

Aida Santos

Spirituality and Activism: Drawing a Connection



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Despite all the discourses on the matter, ultimately, spirituality is something very personal. And as for women activists only too conscious of the reality of a patriarchal, unjust society that they spend 24 hours a day trying to change, can they continue fighting for gender and social justice, be effective, and at the same time be spiritual? Luz Maria Martinez of Isis International spoke to Aida Santos, one of the leading feminists in the Philippines. Aida is director of Women's Education, Development, Productivity and Research Organization (WEDPRO), an organization that tackles women's issues, a poet, a writer and a mother to two grown children. She shares her thoughts on spirituality, feminism and activism, on the tensions that inevitably arise when she tries to make the tangible and intangible connect.

"I am not a person into meditation or yoga and things like that even though I believe in their practical reasons. I have no concept of karma. I have always located personal pains, personal journeys and all social injustice within the concept of feminist and class struggles and capitalism."

Aida lights herself a cigarette, settles herself, then proceeds with her definition of spirituality. "Spirituality is a deep sense of yourself, a deep attempt to know yourself in relation to others, including your environment and the systems that surround you. It arises out of a realization that there are untapped aspects of ourselves we need to look into—such as our thought processes, symbolisms, the rituals we have in our daily lives, the way we deal with intimate relationships—whether they are sexual or non-sexual."

Eco-feminism has given Aida a political framework where she can connect spirituality, the environment and feminism as part of a development issue. She sees the role spirituality plays in women trying to make the connection between their environment and experiences. But while she appreciates this link and finds a certain "allure" to it, she would be the first to acknowledge the tension in dividing time between self-reflection and the demands and responsibilities a woman activist faces.

THE OTHER AGENDA

"I want to be very careful," she says. "If I get deeper and deeper into [self-reflection], I may lose touch with the real world. Those rituals are very introspective, they tend to take away your mind or concentration from the realities around you. You become self-centered,

and I don't mean this in a negative way. I mean a centering within yourself. I went through a stage of being self-engaged myself, which gave some inner peace though it also tended to make me detached from the very political events.

"I have some very real fears when I see some women who practice spirituality in different forms and molds while looking at the world with cynicism. Their visioning becomes for the other world, the other dimensions. There is value and virtue there, I suppose. You begin to look forward to the other world, which is less nasty, less unjust. But it's also a kind of forward visioning that could detach you from the present realities."

"Another fear I would have is that of being neutral in the sense that I would always see something good in every person, that everything would seem good. I know that when you look through the lens of class, some people are nasty

me. The one leading the group, a dear friend, told us all to close our eyes. The idea was for each one to concentrate their energies toward me. We were asked to think of a white light beaming toward me and healing me. Shortly after, we were supposed to open our eyes and share with the rest the visions we saw. One said she saw flashes of color just like a *fiesta* and white light enveloping me. The rest had very similar visions to share. My turn came. I said, 'Yes, I saw a white light, but I will be very honest with you. While I was seeing this white light, I was also very anxious that the bread in the oven is burning.' Of course it was wonderful to see friends so caring and concerned but just then I realized that the image of white I saw was the white loaf of bread I was afraid was burning in the oven.

"If I was to sit down and watch the moon with no other agenda than to watch the moon,

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by virtue of their class, by their self-interest. I do believe that humanity is essentially good, but we are constructed by the world. If the world is nasty, unless you are very well balanced, you get caught in the trap of trying to survive. These were my thoughts for many years. If I give so much time for self-centering, then I'd be taking time away from the world. It's a constant battle.

"I think spirituality makes a woman more aware of herself. The only anxiety I have is when that self becomes disengaged with the day-to-day struggle.

Aida recalls a time when she was very ill and some friends from the NGO community and women's organizations visited her to do a ritual of healing. They formed a little circle around

I am sure that after a certain point, my agenda would flash through my head and I would think, 'Oh Jesus Christ, it's eight o'clock! The moon is beautiful but I have a deadline and must finish this task by ten tonight.' For me, there's just no denying the reality of being a woman with all the multiple burdens and constraints women have or of simply being a poor person trying to earn some income.

A SOCIAL DEFINITION OF "SPIRITUAL"

It becomes clear that Aida has an essentially "social" definition of spirituality. While embarking on a search for inner peace and calmness may be seductive, she would still not be able to find this peace if the others around her do not have peace as well. She leans for-

ward and says, "Another form of spirituality is when a person can leave behind the lure of a lucrative career after a good academic education, the promise of a good salary, fun weekends and other material benefits, even a great, satisfying sexual life. Spirituality could also mean leaving all those behind to join an underground movement that is so inconstant, that poses danger all the way, all the time, that makes you sever ties with family, friends and partner, so that you can work for this sometimes abstract notion of the masses, the poor. This is difficult



in itself, especially when you were not so hard up or marginalized yourself.

"To be inspired just by a vision, a cause, that there is a mass of people who are not as well off as you are. You leave material possessions and the prospect of a good life behind, without any promise even of getting a parish, as in the case of priest, or the promise of being with sisters, as with nuns, without an assurance of spiritual liberation at the end of your life even. About the only promise your activism holds for you, and it may not even happen in your generation, is that there will be less injustice. That is so abstract and perhaps one of the most spiritual things a person can do."

FEMINIST TREND

Aida attributes the spirituality that has become increasingly appealing in feminist circles to the feminists' heightened awareness of themselves in relation to the environment and the people around them. This, she adds, also serves as their expression of who they are and their milieu in light of the changing political environment.

"A friend of mine told me I could have a third eye if I wanted to. My own interpretation of the third eye is that we women are basically intuitive because of our conditioning. We have been so silenced that a lot of our pains, as well as the thinking we do, is intuitive. When you have been in [a revolutionary] movement and imprisoned, you do develop a third eye—you

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become very keen of danger. I know that my keenness of intuition was developed particularly in the underground and in prison. Everyday was a life-and-death matter. If every single day, not only your own life but that of your comrades, friends and loved ones hang in the balance, you become very keen to your surroundings and to your own feelings and your fears. I know how it feels when you don't know what will happen but you want to be able to take certain actions. I don't know if that is being spiritual, maybe that's just a keenness to your environment."

"Spirituality has come about in the women's movement as a way to find our roots, as in terms of the *babaylan* tradition, and to explain to men the status we had in our pre-colonial past. But beyond that, what do we do? After learning of the role, functions and significance of the *babaylans*, not just in terms of the political but

the economic, community and spiritual dimensions, what do we do with this knowledge? We can not turn back to babaylans, that would be a kind of primitivism, a romanticism of the past.

"Maybe the rise of spirituality is a manifestation of the need of women in particular to look for meaning and explanations to the things happening to themselves and the people around them, to explain the world. With my generation, we looked at the world through mass activism, joined the underground to fight the dictatorship or the parliament of the streets. What may have happened was after the Marcos dictatorship, the enemy was no longer as stark, some were lured, magnetized by the charm, mysticism and peace of spirituality. They have gone into rituals, meditation, the like, because it is their way of interpreting the world, the milieu, which is quite though not all that different from my generation's."

Spirituality may bring about tranquility and centering, Aida is certain she does not want to lose nor temper her passion for advocacy of women's rights.

"I ask myself, if I become a spiritual person just as some of my friends and colleagues have turned out, will I still have that fire and passion, the intensity to speak against injustices? Or will I have calmed down my soul? What if I do speak of injustices, but my words are so controlled? Several deeply spiritual friends whom I dearly love are women whose disposition is very calm. Agitation does not come quickly to them. They have a very measured way of looking at things. A great part of me is not very calm nor very measured. I think that I am a person with such intensities. That's not to say I don't want to be less intense. I think deep inside, as we mature, we feel the need to be less intense. You cannot keep raging. There are moments you must stop to smell the flowers."

"But I also want this rage . . . We have to awaken to the injustices around us. I think you cannot live a spiritual world when you interact with so much passion, all the time, with the chaos of the world."

Maybe I'm stereotyping, but I've noticed that a lot of my friends who are in the self-reflective mode are also very slow, specially in the way

they talk. They have to ensure that they will not say anything that will hurt. But there are also times when I say, "Well, this is going to hurt because it has to hurt."

Aida enjoys burning incense, lighting candles and having flowers but these do not necessarily make one spiritual.

"My grandmother is very spiritual. She does not take her spirituality from somewhere else, she lives it. For example, at six in the evening, she burns a candle and has to meditate. She calls it prayer, others may even call it superstition, but she has to meditate anyway—nobody can distract her from that. During death anniversaries of kin and friends, she simply offers a prayer, she doesn't have any symbolic ritual. But with some of us, if we have to deal with things like that, we have to have these elements of symbols.

"Maybe that is why I have a resistance to the "ritual" kind of spirituality. If I were to be spiritual, I would want this spirituality to be part of my life as a norm, not as ritual. When I wake up, I do something because I have to do it, because I will feel that something has been taken away from me if I don't. I would not want to have to do something simply because it symbolizes my spirituality."

Aida is one of the most talented, published women writers and poets in the Philippines. Her poetry, she says, is her connection and journey to her inner self. "I used to write poetry as if it was flowing out of me, but I can't anymore. I am now sort of disengaged. To find that back, I have to re-establish some connection between myself and poetry. For me, writing poetry is a very spiritual thing and an aspect of spirituality I am most comfortable with. Writing poetry is really dealing with yourself and how you crystallize your experience, your knowledge, your wisdom and understanding of events and people. It is a moving forward from imaging to visioning."

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