

Dilip Mehta

Photojournalist and Film-Maker

'The only thing we are ordained for is death'

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Dilip Mehta is a photojournalist and a film-maker.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is an aspiration. It has been quite nebulous for me, something quite out of this world, and something that I know deep inside I would aspire towards.

What does it entail? No clue. Which is probably part of its charm. Spirituality represents the other side of the door. I like to put it that way, because I am always intrigued by closed doors, so I know that sooner or later in my life – I am now 57 – I would commit to opening that door.

Are you getting closer to that moment?

Yes, I am getting closer. Earlier I would have fully turned my back on it. Not anymore. I listen, I am more open to first hand experiences of people. I don't think I am the kind of person who would read on spirituality. I would rather sample that of the initiated. Because I really value human interaction. I enjoy it very much. And I guess I would be looking for a mentor.

You have met many so-called spiritual people, have some left more of an imprint?

Every person you meet in life leaves an imprint. But of course, I have met some major minds, quite spiritual people without being "officially" so. Unfortunately when you meet an established master, there are preconceptions, which are hard to waver. But I love divinely mad people.

What is madness?

A kind of freedom. As long as one doesn't harm anyone. It doesn't need to be extraordinary. But many times when we do something and wonder where it was coming from, I call this flow divine madness.

Has your life been about divine madness?

I am not coming from a place of arrogance when I say so. Rather it would mean that I think I am a little crazy. Not always doing things in an ordinary manner. For instance the way I have changed directions. I used to be a quite successful and established photojournalist. I could have stayed in that field forever. But I decided to switch to filmmaking. I think human beings are capable of more than one vocation in life. Other than a few technical similarities, those are very different professions. So I guess this is part of the craziness of my life.

Why photojournalism, why filmmaking?

Because of whatever I am and what I am capable of. If I had been as capable a writer as a photographer, I would have been a writer. But I have this intrinsic desire to share what I see. There is so much tragedy, travesty, despair, happiness in this world. I wanted to share it all. Had I wanted to succeed financially, I would have become a commercial photographer, because there is far more money in it than in editorial photography. But it was a clear choice – to speak through what I see.

When you look at your ability to do so, do you think we all have a specific purpose in life?

We all have a purpose in life. Most of us spend our lives beating the shit out of ourselves before even realizing we do have a purpose. Because of circumstances, because of conditioning, because of wanting to be accepted, we do something that doesn't make us happy. For me it's been pretty much the opposite. If there were some financial rewards, good, but basically it was up and down, sometimes I did great, sometimes I was a starving photographer, I went through the whole gamut. So what? It's not the end of the world. I have always enjoyed what I have done.

As a kid, what did you want to do when growing up?

There always was a creative side to me, in some shape or the other. I actually always wanted to be an architect. Even today. Shapes, forms, using space, creating space, all aspects of it fascinate me. Cause and effect are very important to me. I am impulsive and instinctive rather than intuitive. I have burnt myself so many times. But as long as you know you will get burnt and are ready for it to happen, it's fine. I am a very practical person. I am not a space cadet.

So there is no fear?

I am not a particularly fearful person. I don't go through life expecting to be burnt. But knowing that it is part of life is not what prevents me from taking all sorts of "mad" steps.

What about synchronicities and other so-called coincidences, do you believe in destiny, in a divine orchestration?

I don't quite believe in destiny. But remarkable odd things keep happening in my life. I believe the only thing we are ordained for is death. It's the only certainty in life. And so be it. But I am quite fascinated by what I don't know in life. Not knowing what tomorrow will be about is the driving force in my life. I am not a National Geographic explorer, simplicity can open so many realms. It doesn't have to be so amazingly thought provoking or earth shattering. It just could be the color of a leaf. It is the uncertainty of tomorrow that fascinates me. I know that for many people that uncertainty terrifies them. But I try to be more tolerant and judge others less.

Were you always also intolerant towards yourself?

Oh, very much so. I am trying now to be less harsh on myself. I am extremely hard to satisfy, and I am trying to back off a little, not dropping my standards, but realizing that if it does not happen, it is not the end of the world. I should not torture myself.

Isn't it amazing how we are our worst torturers?

Absolutely, other people cannot do you as much harm as you can, yourself. And if others do it, it is also because we allow it.

At times of very difficult challenges, where do you find the energy?

From within. I don't turn for sustenance or strength or motivation to anyone but myself.

What about being a conduit for a larger force when creating - many creative people mention this about their most powerful work?

Well, I haven't felt a guiding hand from some unknown power. I have not felt like a conduit. Because I still feel I haven't done my best. One reason I haven't done books, is that I feel I haven't reached that part of my creative life, which I could exhibit with a passion. I don't feel the hand of divinity or the power of magic at work through me. First of all because it is not the kind of work I do. I don't consider myself an artist. I simply record. I think I have a wonderful eye and a bunch of decent sensibilities. But I am not a personification of photojournalism or filmmaking. That still has to come. Though I would actually die if it were to come. It would be the end. What keeps me going is the search for that. I know that what I do is interesting, vivacious, alluring. But what keeps me going is the awareness that tomorrow can be better and that the best is yet to come.

The concept of God does not talk to you?

I am quite a-religious. Do I believe in some external power? The jury is still out on that one.

Why would it just not be a frank no?

Because there are always incidents taking place in one's life that make you think twice that perhaps the world as you know it is not the world as it is. So tomorrow, if there is some thunder and a deep voice it would be wonderful and I wouldn't deny it...

If at all, if there is God, I would imagine it as beings technologically and mentally superior. But someone to kneel down to – no!

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

I would not want to know my future. I would want to be a participant of the past. I would want to be present when Jesus walked the earth, when man walked his first step. I would have loved to view it first hand. The past intrigues me phenomenally. Because it helps us understand who we are today.

If there were such a thing as rebirth, what would you choose?

I don't believe in reincarnation. Can you imagine what spiritual traffic jam it would be up there if souls would go on?

I think sometimes that reincarnation is there to answer life's dissatisfactions, disappointments and shortcomings. Whereas I am actually pretty satisfied with who I am - not who Dilip Mehta is, but who I feel I am from within. I don't go through life putting myself down. And at the same time I don't ever want to be complacent. But doubt doesn't mean you constantly have to challenge your existence to the core.

I often consider myself to be a blotting paper in life. I love to sample the world as it is so rich in its offering. I would be naïve and foolish to segregate and only go and explore a bit.

The two things I enjoy most are seeing and hearing. People don't realize that they go hand in hand; one cannot go without the other. The absence of sound in photography is what took me to the next step, filmmaking. In the former, one had to imagine the sound.

What is your idea of happiness?

To be able to wake up in the morning with the belief that the day is going to be a fulfilling one - not necessarily about achieving, but imbibing something new, having some turn of event, which could be as simple as a tree shedding its leaves.

Happiness would also be the hope that we are going beyond the overwhelming suffering and misery of this country. So happiness involves the ability to give back. I am at this point in my life when I feel I have been given so much, and I must find all possible ways to give back.

What about contentment?

Contentment would be complacency. I cannot sit on laurels. I am too much of a nomad in my own fashion to just rest on laurels. I couldn't and wouldn't want to sit back and be content.