

# Writing helped me connect with my soul: Paulo Coelho

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Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho (Reuters Photo)

*Paulo Coelho was sent to a mental institution at the age of seventeen. He was kidnapped and tortured because he believed in free expression. Then he walked the Road to Santiago, a journey which changed his life and continues to change the lives of millions. In an e-mail interview to Indiatimes News Network, the author says that he is still searching himself...*

**Who is the Coelho lesser known?**

I am searching him.

**Your books seem to have been written at a transcendental level. Are you always in that state**

**of mind?**

Mind you, they are written with the same state of mind that I am giving this interview to you. I'm first and foremost a writer. I followed my personal legend, my childhood dream of becoming a writer but I can't say why I'm one. It's as if you asked me why do we dream. Why do we do what we do? I believe in my case writing was the best way in found in order to connect with my soul and others. Therefore, instead of being transcendental, I need to live fully my human condition.

**Do you think your readers can always absorb the messages you wish to give?**

I can't consciously explain how people feel after reading my books. All is too personal. What I can say is that all my characters are searching for their souls, because they are my mirrors. I'm someone who is constantly trying to understand my place in the world and literature is the best way that I found in order to see myself. I believe that we are constantly experiencing transformation and that's why we need to let life guide us. That's what the main character in *The Zahir*, for instance, does: he runs the world in order to discover himself. The physical journey mimics the psychological one in the sense that it's only through this experience that he is able to grasp the deeper meaning of his life, the reason for his wanderings.

**Your craft is simple and unforced. It seems you're trying to share messages rather than writing books. Is that so?**

I am writing books. Messages we can summarize in sentences and postcards.

**How difficult was it to write *Eleven Minutes* , for it was your first book that dealt with a subject as harsh as prostitution? How difficult was it to bring out the soul in a character immersed in such a life? Have you ever experienced such sexual awakening yourself?**

I was in Switzerland during a book signing and met a reader that started to talk to me about the relation between body and soul. We talk a lot and the next day I invited her for a coffee. When we met at this café I had the feeling that I was in front of a story. Her story, and the story of other prostitutes that I interviewed during the writing process, gave me the background against which I created Maria.

It's curious how I start the book saying, "Once upon a time there was a prostitute called Maria". It's a contradiction because I'm juxtaposing a child's tale with the harshness of an adult theme – prostitution. But I believe this is a true reflection of our lives. We always have a foot in the abyss and another in paradise. To know how to walk along the razor's edge is a challenge. Sex is all about this fragile equilibrium.

**In *Veronika decides to Die* , you talk of a young girl who wants to end her life even though she practically has everything that would define a 'good life'. This story well portrays the life of many today. So how must one get away from the troubles of one's daily grind without getting away from a practical day-to-day life itself?**

There's a motto in *Alchemy* : "Concentrate and dissolve". As you may know alchemists would, through laboratory studies, try to distill the mercury from the sulphur and then refine the mercury until it converted into gold. This quest would lead them to the Philosopher Stone (which was the solid component) and the Long Life Elixir. All the process of distilling is based on this very simple motto: concentrate – meaning extracting the essence – and dissolve – meaning mixing the essence with something else.

Through this routine, alchemists were also training their patience and thus transforming their perception of the world. I think you can apply this same motto to life and love: in order to preserve love's freedom, one has to be able at the same time to dive into its essence and to share it others.

**If a random reader came up to you one day and requested you to allow him/her to have the honour of spending an entire day with you, what would you say?**

"Thank you. It is my honour".

**You believe that "what matters most to the author is the honesty with which a book is written": Honesty to the self, the reader, the subject or all the three?**

Honesty to yourself. Writing is sharing yourself as you are, not to please others.

**Is your writing never swayed by personal interpretations that may often be biased**

### **or illogical?**

Of course it is. Coherence is to be obliged to think tomorrow the same thing that you are thinking today. My literature is much more the result of a paradox than that of an implacable logic, typical of police novels. The paradox is the tension that exists in my soul. Like in archery, the paradox is the bow that can be both tense and relaxed. I know that it's important to have values in life, but I've always been more drawn to incoherence, because life is not static but rather like the tides, coming and going.

### **What does love personally mean to you?**

Heaven with a pitfall to hell in the middle of it.

### **How can one be open to the divine inspiration that you always seem so full of?**

I'm profoundly human and I'm constantly fascinated about people and how they deal with themselves, others, circumstances. It's not difficult to see that there's no pattern, that at the end of the day everyone does and feels things differently. There's a story from the desert priests that illustrates exactly that (and probably you also have an Indian version of it):

The monk Lucas was walking through a village accompanied by a disciple. An old man asked the man from Scete:

- Holy man, how can I come closer to God?
- Enjoy yourself. Praise the Creator with your joy - was the reply.

The two went on their way. Just then, a young man came over.

- What must I do to come closer to God?
- Enjoy yourself less - said Lucas.

When the young man left, the disciple commented:

- It seems to me that you are not sure whether or not one should enjoy oneself.
- A spiritual journey is a bridge with no railings across an abyss - replied Lucas, - If someone is too near the right hand side, I tell him 'left a bit!' If he approaches the left side, I say 'right a bit!' The extremes veer us away from the Path."

### **If you had to leave writing for one thing in life, what would it be?**

"If" is not a word that exists in my dictionary. I am who I am. I can't answer this question because it's impossible to guess such an answer without the experience: in the end all would be pointless divagations. As Ortega Y Gasset once said "I am myself and my circumstances". I can only speak about what I've been through, my story... not conjectures.

### **Do you have any inclination or desire to come to India sometime?**

Yes, but not to promote a book, just to wander in your magnificent country

**Indians are diehard fans of your writing. They consider it spiritual and enlightening in an otherwise maddening world. Any words for your admirers here? Also, will you be visiting the country sometime in near future?**

Yes, but not to promote a book, just to wander in your magnificent country. When I go to India, by the end of the year, please invite me for a coffee, for your parties, etc. The only way I can get to know a country is through its people.