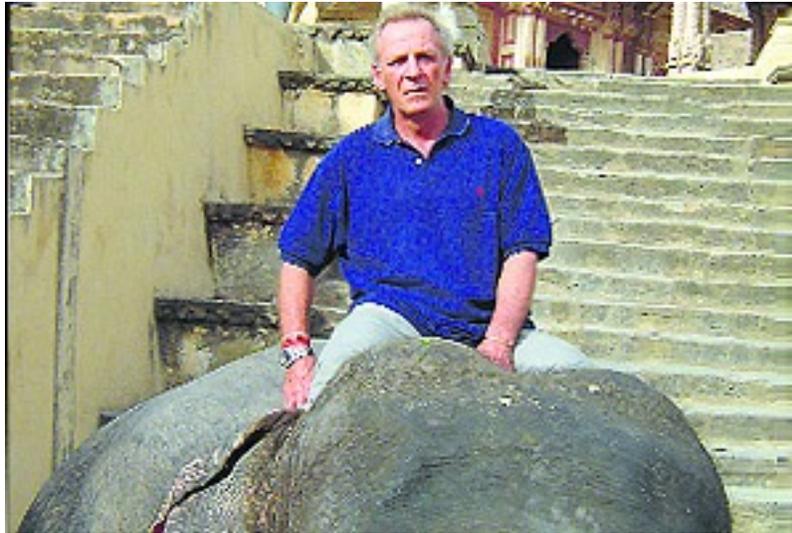


Mark Shand

Author

'I would love to come back as a wave or the tide'

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Mark Shand is actively involved in the conservation of the Asian elephant and is the author of *Travels on My Elephant*.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is about recognizing there is a higher power, recognizing that there is something we are not quite aware of.

It tends to be geographical for me. I sort of lose my spirituality when I am in the West. I really do. Spirituality came to me when I started losing people close to me and I was looking for something. Where I can see it most is in nature, without a doubt. If I am having a bad day and I need to connect with something, I just go and sit under a tree. It sounds boring I know, but that is really what it is for me.

Spirituality has to be soothing in your hard times.

But there is also nature in the West, so why do you lose your spirituality when you go back there?

Well, spirituality has a lot to do with religion in the West. And that's the problem. I used to live in Sussex, I would walk to the hills and see the sea and there I would gain some spirituality. But if you mix it with religion... I am not a particularly religious person, though I would refute it when it comes to India. But there, it's about going to church. The church is locked and gloomy, the service is gray.

Whereas you should be able to celebrate. Here spirituality is celebrated. I don't think it is in the West. You are confined to the religion you supposedly belong to, and you are meant to follow certain rules. I don't think there should be any rules in spirituality.

I also don't believe there is such a thing as a coincidence. I believe everything is supposed to happen. And I have always believed it here in India more than anywhere else because I have had some extraordinary things happen to me.

I look at life like a big wheel. There are hooks on the wheel. Some people will jump and grab a hook; others won't and will stay back, because of fear; some will take the wrong hook going in the wrong direction. But usually, if you jump and grab it, it will get you around where you are supposed to be. I have always been an incredibly impulsive person. That has actually been a big mistake of mine.

Why?

I have been burnt enough times. I tend to get really excited about things and now I have sort of calmed down. The wisdom I look at things with, is a form of spirituality also.

Life has been incredible to me. I have been so fortunate to do whatever I wanted. I have made mistakes but everybody does. I have been impulsive. But we have all taken the wrong path sometimes. But yes, life has a habit of really hammering you. Just when you think everything is going to be ok, you have the worst year of your life. That is why it is important to recharge. And nature does it for me. It is that higher power saying "hang on, see this tree growing..."

So of course life bangs you on the head, but it also is your fault. I have gone through therapy and it is fascinating when you get to this understanding of how responsible you are for your own actions. That is what is so important to know. Why you made that mistake, learning not to make that mistake again, learning to forgive.

But then again, if everything is planned as you said, were you meant to make a mistake so that you could learn the lesson attached to it?

I don't know. It's very odd. I don't actually mean it's all planned. But I don't think there is such a thing as coincidence.

India is a great teacher when it comes to this. When you try to do something here, everything that could possibly go wrong, goes wrong. You can be driven mad. We are used in the West to have things happen as and when planned. Here, never. But if you calm down, and persevere, gradually the walls you are up against loosen up. You learn to let go. And once you are through, India embraces you. It taught me not to always plan, and surrender to the amazing things that can happen if you flow. Sometimes I take a day off, without a single plan, and just see what happens.

Can you explain more what you meant by coincidences, is there a larger orchestration somewhere?

Yes I think so. So many things happened to me... Maybe it is something guiding me.

I am now much more cautious than I used to, but I don't think I have lost that holy instinct. I know from gut when I like someone. The older you get, the fewer friends you have. It doesn't matter if you don't see them for two years. But they are there.

So my instinct has been honed with a little bit of wisdom, something is guiding me, but I don't know what it is.

With this guidance though, I now know that I am on the right path. But I know I could be tempted to all sorts of sideways. And of course, magic often happens in the sideways.

And if there is no magic or passion in life, there is no point in doing anything.

The object of your passion has changed over time?

Not really. I have always loved traveling. I was lucky I could make a living out of it.

I had written a first book, on cannibalism. The book didn't do well at all. But a great friend of mine encouraged me to keep going. So I came to India, the place that fascinated me the most. I was looking for a different way to look at it. I found in my grandmother's papers a photograph of an elephant chasing a mahout. But the mahout was wearing high heels. It was the most surreal thing I had seen. After that, elephants kept showing up no matter where I looked. So then I thought, there it is, let me go to India and buy one. I fell in love with one, who took me on a journey and taught me how endangered her species is. And things unfolded...

Talking about passion, as a child, what were you dreaming to do?

I come from a long line of people who had traveled much, and explored. So I guess it always was there in me. Also, I was brought up in the country and always loved animals and nature. But when people ask me why I chose to do what I did, I've got no idea! People want to know a reason for everything. But there isn't always a reason. It was just a whim! You can fall in love with a person, a place, an animal. And you don't know why.

I was just 17 when I first traveled to this region and I have been fascinated by the East ever since. Among others, I am completely fascinated by the festivals here, how welcomed you always are in all those spiritual events, and you always have a good time. Whereas in England a church is so locked, so cold.

Was your upbringing religious?

Not at all. I was confirmed but nothing more. My father was a-religious. Church was just not part of our upbringing.

You mentioned a higher power, what do you mean by that?

Nature I guess.

Of course, I have been in really dangerous situations in my life, and then I've said those things like "If You get me out of this, I'll be good". But somehow I always felt it wasn't my time yet.

And as someone said, I believe in God, and I call it nature. I see it in sea, in a forest, in the mountains. For instance when I first went to Kailash, it definitely was one of the most extraordinary things I've seen in my life.

Those things take your breath away.

It's where it makes you humble.

That higher power is when you have an experience that humbles you.

I was in the tsunami and I survived. I was in Sri Lanka. Everybody around was killed apart from two hotels. It was the oddest thing you could fathom. I have been in the Los Angeles earthquake. I have been in two other earthquakes. I've been ship wrecked in a hurricane. Those are all forces of nature. It simply was not my time. And I was always in awe... It is the most humbling thing when you see nature in all its glory. I remember, when I was ship wrecked, sitting, with no wind, the massive horizon of the Pacific all around. In such moments, you look at the universe around and you think you are THAT small, THAT insignificant.

So at times of difficulty or major challenges, you find your energy and anchor in nature?

Absolutely. That is why also I can so much relate to Hindu religion. I sort of guess it is the nearest religion I have, in things like Ganesh and all its connections to nature. But as a power, it is definitely nature.

When you say, "it was not my time", does it mean that somewhere there is a protection?

Yes, I really believe it protects. It also inspires.

What about a larger meaning to life – are we all here because we are meant to do something?

I would like to say yes, but I don't really know. Some people get called, others don't.

You got called?

In some little way, yes, something touched me, and motivated me to do all this.

How would you define your purpose?

My great passion is Asian elephants. It is to see that one of the greatest animals ever created, survives. Because of land encroachment, human beings end up killing it. It's all incredibly connected. If you keep cutting those forests, you don't know what's going to happen, if water will disappear and so on. So elephants are almost like a custodian of our environment. Since it is the largest animal, it needs the largest amount of land to travel and the largest amount to eat. So by saving the elephant, you save everybody else behind it.

And it is such a clever animal, so adaptable.

I can't stand it when people say, "you are behaving like a wild animal". Human beings are the worst – we are manipulative and vicious. There is no order. In the animal kingdom, there is order. There is a whole chain, which worked very well until human beings came and decimated it.

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

That's a difficult one... Would I ask something really personal, or about the world...

If I were looking at the bigger picture, I would say, how can You stop deforestation?

At a personal level, the nearest human being that I love is my daughter. So I would say, my life is coming towards an end, can You make sure my daughter has all the happiness possible for her future?

Of course the two are interconnected, since to be happy, she needs a healthy environment.

I would not ask why human suffering happens and so on. Human beings are the problem. They do it to each other. Now, was it supposed to be? Is this bad programming on God's part? Did God just press the wrong button on the computer?

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

I would like to believe there is reincarnation but I don't know.

That's an amazingly difficult question.

I am not too sure I would like to come back as a human being. Or an animal for that matter, because what they are all going through now...

I guess I would love to come back as a wave, or the tide. It is eternal, and it constantly changes.

What is your idea of happiness?

To see my daughter live a long and happy life, for her to succeed in whatever she does and wants. A perfect day would be with her, an elephant, and a picnic underneath a fantastic mountain.