

Major H.P.S. Ahluwalia

Veteran

'On top of the world, it's not as great as you'd think'

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Major H.P.S. Ahluwalia has climbed Mount Everest. He was injured in the 1965 Indo-Pak war and went on to open the Indian Spinal Injuries Centre in Delhi.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I do not have much of a spiritual nature. But if you say religious, then yes, intensely so. Those are beliefs and values deeply inculcated by my mother especially and I have lived with them since childhood.

Every morning, she would say her prayers in front of the Granth Sahib and at the end, she would stand up, get us children inside the small temple and tell God "if you gave me children, let them be worthy of it".

So those things got stuck in our minds. We had to lead honest lives, we had to achieve.

When you say I am more religious than spiritual, what does spiritual mean?

I still don't know what the exact definition of spirituality is. How does it relate to my daily life? I don't know. I associate it with those old gurus. Maybe being a disciple of theirs means being spiritual. But somehow it doesn't talk to me. I have a set of clear principles and that's it.

You never modified or questioned those principles?

No, I haven't. They are very simple and have never changed. For instance, it's about having the right role models, and I always insist on it when I talk to younger people. Not merely a cricketer. But someone who can really teach you concrete values and useful things for your daily life.

For me, it was my mother and my grandfather. He was religious and in particular, he was religious about punctuality. It really was something crucial for him. It taught us the value of time. Because in fact, if you don't value time, you don't value life.

When you mention "God", what does it mean to you?

It's about values like honesty, not to lose temper or hurt anybody. I get angry maybe once in three or four years.

It's also a presence, a guiding force. For instance, while climbing the Everest, especially towards the end, I felt there was somebody pushing me and helping me, step by step.

Or when we reached camp number 2, we left our gear and oxygen but didn't stay for the night, as there were risks of avalanche. We came back in the morning, and sure enough, it was all plain white, everything had been covered by feet and feet of snow. There was no way we could have reached the summit without all the material buried under it. Yet we could have spent days looking for it. Instead, we prayed before starting the search.

And believe it or not, within a minute of digging, we found everything.

How did it feel to be at the top of the world?

It's not as great as you would imagine. When you reach the summit, you stay for a few moments with the feeling of having accomplished your job. But then a tinge of sadness sets in. Because you know you have to climb down. You know you have to go back to lower plains and nothing higher is there to be climbed. What other challenge could be there? We had dreamt about it for so many years and now what?

While up there though, when looking north, I could see Tibet and beyond, I could imagine Central Asia. This gave me the idea of organizing an expedition along the Silk Road. It took me seven years to organize it, but it was a memorable experience.

Have you felt this guiding force all along?

I guess so. The way we escaped Lahore at the time of Partition was itself a miracle. We basically caught the last train, and were hidden in order to ride it.

Another example I can give you in this Spinal Injuries Hospital. When I decided to start it, nobody believed it could happen, they all thought it was an impossible dream. I was neither a doctor nor a well-off person who could finance it. I just had this idea, the conviction that it HAD to happen. I was very clear about what I wanted to do. And the fact is, everything fell in place, everything came through: money, land, people.

During the 1965 war, you were very seriously injured – did this protection fail you?

When it happened, I did ask myself "why", and I asked God, I asked my mother. I had come extremely close to being killed. I could have so easily gone. Yet instead, I was made to live and suffer. My mother thought that God had some purpose in mind that only me, in such conditions, could have fulfilled.

It could be true...

For instance, I would have most likely never set up this Spinal Injuries hospital had this wound through the spine never happened.

So do you think we come on earth with a specific purpose?

I think so. I believe we come with a finite and pre-written amount of time to be on earth. And then it's a combination of preordained facts and what we make out of them, with our free will. Some people come to be an artist, others to be an engineer, others to be a crook.

When you see a child suffer, is that preordained?

I guess it's part of humanity. But at least I can try to do my bit to help. So for instance, we have 14 beds totally free. People can come and be treated even though they have no means to pay for it.

Do you believe in reincarnation?

I haven't thought of it.

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

I would want to have an adventurous life, skiing from the mountaintop, climbing, having a house by the side of a beautiful river, with a splendid mountain at the back.

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

It is said that to reach the Everest's summit, you must have done some good deeds. Yet four months later I was wounded. What happened during those months?

I have to mention though a strange story. While climbing, we were trying to convince the deputy leader of the expedition, a sherpa by the name of Phu Dorjje, to come to the summit as well. He kept throwing pebbles to ask if he should come or not. The answer was always NO. Yet we forced him. He told us that it was completely wrong and that it would backfire on us, we would all suffer the consequences of it.

And indeed, every member of the expedition subsequently suffered in some awful way. I got very badly wounded shortly after, and then one after the other, every member of the expedition went through some heavy ordeal. Phu himself fell into a crevasse the next time he accompanied an expedition to the summit and died.

So had his prediction come true?

What is your idea of happiness?

If I can get up in the morning without any problem and go on with my life, then I am happy. So happiness is about genuinely asking reasonable things and see them come through.