

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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Let the beauty we love be what we do¹
For Coleman Barks. I am at your feet.

Come, come, whoever you are.
 Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving.
 It doesn't matter.
 Ours is not a caravan of despair.
 Come, even if you have broken your vow
 a thousand times.
 Come, yet again, come, come.

That's Rumi, the Persian poet; Rumi, who, 800 years after his birth in what we now know as Afghanistan, is, today, the best-selling poet in the United States.

In a recent National Public Radio program entitled "Rumi: The Poet at 800," Professors and Islamic scholars James Morris and Fatemeh Keshavarz said something to Tom Ashbrook that stunned me with my own ignorance. Eighty percent of the Muslim world, they said, became Islamic after poets and musicians carried Rumi's work there. In every place but the Arab world - where, in 1924, the discovery of oil and the conquering of the peninsula changed everything - in every place but the Arab world, Rumi is the face of Islam ... the *mainstream* face of Islam.²

Who was this man? He was a poet, yes, but "he was also the head of an academy, a judge..., and a philosopher.... [His] genius [was] in his capacity for love and his power to give it poetic expression."³ He wrote,

¹ Rumi, "Let the beauty we love be what we do. // There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground."

² Professor James Morris, professor of theology at Boston College, and Fatemeh Keshavarz, professor at Washington University, interviewed by Tom Ashbrook on NPR's "On Point." *The Poet Rumi at 800*, October 5, 2007

³ Huston Smith, "Introduction," *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks, p. xv

Gamble everything for love,
if you're a true human being.

If not, leave
this gathering.

Half-heartedness doesn't reach
into majesty. You set out
to find God, but then you keep
stopping for long periods
at mean-spirited roadhouses.⁴

“Love is the religion,” he said, “the universe its book.” “Putting aside duality, I have seen that this world and the next are one. I seek the One, I know the One, I see the One, I invoke the One.”

Rumi has something very important to teach us about the power of *longing* to connect with our deepest and highest selves, and with our individual and collective capacity to wake up,⁵ to love, and to live a fully awakened, engaged life.

He writes,

I was sleeping, and being comforted
by a cool breeze, when suddenly a gray dove
from a thicket sang and sobbed with longing,
and reminded me of my own passion.

I had been away from my own soul so long,
so late-sleeping, but that dove's crying
woke me and made me cry. *Praise*
to all early-waking grievers!⁶

Poet Coleman Barks, Rumi's principle translator, explains, “... Exiled [from Afghanistan] early in life by the Mongol invasions ... Rumi [was educated in Damascus⁷ and] lived most of his life in ... Turkey, which, in the

⁴ibid, pp. 193-194

⁵ Professor James Morris, interview, NPR's “On Point.” *The Poet Rumi at 800*, October 5, 2007

⁶ *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks, p. xxiii

⁷ ibid

13th century, was a meeting-point for many cultures at the western end of the Silk Road, a connective node for Christian, Islamic, Hindu, and even Buddhist worlds. [He] weaves elements from these traditions into a whole, a single energy.”⁸

Here is his poem “Only Breath.”

Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu,
Buddhist, Sufi, or Zen. Not any religion

or cultural system. I am not from the East
or the West, nor out of the ocean or up

from the ground, not natural or ethereal, not
composed of elements at all. I do not exist,

am not an entity in this world or the next,
did not descend from Adam and Eve or any

origin story. My place is placeless, a trace
of the traceless. Neither body or soul.

I belong to the beloved, have seen the two
worlds as one and that one call to and know,

first, last, outer, inner, only that
breath breathing human being.

Here’s a little background on Rumi, from Huston Smith, a preeminent scholar of religious studies:

“Islamic mysticism is known as Sufism ... and it is not misleading to think of the Sufis as impatient Muslims. Every Muslim [seeks to] meet God eventually, but Sufis want [God] stage center in this very life. This takes effort, and those who undertook it attracted followers who acknowledged them as their *sheikhs*, or masters, and formed Sufi Orders around them. Rumi’s father was such a *sheikh* in [what is] now ... Turkey, and when he died, his son succeeded him. Rumi’s creativity was too great to fit the existing mold,

⁸ John Moyne and Coleman Barks, from the Introduction to *Unseen Rain: Quatrains of Rumi*

however, and it gave rise to a new lineage ...[that] became famous for the sacred dance that was its central practice.... [Rumi's] followers came to be known as Whirling Dervishes.... [Dervish means 'doorway.']

“... After Rumi's poetry..., [his dance] is his other great legacy.... Far from easy, the dance requires months of practice in which [novices wedge] a large, exposed floor nail between the big and second toes of [their] left foot, and [pivot] around it with both arms extended, one palm cupped upward to receive God's grace and the other overturned to empty that grace onto the world after it has coursed through [them]. In the actual [ritual], each dancer sees [their] own face in that of others, as twirling faces flash like mirrors, reflecting one another.... The protracted mirroring loosens the [dancers'] identification with [their] own individuality, making it, too, seem flickering and chimerical.

“The dancers are positioned in a large circle that revolves slowly clockwise. The first half of its gyration symbolizes creation, the arc of descent in which the universe pours forth from God. When that semicircular outpouring is accomplished, the *sheikh* enters. This is the moment when night changes into dawn, and the sun rises. Face-to-face with their spiritual master, the dancers now reverse their circle's movement to return to its starting point, which, metaphysically, is Allah.”⁹

Here is Rumi's poem, *The Guest House*.

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
[They] may be clearing you out

⁹ Huston Smith, *op cit*, pp. xii - xiii

for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.¹⁰

“A man in prison [was] sent a prayer rug by his friend. What he had wanted ... was a file or a crowbar or a key! But he began using the rug, doing five-times prayer before dawn, at noon, mid-afternoon, after sunset, and before sleep. Bowing, sitting up, bowing again, he [noticed] an odd pattern in the weave of the rug, just at the *qibla*, the point where his head [touched]. He [studied and meditated] on [the] pattern, gradually discovering that it [was] a diagram of the lock that [confined] him in his cell and [a picture of how it could be opened.] At last, he was able to escape.”

Keep knocking
and the joy inside
will eventually open a window
and look out to see who's there.

The lesson is that, through spiritual practice, through devotion, we open our lives to the deepest spiritual truths. The opening is freedom.¹¹

Sufis seek that freedom, which they name as union with God, through three practices of mysticism: Ecstatic union, Noetic (or intellectual) union, and Love union. Rumi had an extraordinary experience of all three practices, which was deepened and heightened by his relationship with a “wandering dervish [named] Shams of Tabriz, who had traveled throughout the Middle East searching and praying for someone who could, [he said] ‘endure my company.’”¹² It's impossible to speak of Rumi without speaking of this relationship.

¹⁰ *The Essential Rumi*, p. 109

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 253

¹² *ibid*, p. xvii

“Rumi was thirty-seven when he met Shams in 1244, Shams about sixty. Up until then, Rumi had been a fairly traditional mystic [which, I know, sounds like a contradiction in terms, but traditional in the sense that he was] one of a long line of scholars and theologians. Shams literally took Rumi’s books, his intellectual brilliance, and threw them into a well, to show him how he needed to *live* what he’d been reading.

“[Over the next four years,] the two of them went into week-long periods of *sohbet*, mystical conversation and merging.... [Then,] on the night of December 5th, 1248, as Rumi and Shams were talking, Shams was called to the back door. He went out, never to be seen again.”¹³ The legend varies, but it appears that eventually, jealous followers – possibly Rumi’s son – murdered Shams. Rumi was devastated.

But in his poems, inspired by the celebration of their meeting and the grief of their parting, we hear their conversation continue. Rumi’s beloved, spiritual friend becomes his capital-F Friend, one and the same with the divine. He writes,

Why should I seek? I am the same as
he. His essence speaks through me.
I have been looking for myself!¹⁴

I want to say a little more about the three practices of mysticism. Which one calls to you?

First, in “ecstatic union ... [the] mystic is elevated to a state of consciousness that is so completely occupied with God, no room remains for [individuality].

“Sufis honor their ecstasies, but [believe that] too much time vacationing [in heaven, as it were,] can divert us from duties at hand. Sufis refer to their ecstasies, affectionately, as spiritual drunkards who hang out in God’s tavern.

“It’s 4 a.m. Nasruddin leaves the tavern and walks the town, aimlessly. A police [officer] stops him. ‘Why are you out wandering the streets in the

¹³ *Unseen Rain*, “Introduction”

¹⁴ *The Essential Rumi*, p. xviii

middle of the night?’ ‘Sir,’ replies Nasruddin, ‘if I knew the answer to that question, I would have been home hours ago!’”¹⁵

The expectation is that the ecstasies of the ecstasies “will transform [them], returning [them] to the world a better person....

[Second, in noetic or intellectual union,] “Sufis seek to know God not through factual knowledge, ... but *intuitively*.... Noetic knowledge is more like seeing than thinking.... It has the advantage over ecstasy in occurring within this world, not beyond it. The world remains in view with its significance recognized.”

Coleman Barks writes of noetic union, “The sudden opening of one’s eyes to the elaborate, extravagant beauty around us.... The gorgeous dirt road down to the river. Three hundred million galaxies. The gold around a frog’s eye. The intricacy of the present moment, all the wealth we need. Rumi feels this abundance, and his gratitude for it pours out the waterfall of his work.

“It may be that the clarity Rumi calls ‘reason’ is a brilliant lawfulness ... the coherence in any system, and that the mystic and the scientist both attend the same, layered intelligence: the grand and precise artistry of existence.”¹⁶

Rumi writes,

This now is it. *This*. Your deepest need and desire
is satisfied by the *moment’s* energy
here in your hand.

Third, in love union, we see the poet Rumi most clearly.

Birdsong brings relief
to my longing [he writes].

I am just as ecstatic as they are,
but with nothing to say!

Please, universal soul, practice

¹⁵ibid, p. 1

¹⁶ ibid, p. 145

some song, or something, through me!¹⁷

“Rumi’s ability to ring the changes on love [seems] to be inexhaustible.... [He was] particularly attuned to [the experience of] longing. In Rumi’s hand, the reed flute became something of an icon for ... [the] pangs of separation. The lament of the flute - hollow, empty, torn from its riverbank, and in all ways symbolic of the soul’s severance from the divine - threw Rumi into states of agitation and bewilderment.... [Nevertheless], the poet assures us, our human love is returned....”

I have lived on the lip
of insanity, wanting to know reasons,
knocking on a door. It opens.
I’ve been knocking from the inside!¹⁸

Five hundred of Rumi’s poems end with the word *khamush*, meaning silence. He continually asks, “Who’s making this music?”¹⁹

Rumi died at the age of 65 on December 17th, 1273. “... Representatives of every major religion came to his funeral. In the midst of the crusades and violent sectarian conflict, he said, ‘I go into the Muslim mosque and the Jewish synagogue and the Christian church, and I see one altar.’”²⁰

Stay together, friends [he wrote].
Don’t scatter and sleep.

Our friendship is made
of being awake.²¹

Today, “there’s a game that’s remembered in Iran called *moshaereh*, which means ‘being in company with poetry.’ One person says a line from Rumi, then the next person must begin a Rumi line with the word [with which the first person ended]. And so on for hours, ... [weaving] together the fabric of community and [keeping] it [holy]....”²²

¹⁷ *ibid*, p. 243

¹⁸ *ibid*, p. 281

¹⁹ *ibid*, p. 17

²⁰ *ibid*, p. 246

²¹ *ibid*, p. 247

²² *ibid*, p. 246

My spiritual companions, may we, too, know a friendship of picking up a new line of poetry where the old one ends, a friendship made of being awake: a spiritual friendship. May we live a faith that honors one altar. May we long, and seek, and find the key to union with the divine, hidden in plain sight. And may our lives be a dance of opening our hands to receive grace, and pouring it out on the world.