

Leela Seth

Lawyer

'Sometimes you have to stretch law to find justice'

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Leela Seth, Lawyer.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It all began with me wishing to be a nun, while I was in a convent catholic school. Back then, religion and spirituality were the same. The abnegation and sense of self-sacrifice displayed by the nuns was so inspiring to me. But my Hindu mother opposed it and she took me out of school. Later on, as I began reading more about science, I started questioning my blind belief in God. And today, I would describe myself as an agnostic, for whom spirituality is not connected to religion. It is more about my conscience, the spirit within that tells me what to do and who to be and which – if I listen enough – can provide me inner peace.

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

I used to think that everything in the world and in my life is God's will. I no longer do. But pure reason cannot explain everything either. So I am left wondering...

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

I never imagined I would become a lawyer or a judge. I had destined myself to become a Montessori teacher. But when my husband was posted abroad and I had a chance to study, I picked the one course that did not make it mandatory to attend classes, as I had to take care of a home and a child. And it happened to be law. So I stumbled on that career absolutely by chance. On the overall though, I would say that my life's purpose has been to make a difference in people's lives as much as I could, while loving and being loved, sharing and being nurtured, and one more important thing: cultivating hope.

What is spirituality for you in your day to day life?

To be a good human being, to cultivate my mind, to be in touch with beautiful things. Whenever possible, to fight for justice and help people. To love truth and fight to get it established wherever I see it.

What has been the role of spirituality in your life as a lawyer and judge?

Two things: always try and do my best in giving judgments and be as honest as possible. Law and justice are not always coinciding and as you aspire to follow your conscience, you sometimes have to stretch the law to find justice, which can be daunting at times.

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

I would not recall a specific experience. But some events do trigger some questioning. For instance, as my brother and his wife had lost their three children, my husband and I had a child specifically for them. They raised that girl so lovingly, but she too passed away, when she was 16. Why? Those things are too odd not to raise questions – is there a God, and if yes, is there any justice?

What have been your main spiritual inspirations?

During childhood, the Bible imbibed in school was intertwined with my mother's Hinduism, my best friend's Islam and the Brahmo Samaj's modern beliefs of the family we joined when my father passed away (I was then eleven). Later on, scientific reading prompted me to question it all, while my son's Buddhism has occasioned more thinking. So it has been a rich combination of influences.

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

I actually do not believe in the transmigration of souls. But had I to choose, I would want to be a woman, and able to have an impact. Indeed, I believe women have more inner strength – among others because they bear children – and can therefore generally endure pain with more equanimity. That gives them a lot of power to do things for others.

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

If You are all pervasive and powerful as some insist You are, why aren't You just and give enough to everybody?

What is your idea of happiness?

It is a combination of things: being surrounded by happy and cultivated family and friends, sharing my joys with them, while doing what I am good at – though I cannot change the entire world, at least I can try my best in my own sphere.