

Laila Tyabji

Founder of Dastkar

'I see life as a carpet being woven'

Sun Jun 21 2009



Laila Tyabji is the founder and Chair of Dastkar, a society aiming at improving the economic status of craftspeople, thereby promoting the survival of traditional crafts.

What does spirituality mean to you?

I never really think about it. I am a very practical person, very involved in the day-to-day aspects of life, without too much introspection. I used to introspect a lot when I was young, but now I feel it is a waste of time.

If I had to think about it though, I would say spirituality is about the awareness that however strong I am, there is something – both within and outside – stronger than me and without which I cannot function.

I am not at all conventionally religious. I do not practice most rituals, mainly because I find the way they have been distorted and interpreted so depressing. Too often they have become more important than the essence of religion. So even things I used to find beautiful as part of my culture, I now do not feel like practicing because they have become a sort of statement, a way of saying 'I am different from you, my way is better than yours' etc.

At the same time, I could not manage without a sense of something bigger than me, and being held by it in a way. I suppose this is spirituality to me. And I have a great sense that there is a larger pattern to life. Life is like a carpet being weaved, while we only are a little dot within it. We do not see ourselves in the overall pattern because we are too near it. So we question. For instance, "such a good person suffered so much –why?", or "she was just a child and died – why?" etc. In the carpet sometimes, a knot has to be sniffed off and nobody analyses why, was it an innocent or a wicked knot. Or it gets worn out because people are walking all over it all the time. The same goes with life.

How does this stronger force manifest in your life?

I do not think about it too much. But it is there. In fact it both is a source of strength and can lead to escapism: doing things up to a certain amount and then sitting back, floating because something else will be taking care of it.

Did you always have that certainty of a strong force?

I think so. I grew up in a very contrasting, old Muslim family. My father, who was a very sophisticated Oxford-educated ICS man, was quite religious in a practicing way. I think that somehow it was a mode of self-discipline for him. On the other hand, my mother, who came from a much more traditional home, was the one who rejected conventional religion. So as children we were never taught religion. The idea was that if we wanted it, we would come to it in our own way.

Yet culturally – with the food, the music, the festivals etc. – ours was a very Muslim home. We also observed the other Indian festivals like Diwali, Holi and so on. It was genuine secularism. Back then Indian society was much more inclusive, while today people are much more conscious about overtly doing things as a way of asserting their identity.

For many years, I was greeting people in a Muslim way, while if I were to do it today it would have a completely different meaning. Practicing certain rituals, wearing particular clothes is now a statement. So I often feel like not doing it, so as not to be part of that whole thing. At the same time it is sad that something which was so part of the composite culture of India, that made India so interesting, has now boiled down to being apologetic and so on. Basically, all religions seem to have gotten highjacked by their most narrow interpretations. Instead of a private decision, it has become about a deliberate statement – "I am X and I am different from you". It is more about the way I cut my beard, or wear my pajamas, or pray five times a day. And I definitely do not want to get involved in that.

Besides, I feel very irritated that since I do things differently, I am looked at so strangely – because I have short hair, because I do not wear a burqa, because I am not married etc., many do not consider me as a real Muslim. It really irritates me because I still feel quite Muslim. I do not think that those are the defining things about it. I feel I am a Muslim because this is the way I was brought up. I do not feel anything against Islam in its basic principles. But I have many problems with the way it is being interpreted today. Having read the Quran, and studied Islam, I know it is not the essence of it. Islam for instance was one of the first religions giving women rights such as property rights, the right to refuse marriage and so on. But now those very things, which were so progressive when the religion started, are interpreted in a way to say "no, women should ONLY get so much". Originally it was to protect a woman that a widow should marry her husband's brother, at a time when men were constantly being killed and there was a shortage of them. Now they are saying it MUST happen that way. And no one looks at it realizing that if the Prophet cared enough about women so many hundred

years ago, can you imagine what he would do today? All those kinds of things that were beautiful and compassionate are now interpreted in a narrow and violent way.

Do you still see a role for religions today, as they so often seem to create separation & violence?

Indeed, for someone who used to take religion for granted, I now feel it is almost something I do not want because it causes so much violence, pain and difference. Wiping them all off though would be too short-sighted. Because if you remove spirituality from people's lives there is a huge emptiness. And religions are supposed to lead people to spirituality. But if you take it out and focus only on rituals, then it would be much better without religions.

Unfortunately I do not think the world would function well without them. It needs them. Of course if you are philosophical enough to evolve your own spirituality then you can do without religion, but most people need a sort of pathway. And religion tells people what the path ought to be.

Then once again people confuse the journey with arrival and that is the main problem. We have all seen what happens to society when you remove religion altogether. The kind of consumerism we see today, the emptiness, the violence that many youth feel – it is because they have not found a comfortable way to address that thing which is other than themselves.

Recently for instance, I was in Baroda, looking at the Fine Arts students' final work. It was very disturbing to see the violence, the emptiness, the lack of beauty and tenderness emanating from their work. We all need some answers and guidance. And to find it, some go into violence, or extremism, or pay lip service to some religion.

Are there specific instances when you feel guided?

We all do, especially when feeling most vulnerable and depressed. It is as if some hand was coming and lifting you up, with the most unexpected thing showing up when you feel you just can't cope anymore.

I do feel things happen in the strangest ways, showing there is a larger pattern at play. It is too simplistic to think 'if I pray for something, it will appear', because this pattern is larger than us. So what we are asking for may be right for us but not for the larger pattern.

For instance, I never got married and was always happy that way. I was very busy working and always thought "not just now". Until I decided it was just not for me. All my friends were telling me "you are having a great time now, but wait until you get older, you will be so lonely, who will be looking after you? Now it is ok because you have lots of friends and lovers but later on it will be very tough". Most of those friends actually had quite unhappy marriages.

I was looking after my father during the age of 40 and 50, and then began to think that I may indeed become lonely. Then suddenly came a young girl. She just wrote to me one day, we then became very close friends and sort of adopted each other – she being like my perfect daughter. She lives with me, she is caring and lovely, she is there for me at a time when most of my friends' children have gone, and are all over the world.

I would have never dreamt of such a thing. Had you asked me if I would have wanted a daughter I would have said "God no, I am too independent!" Even the thought of a long-term relationship in my

youth used to give me claustrophobia. And this happened most organically, without my thinking or even realizing we were getting so close and she was becoming a daughter to me. So I think that in life, if you let yourself flow with it, things just happen.

Of course we should think, and introspect and not be just stupid assuming that things will happen without us playing a part in it. But at the same time we should let ourselves flow with the tide. We should be open to things that happen. And not just say I decided this is how things will be.

Another example is the way I ended up with Dastkar. I started off life studying fine arts, thinking I would be an artist with a capital A, feeling that business, running an office, management etc. were definitely not for me, were "bellow me". But again without my realizing it, life took me into running a staff of 20-odd people, working with about 20,000 crafts people all over India who are like an extended family to me, putting together business plans, strategizing and so on. All those things that I would have never thought I would do, let alone enjoy. And I do wake up in the morning, thinking what a fantastic day ahead!

Actually, do you think there is a specific purpose to our lives?

We are definitely part of a larger pattern but within that context, I am not assuming that every human being is here to make a permanent mark on his time. There can be a lot of blank dots as well. And we do not need to create some masterpiece, run a country, make some huge scientific discovery. Just a happy memory that someone has of me would be enough. My mother for instance died more than 30 years ago but she is still so alive in me, in so many small & large ways. In fact, it is impossible for people's lives not to affect each other. And I think that is what it is all about. It is as silly to think one is so important, as to think it is irrelevant how we live our lives.

How did the shift from arts to crafts take place?

Two things happened. First, I went to Japan after school and there, I really liked how being an artist was not with a capital A. You could be a basket maker doing it in the best of your abilities and be respected just as much. And I loved the way they put so much of themselves in everyday's things. I came back to India at the age of 20 still thinking I would be an artist with a capital A. Yet, I had unconventional ideas of living on my own with the money I would earn. I came to Delhi, rented a little barsati and had to find ways to pay the bills. I started odd jobs, including design jobs and gradually discovered that what I genuinely loved was doing things with others, that people could use. And not just doing some painting isolated from everyone else.

Besides, the Delhi art world back then—in the late sixties, early seventies—was very, very closed. There were hardly any galleries and very few people attending them. It felt like a closed world. And I did not have that burning feeling of needing to be an artist. Gradually, the assignments I got became more and more crafts' related. Among others, I was sent to Kash in order to work with craftspeople and document their craft. There, working in the villages, I became aware of the extraordinary skills people had yet they could not make any money out of it. That was the genesis of what I do now.

Then I came back to Delhi and in quite random circumstances became in charge of creating the shopping area of the newly built Taj Mansingh. Because of its location in Lutyens Delhi, they were not allowed to rent shops to other people. It was a great success from day one. On the second floor, I wanted to have very large plants. I found some beautiful baskets in the Assam emporium. It turned out people were buying them in a frenzy. But Mr. Kerkar, the Chairman of Indian Hotels, asked me to stop

selling them because the profit per square meter was way too low. The Assam emporium also wanted to interrupt the delivery, because it was too cumbersome to bring those baskets from Assam.

I was struck by the absurdity of the situation: villagers were making those baskets and needed to sell them to make a living. People in Delhi were extremely keen to buy them. Yet, there was a disconnect in the delivery chain between the two. That is how the idea of Dastkar came in – as an organization linking the two ends of the chain.

In the ups and downs of life, where is your anchor?

There are for sure both ups and down. Seeing for instance how we changed the lives of so many people is a high – just as an example, watching women who could barely survive, now having paka houses, educating their children, looking after their own health and so on.

On the other hand, thinking that we may work with 20,000 people but there are 14 million craftspeople in India! Most of them have amazing skills and earn less than the minimum wage. Then it feels like I have done almost nothing.

So the only way is to go on doing what I can do, undisturbed by the larger picture. Otherwise I would end up doing nothing. India is so complex, so full of problems and challenges; it is very easy to feel quite helpless. So being a bit of an ostriche, digging and digging – that is the way.

In the end, my real anchor is the individual. I try to separate this mass of so many billions into small faces of people I know and recognize, with small objectives, step by step. And certainly the kind of love I get back, the feeling of being part of something that has made a difference, is of great help. If I were going on and on seeing no change, it would be very difficult to continue. But it is not the case.

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

I would not want to ask anything, because I like to keep it as a bit of mystery. And He knows His business best.

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

I would like to be myself but in my parents' generations rather than mine. It was such an exciting time, when India was making itself new, when there was such a feeling of hope. I would have much rather been part of that venture, rather than dealing with some of the decisions made then with which we are stuck today – and with which I have quite a lot of problems.

But in reality, I do not feel here is such a thing as a soul, reincarnation and so on.

What is your idea of happiness?

I am happy most of the time, touch wood. And it can be so many things – being with people I love, listening to some great piece of music, seeing some amazing work of art, kicking off my shoes and sinking into my bed at the end of an intense day. Basically, happiness is a sense of being in the right place, at the right time.