it.

If there were such a thing as rebirth, what would you choose for the next round?

I wouldn't mind being myself again, but doing things a bit differently: I wouldn't be so trusting, I wouldn't be so foolish and I would hopefully have learnt from this life's experiences.

What is your idea of happiness?

Fulfillment. Whether it is your personal or professional life, it is all about fulfillment. Happiness is a very abstract thing, whereas fulfillment is tangible.