

Nayantara Sahgal

Author

'I am a natural believer'

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Nayantara Sahgal, Author.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It is the third component of a person's make-up. There is the physical, the mental and the spiritual. The spiritual looks beyond the five senses, it is concerned with yearnings we have and that sometimes we cannot put a name on.

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

I believe we are responsible for our own actions but at the same time that there is a universal intelligence and consciousness. This intelligence impacts my life in the sense that it gives me the feeling I am not alone. When passing through very troubled times – and it has often happened in my life – I

rid myself of the responsibility. I just tell whoever is out there "You look after it now, I cannot bear it anymore". Then it is gone for me, I have passed on the responsibility, I can go through the ordeal. But I do not believe in a controlling destiny, or a force ordaining it all. We control our own journey and we reap whatever we sow. Whatever energy is out there only exists to help us in the same way Krishna is always shown as Arjun's charioteer but would not do the fighting; Arjun had to do the fighting. And on the overall, I have to say that my life has gone through many turbulent times. My parents and my uncle Nehru – who lived with us and was really like a third parent to me – were always in and out of jail. I then had a tempestuous marriage and divorce before living for several years with the man I would later marry. This was extremely unconventional back then and it was not easy, especially as I am not a flamboyant person by nature, I do not like to have all eyes on me. Besides, I had to raise three children without any support because I had nothing from my first husband. So I faced emotional ups and downs and financial hardship, which in fact forced me to write, especially for newspapers, and become a political columnist. But I do not worry about the cause of all those turbulences; I just know I have had a very full life, and never a dull moment. Sometimes I would long for it to be dull, to know that tomorrow will be like today. But it has not happened yet.

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

When I was a child, the mission was very clear: I would grow up and go to jail, the same way my parents did. There was no other way to be. Those were really idealistic times. I was taught I should build up my mind and body strongly enough to face the struggle when my turn would come. Of course it didn't, as Independence happened. But this unusual childhood is what propelled me into writing. I wanted to capture it almost as a magical time instead of it just becoming another page in history books. And so I wrote my first book, *Prison in Chocolate Cake*. And from then it went on. I usually start with a character or a situation or an atmosphere and once a story takes a hold of me, it unfolds as a process by itself. I equate it to pregnancy: you become pregnant, then the process carries on. It is a wonderful sensation when it happens because you feel as though words are pouring out of you. At times you even write things you would not have thought of saying but they simply are there, and you flow with it.

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

It is the impact you have on the world, on your friends, the way you react to different things. And it would be for others to say. In terms of daily practice, I have been meditating for a number of years. It is a way to focus the mind, to sharpen my concentration, to be more efficient and alert in every possible way.

What is the role of spirituality in your writing?

I would say it is for the reader to define.

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

There was not a particular event: I had yearnings for something beyond the five senses since I was a child. And my environment was encouraging it on one level with my grand-mother's and great-aunt's devotion and on the other with my uncle and parents search for something beyond the material side. Because for sure there was no material reward in what they were doing. And one thought it was the most wonderful way to live, that there was no other way. So in those two approaches, there was a

common longing for something beyond oneself, an idea to reach outside oneself like reaching for the stars, and every person would do it in their own way.

What are your spiritual inspirations?

By far I would first and foremost mention my uncle Nehru. He was the greatest influence on my life and on my writing. And although he did not call himself religious, he was in a way one of the most religious people I have ever known. His absolute integrity, the devotion to his ideals, his service to humanity – what else is religion? The fact that he would not go to a temple or a mosque to worship does not make for religion. Besides, the atmosphere at home was tremendously open. While Nehru and my parents were agnostic and so open-minded, my grand-mother and her sister were deeply religious. Every morning I would gather the flowers for my great-aunt's puja and sit with her while she was praying. And I loved it. At the same time I would go to a convent school where I prayed to Virgin Mary. And I would spend long hours with our Muslim tailor who would pray five times a day. So on the overall, it was a harmonious household where people could believe or not as they wish, and where the chief bonds were love and respect. One learnt then that religion is something that matters in the life of people but that one would choose later on when old enough. And I chose to be a believer. I believe in fairy tales, Santa Claus, love, marriage, you name it! I have believed in all of it. Some of it has let me down at times but I am a natural born believer.

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

I am enjoying this life so much that I do not want to think of the next one! I am having such a full life, every turn of the corner brings me something interesting or exciting. So I am happy here and now. Reincarnation though is something I cannot discount. I do not believe in the Christian idea of heaven and hell. Rebirth seems to be the most sensible explanation I have come across. Things do not work out over a lifetime but several. And it is also the only way to explain evil.

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

Make it a better world!

What is your idea of happiness?

Being in love! It could be a very passionate devotion to a goal or an ideal, or a driving passion that lights up your life, but there is no substitute to being in love with a person. So many writers have written about it, it is a little bit like a disease, but it is when you function at your peak, mentally, physically, emotionally. It is the highest you can achieve as a human being. So what could be better than that?