

Pooja Sood

Chairperson of Khoj

'Being good is something you have to work on'

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Pooja Sood is the the chairperson and coordinator of Khoj, an artist collective.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is a fantastic word and not something I feel uncomfortable with. As a child I grew up thinking it was all about god men. But as I grew older I realized that it had a much deeper meaning. It's about who you are. Being a spiritual being is about knowing yourself, being aware, being in touch with yourself – with that intrinsic goodness in yourself. That is why when people are deeply spiritual, there is a goodness in them, a deep generosity of spirit, a graciousness.

Spirituality is also correlated to a sense of integrity, not in a narrow moralistic sense, but as in being whole. I'm not sure if many of us really work at feeling 'whole' – feeling complete.

So if we know ourselves better, we become better human beings?

That's a complex question but yes, I think so. At the very least, a person who is in touch with himself isn't petty and judgmental. Hopefully he has a larger understanding of life and knows how to let things go.

And I don't think you are born being 'good'. It is something you probably have to work at, the same way you would work at your career.

How do you go about that work?

By introspection: by doing your best in whatever you do and having a larger reason for doing it; by being brutally honest with oneself; by trying to make sense of the world and your place in it. Broadly, I believe one has to have a social consciousness in one's work. By that I do not mean social work which is most narrowly translated as working in slums etc, but since one lives and works in a society, surely we need to be aware of its various needs by being aware that one has to live and work in a society which has many needs.

Giving is actually about doing your best in whatever you do and having a larger reason for doing it – which while allowing you to earn a good living hopefully transcends the need for only material benefit. If you seek success exclusively in a material way, it will definitely corrode you on the long run.

What is success for you?

Reaching your potential. Pushing yourself. Setting benchmarks. Achieving excellence as you define it. Asking yourself - what kind of impact do I have on (and for) people? Do I touch lives? Is one looking at the bigger picture – beyond oneself?

One can't be great at everything of course, but whatever one decides to do one should do it really well and push the limits.

So for instance, I may say I am a great curator but what does it mean? What are the things I am trying to do? What are the things I am trying to facilitate? How am I looking at the bigger picture? Am I really trying to build an infrastructure for the arts?

How did you know what YOU had to do, what impact YOU would have?

I don't think you know these things at birth! If you have a questioning mind - you grow into it. I started my career with a B.Sc. in Mathematics and then an MBA, thinking I would become a corporate/business hot shot. I had grown up in an industrial family - and listening to business conversations, thought it was the thing to do. Not to mention that as a woman the desire to prove myself in a highly patriarchal family was even stronger! Then I got married, had kids and later on, went back to study – for fun! I chose history of art, because I had always loved the arts. Even as a young girl I used to play the piano, dance and loved poetry and fiction. I didn't know, sitting in Pune, that you could study the arts. But I was always attracted and fascinated by them. When I finally did do an MA in Art History, the world of ideas, a philosophical questioning of beauty and justice and the like had me hooked! I wanted very much to explore this world of ideas in a tangible way - through art. I first ran an art gallery, then joined Khoj and from thereon it became a career.

But today I can't help but ask if it isn't time to move on and explore other things? On the other hand, can one really abandon the responsibilities that come with a career?

But I think one has to figure out what truly motivates you at every point in time. Doing something just because one is good at it doesn't seem to be a good enough reason to be doing it! I know it sounds old-fashioned, but values like honesty and integrity make you, they guide you in life. You don't do stuff for the wrong reasons.

At times of major challenges, where is your anchor, where do you find your energy?

Thankfully, I am blessed with close friends and family who are there to listen and give support. People are very important in my life. But at the end of the day, we have to find that strength within, roll up our sleeves and figure things out. One can't sit around feeling victimized! I don't like moping. I grieved a lot when I lost my mother for instance. Full of regret and pain, I soon realized that I was becoming dysfunctional and that I had to find a way out.

Somewhere along in life, one understands that parents, kids, husband, friends 'happen'. People come and go. One has to enjoy and love them – but being attached in a needy way is actually quite depleting. Ultimately one has to live with oneself; one must figure out things you love and what makes you tick – music, sports, nature, books, whatever. One has to figure out a way to be happy on that sofa 'alone'.

What about a belief in a larger force, that some call God?

I believe in energy. I do not know if it is AN energy, or if it is the addition of all of our energies as individuals that constitutes that energy. Somewhere I feel there must be something that ties us all together. I am not fearful of it for I truly believe you get back the positive energies you give away. It sounds very new-agey. But that's what I believe.

Prayer and other such things have a place in your life?

During a bad patch - one can hang on to anything! But beyond that - not really. On the whole, I am not a ritualistic person. I tried chanting once for instance, but apart from the people I met who were really nice, I felt a fake. It was also disrespectful to everyone else around me who were being so welcoming and well meaning and who deeply believed in it. Till I can do things with honesty and belief I'd rather not.

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

While one accepts the inevitability of death intellectually, it was the recent loss of my mother that made me acutely aware of my own mortality. I am accepting of my life here - knowing that some things cannot be controlled. But the mystery of where one goes after... sometimes makes me fearful. So I guess I would rather ask about the meaning of death, ironically perhaps to understand the meaning of life.

If there were such a thing as rebirth, what would you choose for the next round?

I haven't done too badly in this round. If I were to die tomorrow, I would be fine. That's a good place to be in! So I suppose what I'm saying is that I wouldn't mind coming back in a similar life.

What is your idea of happiness?

It's a state of being: feeling good and positive about yourself and your life; not constantly berating life as "unfair" (as it sometimes is and can be!). So I don't think it's a 'high' or constitutes a specific situation or activities. It's an attitude, a general outlook on life: even if horrible things happen in life (as they do to everyone) if your general perception is that you can make your life good – then you're a happy person. You either have a positive disposition or a negative one.

But then I feel very lucky to have a healthy body and mind, family and friends, a meaningful career and a comfortable lifestyle. Some people have really really tough lives. Would my idea of happiness be different if my circumstances were different? I do not know.

When you talk about luck, is there such a thing as preordained destiny in life?

I think there is. There are too many things in life that are inexplicable. Being a parent makes one believe it even more. One is so inextricably linked to one's children – their hopes and aspirations and yet one realizes at some point that no matter what, what will be, will be - both good and bad and regardless of you. Every individual has his own destiny.

What about realizing it when things happen in a most unplannable, unfathomable way?

Well, I think you can sometimes try and rationalize it and when you cant you say its luck!

You wouldn't call it destiny then?

Destiny seems to heavy a word for small things. What really freaks me out is when I begin thinking about something and then it happens. It made me believe in the power of positive thinking; of the importance of dreaming or imagining scenarios. You have to take time out to day-dream. It's not all only about your hard work. Opportunities present themselves at you all the time. You have to be able to see them, seize them and make them grow.