

Shovana Naraya

Kathak Dancer

'I am most alive when I am dancing'

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Shovana Narayan is a Kathak dancer, a Padma Shri and a bureaucrat.

What does spirituality mean to you?

However strong we may be, we need a pillar of support. We have that longing and yearning for a force larger than us. So it is about an amorphous and indefinable force beyond myself, beyond the comprehensible. But at the same time, more important than anything else, there needs to be faith in oneself. Why and how (should you) only rely on an external force?

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

I am not sure I would talk about guidance or protection. I believe it is rather about what you do with your own life. It is one's own inner inclination, passion and determination that propels one forward. Because of our faith we may attribute things working out to an external force, but we are working on it ourselves.

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

I would not use the word mission because it entails thinking it all out, chartering and planning one's life. For me it is about a passion. I have been dancing since I was two and a half years old. If you take dance out of my life, there is no more life. When dancing I feel most alive, in every single cell. At the same time, I always loved studying and had a scholastic side, which translated in my career as a civil servant. People always told me that if I was to excel at one of the two, I should abandon the other career. But I never accepted that, and always believed that if passionate enough, one can excel in a number of fields. So I went ahead, irrespective of what people were saying or had done, pushed by that passion. Why Kathak? At the age of two, I could not choose, of course, so it was my mother's deed. In retrospect, I can reason that it fitted me best. I find it to be an infinite canvas with endless expressional possibilities. I can play on a word or a phrase forever; I can be as loud or as subtle, as slow or as fast as I wish. The range is infinite.

What is the role of spirituality in your life as a dancer and a bureaucrat?

It is about trying to be true to what I am doing.

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

Some moments tested me but also taught me much, for instance, when my father suddenly died in a train accident. I was very young and was called to identify the body. I got the post-mortem done, brought the body back to Delhi on my own, broke all Hindu traditions the next day when as a woman I lit the pyre. Grief was tremendous yet I felt so strongly that life must go on. Three days later, I performed at a festival as planned. It made me understand life differently and imprinted mortality as the strongest reality, yet it also was a reaffirmation of life beyond grief.

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

If there were such a thing as blind faith in my life, it would be regarding my mother. She inspired me the most, and for her there has always been only one religion, humanity. Life for her is about sincerity and humanism, knowing that one's action always has a reaction on others, which then rebounds on us. So one better get the good vibrations around around.

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

A dancer of course.

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

We know we will die one day, so why is there so much animosity, race and competition; why do we all have to prove we are better than others?

What is your idea of happiness?

It can be anything that gives me a little sense of peace, a blooming flower, my dog jumping, a child on the street and, of course, above all, dance. I keep praying to that unseen force that when it is time to go, I should be on my feet, dancing.