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Chairman

'You learn from hardship'

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What does spirituality mean to you?

First of all, let me tell you what it does not mean to me. It is not about formal religion, or rituals, or doing things because someone expects you to do them, or in order to subscribe to some conventional practice. I am not religious in the conventional sense of the word as most people are. I do not go much to temples, nor know much about rituals.

Instead, I am convinced our comprehension of the world is very limited. I firmly believe there is a superior force out there. I have experienced it in my own life. Sometimes we are giving it a name and then believe that He or She is the arbiter of our destiny, the final scriptwriter. Maybe it is true. But that said, spirituality is rather a sense of moving beyond the here and now and subscribing to a value system that enables me to live life with a certain level of satisfaction. It is about not going through a simple humdrum existence. It is the additional dimension to human life. It does not mean understanding everything but at least allowing that dimension to inform my thoughts and actions.

In what ways have you experienced that superior force?

I have been through so many experiences that showed me there is such a force.

For instance, as I was in my first assignment and newly wed, I had spent my whole salary in the first half of the month. I could have raised loans for the rest of the month but did not want to do it; besides, I was too proud to ask my wife to lend me money. But I knew I had to find a solution by a certain date. That very day, I happened to open a pile of papers, and discovered an envelope with an arrear bonus from my previous position. It came that day, of all days. Somebody, somewhere must have thought "if he needs help, he needs it today".

Similarly, years later, I had moved to Delhi for a new posting and had bought a lot of new furniture. Again, we went way beyond that month's pay. I was undersecretary at the Ministry of Defense. The day I needed to find a solution, the additional secretary asked me to help him on some project. And I was handed an envelope of cash as an advance. It happened the very day I needed the money. So I thought "someone" again was playing savior to my financial mismanagement. Someone was looking after me, saying "this guy needs help, he is not a bad fellow, he is doing the right thing but mucking up his own finances".

There were so many examples of the sort. Basically, I think it is because I try hard to live within a value system. Therefore, someone must be saying "when this guy gets into difficulty, he deserves a helping hand".

There were never occasions when you felt let down?

There were definitely occasions when I believed I was not dealt the right kind of cards. But I suppose you cannot expect everyday to get the best cards. And also it is my responsibility not to put myself all the time into situations requiring that protection. It would mean I am not doing my job and am doing something wrong!

Most importantly, I am convinced there is a lot of learning coming from hardship. In a career of 38 years I have had far more difficult jobs than many of my contemporaries. Many tried to discourage me from taking them – only to seek the same positions years later, as things would have improved, to the point sometimes of trying to oust me!

So hardship sharpens your skills and makes you a better human being.

Most learning comes from hardship?

Definitely, I would even say that we only learn from hardship. Because in difficult times, you have to do certain things and take difficult decisions that otherwise you would shy away from. There is no choice in those moments, whereas when things seem hunky dory, you feel you can postpone decisions.

In those times of really difficult challenges, where do you find the energy, what is your anchor?

I always tell myself a few things: if I leave it as it is, I have not earned my pay; besides, no one else will come and help me take that decision; finally, in a sense it challenges me to use my reason and face the greatest challenge of us all as human beings: we are all born with a certain potential, we all perform at a certain level, and the journey of excellence is the one in which you attempt to reduce the gap between your achievement and your potential. Excellence is not about measuring oneself to others. Everyone was created by God with a different potential. But am I doing as well as I can do? Will I be able to look at the mirror tomorrow and tell myself that I gave my best shot?

When you talk of potential, does it mean each one of us has a specific mission in life?

I believe indeed that there is a specific purpose to each one of our lives. It does not mean though that at the age of 62 I really know what mine is! In any case, rather than understanding the final purpose, it matters more to do my best, whatever I am assigned to do today, whatever I have understood until now.

It would be too simplistic to say that my life was about getting into government service. Still, I would say that the red thread through all my assignments has been my concern to do more for the less privileged, for the underdog. Somehow I tend to identify more easily with the underdog. For instance, I am a huge football fan and I will always root for the losing team – I never rooted for Manchester United and would more likely support Liverpool, with its working class background. I actually think that all of us harbour some sympathy for the underdog in our teens. Some completely shed it away as they grow, while others retain some elements of it. So I have kept some of that idealism.

But why did you choose to become an IAS officer and your subsequent carriers?

I was a quite brilliant student, the youngest in class, and topping it. I then did my pre-university. There were two career choices only at the time, becoming a doctor or an engineer. Back then, being a lawyer or a journalist were not so looked up at. So I applied for the IIT and entered IIT Madras.

Two and a half years later, I realized I was not cut off to become an engineer, among others because I am not an early morning person, while everyone else was on time so early in the morning. I felt I wanted no part of that life. I am a late night person. Also, I did not have really exciting teachers. So I left before getting any academic credentials.

But I learnt how to do crosswords, solve chess problems, my tennis and organizational skills improved. So in a way, I equipped myself for life.

Then I moved to economics and law. But as I my father retired, I dropped out after a year, and joined a bank in Madras, then the State Bank of India.

All along though, something in me made me feel I had let my parents and their expectations down. So I applied for the IAS exams. And God was kind, so here I am... I never planned my career as many do in the services. My first posting was in the Northeast, which many people consider a kind of calamity. But it turned out to be an amazing opportunity. And I then went from one place to the other.

What about now, what goal do you pursue, what makes you feel alive?

In a public service career as the one I have had, there are many aspects of my personality I was not able to explore and express. So I felt upon retirement that it was time to have the space for it. For instance writing, or teaching. I feel I must share the experiences, especially the mistakes, of a very rich and intense career of thirty eight years. I do it with large numbers of audiences. I talk a lot to schools and universities. It helps recharge my batteries considerably. When you are with younger people, you feel younger – there is no question about it.

Besides, I decided not to take a full time executive responsibility, nor to be working for anyone else, for the first time in my life. I needed to have that freedom.

So I spend a lot of time reflecting on things around, on issues of the moment. I want to contribute, not in a political way. But certainly being in the arena of political change in India. Without being in the ring itself. I want to have some contribution, something that makes me feel that when Judgment day comes, I was not only on the liability side...

Is there something such as destiny?

I am not ruling it out. If it had been only one incident, you could easily say it is a coincidence. But when it happens a number of times, you cannot rule out a pattern to it all. I have never spent much time or effort to understand the larger pattern. But I believe that the journey is more important than the destination, and the destination is more important than destiny. Because destination is what you seek, while destiny is what some force takes you to.

What have been your spiritual inspirations?

Certainly not so-called God men or God women, but rather my parents. They have built my value system. And I did not need to look outside for inspiration. There was a daily prayer and to this day, no matter what, I say mine at night. I call it rendering my accounts to God and to myself. I try and analyze what I set out to do in the morning, what went right and what went hopelessly wrong. It enables me to sleep peacefully.

If you were to be reincarnated, what would you choose?

I look at all God's creatures, and I would love to be a bird that can fly long distances, seeing new territories every day. I envy birds. For all of our learning, if we are to try and do what they do, we would fall flat on our faces.

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

Why people who seem to do the wrong things day after day after day seem to have the luck of the draw most of the time?

I have asked so-called men and women of God – though I do not believe particularly in them, it is simply that they use their mental faculties more than the average person – how could they receive people who obviously are not good? And they would say that those people are also creatures of God so how could they drive them away...

So I have to ask God directly. And even though I acknowledge there is a superior force, I wonder if it is superior enough to see that those generally perceived as good get the lucky picks. This question definitely bothers me, though not to the point of doubting the existence of that force, or deflecting me from doing what I have to do. I just guess there is a larger purpose to it all, which I am unable to understand.

Finally, what is your idea of happiness?

It is not about I, me and myself. I am happiest when people around me are as happy as I am, when they do not feel deprived in relation to their wants, when they can accomplish some of their tasks, fulfill some of their aspirational roles, and not be too weighed down by externalities such as setbacks.

So at one level I am a very private person, and at another I am quite a community person, drawing strength from my immediate surroundings and hopefully adding to their strength as well.