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'We forget we have a divine force within us'

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What does spirituality mean to you?

Spirituality is about my faith in the divine, in that super power which is the Creator of the universe, which governs every human action; but without a religious connotation.

Spirituality is about seeking, about a quest to raise myself and my level as a human being. In that, one is governed by that power, which I constantly feel, though I have not given it a name. It is like a friend, always present by my side. Whenever I face a tricky situation, and that is not rare, I just talk to it. If something is bugging me and I go down the lift to my car, I will tell it: "come on, what is going on?" To be friends and continue to have that guidance and dialogue is my spiritual path. It is actually the purest dialogue and the purest relationship I have. And I have had it for so many years.

Since childhood?

Maybe I learnt it then indeed. I got all my values from my parents, especially from my father who was a scholar of the Gita. He was an ICS officer and ended up his career as Governor of Goa. He had his ups and downs. He was there during Partition. Yet when he retired, he would do his own work, pay his bills, he lived his religion in all humility. He was not religious in the sense of attending temples or doing

rituals at home. He only had a photograph of Krishna and would stand in front of it for a couple of minutes every morning. In the evening, he would walk for an hour and a quarter, because it took him precisely that time to recite the 18 chapters of the Gita.

He always had some anecdote from the scriptures to answer any of my queries. So I grew up in an atmosphere where there were rational explanations to most of the experiences we go through life, and which may seem illogical or painful at first sight. It gave me the mental courage to feel that whatever comes, comes from God, good or bad. And if He is your friend in good moments, He is your friend in difficult times as well.

On the overall, I grew up in a liberal thinking environment. And I never allowed any religion to bind or define me. Long ago, when we had to declare our religion on certain forms, I would never fill that column. I always felt, how could any religion be big enough? How can we be confined to one name? All religions have a common tread larger than any one of them. I was born in a Hindu family, there are strains of Sikh religion in our family, and I attended a Christian school. I am also very attracted to Buddhism. But I do not feel like being bound by any particular religion.

Beyond a dialogue with this larger force, do you feel it is also protecting and guiding you?

I am now 66 years' old, and I have had several experiences from the time I was in my twenties, till quite recently, when I really felt a presence. I would pray very hard, sitting alone in a room, and then feel a presence. It could be a figment of my imagination. But whatever it is, I do feel it, I do feel I get answers. Very often I find I have escaped a problem or a situation thanks to that greater power, that divine force protecting me.

On the overall, when I have sought, I have got.

And if I haven't got, I mostly have realized why it had to be that way. Even though I have to say, I also fight with that force, I complain – "come on, that's enough! Why are you punishing me?"

And for things to happen or not, is it all preordained?

The Hindu philosophy talks about it, and how all is a consequence of our deeds in a past life etc. but I am not sure I think that way. I have this life, for as long as it lasts and I don't want to be separated from this power that has come to be quite close to me. That is all that matters.

I am no mystic, no psychic, no ascetic, I am a human being with all my faults, and follies, and trials and tribulations. But I have this great confidence in this fellow walking along with me. Sometimes I pray really hard to him, for instance when I have to make a speech and I say: "come on, hold my hand, this is really one of those few times I want you to help me!" And sometimes it does go ok, at least to the point I am not embarrassed...

Is there a specific purpose to each of our lives?

When I am answering your questions, I am influenced by the impact of the last 60 years of my life. So of course I will tell you that I am different from all other beings, with a specific purpose, an agenda, which can best be followed if I follow the guidance from within. I have to live with myself. And for that, I have to hear the voice from within. All of us do.

When we do namaste, it is about bowing to the divine in you, but often we forget we have that divine part in us. If I have a part of that divine force within me, then I have to excel, not only by fixing up a few targets – like let me become an MP, then a Minister, then another Minister and so on. No! I have to be worthy of this unique opportunity to be a human being and leave an imprint.

I do not wish to hurt or annoy as I go along. I have a temper, but I do feel regretful if I use it. If I am sensitive, I would like to be conscious of other people's sensitivities. I would rather spend this life taking people along, rather than surging ahead alone.

How would you define your own purpose then?

I would not say whatever is destined to come, because it sounds too fatalistic. But whatever comes my way, I should do my optimum best, realize my potential and not look for the reward.

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

I for sure didn't think at all of politics. I used to think of travelling. The idea was to know, to discover, to explore. The quest was for imbibing, learning, enriching myself with multiple contacts with different people, and constantly grow. And I really feel I am constantly learning. This ministry for instance, is completely different from the last one. And it is a totally different ball-game. I am trying to learn, and it is a challenge.

So to summarize, my whole thing has been to grow, explore, imbibe and do my optimum best in whatever I have been assigned. You basically cannot be stagnant! That's why I cannot be a fatalist. I have this life at least. So let me make the most out of it. The multiple dimensions of life – let me experience them. And let's see what happens next.

But why politics as a form of exploration?

I don't know, it just happened. I never thought of it before. It came by accident. I was married to a Foreign Officer, I lived in Bangkok and Cuba. I learnt French, then Spanish. In Cuba, the life of Fidel Castro impressed me enormously and especially the feeling of pervasive equality, how everyone was involved in doing something for "la patria", for the country.

Then we came back to India. Indira Gandhi was cancelling the privy purses and nationalizing the banks in that same spirit of equality. And it was inspiring. I came into contact with her and from one thing to the other...

I have had vast experiences. I was the only woman President of the Youth Congress. At the time, it was not easy for a woman to be in public life. No one in my family had been in politics. It's always been a new exercise, stretching my limits. But probably my spirit of adventure got me into it. And then from one challenge to another, with disappointments all along, the fighter in me got me going, with a constant philosophy – "never say die". There must be a really strong fighter in me, otherwise I could not have survived!

Where is that fighter spirit coming from?

I think you have the courage to fight only if you believe in what you are doing. Otherwise you can face one of two struggles but then give up. Only if you have something from within taking you forward can you constantly fight.

Can you imagine, I have been for forty years in public life... They have not been easy, it's been full of struggles. But this spirit of "never say die", always accepting new challenges, has saved me. I view it as part of the rebel in me, which will just not accept defeat, no matter what the cost, whether health, or me as a woman for instance – things like going to the beauty parlour, buying dresses and jewellery never were my priority.

Life is such a race, how do you make sure you have enough time and space to hear your inner voice?

Even when I work alone in this room, I listen to it. I don't let it go! Because it is my sustaining force. My husband was abroad, my mother was in the Sai Baba ashram for long periods of time, and in political life, friends don't come easy, so I have been a loner. If I hadn't had this inner voice, whatever you want to call it, my conscience, this little spark of divinity which is in all of us, I don't know how I would have sustained myself.

So there is that core thing to which I reach out. Even in happy times. When good things happen I remember to thank it.

As life is so full of mysteries, if there were one question you could ask God, what would it be?

There is so much I do not know, so I am not sure what I would be asking...

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

It would be yet another opportunity to explore, but I should fine-tune it a bit – hopefully I would have learnt from this life! Most importantly, I would like to have the same mother and father. They were very special beings.

What is your idea of happiness?

To be able to live in peace with my own conscience. If you can spend a day or two alone, it means you are fine. If you are uncomfortable with yourself and need some book, or movie, or something else, then something wrong is going on.

I am lucky of course to be able to speak that way. Because for the large majority of people, it is a struggle to survive, to fulfill their obligations to those who depend on them and so on. At every level, life is a struggle. My father used to say that the world is a large battlefield and life is a constant struggle. Life is definitely a constant struggle. The very fact we have to make choices is a struggle. Of course our inner courage and mental resolve and a value system must be there to help us decide. Though it sounds very elitist!

Why?

Because so many people fulfill this kind of a thing by going to a temple or a church or a mosque.

But every one with their own way, isn't it?

Of course...