

Ben Verwaayen

Chief Executive

'You are born with certain cards'

Sun Dec 30 2007



Ben Verwaayen, Chief Executive, British Telecom.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It means a philosophy of being and a source of inspiration for my behaviour, my values, the way I conduct myself and inspire others. It is about the meaning of me for me and the meaning of me for others. It is something that I have been finding out throughout life and that has changed with the various experiences I have been through.

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

Luck is definitely a very important factor and I have always been lucky in life. But I would not talk about a guiding force. I take full responsibility for all that I do and if there is a God, it certainly is not a God that takes personal account on losers and winners. Because with all that happens in the world, it would mean God is so unfair and would go against the principle of goodness. That principle would for instance constantly be contradicted by history: so many people commanded the most atrocious behaviour and stayed for so long in power, whereas how many positive leadership positions lasted for as long? Dictators and other negative situations seem to happen over much longer lifecycles than the good ones, why is that so? Some people say that dark forces have more resistance thanks to the spread of fear, while good things inspire people, but do not necessarily create the capability to prolong. I am not sure about it.

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

I believe you are given the cards you are given and you have an obligation to make something out of it. In my case, I did not know what the specifics would be but I never doubted in any way that I would do the things I would want to do. Though I have to say, I had no reason whatsoever to believe so. I failed twice in school because I would rather play than study and was really a quite average guy there. But I had the attitude of going and doing it. I went on and started the first union ever created in an army because it was fun, it was not the ordinary and it was natural to me. I did not have to force myself. This brings me to the question of leadership. I do think there are natural born leaders. In my case, I think I can convince people to do things and inspire them to do better than they ever thought they could do, to get them beyond their comfort level of achievement. Besides, I function much more at the level of instincts and intuition than on an intellectual level. I can see within about five seconds of meeting someone what kind of person he or she is. Then, the art of understanding the other, the emphatic capability are very important. I learnt a lot from a previous boss who told me that when you get to that kind of position, and you have to see twenty people in a row, when number 19 comes in you have no patience. But for that person, it is the ONE meeting he is likely to have prepared for weeks and which will affect him for weeks to come. So you have to treat him well. Besides, though I do not deny I am the boss of the company and I cannot say I am a buddy-buddy, I still want interactivity and do not want to be seen as an institution. There is no such thing as being alone at the top unless you want to be alone. And I am convinced that great leaders gain not only by knowing their own selves but also by getting into the inner selves of others, by testing and getting feedback. So on the overall, there is a purpose to life if you give one to it and to me it is to learn, and learn with others.

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

It is completely integrated to my life. I do not need specific moments like rituals, meditation or mountain climbing for it. It is about reflecting and going through experiences that make me a more rounded person over time and therefore a more relaxed one. Indeed, the more you are able to view the total picture instead of a detail, the better you put things in perspective and the less agitated you are. Day-to-day spirituality also comes with a sense of relative importance: people give an enormous amount of importance to the here and now, but if you take a step back and ask what was not letting you sleep two or three weeks ago, you would hardly have an idea of what it was. There are only a handful of things that really matter and define you as a person, for instance your authenticity. Are you who you really are or are you trying to live what your business card tells you to be? And though I may not succeed 100% of the time, I absolutely refuse to do the latter.

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

Values are extraordinarily important to me. I just do not compromise on them. And that is called spirituality for me – the boundaries of where I am willing to go. It makes life quite comfortable and easier because there is such a certainty about what I would never do.

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

For me a pivotal moment was the birth of my grand-son. Grand-children give you a perspective on life that your own children would not, as if it added the prospect of next generations and showed you more your role in a continuum, in the longer term.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

Life is a mosaic and those inspirations are like a mosaic as well, shaped by the various experiences I have had over time. It is like when asked who my heroes are, "the Gandhis of the world" would usually be the politically correct thing to say. But I'd rather talk about the little people, those we would never think as extraordinary. Among them are several people who made the strongest impression on me by the way they handle themselves and inspired me more than many books on so-called great people. There was for instance this help we had in Holland, with a very disabled husband. She was always so positive and such a source of energy, so inspirational.

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

I would like to be a human being for sure. But I would not wish to do it all over again, as I already had that experience. Rather, I guess I could be a journalist or a philosopher. Indeed, I am a very curious person and I think that journalists have the ability to uncover things that are not apparent, to take the extra layer off in people. And sometimes that extra layer ought to be taken away, it helps the person see things in him or her that otherwise he or she would not necessarily see, it gives a different perspective and goes beyond a lot of things that are make-belief.

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

Why?

What is your idea of happiness?

I am extremely clear about that. Happiness is about the satisfaction and acceptance of where and who you are, along with the ability to share it. Things do nothing to me. I am not a collector of things. I am not particularly happy if I buy a new suit or a car. Instead, sharing a meal or an experience with someone special makes me happy, with a feeling of acceptance whether this person is high or low in the perception of the world. People with a grunge or a moan though are very bad company, for instance those who had some bad experience and are not able to get over it. That is not happiness. Rather, it is about sharing with people who have gone beyond hardship and can be positive.