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'I am spiritual in the sense of being open to the unknown'

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Malvika 'Mala' Singh is the editor of Seminar.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I grew up in a leftist home. So religiosity was never part of our lives, we were never taken to temples or anything of the kind. On the other hand, I went to a Protestant school in Mumbai, where we went to church, sang hymns, said our prayers.

Did you relate to Christianity?

It is very much part of my being. I am not sure how much I understood it then. But it definitely is something I enjoyed, including going to church and the whole ritual of it. Because I came from a background without any ritual, there was a certain awe in kneeling, getting up, singing together. There was a certain togetherness that transcended who you were, where you came from and so on. At home, my father used to say that religion is the work we do, how we do it and how honest we are to ourselves. I was brought up in a purely atheistic environment. But beyond that, it was extremely open and liberal. So I never had a sense of inadequacy, of something missing.

It was only years later that I gradually became more open to another way of looking at things. A friend told me one day that I had not understood India, because I had not understood faith. I dismissed it, reminding him that for me, faith pulled us down - it led to religious clashes and many more curses.

But he insisted, and took me to Benares. There, watching the evening aarti, I sensed and understood for the first time that there was some power in rituals. I understood that with its huge disparities and immense poverty, India had been kept together thanks to faith. I could see children playing, a body being burnt, a marriage taking place, the whole cycle of life, all in the same place on the ghat. And people taking it in their stride, no matter what.

So I began to understand that in their best definition – not with their political nonsense – religious rituals actually play the role of a psychologist in difficult lives. I hadn't veered towards it because I had a very privileged childhood and life thereafter.

But after this experience, I became an agnostic and began looking at everything with an open mind.

Then, a friend insisted I meet Mother Teresa. I was very resistant, because of some of her archaic views on abortion and so on. But the friend insisted. I had a most amazing experience with her.

She just looked at me, and said "you don't believe in God, do you?" Her eyes were piercing. I said "I am not sure", which was really the truth.

"And you do not believe in the power of prayer" she added.
"Not really" I answered.

She hugged me and said "you are a very good woman and you do not have to do anything. Do what you do, don't change, be as honest as you are, if you don't like something say it, if you like something embrace it".

"But something is bothering you, she added. What is it?"

I mentioned a friend of mine's son, Kim, who had been kidnapped in Kashmir for over two weeks. We had no news. We were really desperate.

She then said "I will prove you the power of prayer".

I thought I just can't bear this. We left and came home.

The next day at work the phone rang. News came of Kim's release.

I returned home and as I entered, the phone rang. It was Mother Teresa on the line. She said "my dear, I have proven to you the power of prayer" and she put the phone down.

That made a huge impact on me. I just thought I had been bloody selfish thinking there is no other power, that what we do - we do, what we see - we see.

Today, when I am depressed or nervous about something – which doesn't happen often, usually I am angry but not depressed - I place Mother Teresa's rosary under my pillow and fall asleep.

In what way did this experience change your life?

It opened my horizons. I started believing in spiritual healing. Say a spiritual healer would have me do something apparently absurd and foolish, which could help a suffering friend, I may very well do it - whereas I would have never, ever done it before.

This experience opened my mind to read and know more about it. It also enabled me not to be terrified internally of experiencing something different.

Was there such a terror?

Well, maybe not a terror, but why would have I wanted to?

Let me give you an example.

I worked in Business India for 25 years. The ending was very bad. The person who ran it took the money we raised, the business collapsed, and the blame came on me because I was the upfront person. I was fifty - not the time to start a life all over again. I had two options: crawl into bed, cover my head and say I have a lovely apartment and that's it. Or get up and say, forget it, I'll get over it. At that point a cousin of mine suggested I meet a medium. Despite my initial resistance, I went and sat with this Englishman for a most extraordinary hour.

He told me two people wanted to connect with me. He described them, their names, the way they died and more. Those were my parents. They were saying I should not feel I am a failure; it was just a bad period. I had done the correct thing and they were there for me. It looked as if I had lost everything but in fact I had gained a lot because this whole saga would mean the start of a new trajectory in life. It was completely amazing. Many things they said, no one else knew. And it could not be mind-reading either, because several elements were coming from such deep recesses of my childhood that they were definitely not on my conscious mind at that moment.

So to come back to the original question, am I spiritual? I would say yes.

And what do you mean by that?

Having a very open mind about everything, attempting to transcend the mundane, using one's instincts to react and do what you think is the right thing. That is my definition of spirituality. It may sound very stupid at one level, but that's what it is for me. I have never sat down and actually thought it through. It just is part of my life.

I am a very opinionated person, I shout and scream and joke. In many ways it is a façade. But over the years, those experiences helped getting me out of the arrogance which could have become a very dominant part of my personality. An arrogance of knowing it all, of seeing everything as either black or white, thinking I have thought it all through. Instead, I am able to say I haven't quite thought it through, and I don't know it all.

On the surface, I am impossible as it is; but even for my own self I would have been impossible, had those few things not happened and opened my mind. When they did occur, I felt like a little shit... Look at that woman, Mother Teresa, and how she dealt with an arrogant girl telling her she didn't believe in everything that was sacred to her.

When I was going through a really hard time, being kicked around by the company I had been with for 25 years, she sent me a postcard. It had a hand and a little bird on it, essentially telling me that "you too will fly again".

You talked about listening to your instincts, how do you manage to do so, in the race of life?

I have learnt that, especially in my kind of hectic life, it is an absolute must to spend time alone every day. So every single day, I lie in bed or sit in my office for an hour and talk to myself, asserting myself out, letting thoughts come and go, with no order, no focus, no control. It helps tremendously.

You have been involved in so many things, why? Is there a particular purpose to one's life?

Yes, I do think there is a purpose. I never did something because I had to do it. I am very privileged in that I only did things I wanted to.

When you were a child, what did you want to do when growing up?

I didn't want to do anything in particular. And that is exactly what I am to this day, a professional dilettante. Theatre interested me as it was very present at home – there were rehearsals almost every night. Also, politics always attracted me as it was a very political home.

So once I was thrown out of university, I went to the National School of Drama where I trained as a Director. I then stopped it, went to America following my future husband and worked as a salesgirl in a sauna shop. Once back, I worked with Pupul Jayakar in crafts. And things unfolded from then on. Among others, they led my husband Tejbir and me to Seminar, a magazine started by my parents. We could have very well decided not to pursue its publication once they were gone. It brings no income, no salary. It is a labour of love. But it brings us joy, it is the anchor of our lives, it broadens our world. I don't know what I would have done without it – a ten to five job with lots of money and a Mercedes car? Who wants this?

What about politics?

I would have loved to. But you have to be completely dishonest to be in politics and there is no way I could. How could I sit in a room where someone with a whip would tell me the only way I could think or speak? The culture of politics today in India is just not something I could handle, unless I was on top of it and telling everyone what to do!

So since politics has always been my passion, and I cannot fulfil it professionally, the next best thing is to write about it.

Is there a larger purpose to writing?

Absolutely. If I didn't feel it had some kind of an impact, there is no way I would do it. And I do feel it is the case with Seminar.

Sometimes it was a bit ahead of its time, like with India Magazine, a cultural magazine I launched when I was 28. There definitely was a purpose: all the things the Magazine was about were going to die, and as a people we were losing our pride because we were losing our cultural roots. I had been

brought up to think that rituals are the death of India, but I gradually understood that it is the exact contrary. That richness is what sustained the country's relative peace despite its poverty. No matter what you look at - the crafting of a murti, the waving of a piece of cloth, the making of a pot - there is ritual and dedication in it. That is what gives it grace and dignity, which the Left and that whole influence disregarded. It killed the cultural roots and therefore killed the pride which led to the anarchic political situations we are facing now. If a politician were to understand that, I would be happy to contribute and work with him, at the panchayat level for instance.

Looking at the way your life unfolded, would you say it is destined, preordained?

No. Because the moment I would think that way, I would simply be sitting home doing nothing. But I do believe that if you are dreadful, if you are nasty to everyone including yourself, it does come full circle. There is something we have not been able to identify or touch, which plays an important role in our lives. I have never thought it through though. I just live my life as things open up. I respect them for what it is and then modify my trajectory, becoming more mellow, less arrogant.

You mentioned anger - why?

More than anger, my biggest problem is that I always imagine the worse. And I have this tremendous impatience. Over time I may develop a trust in the way things happen and this agitation will go. But that calming down process has yet to happen. Basically, as I go along, I am gradually shedding all the layers of my upbringing and as I do so, I prepare myself for a calm exit.

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

I wouldn't know. I never thought about reincarnation seriously, but I don't disbelieve in it.

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

I must say I don't have one. It comes from my upbringing which insisted I should live the moment and ask no question.

What is your idea of happiness?

My life as it is! I have always had the freedom of being who I am. And I have been so fortunate that everybody, including parents, husband, children gave me that space and freedom.