

Raghavendra Rathore

Designer

'Creativity is the ability to displace an idea'

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Creativity for Designer Raghavendra Rathore is to displace an idea and contemporise it in the most practical, functional and aesthetic way.

What does the word spirituality mean to you?

It's a roadmap. I don't see colors, I don't see religions, I don't see shapes, I just see a roadmap. There are certain parameters that define who you are, like a grid, and you maintain yourself within those parameters.

This grid is a very electronic one - the future is going to be more spiritual than the past as everything will be in ones and zeroes. More and more we will leave a trail of everything we do and everything we are. We can now be traced at every level, there is no more need of a god evaluating us at the end of our lives. It is actually happening every day, everywhere...

So if every day you can plan to die by the night, if every day can be like your last one, then you'll have a very beautiful life. You summarize your life at night, and make sure that if there is an issue you find a solution and implement it in the morning. I want to be able to go back to my slippers and nightsuit with that feeling. And I should build my empire with that approach.

Tell us more about the "grid" -

It is a plan with a date. There is a departing time to the next world. So look at your plan according to that fact. Everything eventually leads to the same thing. You may have a whole vision for yourself. But when you are no more all this disappears.

My father told me this and I never forgot it – for twenty years I am taking care of you, for twenty years you will be taking care of me then I will be gone and you will take care of your kids. It is a very straightforward plan. Every day that goes by, you lose a bit of that speed of life.

We are all like monkeys living on our own trees, sometimes we go to someone else's tree but then we have to come back to ours.

I have a guru whom I speak to and keep as a spiritual advisor. He is South Indian and lives very far from the worlds I usually move within. Over time, I understood thanks to him a number of things – for instance, I hire and fire people constantly and I used to be extremely affected by it. But he explained how I could get stuck in strange places if I were to function this way all the time. If I get worried about every such thing, I could never function. As part of the grid, I know what I want to build and achieve, and I therefore know that in order to achieve it, I cannot bother about everyone's suffering. The grid gives me those guidelines about where and when to act or where and when to ignore something. There are so many problems in India so you must have a clear and clean line about where you act and where you need to move on.

The grid is a framework that predetermines my thoughts and actions, my positions and mind so that I do not go off track and nothing comes and distracts me. It keeps my mind in check. It is about a few principles that guide my actions and my life. If there is a crisis, you know what to do. If there is a danger, you know you first have to save the youngest person in the room. How you deal with a challenge within a few seconds says a lot about you.

How did you meet your Guru?

Many families in Rajasthan have such associations with a spiritual advisor. He's been with my family for a while. My mother is quite a spiritual force and she brought him in. If she hadn't brought him into my life, I wouldn't have known about the possibility of having such a connection with someone. He's answered some of the most difficult questions I've had. It is like having your personal doctor, it is different than going to any doctor since he knows you so well.

Does religion play a role for you?

I believe very strongly in my religion and it plays an important role for me, but religions can so easily get misused and misguided. I fear those misuses.

What about the idea of God?

The peace that comes to my questions from within is my god. I don't believe you can meditate. How can your mind control your mind? When you say 'relax', it is your mind telling your mind to do something. You think you are relaxing but I think it actually takes you away from reality. I still want to climb to my tree at the end of the day. To me, spiritual relaxation, the quantum of happiness is that millionth of a second when I am about to touch my bed in the evening: I am not yet on the bed, but I know I am about to have my own time to relax, knowing I have completed my day.

What about design – why design?

I left the shores of one place, Jodhpur, without any idea of which shore I would reach on the other side. And straight from Jodhpur I got into Manhattan. I was seen in the family as the first one to go

through the seven seas. It was a journey, it was an education. I had not liked the universities I had seen in India. I knew that academic environments could kill the pursuit of creativity. And I was simply searching for an education. I used to be very good with electronics, so I decided to first study robotics. And that journey led me eventually to my strength, to design. Thanks to really good advisors I flowed into it. America has this amazing ability of giving you such a cross-cultural understanding, opening up the range of what is possible. At some point I was advised to look at Parsons School of design and of course, the minute you come to New York, everything changes, you are constantly on the edge, you get completely transformed.

Once I got into Parsons, I felt this was it, I had found the right thing for me. And then things flowed in the most unpredictable ways. One day Dona Karan walked in, picked up three kids to work with her and I was one of them. That is really what completely changed my life.

Was it all by chance or predestined, meant to be?

I don't think there is such a thing as meant to be. Timing is important. But what happens beyond timing is about your actions, your efforts, who you are. Destiny is not a concept that talks to me.

I stayed at Dona Karan's for a little while then I ran into Oscar de la Renta who offered me to join him. Of course you have to be lucky to be at the right place at the right time, luck plays an important role, but then it's definitely about who you are, the accrual of your expression. The other person needs to see a value in you whether in work or friendship.

In terms of the meaning of your life, is design one of the answers, one of the ways to have an impact?

Design to me is about providing practical solutions to people, but with esthetics. It is about being a vessel, holding a tool in my hands and using my skills to do what I need to do. So much of what I do goes beyond design and is more about connecting people with what and who they are looking for. I see myself as being a mediator, way beyond only designing clothes or homes or other such things.

Of all that I do, the most fascinating aspect and the one with the biggest impact is the ability to change something that has not changed for years, the ability through design to transform esthetics in a way that people would be touched. For instance taking a simple roundabout on a simple road and redesigning it.

Of course, there is a lot of negativity in the world of design. Somehow, people find it tremendously difficult to accept that someone can do something beautifully. There is always resistance first. I don't know why.

Tell us more about the creative process – how does it happen?

Creativity for me is the ability to displace an idea that has already come before you, and contemporize it in the most practical, functional and esthetical way. It's been done somewhere before in a different context, but who can displace it from location A to B? That process requires creativity. Design is not the obsession to create beautiful clothes, it is the ability to take a print from China, convert it with a contemporary feel so that nobody finds it absurd and put it on an outfit in India. It is about displacing ideas much more than just cutting a dress. Fashion needs to move to ideating rather than cutting and stitching.

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

I just want to know, this myth of God watching the movie of your life in a big large theater - is it true or not? I always have this vision of everybody wearing a white robe, waiting for our turn, then going into a gigantic hall where we'd sit with this white-bearded old man, putting a device on our head so that our entire life and past births would come in front of our eyes, then get an evaluation, and off we'd go to a womb again, or up to heaven, or down to hell. I would like to know if that is true. It would help me live a better life!

What is your idea of happiness?

Happiness is like little bubbles in a glass of sparkling water. There is no such thing as being constantly happy. Happiness is the gift that momentarily releases a beautiful jolt of adrenaline somewhere, then it diminishes. It prevails as long as you want to play with that thought but eventually you have to go and find some other happiness somewhere else. It can come in such a variety of ways – a sense of achievement for instance if I see someone wearing an outfit of mine and hearing nice comments around, completing a project better than I expected, having an intellectual conversation and a fun evening, all those things give me happiness.

Happiness is also about assessing my actions of the day and feeling complete, feeling that the day was complete, feeling a balance between all the hemispheres of my requirements.