



Rumi Teaches Blog Posts: 2015

by nashid fareed-ma'at

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INTRODUCTION

(from *Rumi Teaches Blog Posts: 2013 - 2014*)

In 2013, I started the *Rumi Teaches* blog. As much as there is some mainstream interest in Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi, much of it tends to reduce him to just a mystic poet. The majority of mainstream portrayals of him take him out of the context of Islam, and even less acknowledge the deeper purpose of his work to arrive at the station of realizing the Beloved, the Absolute. To address this poignant gap in how Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi is presented, I was moved to utilize this blog. Sharing guidance and lessons I received, the blog posts seek to inspire a more wholistic approach to reading and applying what Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi taught through his poetry, stories, and words. As the blog continued for over a year, a question arose of what to do with the growing collection of posts, especially since at times the blog focused on specific themes that might be useful in a collected format.

To this end, I present the original posts as they were posted in a book form. I chose not to re-edit any of the posts, partly because of time constraints as well as to retain the original “flavor” of the posts. Reflecting on the first two years of the blog, I can certainly notice a growth in my ability to utilize the blog format to reflect on Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi’s words.

Although the posts have gone through an extensive edit and rewrite process prior to being posted, I am sure my imperfect eyes have missed some errors. For that I apologize. But I pray the intention of capturing

a more wholistic presentation of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's work is served despite any shortcomings on my part.

At the time of posting this collection, the *Rumi Teaches* blog continues on. To read the present posts, you can go to the blog webpage at:

< http://www.blueantelopeproductions.com/rumi_teaches_blog.html >

In Surrender and Peace,

nashid

November 2016

Smash a rock against the jar

January 2, 2015

Smash a rock against the jar of companionship with the ignorant,
And clutch the hem of the robes of the wise ones in the world.
Don't pause for a moment with the unworthy,
For the iron mirror collects rust when you put it near water.

(adapted from *The Quatrains of Rumi*,
translated by Ibrahim Gamard and Rawan Farhadi, p. 503)

* * *

This quatrain deals clearly with the issue of companionship, who we choose to have in our lives as friends, lovers, and fellow seekers. Many people tend to be causal with who they allow and keep in their lives, even if such persons are not sincerely committed to living a genuine spiritual life. Yet this goes against the guidance of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi and other wise ones who draw an uncompromising line between the wise and the ignorant.

First, let's settle on a working definition of ignorant. Islam holds that Allaah, the Absolute, is the only Reality, the only (ultimate) Truth. In this regard, anything that turns a person away from, distracts, or makes a person forgetful of Truth is ignorance. And those who live in ways in which ignorance is the predominant force in their lives would be considered ignorant. In traditional Islam, there is no judgment assigned to this designation since, except for a rare select, we can all fall into ignorance. A person can have clear knowledge of that which turns and directs one to Truth, spend many devoted years living such,

and in a moment can fall into ignorance. There is even the danger that the things that turn us in the direction of Truth can be a basis for ignorance if we make these more important than surrendering to be brought to Truth.

To the contrary, wisdom is that which removes those things that turn us away from, distract, or make us forgetful of Truth so that we can be brought to Truth. The wise caution that humans cannot find Truth, it is a grace bestowed. Ironically, this grace already exists within our hearts, but we often ignore it and, therefore, live in ignorance.

One of the reasons deliberate consideration is given to the company of ignorant (as well as the wise) is because of the contagiousness of ignorance. Even masters carefully consider whether potential students are serious about becoming free from ignorance before accepting them as students. And if students regress back to unrestrained ignorance, traditionally, many masters would send them away until they returned to being serious about renouncing ignorance. There is a metaphor within the Sufi lore: if you want to smell like roses, go sit in a rose garden. By keeping the consistent company of roses, their fragrance will effortlessly settle upon you. And roses are often used as metaphors for the wise. Being that wisdom and ignorance are opposites, you can choose an appropriate metaphor for the fragrance of ignorance, that which a person will smell like if one keeps the company of the ignorant.

It is our responsibility to be aware of these dynamics when choosing who we allow and keep in our lives. This is a choice of utmost importance: it literally affects the core of our spiritual practice and our lives. Therefore, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi is explicit and direct when he

says: *Smash a rock against the jar of companionship with the ignorant.* A person can be established in a disciplined, fruitful spiritual practice, and have this completely undercut by keeping a single ignorant person as a companion: a friend, lover, fellow seeker. And the line is clear: it says smash *the jar of companionship* with such persons, not to smash those persons. At issue is our choice to interact with such persons beyond what is absolutely necessary. For example, if you have a job that requires you to work with ignorant people, in the scope of your job duties you work with them. But with anything beyond the duties of the job: pause! The same applies to other duties such as family, neighbors, people in need that destiny places before us.

Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi, as well as other masters, warn us against trying to change or “save” people immersed in ignorance. In another quatrain, Jalaal ud-Diin states:

From [the influence of] the sun’s face you may become moon-like,
But from companionship with sulfur you will become fire.
You strive so that an unpleasant one may become pleasant;
That one will never become pleasant, but you will become unpleasant!
(*Quatrains* p. 501)

Many of us encounter these warnings after already being in relationships with ignorant people, so what to do? Again, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi’s advice is explicit: he advises us to smash the jar of our interactions with such persons. At issue is not the people or even their ignorance, but how we engage and interact with such persons. Jars are a contained space that have a defined shape, and if we look at the

jars of our relationships we will see there are distinct patterns and limiting orientations to our interactions. At the root of this is the fact that most of us form relationships with people who validate our ego in some way; and we, theirs. So the jar is part of a larger ego-based approach to life which the spiritual path seeks to reduce and eventually eliminate. Yet, in smashing the jar this ego-based validation is challenged or removed, which usually leads to egos reacting and acting out.

To be explicit, if the jar is ego-based, which is the case with the overwhelming number of relationships formed in ignorance, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi advises such interactions to be smashed -- not salvaged, reworked, or restructured. And a simple question can indicate whether a jar is based in ego and ignorance: when interacting with this person are you immersed in activities or a state of being that turns you away from, distracts, or makes you forgetful of the Beloved (Truth, Reality)? We shouldn't limit the Beloved to constraining concepts: genuine peace (not merely the absence of conflict) is an attribute of the Beloved. So too is genuine union (not merely separate egos cooperating), and other divine qualities that may manifest in relations that restrain or transcend the ego. When we smash the old jars of ignorant ways of engaging people we can see if new jars will replace them. But the fact that most wise persons have very few friends suggests that more often than not, the old jars will be removed and that's it.

As much as "smashing the jar" may create apparent turmoil, it is something Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi went through himself. When he encountered his master Shams al-Tabriz, he cut off almost all relations with others and resided in seclusion with his wise master. Many thought Jalaal ud-Diin lost his mind to leave his family, friends, and

students to sit at the feet of a traveling hobo. This exclusion even included long-serving students Jalaal ud-Diin was mentoring. When with them, he was immersed in being a teacher, which is not the same as being a seeker of or dwelling in remembrance of the Beloved. But he described Shams as being the Absolute in human form: for Jalaal ud-Diin, every moment with him was focused on the Beloved. During this seclusion, Shams transmitted from his heart the “secrets” that opened Jalaal ud-Diin to his own heart. And in being with Shams (the wise), Jalaal ud-Diin found a refuge from the turmoil of smashing old jars: *And clutch the hem of the robes of the wise ones in the world.*

Note the hem of the robe is the bottom part that is turned inward and sewn. There are powerful metaphors in this. The first being that hem turns inward, which is the shortest, most direct way to Truth. Robes were traditionally worn by people of importance, people who “earned” a status of being given a robe. In many traditional Sufi orders, one of the noted ceremonies is when a student reaches the stage where the teacher bestows a robe on the student. In clutching the hem of the robes of the wise, there is a lowering (humbling) of one’s self to a person who has attained a noted level of spiritual maturity. These are the rose gardens we should to stay in the company of so the fragrance of their wisdom may rest upon us, cleanse us of the stench of ignorance, and ultimately guide us to the abode of transformation. Maintaining the company of the wise in conjunction with a disciplined, fruitful spiritual practice is sufficient to remove all barriers to being brought to Truth. Also, clutching the hem in ancient times was an indication of seeking protection from the one whose hem was clutched. Not just protection in the physical sense, but also the protection of being guided by one who knows how to avoid the dangers of going astray.

The danger of keeping company with the ignorant is so poignant that Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi reinforces: *Don't pause for a moment with the unworthy, / For the iron mirror collects rust when you put it near water.* I say again: many sincere seekers undercut their own practice by the company they keep. I've seen people with vast understanding of spiritual matters, immersed in sound spiritual practice remain stagnant or regress in their spiritual journey because of the friends they keep. It is no coincidence that the wise usually very few, if any, friends or companions because there are so few wise persons who are suitable to be beneficial company. Even with Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi, you can count on one or two hands the companions he had in his life after awakening to the heart. Even his interactions with students, which is not the same as companions, were greatly reduced: acts performed out of duty not seeking companionship.

Also note, that Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi warns about the mirror being *near* to the water: sometimes we justify keeping ignorant people in our lives by thinking we're safe because we're not in the waters of ignorance, just near it. But the wise take great care to protect their mirrors from the moisture that exists in proximity to such water. If you've ever treated rusted metal, you know the efforts involved in preventing extended exposure to rusting factors are less trying than the efforts needed to remove rust and its stains. And sometimes, no matter how much you scrub, sand, and polish rusted metal, a rusting stain remains. A metaphor for how we must care for our minds and bodies as these serve as tools of the spiritual journey.

The matter of companions is something we should take very, very seriously. I exaggerate not when I say it is better to be alone than in the company of the unwise. A wise solitude will lead us to the Friend

of all friends in due time, whereas the company of the ignorant will lead us to... (you can finish this sentence if you wish). Yet if we are fortunate to cross paths with a wise one, let us be wise enough to clutch at that one's hem. But there is a duty to restrain, renounce, and release our own ignorance if we wish for the wise to accept us and keep us in their presence. If we remain in ignorance, we cannot fault the wise if they deal with us cautiously or not at all.



Veils for a good purpose

January 15, 2015

Allaah has created these veils for a good purpose. For if Allaah's beauty were displayed without a veil, we would not have the power to endure it. Through the intermediary of these veils we derive life and enjoyment.

Look at *as-shams*, the sun. Through its light we can distinguish good from bad, and find warmth. Trees and orchards become fruitful from its heat, and their fruits -- unripe, sour and bitter, become mature and sweet. Through its influence, mines of gold and silver, rubies and carnelians are produced. But if *as-shams* were to come nearer it would bring no benefit whatsoever. On the contrary, the whole world and every creature would be burned up and destroyed.

When Allaah reveals Himself through a veil to the mountain, those slopes become fully arrayed in trees and flowers and verdure. However, when Allaah brings revelation without a veil, It destroys the mountain and breaks it into atoms.

(adapted from *Fihi Ma Fihi*,
translated by A. J. Arberry, p. 65 - 66)

* * *

In Surah *Al-Araf* (Surah 7, Verse 143) of the Qur'aan, the Prophet Muusaa (Moses), a.s., asks the Beloved to show Its face to him. The Beloved replies that Muusaa cannot see It directly, but to look upon a nearby mountain, and if the mountain can bear the revelation of Its Glory then Muusaa would be able to see It. When the Beloved manifests Its Glory upon the mountain, it instantly crumbles to dust.

Imagine if you can a huge mountain crumbling to dust before your eyes due to an unseen force. Even if we saw a bomb blow up a mountain, we would see an explosion and smoke indicating a cause. And there would still be big chunks of rock and remnants of the mountain remaining, but this mountain was completely reduced to dust. Overwhelmed, Muusaa fainted. This was from witnessing the Glory of the Beloved, not direct sight of It. When Muusaa revived, he repented for his request and affirmed that he would be the first (most devoted) of the faithful.

Islam unequivocally affirms that Allaah, the Absolute, is the Creator of all -- including evil, including veils. In the divine intention of every creation lays a benefit; this should not be obscured by how humans use the gift of freewill to turn in ways that differ from this intention. As has been addressed in previous posts, within the divine intention of evil is the opportunity to withstand its temptations and mature into the strength of living divine guidance and piety. So what is the divine intention of the veils of creation?

Another unequivocal affirmation of Islam, especially among Sufis, is that Beloved is the only Reality. Sometimes this is phrased as: all there is the Beloved, the Absolute. But how many of us are really ready to accept and live this? Even to consider this point conceptually, if the Beloved is all there is then who am "I?" What is this "I" I consider myself to be? Unless we are ready to completely relinquish the "I," Reality is not something we (the "I") can withstand. Even for Muusaa, a prophet of the highest spiritual maturity and surrender, as long as there is the "I" that asks to see the Beloved's face, veils are necessary to prevent his destruction. Until we are genuinely ready to

relinquish the “I,” to have it be dissolved into the only Reality, veils are here to serve *a good purpose*.

The dissolution of the “I” into the only Reality of the Beloved is regarded as being among the highest of spiritual stations. Some regard it as the ultimate purpose of creation: that we are created from Source, journey through this which we call life, only to return to (dissolve into) Source. Part of the intent of the veils is to facilitate this “I” unfolding into the depths of surrender until one is genuinely open to pure dissolution. Ultimately, it is the realization of the Beloved that begets this unfolding. We cannot see the Beloved, but Its beauty gracefully turns us in the direction of this realization. This points to one of the good purposes of veils: *For if Allaah’s beauty were displayed without a veil, we would not have the power to endure it. Through the intermediary of these veils we derive life and enjoyment.* Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi further adds: *When Allaah reveals Itself through a veil to the mountain, those slopes become fully arrayed in trees and flowers and verdure.* Life and enjoyment, the lushness of creation’s manifestations: are we engaging and experiencing these in ways that point us to the beauty of the Beloved? So often we seek to experience these for the sake of our own pleasures, not as a veiled revelation of the Beloved that we (“I”) can withstand without being destroyed.

It should be noted that these divine or natural pleasantries are distinct from the ego-based pleasures we form through attachment. The Beloved and its revelations are the only true enjoyment; all pleasures we seek are only imitations and poor substitutions for this.

To further explain veils, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi turns to the metaphor of *as-shams*, the sun. It is no coincidence that this is also the name of

his master Shams Al-Tabriz. Often Jalaal ud-Diin uses the sun as an intentional double metaphor, since for him, Shams was the sun that turned him to the path of the heart. The distance of the sun serves as a veil by which its light produces benefits: distinguishing what is good, finding warmth, ripening fruit, producing precious metals and stones within the earth -- all of which can be seen as metaphors to benefits unfolding on the spiritual path. Yet if the veil of the sun's distance was removed, *the whole world and every creature would be burned up and destroyed.*

Are we engaging the veiled light of the Beloved in ways by which we are distinguishing what is good from what is bad, and are sincerely honoring and serving what is good while disengaging from what is bad? Are we engaging the veiled light of the Beloved in ways that a sweet warmth is permeating our lives, a warmth that has the nature of the sun's light? Are the fruits of lives being made ripe, mature, and fruitful from how we engage the veiled light of the Beloved? And is our engagement in such light resulting in the natural alchemy that transforms the buried metals and stones in our lives into precious treasures that will be uncovered by the deepening of our surrender? If we can't honestly answer yes to these questions, we would be wise to examine if we're honoring the divine intention for these veils. These veils can serve a good purpose, but part of whether such is fulfilled or not is determined by the choices we make with our free will.

If we honor and rest in the beauty of what is beautiful, not the pleasures of the "I," this beauty will bring us to the Ultimate Beauty, the Beloved Itself. There is a deepening beauty in living a good, warm, fruitful life beholding buried treasures that in time will be surfaced by our spiritual practice. The more we rest in such beauty we become

it, and when we become one with the veiled light we become open to the “I” dissolving in the fullness of such light, into Oneness with the Sun. This calls for the purging of all (ego-based) attachments, since these resist dissolution and the Beloved rarely compels us (endowed with free will) to do anything. When there is nothing to resist dissolution, we are truly ready to be shown the unveiled revelations of the Beloved which will dissolve the “I.” In living complete surrender, where there are no exertions of the “I,” there is an effortless openness to whatever the Beloved wills -- whatever that may be. Veils provide a space for us to move from the exertions of “I” to the depth of surrender. And in the depth of surrender we are willing to have all that “I” annihilated by the revelation of the Beloved, so that only the Beloved -- the only Reality -- is.

An encouragement to fulfill the divine intention of veils, not the other intentions we impose upon them in delusion...



Show me things as they are

January 29, 2015

Life can show the most wonderful things, but behind all of them lies a trap should we forget the Source of this wonder. Allaah has devised this plan so that we will learn not to claim, out of arrogance and vanity, these ideas and plans as our own.

If everything were in truth as it appears to be, Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), endowed as he was with a vision so penetrating, so illuminated, would never have cried,

*“Lord, show me things as they are.
You show a thing as fair, and in reality it is ugly.
You show a thing as ugly, and in truth it is beautiful.
Show us everything just as it is,
So that we will not fall into the snare.”*

Now, your judgement, however good and luminous it may be, is certainly not better than the Prophet's judgement. So do not put your trust in every idea and every notion, but only in Allaah and Its wisdom.

(adapted from *Fihi Ma Fihi*,
translated by A. J. Arberry, p. 11)

* * *

The purpose of this life lays not in this life, but beyond it. To even attempt to describe this in words does not suffice. But if in every instance of life we remember to look beyond the captivating

appearance and manifestation of life unfolding, to allow the Source (or at least remembrance of the Source) to have Its rightful place in our lives, we will avoid the delusion that entraps so many of us. Can we truly remember, as Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi attests, that *Allaah has devised this plan* for how life is playing out, to the smallest and seemingly insignificant detail? Can we avoid laying any claim to it, whether as assigning credit or blame to ourselves or others? Or even grasping what is fortunate or seeking to avoid what we (from the ego) desire to not be part of “our life?” This calls for a deeper humility than we often realize. And sometimes a humility we cannot humble ourselves to but must be humbled to through whatever means the Beloved utilizes.

When we talk about the Beloved’s plan, we should not look at this in the ego-centric way we look at “our” plans. Often self-based plans are linearly contrived by the limits of our minds, namely what we can conceive. And the goals we seek are often pursued through exerting effort to effect (dare I say manipulate) desired outcomes. The Beloved’s plan doesn’t operate in this manner: it is fluid and without compulsion. In this manner, the Beloved sets our life in a flow toward certain opportunities of destiny. If we are in harmony with the Beloved’s plan, we will open to and embrace these opportunities; if we are in disharmony with this plan, we may not only reject them but contrive delusions out of nothingness that make it seem we are taking our lives in a direction other than where our life is being guided to. The next blog post will explore this topic in more depth.

As we move to the second paragraph of the selected text, some context may be helpful. Islam holds that Muhammad, peace be upon him, is the Seal of the Prophets. Most Muslims regard this to mean he is the last prophet (some say of humanity, some say of the Abrahamic line);

yet this “last” doesn’t mean just a place in a numerical order. It includes a completion of the prophetic revelation through the prophecy of Muhammad: that with what was revealed through him, the expanse of prophetic revelation is complete. Masters and saints come after Muhammad to rephrase and remind people of things already stated through the prophetic lineage: Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi doesn’t profess to say anything that hasn’t already been conveyed by the prophets. In fact, many prophets also rephrased and reiterated some of the same essential points of divine revelation to serve the people of their time. But whereas some prophets came to reveal something not previously expressed to a larger communal or human consciousness, after the Seal of Muhammad’s servitude, there is nothing new to be added to the prophetic book of revelation. It is not that everything was revealed through Muhammad alone, but what was “newly” revealed through him combined with what was revealed through other prophets encompasses the full range of divine revelation to humans on earth. Sufis hold that to realize the fullness of this statement requires looking beyond the surface of the prophet’s lives, teachings, and what was revealed through them, but also at the deeper (heart-based) levels of these.

Let me stress that we are talking about the full range of divine revelation to humans on earth, not the full range of divine revelation which exceeds what can be presented on earth. Tradition holds that the rare of the rare can open to the later and that such goes beyond what concepts and words can encompass. But most humans live within the space (or ignorance) of what has been divinely revealed on earth, and not even the fullness of this. The metaphor of a drop in all the oceans is used to compare the full range of divine revelation to humans to the fullness of (all) divine revelation.

The fact that Muhammad's "sight" is informed by the fullness of divine revelation to humans on earth plays a role in why his *vision [is] so penetrating, so illuminated*. Yet he doesn't rely upon his own means in deciphering the unfolding of life. Instead he lives with a complete reliance upon the Beloved for understanding: *Lord, show me things as they are*. This is his approach although he has a mind cultivated, transformed, and expanded by receiving and living divine revelation. He has a mind and heart endowed with the vision of foresight to see how gross and subtle dynamics unfold, have unfolded, and will unfold on the level of phenomena. But even with this expansive sight, he acknowledges a potential flaw in it: *You show a thing as fair, and in reality it is ugly. / You show a thing as ugly, and in truth it is beautiful*. It is not so much that the Beloved presents something fair as ugly, but within the unfolding of life, the Beloved allows our minds (namely the impressions within them) to color something that is fair as ugly, and vice versa. This flaw is present even in the mind of a prophet that beholds the fullness of divine revelation to humans.

As Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi states: *your judgement, however good and luminous it may be, is certainly not better than the Prophet's judgement*. Most of us, even if we are the best students of the prophets, don't behold the fullness of the divine revelation to humans; therefore, our judgment lacks the scope of Muhammad's judgement. (And this doesn't include the "secrets" prophets possess that are not shared openly.) Instead, most of us formulate our judgments based on experience or things learned from the past that we project upon the present: not seeing the present situation as it uniquely is, but instead viewing the present through the past and imposing what we deem to be "wise" (or desired) upon the present situation. But note Muhammad's approach, he asks the Beloved: *Show us everything just*

as it is. / So that we will not fall into the snare. He doesn't attempt to see and decipher phenomena, but asks the Beloved to reveal *everything just as it is* in the fullness of what is in the present moment: the surface and underlying dynamics, what is occurring and what it means in regards to how we should engage (or not) what is happening. He surrenders self-effort, including his judgment, to allow the Beloved to reveal how what is happening fits within Its plan. In this way, he does *not fall into the snare* of trying to interpret or impose his own (ego-based) will upon life unfolding.

Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi warns us: *So do not put your trust in every idea and every notion, but only in Allaah and Its wisdom.* This statement could even be rewritten as: 'So do not put your trust in any idea or any notion, but only in Allaah and Its wisdom.' There is a strong temptation that once we open to the benefits of adhering to divine revelation -- when we "get a little wisdom" -- that we seek to impose our will and put trust in our efforts to navigate phenomena. Or even relying upon the imposition and efforts of others to effect the direction of life. The prophets and saints avoid this snare by relying only on the Beloved and being guided by *Its wisdom*, which is one of the lights of divine revelation. Even when Muhammad could see a situation clearly with his own mind and conceive clear means of engagement, he always turned to the Beloved and sought Its guidance for how to deal with what was present. And he followed that guidance whether it was pleasant or challenging, immediately fulfilling or a call to be tolerant and patient, knowing the greater path is to surrender to the Beloved and remain in perfect harmony with the Beloved's plan -- whatever that may be. And we should remember: the Beloved's guidance is perfect -- it is one thing to accept this conceptually, another thing to truly surrender to eventually realize this perfection for ourselves. We

would be wise to follow Muhammad's example in this regards with every instance of life. The unending and perfect guidance of the Beloved is always available if we listen and heed it.



To catch a deer - Part 1 of 2

February 12, 2015

Once, when Ibraahiim, son of Adham, was king, he galloped in the track of a deer he was hunting, until he became entirely separated from his soldiers, leaving them far behind. His horse was weary and covered with sweat, but still he chased on. After passing far into the desert wilderness, the deer suddenly stopped, turned back its face and said, "You were not created for this. Beingness was not brought forth from not-being for you to hunt me. Even if you catch me, what will you have accomplished?"

When Ibrahim heard these words, he cried aloud and flung himself from the horse. There was no one in that desert except a shepherd. Ibraahiim said to him, "Take my royal robes encrusted with jewels, my arms and my horse, and give me your gown of coarse cloth. And please tell no one, not even a hint to anyone, what has become of me." He put on the rough gown and set out on his way.

Now consider what his intention was, and yet what his true objective turned out to be! He wanted to catch a deer, but Allaah caught him by means of that deer. Therefore, realize that in this world things happen as Allaah wills. Allaah's is the design, and all purpose comes from Allaah.

(adapted from *Fihi Ma Fihi*,
translated by A. J. Arberry, p. 290 - 291)

* * *

As promised in the last post, this post will address the topic of the Beloved's plan. The Beloved's plan is not something that can be fully

explained. So instead of taking an approach that seeks to understand it, let's use the above story to reflect on the dynamics of how the Beloved's plan can unfold -- and in particular, where we are in relation to this.

Ibraahiim ibn Adham is one of the more noted Sufi saints of the Persian region. He was a king of Balkh, the land where Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi spent most of his life. The above story captures the moment in which Ibraahiim renounced his kingly life to embrace the path of a humble ascetic.

In the story he starts off as a king. This is a fitting metaphor for most of us: in living an ego-centered life, even if it's "spiritual," we replace the Sovereignty of the Beloved with the rulership of our mind -- the mind is the seat of the ego. Even if such a mind is sincerely committed to living spiritual principles, if the determining factor is our mind, we have placed that upon the Throne of our lives. Thus, we set off on pursuits that are determined by and appeal to the mind. But such is not in harmony with the Beloved's plan because the Beloved is the only Sovereignty. Even if with our minds we seek to serve the Beloved, for such to be in harmony with the Beloved's plan we must relinquish the mind being the determining factor: a restraint or relinquishment of free will to the quietude (to listen) and obedience of surrender. And note, the mind can be very clever in deluding itself into thinking it's doing something for the Beloved, when it's only serving its own selfish ends. This calls for the deepest of honesty and reflection.

As is the nature of the ego, we often set out on mind-based pursuits in the company of others. For most, the majority of people we invite and

keep in our lives we do so to validate our egos (personalities) in some way. This is often done discreetly: many choose friends because we like them -- likes contrived by past pleasurable experiences of the mind that validate the personality we've sculpted from mind stuff. Or maybe we share certain things in common with them: again, qualities and pursuits of the mind. Or even with family members we don't like, we may maintain relations with them because they validate our identity: our bloodline, shared physical and behavioral traits, shared experiences that affirm who "I" (the ego) am. But eventually even mind-based pursuits bring us to a place of solitude, beyond the company of others even if we are still in their presence. Just as in the story, Ibraahiim stayed on his hunt of the deer -- a mind-based pursuit -- *until he became entirely separated from his soldiers, leaving them far behind.*

For the wise, this separation is a precious opportunity, and some will even seek it directly. This solitude beholds the opportunity to arrive at the realization of the heart, even if just a temporary realization. This rarely happens in the presence of others: in the ego-based engagement that happens with others through the mind, we usually become so consumed with the mental noise (activity) we ignore the whispers of the heart. You can even be physically alone but mentally preoccupied with (in the company of) other people or thoughts about them -- this is not the solitude that is separate from others. But in that solitude that is beyond preoccupation with others, in that quietude we are given audience to the heart -- wherein the Beloved dwells.

Many spiritual traditions, even communal-oriented ones like Islam, recognize the value of this sacred solitude where we shun or are removed from distractions to encounter the Divine. This is an essential

part of the Beloved's plan: for each of us to realize, experience (and whatever other words apply) the Beloved directly ourselves. The stories of prophets and saints are filled with such accounts happening in solitude: Muhammad (s.a.w.s.) receiving his first revelation of the Qur'aan while meditating alone in a cave. Muusaa (Moses) (a.s.) encountering the burning bush alone at the foot of a mountain. Ibraahiim ibn Adham abandoning the kingly life to embrace the ascetic's path alone in the desert wilderness. And more.

In is this solitude we arrive at a place from which we can be brought -- not go by our own effort -- beyond the contrived limits of our minds. These limitations delineate the scope of our mind-based plans -- and the desires, expectations, and actions that accompany these. In our mind-based linear projections, we limit every encounter of 1 + 1 to equal... Yeah, your mind probably already answered 2 without hesitation. Your mind probably isn't even open to any other possibility that it won't label to be incorrect. It's not that the mind is wrong in this instance, but it's very limiting and unaware of this orientation. When our life is immersed in the company of others, their validation further affirms these limits, negating and being closed to anything beyond them. And as vast as the mind's limitations may be, they are still limiting.

When the ego and mind are affirmed, the mind more strongly projects its limitations which are unconsciously closed to anything that doesn't fit within its conceptions and expectations. But life, and certainly the unfolding of the Beloved's plan, is not limited to such. One of the invitations of the Beloved's plan is to be genuinely open to all possibilities, and even beyond what we conceive to be possible: nothing is impossible for the Absolute. If we can realize the

preciousness of this invitation solitude offers, we can save ourselves from heedlessly striving after, and often to being worn down by, mind-based pursuits. Such pursuits will eventually bring us to this invitation, and grace have us encounter it repeatedly, but not without dangers.

Even with some who become great saints, we often drive forth in our mind-based pursuits. Just as Ibraahiim drove on: *his horse was weary and covered with sweat, but still he chased on*. He even drove himself into the desert wilderness: a dangerous place beyond human habitation. In ancient days, people avoided going into the wilderness unnecessarily -- and even when they did, they did so in the company of capable, strong companions and a guide. But mind-based pursuits can blindly take us there, beyond the reach of wise discretion and safety into places of great danger. Thus, we drive ourselves into situations where we are forced to face the limitations of our minds and our plans. Here mind-based plans are brought face to face with the Beloved's plan. As the story states: *the deer suddenly stopped, turned back its face and said, "You were not created for this. Beingness was not brought forth from not-being for you to hunt me. Even if you catch me, what will you have accomplished?"* We are challenged to reflect on what we are really doing and why.

Let's look at this moment more closely because even the opportunity of this unfolding can be lost in the blindness of mind-based pursuits. For most hunters, if the deer suddenly stopped what would happen? The hunter would kill the deer -- even if as the first words were being spoken by the deer they were ignored in the hunter's excitement of making the kill. But even if the first words were heard, they would probably be dismissed. Why: because to most human minds, deer

don't speak; and the prospect of a divine message being spoken through a deer doesn't fit in the hunter's plan of hunting and killing the deer. But by grace, an opportunity was afforded to Ibraahiim that allowed (was open to) what he didn't conceive as possible to occur. In such instances of grace, the Beloved's plan intervenes in mind-based plans to offer sacred opportunities, but not in a compulsive manner. Fortunately, Ibraahiim took heed of the message, because even after hearing the deer speak, he could have killed it and ignored the message, fulfilling his mind-based plan.

A word of caution should be shared about pushing mind-based pursuits to the brink where only divine grace can save us. The outcome of what happened in the wilderness could have happened earlier in the hunt, if Ibraahiim was open to receiving it. Yet the Beloved allowed Ibraahiim to continue in his mind-driven blindness. And this speaks to qualities of the Beloved's plan: it is fluid and without compulsion. There is space within the Beloved's plan for what It intends (for us to realize the Beloved directly) and what It allows (for us to continue in ignorance or partial acknowledgment of divine realization). In this way, the Beloved offers us countless opportunities to set our lives in the direction of fulfilling divine destiny -- without compulsion.

I remember a teacher who addressed this through the metaphor of person on a log floating down a river. As the river carries the log, the river determines the direction, the speed, the texture of the currents, etc. These speak to the conditions of our lives which we may seek to control (i.e. choose or reject) but instead happen beyond the influence of our "control." The only thing we can really do regarding the conditions is jump off the log or go for the ride and decide which way

we will face -- to be in harmony or disharmony with the flow. Try as we may, we can try to paddle against the flow but this only creates resistance to the where the river is flowing. In doing so, we usually create more troubles and ignore what the flow offers, such as the beauty of the ride and the wonderful scenery. Thinking we can control what the flow dictates drives the mind to such blindness where only "extremes" (such as deer speaking) can reveal the invitation of the Beloved's flow, the Beloved's plan. Yet, there is a chance that the blindness exceeds to where the mind ignores or denies the opportunity of such "extremes" manifesting. The non-compulsion of the Beloved's plan may allow such. In our blindness, there is the danger of driving ourselves into ruin, which is why the wise encourage us as early as possible to note the invitations to be brought into harmony with the Beloved's plan.

Part 2 will continue with examining the deer's message.



To catch a deer - Part 2 of 2

February 26, 2015

Once, when Ibraahiim, son of Adham, was king, he galloped in the track of a deer he was hunting, until he became entirely separated from his soldiers, leaving them far behind. His horse was weary and covered with sweat, but still he chased on. After passing far into the desert wilderness, the deer suddenly stopped, turned back its face and said, "You were not created for this. Beingness was not brought forth from not-being for you to hunt me. Even if you catch me, what will you have accomplished?"

When Ibrahim heard these words, he cried aloud and flung himself from the horse. There was no one in that desert except a shepherd. Ibraahiim said to him, "Take my royal robes encrusted with jewels, my arms and my horse, and give me your gown of coarse cloth. And please tell no one, not even a hint to anyone, what has become of me." He put on the rough gown and set out on his way.

Now consider what his intention was, and yet what his true objective turned out to be! He wanted to catch a deer, but Allaah caught him by means of that deer. Therefore, realize that in this world things happen as Allaah wills. Allaah's is the design, and all purpose comes from Allaah.

(adapted from *Fihi Ma Fihi*,
translated by A. J. Arberry, p. 290 - 291)

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Let's continue with the deer's message. As the story states: *the deer suddenly stopped, turned back its face and said, "You were not created*

for this. Beingness was not brought forth from not-being for you to hunt me. Even if you catch me, what will you have accomplished?" There is much within this short phrase to contemplate but we'll just focus on one point. Note that the deer places Ibraahiim's intent and actions squarely in the context of creation: for what purpose have you been created? And are you fulfilling or serving that with your present action(s)? The Qur'aan speaks to this first question directly:

{56} I [Allaah] created the jinn and humankind only that they might worship Me. {57} I seek no livelihood from them, nor do I ask that they should feed [or provide for] Me. {58} Lo! Allaah! The Beloved it is Who giveth livelihood, the Lord of Unbreakable Might.

-- Surah 51 *Al-Thaariyaat* (The Winnowing Winds),
Verses 56 - 58

It may be helpful to explore how worship is viewed in the context of traditional Islam. What one worships dictates how one lives: what one does (and refrains from doing) is performed in service of or with approval from that which one worships. Such action includes mental engagement: not the random thoughts that might occur and pass on their own accord, but the thoughts we actively engage and attach to, even if unconsciously -- particularly since these often determine the scope of our physical actions. The perfection of worship is to have every single action fall within the framework of what one worships.

In today's society, money (including material possessions) illustrates the dynamic of worship. Despite what some may profess, most people worship money. Money, as most pursue (serve) it through a job,

dictates the schedule of their lives: if their job schedule is from 9:00am to 5:00pm weekdays, that is what they will be doing at those times. Even if they want to do other things, they plan such around their job schedule. The salary one receives usually dictates where one lives and one's lifestyle. It is amazing how many people's lifestyle will change if they get a job paying a noticeably different (usually higher) salary: their residence often changes, their clothes, friends and associates, spending habits, diet, social activities, etc. -- and even their mannerisms may change. Other common "idols of worship" include family (esp. one's familial role, such as being a spouse, parent, grandparent, etc.), social status and reputation (such as politicians, celebrities, recognized leaders, etc.), and even religion -- when approached merely as a set of rites and customs, not a path opening one to the realization of the Absolute.

Islam is explicit in stating that the only "thing" that should be worshiped is Allaah, the Absolute. Islam also emphasizes a "straight path" (direct route) of worship, forbidding intermediaries and partners to the Absolute. For example, one should not allow Allaah and money to dictate one's life, only the Absolute. There is a practical reason for this. Consider why people worship money (among other things): because they feel they can control (dictate) the whole or key parts of their lives with money. The Beloved allows this to play out to a certain extent but the ultimate determining force of all is the Absolute:

Lo! your Lord is Allaah Who created the heavens and the earth in six days, then It established Itself upon the Throne, directing all things. There is no intercessor (with It) save after Its permission. That is

Allaah, your Lord, so worship It. Oh, will ye not remind?

-- Surah 10 *Yuunus* (Jonah), Verses 3

Like a sovereign on a throne, the Absolute directs the kingdom of creation even if It entrusts certain tasks to (manifest through) portents of creation. Yet this perfect *directing all things* is done in a non-compulsory manner: we are given free will as to what we worship. Therefore, if we worship things other than the Absolute, the Beloved allows this along with the consequences that follow. Such doesn't affect the Beloved, who seeks not livelihood or anything else from us; yet whether or not we live life as worship of the Beloved affects us -- especially the quality of our lives and those with whom we share an intimate connection.

We should know that when we worship something other than the Beloved, usually through mind-based pursuits, we place ourselves out of harmony with the purpose for our creation. This, usually done very subtly or unconsciously, eventually results in harm: whether as self-harm and / or harming others (the hunting of the deer). But even when our worship of other things seems "successful" (i.e. the person worshipping money becomes rich), the deer's question still stands: *what will you have accomplished?* How many wealthy people who live worshipping money still feel a void in their lives? Or even successful celebrities and leaders? Many try to fill this void with other things or seek to distract themselves from it, most of which proves to be destructive. Many seek to fill this void with materialism (including excessive spending), substance abuse (including food addictions that harm the body), sexual promiscuity, unhealthy and abusive relationships, etc. These mind-based pursuit of sense pleasures may

provide temporary relief, but continued pursuit of these fuels continuing cycles of destruction. Even among religious and spiritual people, there are many who seek to fill this void with rites, ceremonies, scripture study, and other elements of spiritual practice yet the void remains.

The prophets and saints declare throughout the ages that if we wish to fill this void we must fulfill the purpose for why we are created. This entails worshiping the Beloved, living in a manner in which It dictates our lives. This includes turning away from mind-based pursuits and surrendering to the path of the heart: that the Beloved may guide us from Its presence within the heart.

In the story, Ibraahiim ibn Adham responds to this realization by complete surrender: surrendering everything. Not everyone will respond in such manner, and if one is not ready to do so one shouldn't. But know, any sound spiritual practice is essentially preparing us to make a complete surrender. This won't always mean the renunciation of all material things or relationships from our lives, but rather the mental impressions and attachments that allow something other than the Beloved to dictate the whole or parts of our lives.

Although Ibraahiim surrenders by his own free will, this doesn't prevent the mind from reacting: *he cried aloud and flung himself from the horse*. Renouncing mind-based pursuits can be overwhelming to the mind, especially when it's a complete renunciation. For so many mystics, the transition periods of renunciation are often very intense and challenging; yet those who have gone through such encourage us to endure and press on, the hardship will be worth it.

Ibraahiim then approaches the shepherd and says: *“Take my royal robes encrusted with jewels, my arms and my horse, and give me your gown of coarse cloth.”* This is not just a surrender of the royal (celebrity) role of a king he worshiped -- meaning it dictated his life. It is also a relinquishment of the mind-based approach he took to living: where the mind is removed from the throne of his life so the Beloved may rule unimpeded. Thus, he literally takes on the coarse gown of a servant, symbolizing the depth of his humility and commitment to spiritual poverty.

Just as Ibraahiim renounces the comforts (the royal robe, jewels, arms, horse, etc.) that may revive the mind-based pursuits he abandons, he also renounces the company of others. He tells the shepherd, *“And please tell no one, not even a hint to anyone, what has become of me.”* Remember, the company of others -- even if in their physical absence -- often reinforces the mind-based approach to life. By taking the path of solitude and secrecy, he better protects himself from slipping into old habits.

When Ibraahiim surrenders everything, he is able to see *what his true objective* is: to worship and be a servant of the Beloved. When one deepens and matures into this approach to life, one comes to realize on a level beyond mental concepts that *Allaah’s is the design, and all purpose comes from Allaah*. We may say these words and think we understand them living a mind-based life, but when we shift to a heart-based life we realize a profound deeper meaning to this that words can’t fully convey. That truly *in this world things happen as Allaah wills*, even as that Will allows us to pursue things counter to Divine Intention. When we shift from wanting to catch a deer -- and all the fleeting nature of mind-based pursuits -- to allowing the

Beloved to catch us (guide us), our lives are immersed in a mystical wonder leading to Oneness with the everlasting Reality of the Beloved. Then any secondary purposes we are to fulfill that serve the primary purpose of our creation will be made clear and attainable by the Beloved. For Ibraahiim it meant living as an ascetic. But for others it may include living a seemingly worldly life in society that is completely dictated and directed by the Beloved.



A courageous spirit

March 12, 2015

I am a hungry man, but I have the liveliness of a satiated person.
I am only a fox but I have the name and honor of a lion.
There is a self belonging to me that is terrified by a phantom,
But don't look at that, since I have a courageous spirit.

(adapted from *The Quatrains of Rumi*,
translated by Ibrahim Gamard and Rawan Farhadi, p. 36)

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Let's use the above quatrain to explore courage and fear.

How much would your life be transformed if you lived within the expanse of complete courage? That even when the mind is in a state of fear there is a deeper trust that is not disturbed by the present vulnerabilities. At the essence of such courage is not the absence of a fear of death, from which most fears emanate. When we talk about fear of death being the source of most fears, there are three components in particular we'll focus on: 1) fear of the potential pain and suffering of death; 2) fear of "loss," particularly the loss of "I" and not being able to gain what we deem as treasures in this life; and, 3) fear of the unknown, unsure of what happens to "me" after "I" die. Having a courageous spirit doesn't mean the absence of these fears, but instead a willingness to face them with a doubtless faith and unrelenting trust -- fruits that mature from deepening surrender and obedience to divine guidance. The harvest of such fruits calls for transformation.

Courage and fear are of vital importance when we talk of transformation: not the caterpillar who rearranges or renovates itself, but instead becomes a “new” butterfly. Fear is one of the biggest barriers to transformation and without courage, a “new” becoming is virtually impossible. Fear happens on the level of the mind, and most things we fear seem or are threatening and distressing to the mind. Modern society deems fears to only be problems when they are big. But the saints regard even small fears as great dangers because of the mental dynamics in play.

With fear, there are two main factors to consider. First is the (mental) object feared, which is not always physical and may even be something untouchable (like an experience) or something the mind imagines. The second factor is how the mind reacts to the object. Oftentimes when we are afraid the mind perceives an object as threatening or distressing when in actuality it isn't; or if it is, the mind usually perceives the object to be more threatening or distressing than it is. In this vein, how the scared mind reacts (or usually overreacts) is more dangerous than the objects themselves. And this impression (pattern) of fear-based reaction is usually ingrained into the mind repeatedly through “small” fears: fears that make us scared but don't totally overwhelm the mind. But once the field of the mind has been sowed with the conditioning of small fears, we should not be surprised when the mind is thrown into illogic and dysfunction by bigger fears.

To this dynamic of mental conditioning, particularly the mental reactions, the saints say: “Fear nothing but Allaah.” And even this “fear” of Allaah speaks more to stilling and quieting the mind to allow humility and reverence to arise, not mental reactions. Now this doesn't mean that we won't encounter objects that are threatening and

distressing (let's call them stressors), such are part of creation. Rather the path of courage faces stressors by restraining and minimizing, if not eliminating, the mental reactions and what these add to these encounters. In other words, courage is not the absence of fear but instead a willingness to deal with the dynamics of fear (particularly the mental reactions) with a steadiness of mind. And most mental reactions disrupt steadiness of mind.

When the mind is steady, one is better able to respond (instead of react) to what the situation calls for: which sometimes means running or walking away, sometimes encountering the stressor, sometimes taking on suffering or enduring the situation. As one's courage increases, one comes to realize what the Qur'aan declares: that the Beloved doesn't place on any soul more than it can bear (Surah 23, Verse 62). But if we, through our mental reactions, add to this burden we can make what is bearable overwhelming. Courage prevents this from happening. And, as stated earlier, without courage transformation is virtually impossible because, at any time, the mind can be thrust into mental reactions that undercut our spiritual growth and keep us in bondage.

Many spiritual people in quest of transformation look to "transform" (change) the components of their lives, not the orientation and approach. From a place of fear, this often looks to remove stressors from our lives as opposed to having an orientation and approach that embodies courage. Traditional Islam instead looks to first transform the orientation: to shift from a life of mind-based self-effort and determination to surrender to (reliance on) the Beloved. Within surrender, one realizes the only true and lasting source of protection is the Beloved -- that nothing can harm or affect us unless the Beloved

allows it. Thus, fear (namely the anxiety and mental reactions) becomes illogical as long as one is living in surrender to the Beloved and Its protection. But this doesn't mean a life absent of stressors, since the Beloved sometimes uses these to facilitate our individual and collective growth.

After transforming the orientation, the approach is addressed: shifting from an ego / mind-based approach to a heart-based approach: the Beloved dwells in the heart and reveals guidance from therein. Since fear happens within the mind, when we shift from living life predominantly through the mind to the heart, the mental reactions to stressors diminish until they disappear. Thus, it is easier for the mind to remain steady in the face of stressors and courage arises of its own accord. Look at babies and young children and you will see how their explorative nature affirms that courage is an innate quality, whereas fear is learned through conditioning.

Then with a transformed orientation and approach, the path of traditional Islam addresses the components of one's life. Some components are removed or released, some are transformed, and some remain unchanged (although fluid, not stagnant). Within a transformed orientation and approach even unchanged components, including apparent weaknesses or fears, can be utilized in ways that serve as strengths. Within this context, the lines of the quatrain may take on a deeper meaning.

The quatrain begins with: *I am a hungry man, but I have the liveliness of a satiated person*. In Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's day, hunger was a prevalent threat and occurrence. Given the tides of famines, ongoing war, dislocation to avoid war, many people were afflicted with lasting

periods of hunger -- including the wealthy. When one experiences a prolonged emptiness of belly (not for just hours, but days and weeks), one experiences deep physical and mental pains. The fear of encountering this reflects on the fear of the potential pain and suffering of death: if one can experience such piercing pain while in the body will departure from the body unfold with more torment? This concern seems to be validated by those who die in immense suffering. But with a courageous spirit, one can endure the pangs of hunger with the vibrancy of being well-fed. It's not that one doesn't experience hunger pains, but this can be more easily bore with a steadiness of mind that doesn't add to or intensify the pains with mental reactions.

The next line presents the fox and lion, figures with rich symbolism in Sufi lore. Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi states: *I am only a fox but I have the name and honor of a lion*. To be simplistic, many students and disciples would be compared with the fox whereas the master would be regarded as a lion. In Sufi lore, foxes are often portrayed as slick, clever, sometimes manipulative and willing to compromise ethics. Particularly in stories, foxes use these traits to attain what they could not otherwise gain and to prevent loss of their spoils. How often do we see the unrestrained ego act out these same traits for similar reasons? In this vein, one may see the fear of loss (the loss of "I") aspect of the fear of death, particularly as a motivating force for the fox's (ego's) tendencies.

But, as Jalaal ud-Diin states, we *have the name and honor of a lion*. When we surrender to allow the loss of the fox qualities, we are more open to realize the qualities of the lion within us (the heart). The lion has an innate majesty, courage, endurance, and power. And when the lion lives these qualities piously, all of nature respects and honors the

sovereignty of the lion. To live up to the name and honor of the lion, we must surrender (allow the loss of) the fox's qualities -- which includes the loss who "I" am and often many things attained through the fox's (ego's) qualities. Are we willing to allow the loss of our ego to realize the majesty, courage, endurance, and power within? Are we willing to endure such loss to live up to the name and honor of what the Beloved creates human beings to be?

Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi then states: *There is a self belonging to me that is terrified by a phantom.* Clearly this self that is terrified is mind-based, if not the ego itself. And the phantom can be seen as a metaphor for this created world, an apparition that mystics of many spiritual traditions say is not real. Some say all fears are of things with in this apparition or emanate from a perspective rooted in this apparition. Even the aspect of death that fears the unknown is based in a perspective rooted in being "alive." As long as this self is terrified by the phantom, the cycles of fearful mental reactions impede a realization of Reality. Traditional Islam holds that Allaah, the Beloved, is the only the Reality, and if we come to "know" this we will fear nothing. But as long as we look at "things" which can fuel the dynamics of fearful mental reactions, we won't realize Reality and will remain in bondage to the cycles of fear.

To this, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi states: *But don't look at that -- the dynamics of fear.* Instead, remember: *I have a courageous spirit.* In remembering this and stilling just the mental reactions, we allow space for the lion within to emerge. Then courage can begin to establish a lasting presence in our lives. Then, the stressors we encounter need not demoralize or incapacitate us; rather we can endure them with

courage as part of a larger “journey” of realizing our innate nature, which is better suited to realizing the Beloved.



It must be a sieve

March 26, 2015

This king entrusted his son to a team of learned scholars. In due course, they taught him the sciences of astrology, geomancy, and the interpretation of signs, until he became a complete master, despite his utter stupidity and dullness of wit.

One day the king took a ring in his fist and put his son to the test.

“Come, tell me what I am holding in my fist.”

“What you are holding is round, yellow, inscribed and hollow,” the prince answered.

“You have given all the signs correctly,” the king said. “Now say what it is.”

“It must be a sieve,” the prince replied. [* A sieve is a food strainer.]

“What?” cried the king. “You know all the minute details, which would baffle the minds of anyone. How is it that out of all your powerful learning and knowledge, the small point has escaped you that a sieve will not fit in a fist?”

In this same way, the great scholars of the age split hairs on details of all matters. They know perfectly and completely those sciences that do not concern Soul. But as for what is truly of importance and touches us more closely than anything else, namely our own Self, this your great scholars do not know. They make statements about everything, saying, “This is true and that is not true.

This is right and that is wrong.” Yet, they do not know their own Self, whether it is true or false, pure or impure.

(adapted from *Fihi Ma Fihi*,
translated by A.J. Arberry, p. 31 - 32)

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There is a great danger when spirituality and religion get reduced to stuff of the mind. It is not that the mind or the “mindstuff” are the problem, rather our use (or misuse) of these are at issue. Many spiritual people will set off in quest of “knowledge,” stuff to be known on the level of the mind: namely, the five senses and the “thinking” part of the mind that organizes what is perceived. This can include facts, rites, ceremonies, conceptual understandings of scripture and teachings. But to what end is this mindstuff being used? How is such being applied? Are these being pursued as goals unto themselves that sustain our ego / mind-based ignorance and the false self we contrive from such? Or are these genuinely being used to come to know our true Self, the Absolute? We can use the above story as a means to explore these questions.

The story begins with the king entrusting his son to a *team of learned scholars*. Some interpret the king (or sovereign) to be the spiritual master who takes on the duty of caring for its disciples like a dutiful parent. Others interpret the king to be the Beloved, we being Its created children. In either case, we are entrusted by our “spiritual” parent to “learned scholars” of this world. We need not limit scholars to just humans: whether through a teacher or other means, there are things for us to learn from this world, even for those on mystic paths.

Sometimes this includes sciences based on accumulated studies of this world or sometimes direct study of the world itself. For example, a river is a master “scholar” of the science of being a river and there are things we can learn from rivers (e.g. how it flows) that can support our spiritual unfolding. Also, just because we have things to learn from this world doesn’t mean we need to amass great volumes of knowledge: sometimes a little worldly knowledge will suffice.

The spiritual purpose of this learning is not for the sake of the learning itself, rather to support us coming to know our true Self, the Beloved. Note that Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi mentions the son’s *utter stupidity and dullness of wit*: this description applies to most humans, but not in the insulting manner we tend to use these words nowadays. Anyone who does not live the awareness of “knowing” (direct “experience” of the Beloved) would be regarded as stupid and dull-witted in Sufi terms -- let’s call it ignorance. And most of us ignore the Beloved, the only Reality that is, even if there are points of acknowledgment within our living. Ignorance affords us a sacred opportunity: only by being unknown can the Beloved can be known (or known again) and we experience the wonder and liberation of such (re)discovery. Then life is transformed as we live unendingly in the presence of the Beloved, a state that goes beyond ignorance and acknowledgment. Even the prophets and saints transgress through ignorance to arrive at remembrance to then deepen into the unending presence (of the Beloved) through which their service unfolds. Sciences are tools that can be used to move from ignorance to remembrance: particularly through cultivating and purifying the mind, since such a mind ceases to be a barrier to the realization our true Self.

On a general level, we can look at the sciences in the story as relating to worldly knowledge. It is the means by which we utilize the mindstuff to “understand” the workings of this world. It includes what the senses perceive and the associations we make with the phenomena of the world. Many sciences will then use this information to make inferences (i.e. theories) to expand the sciences, yet these and the “understanding” they purport are still limited. Even with the most careful approach, the mind is subject to misinterpretation because it is created to observe, not analyze and understand the world. For example, the eye is perfectly capable of seeing an object, not understanding and determining what that object is -- particularly those qualities that exceed the sight of that object. For this reason, the wise combine worldly observation and sciences with divine awareness, which rests in the heart. Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi states, “Everyone who possesses a partial intellect [worldly knowledge] is in need of learning, and the Universal Intellect [divine awareness] is the source they are seeking. The prophets and saints have united the partial intellect and Universal Intellect so the two have become one.” (*Fihi* p. 258)

Divine awareness emanates from the Beloved, which is All-Knowing, and is able to place the facts of observation and mental association in a context of discernment. Divine awareness also “sees” into the inner nature of phenomena and, thus, is able to “see” things as they are with or without mental observation. But since most people live through the mind and look to this first in determining phenomena, the wise teach us to use divine awareness to discern what the mind observes. Over the course of history, less people utilized this approach such that many societies now pursue mind-based sciences without cultivating the inner quietude that allows divine awareness to shine forth.

The choice of sciences in the story is also relevant: *astrology*, *geomancy*, and *the interpretation of signs* are metaphors that speak to our spiritual pursuit of knowledge. Astrology in the context of traditional Islam examines the placement and relation of celestial objects as indicators of conditions at play in the human and earthly world, not forces that influence or impinge upon humans' free will. Astrologers look to the skies because these are beyond human manipulation; some hold the earth undisturbed is just as revealing but humans have manipulated and rearranged portions of the earth (and our lives). Geomancy is the art of placing and arranging sites, which becomes useful to aligning human building to be in harmony with the flow of nature established by the Beloved. The interpretation of signs is another means of seeking to navigate the world in a way that is in harmony with nature. How many people embrace spirituality as a spiritual science to ascertain signs to better navigate the world or our "lives," often within a mind-based approach? Many of us do so without being cognizant of this. Yet there are more expansive purposes to spiritual sciences, as the story alludes to.

Elements of these sciences are based on mental observations: what the senses observe and then organizing the "record" of observations through associations. For example, what we call an "apple" is red, has a firm feel, is about the size of a fist, and has a particular taste; so when we encounter an object with these qualities it is logical to assume it is an apple. But there are other objects that share these same qualities which are not apples; and this distinction may not always be discernable to the mind, especially with more subtle phenomena. Where the limitations of sciences prove to be insufficient, divine awareness suffices and guides. Divine awareness also informs to what purpose worldly knowledge should be used. Jalaal ud-Diin

Rumi states: “the partial intellect is like a tool for the Universal Intellect, and we learn and find our purpose from there.” (*Fihi* p. 258)

Thus, one can be a *complete master* of worldly sciences and yet miss the point for why we are entrusted to such sciences. The king can hold a ring clenched in its fist and the son can utilize the sciences to ascertain that the object is *round, yellow, inscribed and hollow* and yet not know it's a ring. In the same way, spiritual sciences can be used to decipher the *all the signs correctly*, but to what end? Something beyond the sciences is needed to discern the sieve from the ring although they share common qualities. This “something” is divine awareness. It is through this that we come to “know” *what is truly of importance and touches us more closely than anything else, namely our own Self*.

Being a master of worldly knowledge doesn't fulfill the more expansive purpose of Self-realization. To this end, are we willing to shift from worldly knowledge being the determining factor of how we live to the guidance of divine awareness? To shift from “what I think” to what the Beloved reveals? To realize the limitations of worldly knowledge, even if such is perfect and complete, and make this secondary to the wisdom that emanates from the heart. If not, even the great teachings of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi (and certainly this blog) become reduced to a knowledge that can't decipher a sieve from a ring. The invitation is here for us to learn without forgetting divine awareness and the more expansive purpose of spirituality which includes to *know [your] own Self*.



This Trust that humanity carries

April 9, 2015

But Allaah does not leave us in sin and foolishness. Out of our physical life comes companionship, families, and a thousand familiar friendships. If this Trust that humanity carries also produces friendships and knowledge, what is so strange in that? What rises from a person after death? Look in their secret heart. Their secret heart is like the root of a tree -- although hidden, its influence appears in the leaves and branches. If a branch or two is broken when the root is whole, they will grow again, but if the root is damaged, neither bough nor leaf remains....

We must test our friends, so that in the end we have no cause for regret. Here is another of Allaah's rules: "Begin with yourself." If you claim to be humble and serve Allaah, do not accept this claim without testing it. When people wash, first they lift some water to their nose and then they taste it. Simply looking at the water is not enough, for water may have the appearance of purity, but its taste and smell will prove if it is infected. Once the test is done, then they wash their faces.

(adapted from *Fihi Ma Fihi*,
translated by A.J. Arberry, p. 338 - 339)

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This Trust that humanity carries is a reference to the following verse of the Qur'aan:

We [the Absolute] did indeed offer the Trust to the Heavens and the Earth and the Mountains; but they refused to undertake it, being afraid thereof. But humanity undertook it; indeed, humanity proved to be unjust and foolish.

(Surah 33 *Al-Ahzaab*, Verse 72)

At the heart of Islam (surrender to the Beloved), the heart of spirituality is a call to *Trust* the Beloved and allow this *Trust* to be the root from which the whole of our lives emanates -- in this world and beyond.

When we talk about trust, we're talking about reliance on the strength and capability of something other than one's "self." In traditional Islam, this doesn't mean a complete abdication of self-effort; instead that our self-effort be secondary to reliance on the Beloved and strictly guided by that. Note these two passages from Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's *Masnawi i Ma'navi* (adapted from translation by E.H. Whinfield):

If ye really have trust in Allaah, exert yourselves,
And strive, in constant reliance on the Almighty. (p.
31)

[The enlightened sage] said, "True; but though trust
be our mainstay,
Yet the Prophet (s.a.w.s.) teaches us to have regard to
means.

The Prophet cried with a loud voice,
'Trust in Allaah, yet tie the camel's leg.'" (p. 28)

The acceptance of the duty to *Trust* is a great responsibility. This entails receiving a power that we are encouraged to restrain (surrender) to the guidance of the Beloved. As the above verse from the Qur'aan states the Heavens, Earth, and Mountains refused to accept this duty knowing the challenges entailed: that with this power come formidable temptations to ignore divine guidance and wield this power in one's own way, namely in pursuit of desires. But each human, in accepting incarnation into a body, accepted the duty to *Trust* and the dual blessing / danger of free will and self-effort this duty encompasses. Thus, humanity has "indeed proved to be unjust and foolish" by failing to refrain from misusing these blessings, by failing to "*Trust in Allaah, yet tie the camel's leg.*"

We literally betray this *Trust* when we seek to dictate our "lives" on our own ego-based terms through the power of our self-effort, regardless the intention of such efforts. This is at the root of so much sin and foolishness, outcomes that can manifest even when we exert our free will and self-effort toward "spiritual" and "beneficial" goals. Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi warns: "But because you put your trust in your own plans, losing sight of Allaah, and forgetting that all things proceed from Allaah, all your intentions have turned out the opposite." (*Fihi* p. 9 - 10) If this disharmony with the duty of *Trust* is at the root of our lives, from this root will emanate stems, branches, fruits and flowers of the same nature. And the calculation of free will and self-effort when under the "reign" of the ego can be very clever and discreet and, thus, be deceptive. Jalaal ud-Diin cautions: "So do not put your trust in every idea and every notion, but only in Allaah and Its wisdom." (*Fihi* p. 9) This is a call to move from the level of the mind to the depth of heart (wherein the Beloved dwells) being the determining force of the course of our lives.

Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi mentions the *secret heart*. It is not so much that this secret heart is something kept from our awareness; rather it is very subtle, reaching beyond the mind's means of perception. But to those who surrender the limits of their perception and insistence on (mentally) understanding phenomena, divine revelation makes plain the "secret" heart and its outflows and revelations. Thus, we can see the value of the metaphor describing the *secret heart is like the root of a tree -- although hidden, its influence appears in the leaves and branches*.

When we are living in harmony with the duty of *Trust*, the heart is "alive;" when we are in disharmony with this duty, it as if the heart is "sick" or "dead." From the vivaciousness, illness, or death of the heart come the outgrowths of life's manifestations such as *friendships [relationships] and knowledge*. For example, if we are in an unhealthy relationship, what do we look at as the cause of this "problem?" Most people look at the other person and their actions as the problem. Some will look at themselves and their own actions. But if we heed the guidance of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's words, we should look to our secret (subtle) heart: is this root alive, sick, or dead in relation to us upholding the duty of *Trust*? Because *if a branch or two is broken when the root is whole, they will grow again*: these "problems" will be resolved or pass away to be better in harmony with the outflowing beneficence of the living heart. There may be things to be performed through self-effort, but only under the strict guidance of the heart -- such guidance being an outflow of the heart. *But if the root is damaged -- if our heart is sick or dead through not fulfilling the duty of Trust -- neither bough nor leaf remains*: whatever is present is headed toward decay and destruction unless the health of the heart is addressed.

When we approach life through self-effort we tend to turn our attention to the branches, fruits, and flowers of manifestation. Sometimes we can affect and manipulate these by self-effort, but only to a limited extent. Yet this approach tends to ignore the state of the root (the heart) which is an outcome of fulfilling (or not) the duty of *Trust*. Fulfilling the duty of *Trust* not only affects the manifestations of the root but aligns us with a beneficent means of sustaining these and the root -- a beneficence that has the capability to completely transform everything and more.

Having the root (the heart) be the priority doesn't mean neglecting the manifestations. As Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi states: *We must test our friends, so that in the end we have no cause for regret.* The branches, fruits, and flowers that extend into our lives from others should be measured by the standard of divine guidance -- whether given directly from the Beloved or through the teachings of prophets, saints, and teachers. This standard certainly includes ethics, which is of utmost importance. Testing doesn't mean judging or trying to change people, but if my ethical standards demand my commitment to honesty should I be in a relationship with people who lie? And if I choose to be in such a relationship, who is the cause of regret when that person's lying creates conflict, drama, and strife? There may be situations where we have to deal with people who aren't in harmony with the standards of divine guidance (i.e. at a job), but it is wise to keep such interactions to a bare minimum: only what is absolutely necessary.

Ultimately, even this testing of others calls for us to heed *another of Allaah's rules: "Begin with yourself."* Whatever we claim or seek to be, we must test -- especially any self-effort involved. For example, the ethic of honesty usually involves some self-effort to restrain our

dishonest habits and tendencies. And when we remember that the calculation of self-effort can be deceptive, testing becomes essential. We must inspect the “water” of our self-effort: *When people wash, first they lift some water to their nose [to smell it] and then they taste it. Simply looking at the water is not enough, for water may have the appearance of purity, but its taste and smell will prove if it is infected.* And we should not ignore these clearly observable signs. If the water of our self-effort is sullied by ego-driven pursuits, what benefit is there in washing ourselves in this “dirty” water -- even if it has *the appearance of purity*, of spirituality? But if the water is clean, being led by divine guidance, it is suitable for washing.

Once we have been washed, we will be wise to fulfill the duty of *Trust*, of complete reliance on the Beloved. This will not only keep us “clean,” but allow us to be drawn into the wonder and unending beneficence that awaits us when we allow the Beloved to totally guide our lives. Herein is complete reliance, complete provision and complete surrender. Then we realize, in a way that transcends ideas and the limitations of the mind, what this life is truly about...



There is nothing worse than poetry - Part 1 of 2

April 23, 2015

I wish to make people happy so much that, when friends come to visit me, I recite poetry so that they will not be sorry and bored. Then for some time I stop the poetry, and they become sad and want me to recite poetry again. And I cannot refuse them, so I recite poetry. Otherwise, where am I and where is the poetry? By Allaah, I am away from poetry, I care nothing about poetry.

In my sight there is nothing worse than poetry. What is this situation like? Upon the request of his guest someone has taken an animal's stomach (tripe) and is washing it. This act of his and his enduring the dirty smells is to fulfill the request of his guest because he knows that his guest likes the meal prepared from the animal's stomach. In our hometown -- the city of Balkh -- there was no occupation or craft more disgraceful than poetry. If we had not come here [to Konya] and had stayed in our hometown, we would have followed their ways. We would have worked the way they wanted. We would have been occupied with teaching, giving lectures, and classifying books, and we would not recite poetry.

(adapted from *Fundamentals of Rumi's Thought*,
translated by Sefik Can, p. 201)

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Given the tendency in the modern age to present Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi as a poet, some may be surprised by his words above. Yet understanding the place of poetry in his life can be helpful to gaining a

more complete understanding of who he is, how he lived, and what can be learned from his time on earth.

Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's view about poetry has its roots in the life of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.s.) and how poets were viewed in Arabia at that time. To be a poet then not only meant to compose or be a channel of one's "own" poems but to also be a reciter of one's own work -- and sometimes the noted work of others. (Jalaal ud-Diin's interwove quotes of others' poems, usually Sufi poets, into his own poems and discourses.) Arabian culture was more oral-based than paper-based in terms of keeping records (i.e. historical accounts, noted stories) and conveying social messages (i.e. "campaigns" to urge societal change). Therefore, great value was placed in those who could not only powerfully communicate with words but also craft or channel words that powerfully imprinted in the memories of those who heard them. To this end, eloquence, captivating metaphors, simplicity and accessibility of meaning, melody and rhythm, dramatic recitation were qualities poets were celebrated for. And the topics of poems were not limited to artistic expression as in modern Western culture: Arabian poems span from art to romance to history to wise teachings to prophesy to social commentary to religion and more.

It is within this setting that Muhammad received the first revelations of the Qur'aan: verses in Arabic directly from Allaah, the Absolute, delivered to him by the angel Jibriil (Gabriel). Many of these verses, which were later organized into books through divine guidance, were clearly "poetic" by Arabian standards. There are countless accounts of how people were moved by the beauty and power of the recitation of these verses, some reduced to tears. For some, verses effortlessly imprinted themselves into the memories of listeners after only one

hearing, almost how today we may hear a commercial jingle or part of a song that we can't get out of our heads.

Although Muhammad wasn't a poet before the Qur'aanic revelations began, some who resisted his claims to be a Messenger and Prophet of Allaah grouped him with poets who also made assertions of divine authority. Such resistance was further fueled by the Qur'aan's explicit challenge to abandon all deities and spiritual / religious approaches other than surrender to and direct worship of Allaah -- not something most of the Arabs of that day wished to hear. Some poets presented themselves as "prophets" who could foretell and shape the future, expound spiritual lessons and powers, speak to and relay messages from various deities; thus, making them worthy -- in their eyes -- of being teachers, leaders, and persons of influence in society. And, of course, some poets utilized these roles to accumulate personal fame and wealth.

Suffice it to say, most of these poets proved to be false "prophets:" many who spun their facades of deception for personal gain as long as they could. Allaah, through the Qur'aan, gave repeated explicit pronouncements that this was not the case with Muhammad:

{36} And [people] say: "What! shall we give up our gods for the sake of a poet possessed?" {37} Nay! he [Muhammad] has come with the Truth, and he confirms [what was conveyed through] the Messengers [who came before him].
(Surah 37 *As-Saaffaat* - Those Who Set The Ranks, Verses 36 - 37)

“Nay,” they [people] say, “(these words are) medleys of dreams! - Nay, he [Muhammad] forged it! - Nay, he is (but) a poet! Let him then bring us a Sign like the ones that were sent to (Prophets) of old!”

(Surah 21 *Al-Ambiyaa* - The Prophets, Verse 5)

{40} That this [recitation] is verily the word of an honored Messenger; {41} It is not the word of a poet: little it is ye believe! {42} Nor is it the word of a soothsayer: little admonition it is ye receive. {43} It is a revelation from the Lord of the Worlds. {44} And if he [Muhammad] had fabricated some of the sayings concerning Us [the Absolute], {45} We should certainly seize him by his right hand, {46} And We should certainly then cut off the artery of his heart.
(Surah 69 *Ah-Haaqqah* - The Reality, Verses 40 - 46)

These words were uttered through Muhammad’s mouth acknowledging their divine source, yet to some they still rung familiar to previous proclamations from false “prophetic” poets. But note, the Beloved also distinguishes prophets and messengers from poets, including poets who are not false. And the saints, which include Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi, are spiritual inheritors of the prophets and messengers, continuing their divinely-inspired service.

At the root of this distinction is the human knowledge of poets which is incomparable to the divine love-based revelations prophets, messengers, and saints receive through the heart. This is not to say that human knowledge is worthless; there may be useful treasures found in the mental inspiration, calculation, and cleverness poets

impart. And for many Arabian poets, the pillars of this knowledge is rooted in sound traditional wisdom and learning, even if sometimes manipulated for selfish aims. But, as Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi states, “Traditional knowledge, when [divine] inspiration is available / Is like making ablutions [cleansing one’s self] with sand when water is near.” (adapted from *Masnavi i Ma’navi* p. 279, translated by E.H. Whinfield) Also note, that the standard of being a poet doesn’t require one to be righteous. There is a potential danger in human knowledge, particularly in how it can be misused and misunderstood: “Cleverness is as a wind raising storms of pride.” (*Masnavi* p. 279)

In contrast, consider what Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi says is necessary to hear divine inspiration:

Take the cotton of evil suggestions from the mind’s
ear,
That the heavenly voice from above may enter it,
That you may understand that riddle of the Beloved,
That you may be cognizant of that open secret.
Then the mind’s ear becomes the sensorium of
inspiration;
For what is this Divine voice but the inward voice?
The spirit’s eye and ear possess this sense,
The eye and ear of reason and sense [the mind] lack
it.
(*Masnavi* p.39 - 40)

Even suggestions of evil, acts not committed but still within the scope of one’s potential behavior, are enough to impede receiving divine revelation. It is possible to mature one’s surrender and ethics so that

it's not even possible that you will commit evil: such as an honest person who die before they tell a lie. And divine revelation is spoken of as a "riddle" because it is not limited to the linear rules of logic that define human / mental reason. On the "level" of divine revelation something can be and yet not be whereas on the level of the mind it either is or isn't.

Divine revelation is not crafted of things outward, even if those outward things include testimony of another's inward revelation. Each prophet, messenger, and saint must have one's own realization of this inward voice, even if the dawning of such realization occurs through heart-to-heart transmission from master to disciple. Actually, this invitation to have one's own realization is offered to us all, if we are willing to surrender completely to the Beloved. And for the prophet, messenger, and saint, the depth of such realization and surrender matures to become the very breath of one's life: if one does anything that impedes this revelation, "We should certainly then cut off the artery of his heart." (Qur'aan Surah 69, Verse 46). This requires a purity, humility, and wholistic approach to life that exceeds what is necessary to be even a honest poet. To be a channel of divine wisdom requires the surrender of one's whole life, whereby Jalaal ud-Diin declares: "Humans inspired of Allaah are the fountain of life; / Humans of delusions are a synonym for death." (*Masnawi* p. 224)

Thus, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's words about poetry are informed, in part, by the complete surrender of life he made to the Beloved, which exceeds what it takes to be a poet. Yet, he still employs poetry as a

means to serve this greater purpose. We'll explore this in the next post.



There is nothing worse than poetry - Part 2 of 2

May 7, 2015

I wish to make people happy so much that, when friends come to visit me, I recite poetry so that they will not be sorry and bored. Then for some time I stop the poetry, and they become sad and want me to recite poetry again. And I cannot refuse them, so I recite poetry. Otherwise, where am I and where is the poetry? By Allaah, I am away from poetry, I care nothing about poetry.

In my sight there is nothing worse than poetry. What is this situation like? Upon the request of his guest someone has taken an animal's stomach (tripe) and is washing it. This act of his and his enduring the dirty smells is to fulfill the request of his guest because he knows that his guest likes the meal prepared from the animal's stomach. In our hometown -- the city of Balkh -- there was no occupation or craft more disgraceful than poetry. If we had not come here [to Konya] and had stayed in our hometown, we would have followed their ways. We would have worked the way they wanted. We would have been occupied with teaching, giving lectures, and classifying books, and we would not recite poetry.

(adapted from *Fundamentals of Rumi's Thought*,
translated by Sefik Can, p. 201)

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The previous post examined the distinction between poetry and divine revelation in Arabia during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.s.) As the religion we call Islam spread throughout and beyond Arabia, and people's embrace of it evolved over time, some Muslims

continued to revere poetry, others developed a distaste for it. Yet there is an element of grace in divine revelation that presents itself in a way that people are fond of -- in a way that makes *people happy*. This informs Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's use of poetry as a saint: a spiritual inheritor upholding the spiritual lineage and service of the prophets and messengers who preceded him.

Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's life crosses between two places that held differing opinions of poetry. As he states:

In our hometown -- the city of Balkh -- there was no occupation or craft more disgraceful than poetry. If we had not come here [to Konya] and had stayed in our hometown, we would have followed their ways.

When he was young, his family moved from Balkh to avoid spreading war in the region. His family eventually settled in Konya which loved poetry, but his hometown's disposition toward it remained: *I care nothing about poetry*. Most poets compose poetry, in part, because of the joy they derive from it. But this becomes irrelevant for one who serves in surrender to be a vessel of divine revelation.

Jalaal ud-Diin states: *I wish to make people happy so much that, when friends come to visit me, I recite poetry so that they will not be sorry and bored*. Yet we should not assume that this is the sole purpose of choosing a medium favorable to the people: the vital purpose is to convey the message of the Beloved. Thus, Jalaal ud-Diin declares:

Every line of poetry the saints and prophets bring forth, every tradition [saying], every verse they write

[recite], is like a witness bearing testimony. They bear witness to every situation according to the nature of the situation. ... The inner form of their testimony is always the same; it is the outer meaning that differs. I pray that Allaah may cause these words to bear witness to Allaah and you alike.

(Fihi Ma Fihi, adapted from the translation by A.J. Arberry, p. 62 - 63)

There are two levels to divine revelation, and within these levels may be various meanings. One level *bears witness* to the listener: verses flowing through Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi as poetry to those who like poetry, the beauty and power of this flow being appreciated (on the mental level) as poetry. We may call this the outer level since the orientation of the mind is outward: even what we think “internally” is based on external phenomena (objects, experiences, conceptual associations, etc.) It is also on the level of the mind that we have likes and dislikes, experience happiness or sadness in relation to phenomena -- these mental states are fleeting and always subject to change. Thus, the outer form can vary from poetry to talks to other expressions.

The second level to divine revelation bears witness to the Beloved: conveying Its message and revelation in ways that may reflect upon but also exceed the mental level, pointing to the (spiritual) heart. For example, a verse of the Qur’aan may be poetic yet convey something deeper than what the mind can understand from the words and ideas of the verse -- something that touches and turns a person to one’s own heart. This is the inner level: the heart, that innermost essence of our being in which the Beloved dwells. Realization of this is described in

terms of bliss and ecstasy that cannot be disturbed, even if only having a temporary taste of these.

Note the following words of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi. Although they refer to the Qur'aan, his "poetry" shares the nature of divine revelation encompassed in the Qur'aan:

Know the words of the Qur'aan are simple,
But within the outward sense is an inner secret one.
Beneath that secret meaning is a third,
Whereat the highest wit is dumbfounded.
The fourth meaning has been seen by none
Save Allaah, the Incomparable and All-Sufficient.
Thus they go on, even to seven meanings, one by
one,
According to the saying of the Prophet, without
doubt.
Do thou, O child, confine not thy view to the outward
meaning,
Even as the demons saw in Aadam only clay.
The outward meaning of the Qur'aan is like Aadam's
body,
For its semblance is visible, but its soul is hidden.
(adapted from *Masnawi i Ma'navi* p. 248 - 249,
translated by E.H. Whinfield)

The inner level is encased within the outer, and the outer level is crafted as something appealing to draw us to the threshold of the inner level. And within the inner level are more meanings. The translator uses the word "secret meaning" to describe the third sense, but

perhaps a better translation may be the word “subtle:” it is not something hidden or disclosed, but it does call for a quietude of mind to “see” this “secret” laying in plain sight. Without quietude of mind, we are more likely to become consumed with the outer level: if it’s something that appeals to our minds we become enraptured in it, or if it’s unappealing we disregard it -- both options playing out without paying any attention to the inner level. Surrender to the Beloved, which is what Islam is, brings us to this quietude of mind. (Note that, for most, we are *brought to* this quietude, usually through obedience to a continuous spiritual practice; very rarely can we attain this through our own efforts.) And when the mind is quiet, we can witness how the heart “hears” this revelation, just as a lover is able to understand the deeper, sometimes unspoken, meanings of the words of one’s Beloved. The fourth and subsequent meanings, which are *seen by none save Allaah*, cannot be seen by humans by their own will; yet if the Beloved shows these to us, we can receive these meanings. But such requires the deepest levels of surrender and quietude of mind, and often the annihilation of the self (ego).

These levels and meanings are present in Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi’s work. Unfortunately, we often only look to and are presented with translations of his works that focus on the outer level, as powerful and beautiful as such may be. This is one of the reasons this blog dedicates so much attention to explaining the Islamic context of Jalaal ud-Diin’s life, since the “context” of surrender to the Beloved can draw us to the inner levels even through outer-oriented translations. In comparing what the outer beholds to the indescribable wonder of the inner level and meanings, you may see why Jalaal ud-Diin describes the reduction of divine revelation to mere poetry in the following way (from the opening quote):

In my sight there is nothing worse than poetry. What is this situation like? Upon the request of his guest someone has taken an animal's stomach (tripe) and is washing it. This act of his and his enduring the dirty smells is to fulfill the request of his guest because he knows that his guest likes the meal prepared from the animal's stomach.

We're not even dealing with the choice meat of the animal, for those who eat meat. But the guts and intestines, the most vile and dirty parts. And yes, these can be washed and prepared into a tasty meal: these abounding divine expressions can be reduced to finite pleasantries of the mind, which often result in partial or complete (ego-based) misunderstandings of what is truly being communicated. But if these expressions are not presented in a way that people like, most people are guaranteed to not even glance in the direction of the inner meanings hidden within the outer level. To have people be drawn to a place where they can at least have an opportunity to turn toward the inner is a motivation for why Jalaal ud-Diin wishes *to make people happy*. That within such happiness one may get a scent of the inner meaning; an invitation to witness what the Beloved is conveying through these expressions. And Jalaal ud-Diin has no attachment to the medium of poetry: he would just as easily convey such through *teaching, giving lectures, and classifying books*.

Regardless of what others may or may not open to in their encounters with Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's words, what are you being open to? Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi cautions: "If you look at the contents you are wise; / If you look only at the vessel you are misguided.... The form [outer]

misleads, but the inner meaning guides." (*Masnavi* p. 421) Are you realizing and honoring such guidance?

(P.S. In a coming blog post, I'll present an overview of the *Masnavi* -- which many consider Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's crown jewel -- in relation to the Qur'aan, to explore more in-depth the dynamics of divine revelation.)



Spat in his face

May 22, 2015

Ali, the “Lion of Allaah,” was once engaged in conflict with a Magian chief, and in the midst of the struggle the Magian spat in his face. Ali, instead of taking vengeance on him, at once dropped his sword, to the Magian’s great astonishment. On his inquiring the reason of such forbearance, Ali informed him that the “Lion of Allaah” did not destroy life for the satisfaction of his own vengeance, but simply to carry out Allaah’s Will, and that whenever he saw just cause, he held his hand even in the midst of the strife, and spared the foe.

The Magian chief, on hearing Ali’s discourse, was so much affected that he embraced Islam, together with all his family, to the number of fifty souls.

(adapted from *Masnavi i Ma’navi*,
translated by E.H. Whinfield, p. 83 - 84)

* * *

The above story brings us to Ali (‘Alii ibn Abii Taalib), cousin of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.s.) and one of his closest Companions (*Sahaabah*). Tradition holds that, as a young boy, he was the second person to convert to the religion we call Islam, second only to Khadijah, Muhammad’s wife at the time. In many respects, he was like a son to Muhammad, who later married Ali to his daughter Faatimah. Ali became one of the most famous warriors in Arabia, a brave and fierce soldier who was exceptionally strong. As a leader in the Muslim community, he was highly regarded for his piety, generosity, wisdom,

impartiality (as a judge), and compassion for others. Thus, he became the fourth Caliph, leader of the Muslim community / nation. He was also a deeply spiritual mystic. Almost all traditional Sufi orders trace their spiritual lineage back to Muhammad through Ali, who received a heart-to-heart transmission of knowing directly from the Prophet. Thus, the title bestowed upon him, “Lion of Allaah,” speaks to his physical, mental, and spiritual strength and courage.

It may seem odd to the modern Western mind that a mystic would be a (political) leader and warrior since these are often juxtaposed to each other. But in traditional Islam, spiritual qualities are explicitly sought for leadership -- especially in the domain of war where, in ancient times, the leader literally led its people to the battlefield and fought beside them.

In the context of war and Islam, the term *jihad* often comes up. The word literally means “struggle” or “resisting.” The Prophet Muhammad taught there is a greater and lesser *jihad*. The greater, and more important, *jihad* is struggle to restrain and conquer one’s own ego (*nafs*). Only then is one fit to wage and lead others in lesser *jihad* against opponents, which can include war. In ancient times, war was not limited to just military engagement: the term includes social, political, legal, and economic tactics engaged in conflicts. Even within the last century, economic sanctions and media propaganda (publishing derogatory information about a country or leader) were seen as explicit acts of war that sometimes led to military conflict. Again, I stress that traditional Islam emphasizes restraint and conquering of one’s own ego before engaging in activities of conflict that seek to restrain or conquer others. And on the scale of lesser *jihad*, military action was always

reserved to a very last resort. Understanding this, you may begin to see how jihaad plays a role in the above story.

Ali, the "Lion of Allaah," was once engaged in conflict with a Magian chief. This is a reference to a famous story that highlights the glory of Ali. In the heat of battle, fighting sword to sword, each man was aiming to not just wound, but kill the other. The intimacy of facing another's deadly aggression is something we don't always comprehend in today's age: where many wars (and fights) are fought at a distance and people are less often killed by another's hand but by the force of powerful weapons such as guns, bombs, etc. Yet within the intimacy of ancient hand-to-hand combat, where you looked a person in the eye before killing or being killed, battles were fought with an etiquette that was uncompromising.

In sword battles, if a person was knocked to the ground or one's sword was knocked from one's hand, that person had to stop fighting and willingly surrender one's life. If a person did not adhere to this etiquette, one's own army would often kill that person and make excessive amends to the other party to uphold the honor of warfare. There are versions of this battle in which Ali knocked his enemy to the ground, and some say he knocked the sword from his enemy's hand with a powerful swing. In either case, instead of adhering to etiquette and surrendering, the Magian chief angrily spit in Ali's face. This would have been read as an attack, no different than throwing a punch, in the military etiquette of that time. Ali would have been totally justified in mercilessly torturing the Magian chief but *Ali, instead of taking vengeance on him, at once dropped his sword, to the Magian's great astonishment.*

The dropping of the sword means Ali relinquished the right to kill the Magian chief: that he was now free to live. And the Magian chief, perplexed, asks why Ali *did not destroy [his] life for the satisfaction of his own vengeance?* Within this phrase there is a powerful message to the Sufi: that in living the depth of surrender that pulls one beyond the reign of the mind to be humbly guided by the Wisdom of the heart, one must never act for the sake of one's own satisfaction. This is part of the greater jihaad, the internal struggle, the Sufi must wage: to literally war against an anger that is absolutely justified by the conditions. Whether it be satisfaction of one's vengeance and anger, or even pursuit of pleasure, the root of this satisfaction lays in the ego. And when we satisfy the ego, we usually ignore the Beloved -- or at least make our ego a partner to the Beloved, which traditional Islam cautions against and forbids.

Another unabridged translation of the *Masnawi* by Reynold Alleyne (R.A.) Nicholson expounds Ali's response to why he spared the Magian chief's life:

He [Ali] said, "I am wielding the sword for Allaah's sake, I am the servant of Allaah, I am not under the command of the body.
(adapted from *The Mathnawi of Jalalu'ddin Rumi*, p. 461, Line 3787)

Even in the fury of battle, which gives rise to ego-based arousals of fear, anger, and survival (even in saints and prophets), Ali is not under the command of the mind-body drives. He experiences these, having a body and mind, but is not controlled by them. How? By the depth of surrender which yields the movement of the body and mind to the

“hand” of the Beloved, to truly be a *servant of Allaah* (the Absolute). The depth of such surrender is rarely cultivated in the moment of battle, instead usually in the countless continuous hours of spiritual practice that precede arrival to the battlefield. This often entails humility to the guidance of a spiritual master, which for Ali is the Prophet Muhammad, so a heart-to-heart transmission may impart a quietude of body and mind to hear the divine guidance that always emanates through the heart.

Ali continues:

I am the Lion of Allaah, I am not the lion of passion: my deed bears witness to my religion.
(*The Mathnawi*, p. 461, Line 3788)

Passion in this sense means the pulls and drives of the ego, including intense desires. And think of the attributes associated with lions: courage, strength, ferocity, protection, sovereignty, leadership. In this world, these qualities are often utilized for ego-based efforts, even if with genuine intentions to benefit others. But for the Lion of Allaah, these attributes facilitate actions performed under the guidance of the Beloved to bear *witness to my religion*: complete surrender to the Beloved. Ali goes on to say: “I am (but) as the sword, and the wielder is the (Divine) Sun.” (*The Mathnawi*, p. 461, Line 3789) Many of us struggle to live such surrender in conditions less intense than face-to-face combat on the battlefield, so imagine how much more challenging it is to live such in the face of war.

I stress: it is not that Ali is exempt or immune from experiencing the pulls and drives of the ego. Anyone who has ever been spat in the face

knows there is an immediate rising fury that literally seeks to explode in retribution for such a dehumanizing act. And Ali felt this, which is why he *at once dropped his sword*. For those on the Sufi path, if there is even an inclination to act from anything other than divine guidance, we are wise to immediately take refuge in stillness -- no action. In stillness, we can allow the mental and physical reverberations of the ego to pass, allowing the mind and body to quiet so that the whispers (guidance) of the heart may be heard. This is true courage, true strength, true ferocity, true protection, true sovereignty, true leadership. Once this divine guidance is heard, it will move us from stillness into actions guided by the Absolute. To witness this, even in an enemy who is about to kill you, can be transforming beyond description. And the Magian chief was so moved, *so much affected that he embraced Islam*: abandoning his former religion, or lack thereof, to embrace the path that Ali is upon. Ali bearing witness to his way gave the Magian chief the precious opportunity to bear witness to it too and be transformed -- even upon a violent battlefield in the face of imminent death.

Ali concludes in saying:

I have been freed from effort and search, I have tied my sleeve to the skirt [robe] of Allaah.
(*The Mathnawi*, p. 461, Line 3807)

In the depth of surrender, we don't have to try, exert, or even search for guidance: it is given. All we have to do is tie our *sleeve* -- our willingness to act -- *to the skirt [robe] of Allaah*, and the Beloved will move us through this life and beyond...



True to his vow

June 4, 2015

There was once a dervish who took up his abode in the mountains, in order to enjoy perfect solitude. In that place were many fruit-trees, and the dervish made a vow that he would never pluck any of the fruit, but eat only what was shaken down by the wind. For a long time he kept his vow; but a time came when there was no wind, and consequently no fruit was shaken down.

The dervish was true to his vow for five days, but he could then endure the pangs of hunger no longer, and he stretched out his hand and plucked some of the fruit from the branches. The reason of this lapse on his part was that he had omitted to say "Allaah willing" when making his vow; and as nothing can be accomplished without Allaah's aid, he could not possibly keep his vow.

Shortly afterwards the chief of the police visited the mountains in pursuit of a band of robbers, and arrested the dervish along with them, and cut off his hand. When the chief discovered his mistake he apologized very earnestly; but the dervish reassured him, saying that men were not to blame, as Allaah had evidently designed to punish him for breaking his vow 'by depriving him of the hand which had sinned in plucking the fruit.'

(adapted from *Masnavi i Ma'navi*,
translated by E.H. Whinfield, p. 192 - 193)

* * *

Vows are easy to make, but can be challenging to uphold. Yet it is for this very purpose of upholding vows through challenges that vows are

taken. No traditional vow would state: 'I vow not do something until I do it.' If a vow is taken to refrain from an action, the person who seriously embraces the vow will not commit that act no matter what -- even if one must die to uphold the vow. This level of conviction in upholding vows is becoming rare in the modern age, particularly in this society where almost half of marriages -- a vow to be spouses until death -- end in the violation or dissolution of this sacred vow.

Traditional Islam rests upon a vow: the *shahaadah*, which is the first pillar of Islam. It states: "There is no deity but Allaah, and Muhammad is Its Messenger." A contextual understanding of the first part speaks to one of the main themes of the above story. In Islam, and the larger Arab culture of Muhammad's (p.b.u.h.) time, what a person identifies as one's deity that person worships. This goes beyond mere ceremonial acknowledgment and praise: in a traditional sense, what one worships dictates the whole of one's life. Every action (before being performed), every thought (before being engaged) is weighed to see if it is in harmony and obedience to what one worships. No act or thought is considered too small to weigh, no room is left for excuses or for one to be even slightly casual. This calls for the highest levels of commitment, mindfulness (attentiveness), and honesty. If there is even a question of if an act fits within the scope of such harmony and obedience, the ancient elders teach that one should err on the side of upholding the vow and not commit the act. To this end, to remind Muslims of the importance of allowing only the Absolute to determine the course of one's life, the practice became established of uttering *inshallaah* (Allaah willing) before committing any act or stating an intention for future acts, such as promises and vows.

This “Allaah willing” was lacking when the dervish *took up his abode in the mountains, in order to enjoy perfect solitude*. For Sufis, when one is in perfect solitude, there is only the Beloved: even the lover dissolves (disappears) into the boundlessness of Love, the Absolute. For most, the quest to such realization means being a humble lover who surrenders all will and self-effort to live in complete reliance upon and obedience to the Beloved. Thus, *the dervish made a vow that he would never pluck any of the fruit, but eat only what was shaken down by the wind*. But he *omitted to say “Allaah willing.”* This goes beyond words spoken as a social norm. When he made this vow, although with good intentions, did he weigh whether this course of action was in harmony with what the Beloved wills? The Beloved placed these *many fruit-trees* there, perhaps to support to the dervish’s opening to perfect solitude. But did the Beloved forbid him to eat any fruit that did not fall from the trees? Or was this a condition self-imposed?

These questions reveal the depth and clarity of the dervish’s surrender to the Beloved: allowing the Beloved to be the determining force of all one’s actions. Traditional Islam warns against the “I” (the ego) being a determining force -- whether directly or indirectly. The Qur’aan states:

“but it may happen that ye hate a thing which is good for you, and it may happen that ye love a thing which is bad for you. Allaah knoweth, ye know not.” (Surah 2, Verse 216, translation by Marmaduke Pickthall)

So many of us, including spiritual people, act out ignorant (not knowing) self-willed acts without any awareness that this is what we’re doing. This delusion is a common aspect of ego-based living, regardless of the direction the ego seeks. To protect against this, traditional Sufi

orders hold that a practitioner should not do or promise anything without first consulting one's spiritual guide. This approach not only protects against pursuing acts that are clearly evil, but also against acts that overly "self-righteous." And in particular, what is ordered, one should not add to. So if this dervish was given permission or ordered to go practice solitude in the mountains, the vow to not eat fruit that did not fall from the tree was an addition made by him. This addition placed him in unnecessary hardship and suffering: *he could then endure the pangs of hunger no longer, and he stretched out his hand and plucked some of the fruit from the branches.*

Allowing the Beloved to determine the course of our lives does not exempt us from hardship. But with the hardships the Beloved guides to, It promises: "No soul shall have a burden laid on it greater than it can bear." (Surah 2, Verse 233, translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali) Yet if we place burdens upon ourselves -- often by means of the delusional ego -- we can find ourselves in the midst of burdens we cannot bear. Thus, the dervish discovers first hand: *as nothing can be accomplished without Allaah's aid, he could not possibly keep his [self-imposed] vow.* And with the breaking of any vow, including misguided self-imposed ones, consequences follow.

In this story, the dervish is able to see a direct connection between him eating the fruit he forbid to himself and being arrested with the robbers to have his hand cut off. He acknowledges: *Allaah had evidently designed to punish him for breaking his vow 'by depriving him of the hand which had sinned in plucking the fruit.'* The manifestations of

such consequences are not always obvious to us who suffer them, but they do come. And so too come the fruits of fulfilling vows.

Also, the last phrase, *sinned in plucking the fruit*, is a reference to the prophet Aadam (Adam, a.s.). He and Hawwa (Eve) were expelled from the Garden of Paradise (Eden) for plucking and eating fruit from the only tree the Beloved forbade them to eat from. The most dire consequence (punishment) that came from this expulsion was Aadam and Hawwa being separated from the Beloved. Islam holds that seven expansive heavens separate the earthly realm from the Throne of Allaah. In the loss of such intimacy -- expelled from a garden in which the Beloved walked side-by-side with them, speaking clear words -- we obscure the clarity of that perfect divine guidance by which we can navigate the hardships of this world unscathed. This speaks to one of the greatest dangers of dishonoring vows, whether through breaking them or unwise self-imposition of vows. In many respects, one of the (sometimes unspoken) intentions of vows is to guide us back to this intimate guidance, often using the hardships we encounter in upholding divinely-given vows to reveal the barriers we hold to this innermost guidance.

In closing, let's briefly address the cutting off of the dervish's hand. In today's Western society, Islam is often portrayed as a cruel and extreme religion, particularly in light of how some associate it with terrorism. Thus, some may regard it as "barbaric" that the dervish's hand is cut off -- and maybe even the robbers' hands too. But many ancient cultures viewed stealing as such a danger to the essence of communal living that dire punishments were levied against those who breached this sacred trust. This includes all the major Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) -- even as these were practiced in Europe and

America. As a result, the rate of stealing and robbery was significantly lower and you literally had whole societies where people lived in close vicinity without locks on their doors. This deterrent was accompanied by a communal commitment to serve anyone in need, including sheltering complete strangers in one's home -- something considered dangerous, if not insane, in many modern societies.

But there's another layer to this "punishment," one in which some commentaries say the dervish looked back at the loss of his hand with appreciation. Note these words by the prophet Isa (Jesus, a.s.):

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell. ... And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell." (Book of Mark, Chapter 9, Verses 43 - 47)

Isa is one of the highly esteemed prophets in Islam, and noted in particular for the depth of his love. Here, he acknowledges there can be a benefit in losing something that causes us to stumble, rather than not experience such loss and continue on a path that takes further away from the Beloved. We shouldn't seek unnecessary loss: better to have two hands surrendered to the Beloved than to lose one in unwise pursuits. But if we bring such loss upon ourselves, there may be an invitation to a glorious, even if harsh, correction whereby we are

drawn to “the kingdom of God:” that sacred intimacy of being close to, if not with, the Beloved.



That special favor

June 18, 2015

Ramadan Mubarak ~ Have a blessed Ramadan!

The Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) says that Abu Bakr was superior to the other Companions, not due to his prayer and fasting, but because that special favor -- the Love of Allaah -- was with him. On the Resurrection Day, a person's prayers will be placed in the balance along with their fasting and generosity, but once Love is brought forth it cannot be contained by any balance. Therefore, Love is the root.

When you find Love in your heart, then encourage it to grow. When you see the original investment within yourself, namely the desire [yearning] for Allaah, increase it through searching. "In movement is blessing." If you do not build on it, even the original desire [yearning] will leave you.

Are you less than the earth? Farmers turn the earth with a hoe and it yields crops. When they abandon it, it becomes hard. So, when you find the quest for Truth within yourself, follow it wherever it may lead. Do not say, "What use is there in following this desire [yearning]?" Just go! The profit will show itself.

(adapted from *Fihi Ma Fihi*,
translated by A.J. Arberry, p. 387)

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In looking for a selection to explore Ramadan, the holy month of fasting, I came across the above text and was moved to choose this. When one looks at the deeper invitations and purposes of Ramadan, one comes to see that one of the (divine) intentions of fasting is self-

purification. And one of the intentions of self-purification is to reveal that abounding, innate Love of the Absolute that dwells within us. One of my most treasured sayings of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi is: “Your task is not to search and seek for Love, but instead merely to seek and find all the barriers within that you have built to Love.” And then to release these so Love, and all its abounding endless glory, may reveal and unfold itself within and beyond us. When we talk about Abu Bakr As-Siddiq, we are talking about a man who lives the fullness of this.

Abdullaah ibn Abii Quhaafah, more commonly known as Abu Bakr, was Muhammad’s (p.b.u.h.) closest Companion (Sahaabi). Tradition holds he was the first person who wasn’t a family member of Muhammad to convert to Islam. Muhammad noted that of all the people he offered Islam to, Abu Bakr was the only one who accepted without hesitation, doubt, or argument. With such acceptance, he went on to draw many converts to Islam. He also spent large portions of his personal wealth to buy and then free enslaved men and women who were Muslims. He was with Muhammad during many key moments in the early history of Islam. He is also the father of A’isha, who remains one of the most esteemed of Muhammad’s wives. Abu Bakr was also a deeply spiritual man: he was called As-Siddiq (The Truthful) because of his unwavering piety. He would cry unstopping tears when he recited the Qur’aan: this was one of the reasons Muhammad instructed that Abu Bakr should lead the congregational prayers after Muhammad was no longer able to do so (because of illness). Therefore, it was not surprising that after Muhammad’s death Abu Bakr was chosen as the first Caliph (*Khalifa*), the leader of the Muslim nation / community.

Muhammad said: “Never has the sun risen or set on a person, other than a prophet, greater than Abu Bakr.” Many people think such a

station is attained through extensive prayer and meditation, fasting, spiritual study, selfless service, charity, closeness to a master, and other components of spiritual practice -- especially if we are engaged in these ourselves. It's not that these should be discounted or discarded, but Muhammad acknowledges a more significant factor for Abu Bakr's greatness: *Abu Bakr was superior to the other Companions, not due to his prayer and fasting, but because that special favor -- the Love of Allaah -- was with him.* But what does this mean in a practical sense?

Those who study Abu Bakr's life will see that he was immersed in the components of spiritual practice listed above. These do not cause a person to attain the special favor of Love for the Beloved but a genuine, grounded, and disciplined spiritual practice removes the barriers to realizing Love. Jalaal ud-Diin speaks to this in terms of the Resurrection Day, but some context may be helpful to understand.

Traditional Islam does not speak of the Resurrection Day as a coming time for judgment where all hope for humanity is lost because we're all going to Hell. One of the explicit duties of Muhammad, as stated repeatedly in the Qur'aan, is that of being a Warner. But he warns from a place rooted in Love. If you see people you care about speeding blindly toward the edge of a high cliff, would you convey with great force for them to stop? Would you warn that if they continue the way they're headed they're going to end up in doom? Yet, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said repeatedly in sermons: humans tend to have more respect for physical laws (such as gravity) than the spiritual laws revealed and expounded through prophets and saints. These

revelations are clear: that there will be an accounting (reckoning) of all the actions of our lives.

The Day of Reckoning plays out in part through the expanse of our lives, with some of the consequences we encounter from our actions while living. But the prophets repeatedly declare there will be a full accounting of the whole expanse of one's life. On that day, all that person did in accordance with the spiritual laws and divine intention for life will be placed on one side of a perfect scale. And all that was contrary to these will be placed on the other side. Then a weighing will take place: a weighing so precise that measures to the fraction of atoms. But Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi -- and other prophets, saints, and sages (even of other spiritual traditions) -- affirms that Love, in its pure preciousness, *cannot be contained by any balance*. Not even scales wide enough to hold universes of universes can contain, and thus measure, Love. Those immersed in Love, are not only brought closer to the Beloved (Paradise), but transcend all duality to be Oneness with the Beloved -- which is Love. And the Beloved has no need to render an accounting of Itself.

In this vein, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi urges: *When you find Love in your heart, then encourage it to grow*. And Love is not bound by time: Love realized in any moment fills all time (including the Day of Reckoning), and beyond into the timelessness that is Oneness with the Beloved. This Love already dwells within our heart, but most of us live in ignorance of (ignoring) it. The challenge is to come to a realization, not merely knowledge, of this *original investment within*. Sufis also refer to this as remembrance. Spiritual practice is a way of facilitating such by removing the barriers that veil this original investment. A sound practice also cultivates the strength (through humility and obedience to

the practice) to restrain from committing acts that add and strengthen the hold of such barriers. (Although we must still choose to act or not act: free will). But there is also a treasure in *the desire [yearning] for Allaah*.

We should be clear about what is meant by desire in this context: we are not talking about ego-based pursuits of pleasures and aversions of what is disliked. It is for this reason I include the word *yearning* in the translation: this word speaks to an intense longing for something one has lost or been separated from -- or we can say, has forgotten. This is not a desire that comes from the mind and the senses being conditioned by past experiences; instead, when the mind is quieted and the senses restrained, this deeper calling from the heart is heard. Will we embrace this? If we do, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi encourages us to *increase [this yearning] through searching*. "*In movement is blessing*." We should not take the opportunity of this yearning for granted, we should not let it pass unfulfilled. He advises that we actively engage it, because *if you do not build on it, even the original desire [yearning] will leave you*. Or one can say, we will forget it again, being distracted by the veils and barriers of worldly (mind-based) desires and pursuits.

The last paragraph of the selected text offers guidance regarding how to approach embracing the call of this yearning for Allaah. *Farmers turn the earth with a hoe and it yields crops*: we must be willing to "break" the surface of our "self" and toil it so seeds may be planted to take root. And for ancient farmers, the care and inspection of the land was done everyday -- whisper: daily spiritual practice and examination and (honest) assessment. *When they abandon it, it becomes hard*: this "tending to the land" must be continuous if we wish to see a plentiful crop. One of the common reasons for stagnation and decay of spiritual

growth is interruption or complete cessation of “spiritual farming.” Then, we must *follow it wherever it may lead*: we must allow the “spiritual farming” to dictate our course. In many ancient societies, the farmers were lead by Nature which is dictated by and serves the Absolute. The danger of delusion with this step is immense: so often, when we embrace *the quest for Truth*, we end up going astray because we start to do what we think should be done instead of following (heeding) what is called for. When the land is dry, we should water it: not simply water it because we “know” crops should watered. If we water crops after it has rained, we may overwater and drown them -- even if our intention is simply to care for the crops. When birds are eating too much of the crops, the art of farming calls for making a scarecrow: to do so prematurely, may be an unnecessary waste of time and resources. When we come to rest in the quietude and humility of allowing the farming to dictate our course and actions, *just go! The profit will show itself*. A profit (blessing) that will show itself in the realm of days, aiming to bring us to a “place” beyond all days: Oneness with the Beloved.



I am keeping you secret as the secret of divine love

(Masnavi Introduction Series)

July 2, 2015

Shah [King] Husam ad-Diin, light of the stars, wants the fifth volume to begin . . . O Light of Allaah! The Generous Husam ad-Diin, you are the teacher to the teachers of those who rescue people from blurred vision and bring them to clarity. Had the people not been behind a curtain, were their hearts' eyes open and their understanding not limited, I would have begun to praise you spiritually, and I would open my mouth to utter words other than these worlds. It is not appropriate to praise you to those in prison. I shall praise you in the assembly of the spirituals (angels) and spread your praises there. It is unnecessary to tell the people of the world about you. I am keeping you secret as the secret of divine love.

(adapted from *Fundamentals of Rumi's Thought*,
by Sefik Can, p. 83)

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I promised a few posts ago to explore the Masnavi in relation to the Qur'aan, in particular the dynamics of divine revelation. The time is certainly fitting in the midst of the holy month of Ramadan, the month in which Muhammad (s.a.w.s.) received the first revelation of the Qur'aan. But before diving into the depths of its dynamics, let me share how the Masnavi came to be.

The title, *Masnavi i Ma'navi*, can be translated as: Rhyming Couplets of Profound Spiritual Meaning. (Masnavi will also sometimes be written

as Mesnevi or Mathnawi.) It is said that as these inspired verses spewed forth through Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi, most of them came in perfect melody and rhyme. This presents a challenge to translators since they must often choose between translating for content or presentation (melody and rhyme). So with translations, something is often lost from the original Persian (with some Arabic), since the meaning and oratorical beauty can rarely both be preserved when translated. I prefer translations that translate for meaning, but, in either case, with a sincere translator we can be pointed toward the deeper messages that go beyond the content meaning and rhythmic “meaning.” In many mystic traditions, sometimes sound and rhythm are more powerful pointers to the deeper messages (essences) that transcend the realms of expression.

The Masnavi was composed as six books. These were “written” over the course of the last 15 years of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi’s life. (Below you’ll see why I put “written” in quotes.) There is some dispute about whether a seventh book was written by Rumi but there is little dispute about the first six books, the sixth left incomplete due to Rumi’s passing. The six books contain over 25,000 verses that include poetic revelation, stories, commentary on the Qur’aan and Hadiths (sayings by and about Muahammad), mystic insights, and more.

In many respects, we owe the grace of the Masnavi to Husam ad-Diin Chelebi, Rumi’s closest disciple and companion. His real name is Husaam ad-Diin Hasan, but he was referred to as Chelebi: a title given to a honorable person who is highly loved and respected -- much like the original meaning of “gentleman.” It’s interesting that just as Shams al-Tabriz (the “master” who opened Rumi to the heart) didn’t consider Rumi a disciple but something more vast, Rumi holds Husam in a similar high regard. Rumi repeatedly refers to Husam as ‘Friend of

Allaah' and 'Light of Allaah': not terms a master bestows on a student but instead are usually reserved for referring to prophets and saints. Rumi opens the fifth book of the Masnavi in the following way:

Shah [King] Husam ad-Diin, light of the stars, wants the fifth volume to begin . . . O Light of Allaah! The Generous Husam ad-Diin, you are the teacher to the teachers of those who rescue people from blurred vision and bring them to clarity. Had the people not been behind a curtain, were their hearts' eyes open and their understanding not limited, I would have begun to praise you spiritually, and I would open my mouth to utter words other than these worlds. It is not appropriate to praise you to those in prison. I shall praise you in the assembly of the spirituals (angels) and spread your praises there. It is unnecessary to tell the people of the world about you. I am keeping you secret as the secret of divine love.

(Fundamentals p. 83)

It is due to Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's love for Husam that he embarked on the journey which unfolded the Masnavi. Tradition holds that students of Rumi were studying the works (books) of other Sufi saints because Rumi had not composed a work that could be studied. He had composed many insightful verses, particularly in praise of Shams, and offered discourses from time to time, but there was nothing that could be approached as a "textbook" guiding seekers to Truth. This saddened Husam who approached Rumi requesting such, and even suggested that he include stories of the prophets and saints and Sufi lore, since these were commonly used as teaching devices. Husam also trusted that

Rumi could share such teaching in a way that was accessible to all, not requiring the prerequisite of knowing Sufi terminology and philosophy to understand the texts of other saints and teachers. So it goes that:

Upon these words of Chelebi, he [Rumi] immediately took out a piece of paper from his turban. On this piece of paper, the first eighteen couplets of *Mesnevi* were written. "Chelebi," he said, "if you write it down, I will dictate it." Husam al-Diin Chelebi agreed to this joyful suggestion. So the writing of the honorable *Mesnevi* began.

(Fundamentals p. 81)

And so it continued until the end of Rumi's life. Husam was essential to the process: Rumi would not work on the Masnavi if Husam was not present. For example, after the first book was complete, Husam was unavailable due to the death of his wife; this resulted in a delay before the second book could begin.

Tradition holds that most of the Masnavi was written in the silence of the night: with just Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi, Husam ad-Diin Chelebi, and the angels who came to witness this magnificence unfolding. Rumi would dictate, Husam would carefully write down each word even as some of the verses effortlessly impressed themselves in his memory due to their power and melody -- similar to how you may hear a jingle or hook from a song that you can't get out of your head. Without any calculation, the words poured forth through Rumi, most in perfect rhyme and measure. Some nights they would "write" until the break of dawn invigorated by spiritual ecstasy, the call to the pre-dawn prayer ending their spiritual sojourn. When each book was complete, Husam read the words back to Rumi for his approval; but Rumi also wished to

hear these words of this revelation in the voice of his friend. Yet these words are the lesser part of two pure and humble souls communing in the true Friendship of Love.

A little background about friendship in the context of Sufism may be helpful. Most of us seek “friends” to validate our egos, often in discreet ways that veil the selfish nature of such. Thus, the quality of such “friendship” is determined by how the parties cooperate in this constantly shifting tug-and-pull of validating the other’s ego while having one’s own ego validated. Such relations are dangerous, even if “friends” never betray each other (which is rare), because in validating the ego, we sustain and add to the veils and barriers that impede realizing the only true Friend: the Beloved. The ego is validated by the body and mind, which is externally-oriented. But a friend, in the Sufi sense, supports our turning toward and being drawn inward. Therefore, it is said among Sufis: the only ones to befriend are friends of the Friend. Those who restrain the outward tendencies of the ego and turn inward; and, through humility, are immersed in the dissolution of the ego. Such friends truly reflect the inward orientation that allows us to be brought to the heart, and can truly share (in non-selfish ways) the treasures of the path that brings one to what surrender truly is. But we don’t always realize such friends, as Rumi affirms:

It behooves us to strip away all our prejudices and seek out a friend of Allaah. However, when we’ve spent our whole life in the company of people who lack discernment, then our own discerning faculty becomes weak, and that true friend may pass us by unrecognized.

(adapted from *Fihi Ma Fihi*, translated by A.J. Arberry, p. 15)

But when such friends are found to each other and unite in the bosom of destiny, they reflect the glory of the Beloved's creative power, serving each other as a mirror of the heart. This occurrence of Friendship between Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi and Husam ad-Diin Chelebi is infused in the depth of the Masnavi. The meanings of the words pointing to the Oneness of (true, spiritual) Friendship, which unerringly points to the Oneness of the Beloved: *I am keeping you secret as the secret of divine love.*

This union between Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi and Husam ad-Diin Chelebi has resemblances of the special bond that formed between Muhammad and the angel Jibriil, who brought him the words of Allaah that we call the Qur'aan. The source of these words was beyond them both, yet in the coming together of these two pure beings is a beauty that speaks another "meaning" beyond words that is also from the Beloved. Therefore, it should be no surprise that in the month of Ramadan, this blessed month in which Jibriil brought the first revelation of the Qur'aan to Muhammad, these two would come together every night and recite the Qur'aan to each other. Perhaps even now, if we become real quiet, we can hear Rumi reciting the rhyming couplets of the Masnavi to his dear friend Husam; and then Husam reciting them back to Rumi for his approval and his smile. It is truly a work of Love, in its most truest and fullest sense...

In the next post, we'll explore the dynamics of the Masnavi in comparison to the Qur'aan.



A certain goose pops his head out

(Masnavi Introduction Series)

July 16, 2015

A certain goose pops his head out of his coop,
And displays himself as a critic of the Masnavi,
Saying, "This poem, the Masnavi, is childish;
'Tis but a story of the prophets, and so on.
'Tis not an account of the arguments and deep mysteries,
Whereto holy ones direct their attention;
Concerning asceticism, and so on to self-annihilation [of the ego],
Step by step, up to Communion [Oneness] with Allaah;
An explanation and definition of each several state,
Whereto people of heart ascend in their flight."
Whereas the Book of Allaah resembles the Masnavi in this,
The infidels abused it, in the same manner,
Saying, "It contains old tales and stories;
There is no deep analysis or lofty investigation therein.
Little children can understand it;
It only contains commands and prohibitions..."

(adapted from *Masnavi i Ma'navi*,
translated by E.H. Whinfield, p. 246 - 247)

* * *

The treasures of the Qur'aan, the treasures of the Masnavi, the treasures of divine revelation lay in application: where we sincerely live the lessons, guidance, and insights provided as a daily (dare I say, moment-to-moment) commitment.

The above critique of the Masnavi and brief reply is telling. As stated in the previous post, the six books of the Masnavi were composed over the last 15 years of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's life. He passed while composing the sixth book, but the first five, when completed, were shared with others: thus, criticisms of the Masnavi were presented to him while he was alive. The above statement is from the third book, and yet the approach of the following books remains very much the same: composed in a direct, simple, and accessible manner, often using stories and poetry heavy with metaphors as the means of delivery.

We should remember: the purpose of the Masnavi is to be a spiritual "textbook" for those seeking *Communion [Oneness] with Allaah*. It is only later that people, particularly Western translators, extrapolated its poetry and stories to be presented as literary works. But Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi is explicit about its intent: a wonder that manifests through the Love of Friendship with Husam ad-Diin Chelebi to point the sincere seeker to the Love of the Beloved, which draws one into Oneness of being Love. Rumi opens the sixth book of the Masnavi as follows:

O LIFE of the heart, Husam ud-Diin,
My zeal burnt within me to write this sixth part!
...
Enlighten the world's six sides with its six parts,
That it may illuminate one who is not illuminated!
Love has naught to do with five senses or six sides,
Its only aim is to be attracted to the Beloved!
But haply leave may be given me hereafter
To tell those mysteries so far as they can be told,
In a discourse more closely approximating to the facts

Than these faint indications of those abstruse matters.
Mysteries are not communicable, save to those who
know;
Mystery in the ear of infidels is no mystery.
Nevertheless, this is a call to you from Allaah;
It matters not to the Beloved whether ye accept or
reject it.
(*Masnavi* p. 405)

The five senses and the six sides relate to the domain of the mind and phenomena (which are perceived by the mind). *Love has naught to do with* these because these cannot understand love nor love, even if manifestations of love's blessings reflect upon objects perceivable to the mind. But as for Love and the call that draws one to Love: *Its only aim [objective] is to be attracted to the Beloved!* -- the Beloved being Absolute Love. And Rumi is explicit about the source of the *Masnavi*, this personal invitation to seekers: *Nevertheless, this is a call to you from Allaah; / It matters not to the Beloved whether ye accept or reject it.* Yet, how often do we use the mind, particularly in quest of understanding, to seek that which it cannot find? The mind cannot find Love but it can certainly be (mis)used to create and sustain endless veils and barriers to Love and Its call. Thus, Rumi asks permission -- *haply leave may be given me hereafter* -- to do what: *to tell those mysteries [of Love] so far as they can be told / In a discourse more closely approximating to the facts.* He even goes on to say: *Mysteries are not communicable, save to those who know.* Yet the use of mysteries, things which are not known by the mind, may cease our mind-based efforts.

So if the mind can't find Love, but it can be (mis)used to impede our realization of Love and Its call, how should a "textbook" intending to

guide people to Love proceed? The Masnavi follows the example of the Qur'aan. It doesn't offer *deep analysis or lofty investigation* -- although this doesn't mean there aren't levels of depth and meaning within the Qur'aan. It takes an approach of such simplicity that *Little children can understand it*. And instead of engaging in ranging explanation and philosophical exegesis, *it only contains commands and prohibitions* as a source of guidance. The main pillars through which these qualities are served are stories and poetry, sometimes even telling stories in poetic form.

There is an explicit intent for why these mediums are used: the ability of poems and stories to engage and, thus, quiet the mind -- particularly powerful ones. When the mind is quieted and stilled from its externally-oriented wandering, one can hear the call of Love that emanates from the heart, our innermost essence. When given audience, Love communicates as It wills in ways that cannot be contained to the realm of the mind's understanding. How a person may understand a story on the mental / thinking level usually differs vastly with how the same story -- the exact same words -- may be used to reflect the language of Love. And when Love uses something to communicate, that thing becomes alive with abilities and qualities of its own.

The wise engage these messengers of Love the same way they engage another wise person: with deep respect, reverence, and humility to be in their favor so that the wise may receive their blessings. To this point, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi shares the following:

The Qur'aan is like a bride who does not show her face to you even when you draw aside the veil. The fact that you have examined her, and yet have not attained

happiness or mystical unveiling, is a sign that your act of trying to remove her veil has itself repulsed her, so that she appears to you as ugly. She says, "I am no beautiful bride." *The Qur'aan shows itself in whatever form it pleases.* But if you do not try drawing aside the veil, and seek only the Qur'aan's good pleasure, watering its fields, attending it from afar, working upon whatever pleases it best, then it will show you its face without any effort at drawing aside the veil. (*Fihi Ma Fihi*, trans. by A.J. Arberry, p. 417 - 418, italic emphasis mine)

One of the most offensive things a man could do in many ancient cultures is seek to remove the veil from a woman's face without her permission. It is no accident that Rumi uses this as a metaphor for our efforts to understand the Qur'aan (or any book of divine revelation). How often do we, of our own (often ego-based) efforts, try to understand (unveil) its beauty with the mind without even asking permission? Ironically, the mind is not even capable of understanding the Qur'aan, but it can delude itself into thinking it understands as it grasps portions of the Qur'aan's fullness. However, we are presented a path of by which *The Qur'aan shows itself in whatever form it pleases.* If we are *watering its fields*: living its commands and prohibitions; if we are *attending it from afar*: staying in its presence (i.e. daily study and chanting) but not so close that we are caught up in its veil or trying to lift (understand) it; if we are *working upon whatever pleases it best*: applying the lessons and insights made plain to us from watering and attending to it -- if we do these, the Glorious Qur'aan *will show you its face without any effort at drawing aside the veil.* (Praise be to the Beloved!!!)

As it is with the Qur'aan, so it is with the Masnavi and all divine revelations. It is not for us to understand these -- unveil their mysteries -- with the mind. Doing such only leads to a deluding confusion these divine revelations will rarely correct. Instead, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi counsels us to water the fields and attend them from afar with diligence and sincerity so that these divine revelations reveal their mysteries and more to us. As these paths to permission quiet the mind, not only will we hear the call of Love but, if we rest in the stillness of this quietude, the call of Love will bring us to Love to be drawn into Oneness of being Love. The stories and poetry are but the outer reflections and manifestations offering this inward invitation to this inner mystical dance.

We'll explore more qualities of the Masnavi in the next post.



Confine not thy view

(Masnavi Introduction Series)

July 30, 2015

Know the words of the Qur'aan are simple,
But within the outward sense is an inner secret one.
Beneath that secret meaning is a third,
Whereat the highest wit is dumbfounded.
The fourth meaning has been seen by none
Save Allaah, the Incomparable and All-Sufficient.
Thus they go on, even to seven meanings, one by one,
According to the saying of the Prophet, without doubt.
Do thou, O child, confine not thy view to the outward meaning,
Even as the demons saw in Aadam only clay.
The outward meaning of the Qur'aan is like Aadam's body,
For its semblance is visible, but its soul is hidden.

(adapted from *Masnavi i Ma'navi*,
translated by E.H. Whinfield, p. 247 - 248)

* * *

The above text follows the opening text of the previous blog post. It is no coincidence that after responding to criticisms of the Masnavi, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi makes mention of the Qur'aan. Not only were the Qur'aan and Masnavi criticized in similar ways, they also share some common qualities, including the layers of "meaning."

Note that in addressing the topic of "meaning," language -- including the choice of words by the translator -- proves to be a barrier. I will do

my best to be as precise as I can in explaining elements of these layers of “meaning” while acknowledging that the full sense of such goes beyond what words and thoughts can encompass.

Know the words of the Qur’aan are simple. This feature of the Qur’aan was celebrated from the first revelations brought to the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.s.) Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi admits the Masnavi shares this quality as he says regarding it: “*There is no deep analysis or lofty investigation therein. / Little children can understand it.*” (Masnavi p. 247) From the first days the Qur’aan was recited publicly, there was a strong affection between it and children. Little ones, with barely a sense of language, are found memorizing and reciting with perfect edict verses of the Qur’aan after only hearing such a few times -- sometimes after only one hearing. The potent simplicity of the Qur’aan and the Masnavi is such that little children can easily remember and recite their verses and stories, stating the sequence of such words and points. But just as we would hesitate to say that a child has realized the full meaning of such by mere memorization, so it is with adults. Perhaps more so, since adults more readily attach to these components mental “understandings” that deify knowledge over the All-Knowing Source from which all knowledge and Knowing emanates.

The words and sequential framework (of points in stories and poems), as powerful as they are in their simplicity, are the first layer of meaning. As beautiful and eloquent as these are, particularly when looked upon as literary works, this first layer doesn’t approach the fullness of the *seven meanings* of the Qur’aan. To illustrate this, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi references the story of Iblis (also known as Shaytaan, Satan) and Adam which is stated in the Qur’aan.

After creating Aadam, which the Abrahamic religions hold to be the first human, Allaah summoned the angels and the jinn to witness this creation. The jinn are creatures made of smokeless fire who roam the earthly and heavenly realms. As stated in the Qur'aan (Surah 17, Verses 61 - 65), Allaah commanded all the angels to prostrate before Aadam but Iblis, a leader of the jinn, refused. Some commentaries state that through heavenly protocol, the angels would first prostrate, then the jinn, following the heavenly hierarchy; Islam regards angels as being more "pure" since they always obey the Beloved, whereas the jinn (like humans) have free will to obey or disobey. But because of Iblis' prideful disobedience -- why should a creature of fire bow to a creation of clay (dust) -- the Beloved curses him to be cast in Jahanaam (Hell). Iblis asks permission to have this punishment delayed until the Day of Reckoning so he may mislead the children of Aadam (humanity). Allaah grants this request with one exception: "Surely (as for) My servants, you [Iblis] have no authority [influence] over them; and your Lord is sufficient as a Protector." (Surah 17, Verse 65)

This allowance of Iblis' request plays a factor in realizing (or not) the deeper layers of divine revelation. The main means Iblis and his followers use to misguide is to whisper into the hearts and minds of humans and jinn. (Not all jinn are evil and even humans can follow Iblis.) In accounts of Aadam's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the Qur'aan explicitly states that Iblis *whispered* to Aadam and Hawa (Eve) to tempt them to eat of the Tree of Immortality, which the Beloved forbid them to eat from (Surah 7, Verse 20; Surah 20, Verse 120). And even *An-Naas* (Humanity), one of the most celebrated surahs of the Qur'aan, is a prayer that asks for protection "From the evil of the sneaking whisperer, / Who whispereth in the hearts of humanity, / Of the jinn and of humanity." (Surah 114, Verses 4 - 6).

Ancient societies didn't limit whispers to just low audible expressions. One of the natures of whispers is that they seem to come from within although it is completely external, even if suggested loudly and with cunning. The whisper doesn't compel or direct one to act, but instead presents the suggestion in a way that hearer may take on as one's own initiative and action. There are stories among the Sufi lore that warn about protecting yourself from others whispering in your ear to control / influence you through the power of this subtle suggestion: suggestions that seem to come from one's self or from within. There is an explicit intent behind Iblis using the whisper, since it is also one of the ways the Beloved communicates and affects Its Will:

It [the Beloved] speaks to the rose's ear, and causes it to bloom;
It speaks to the tulip, and makes it blossom.
It speaks a spell to body, and it becomes soul;
It speaks to the sun, and it becomes a fount of light.
Again, in its ear It *whispers* a word of power,
And its face is darkened as by a hundred eclipses.

...

Whosoever is bewildered by wavering will,
In that one's ear hath Allaah *whispered* Its riddle,

...

If you desire sanity in this embarrassment,
Stuff not the ear of your mind with cotton.
Take the cotton of evil suggestions from the mind's ear,
That the heavenly voice from [the Beloved] may enter it
(*Masnavi* p. 39, italic emphasis mine)

One can translate the occurrences of “It speaks” as “It whispers,” speaking to the subtle, internal nature of the Beloved’s speech. Even the suggestion to *Stuff not the ear of your mind with cotton*, indicates how subtle of a veil it takes to obscure the whispers of divine revelation. *But within the outward sense is an inner secret one*: secret being discreet and subtle, like a whisper. In fact, one of the fallacies of Iblis’ disobedience was that he was so consumed with the outward form of Aadam (the body made of clay), he ignored the subtle essence within Aadam through which the Beloved speaks: *the soul is hidden*. To this point, the Qur’aan states: “We [The Absolute] verily created human and We know what its soul *whispereth* to it, and We are nearer to it than its jugular vein.” (Surah 50, Verse 16, italics mine) This inner means of revelation that whispers (the inner secret) is contained within the outward form, but even here we’re only dealing with the second of seven layers of meaning. Yet this second layer points to the (inner) direction of the deeper layers, whereas the outer often points in opposite ways.

Beyond the second *meaning is a third, / Whereat the highest wit is dumbfounded*. Wit in this sense goes beyond all (mental) logic, whereby statements like “Verily these Dervishes [mystic lovers] of mine / Are thousands on thousands, and yet no more than One” (*Masnawi* p. 166) and make sense. It is at this level that words begin to fail, even as just pointers to what the Beloved reveals. Even deeper is the fourth level which transcends even heart-based understanding: *The fourth meaning has been seen by none / Save Allaah, the Incomparable and All-Sufficient*. From here, the individual (ego) must be completely surrendered, if not dissolved, so that not even the slightest shadow of separate individual being (identity) impedes the pure light of divine Knowing. Here, the Beloved reveals what It wills to be seen by It, the “stillness” or

“dissolution” of the self being a canvas for this revelation. Although this self serves as a canvas, it comes to know (beyond knowledge) what is revealed -- not by its eyes, but by the Sight of the Beloved. The fifth and sixth layers proceed to the most intimate realities of Intimacy: beyond Oneness *with* the Beloved to the All-Encompassing Oneness that *is* the Beloved. And yet, even as the only Reality of the Beloved is revealed, the form that is dissolved into Oneness is able to still exist and come know It in a way that reflects upon an individual’s “knowing.” Again I stress that language is insufficient to explain these states. In the seventh layer, the fullness of the Beloved is revealed as the All-ness that is, beyond conception or even the most vast imagination. This is realized as: It Is as It Is.

These layers of meaning, of divine revelation, exist within the form of the Qur’aan. From my studies, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi doesn’t state how many of these layers exist within the Masnavi, but regardless how many do, it contains so many verses of the Qur’aan with commentary that the Masnavi certainly points in the direction of the seventh layer. But these are not realizations one reaches of one’s own accord. If we wish to arrive at these deeper layers it is imperative to cease with the mental reductionism we engage when we seek to (mentally) understand the Masnavi or appreciate it merely as a beautiful, insightful literary or spiritual work. By ceasing to reduce the Masnavi to the confines of our mental landscape, by truly being open to the incomparable vastness contained within the words, and combining this with a pious life that allows us to be drawn to the deeper layers of meaning, the treasure of the Masnavi will reveal of its own accord the divine revelation it keeps “secret” for the pure servants...



Hearken to the reed flute

(Masnavi Introduction Series)

August 13, 2015

Hearken to the reed flute, how it complains,
Lamenting its banishment from its home:

“Ever since they tore me from my osier bed,
My plaintive notes have moved men and women to tears.
I burst my breast, striving to give vent to sighs,
And to express the pangs of my yearning for my home.
One who abides far away from home
Is ever longing for the day one shall return.
My wailing is heard in every throng,
In concert with them that rejoice and them that weep.
Each interprets my notes in harmony with one’s own feelings,
But not one fathoms the secrets of my heart.
My secrets are not alien from my plaintive notes,
Yet they are not manifest to the sensual eye and ear.
Body is not veiled from soul, neither soul from body,
Yet no person hath ever seen a soul.”

This plaint of the flute is fire, not mere air.
Let anyone who lacks this fire be accounted dead!

(adapted from *Masnavi i Ma’navi*,
translated by E.H. Whinfield, p. 3)

* * *

Building upon the previous posts, let's close this series looking at the opening of the Masnavi. Tradition holds that these were the only lines actually written by Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's hand, that the rest of the six books were dictated by him and scribed by the hand of Husam ud-Diin Chelebi -- may Allaah bless both their hands...

The starting point and a continuing theme of the Masnavi is separation from the Beloved. Or dare I say, the appearance of such separation: which many of us fuel by misidentification with the mind / body entity (and the ego we contrive from such), then alighting this fuel with self-centered, sometimes evil, actions. As a lover of the Beloved, the Sufi does not take kindly to this separation:

*Hearken to the reed flute, how it complains,
Lamenting its banishment from its home:*

Key to realizing the Masnavi as Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi intends is to be cognizant of the pain of this separation and the burning drive to "return home." Most humans look to resolve this issue -- this void of incompleteness, lacking, and displacement -- by outward searching: seeking to find something outside of ourselves to salve or fill this void. Many people, in ignorance, seek such through worldly pleasures; but even many spiritual people look to external things such as teachers, scriptures, spiritual practice, etc. to address this void. If these "spiritual components" are genuine, they guide and remind the seeker to look within. In this manner, the wit of Rumi presents poems, stories, and lessons that reflect and point us in the direction to realize for ourselves that the destination we are seeking is already within. As a famous hadith states, the Beloved declares: "Neither My heavens nor

My earth contain me, but the heart of My faithful servant contains and embraces Me.”

So how do we come to not only know this (conceptually and theoretically) but realize this as a deeper, more intimate realization? Or dare I say, (divine) revelation? Again and again, throughout the expanse of human existence, the path to such realization treads through deep suffering and pain. Note Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi’s words: *Ever since they tore me from my osier bed*, literally ripped him from his home like a reed uprooted, he has wailed in such pain that *My plaintive notes have moved men and women to tears*. Sometimes we take his words too casual: he is literally describing a pain so intense that his expression of it moves others to tears. And yet he doesn’t stop there: *I burst my breast, striving to give vent to sighs*. This pain is so intense he cannot contain it, and its expression moves beyond mere words to sighs. Why: *to express the pangs of my yearning for my home*. In fact, the realization that there is a home he has been separated from may actually increase the intensity of the pain; even if he was still in pain but was unaware that his separation from home is the reason, such ignorance may be easier to bear. I stress that even when the Masnavi is clever and humorous, if we embrace such remembering this driving pain, more expansive and deeper meanings may reveal themselves. The presence of this pain is literally imbibed in every syllable of the Masnavi: *One who abides far away from home / Is ever longing for the day one shall return*.

Let me be clear: this is not a call to glorify suffering, or even “spiritualize” it as some do. Rather, once we are immersed in ignorance, the release of our attachments to suffering is often necessary to arrive at the threshold of freedom. Acknowledgment and release of

suffering is often intensely painful. But when engaged as part of a sound spiritual practice, it serves to bring us to a place where we can be free from all suffering (the grasping and mental reactions to pain), although we most likely will still encounter pain in our lives. Even pain can be endured joyfully when we cease from grasping, reacting, and holding on to mental attachments.

Returning to Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's words: just because we hear his deep wailing doesn't mean we realize what this wailing conveys. Interwoven into this point is an indication of the intended audience of the Masnavi: *My wailing is heard in every throng, / In concert with them that rejoice and them that weep.* For those who rejoice and share in suffering this separation from the Beloved: for these lovers, there is a communion of shared pain that Rumi acknowledges. Bearing this same yearning for home, the Masnavi speaks more deeply and intimately to these lovers. *Each interprets my notes in harmony with one's own feelings:* the state of the hearer / reader of the Masnavi is a significant factor in what is revealed through these words. To the connoisseur of literature, the Masnavi reads as great literature. But to one seeking to return home, these words acknowledge this suffering and point in a direction that offers us the opportunity to realize our home already dwells within us.

Yet, there is even a limitation in this opportunity because: *But not one fathoms the secrets of my heart.* The secrets of the heart are not to be understood (on the mental level), yet the means that point to this revelation are often conveyed through words and ideas that we engage mentally. If we can receive these without trying to understand them, we will see that although these words and ideas serve as messengers of deeper revelations, the former are not separate from the later: *My secrets are not alien from my plaintive notes.* The deeper meanings contained

in the wailing *are not manifest to the sensual eye and ear*, they are not perceivable by the senses and the mind, yet they are not separate. To illustrate this, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi offers a powerful metaphor:

*Body is not veiled from soul, neither soul from body,
Yet no person hath ever seen a soul.*

There is another important message in the phrase: *But not one fathoms the secrets of my heart*. Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi realizes the Beloved within and his ego is dissolved (Therein). As wonderful as this is, it does very little to help me have my own (egoless) realization of such. Language gets in the way when explaining this point, but we all must arrive at our own realization: the realization of another will not make me realize. Certainly, one who dwells in such realization can offer support and guidance, or another's realization can be an inspiration, but each individual must come to such for one's self in whatever way this realization manifests (uniquely) for that person. To use another metaphor: in the dark of night, me waking up in my bed doesn't wake up others in their own beds. They will continue to sleep. And even if I am moved -- not by a self-centered reason, but by the hand of the Beloved -- to attempt to wake up others, I must be very careful how I proceed, especially for those in deep sleep. If not, I can cause more harm than benefit in waking up those not ready to awaken.

Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi closes this poem returning to the metaphor of the flute:

*This plaint [complaint] of the flute is fire, not mere air.
Let anyone who lacks this fire be accounted dead!*

Fire burns. Sufi literature is rich with testimonies of those who burn in the pain of separation, who burn to “return home:” to be reunited, or reminded of the everlasting union that always is, with the Beloved. Sometimes in the making a reed flute, a burning metal is pushed through the inner chamber of the reed to clear (empty) the vessel through which air will be blown. Here is a call to empty one’s self of everything else other than the drive to “return home” -- and eventually, even the drive to “return home” must be released since home already exists within. So there are layers of meaning within the phrase *not mere air*; among them that the complaints of separation are not mere air but a raging fire that burns away everything else. This fire is essential for those who wish to realize what the Masnavi is. In fact, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi’s words speak a stronger tone: *Let anyone who lacks this fire be accounted dead!* Surely, the Masnavi is not written for moving corpses, but those who are alive or seek life through the wailing of separation so that they may arrive at the Life of all life: the Beloved.



Don't regret matters of the past

August 27, 2015

Watch out that you don't regret matters of the past.
You are a Sufi, so don't mention the name of the past.
You are the 'child of the moment'* during youth and old age,
As long as the present moment doesn't pass away.

(adapted from *The Quatrains of Rumi*,
translated by Ibrahim Gamard and Rawan Farhadi, p. 547)

(*Note: the translation states 'son of the moment,' but since it is not limited to just males I adapted the translation to the gender-neutral 'child' instead. I share this for students of Sufi literature, since the term 'son of the moment' is more widely used in translations of Sufi writings.)

* * *

The importance of living in the present moment is acknowledged by most, if not all, spiritual traditions. Therefore, it should not be surprising that Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi offers a quatrain affirming such. Although this premise is commonly known, many people struggle to genuinely do so without the baggage of the past and (contrived) future. To this end, Rumi offers some encouragement and simple guidance to do this thing many of us "know" yet struggle to do.

Often we "live" in the present through the veils of the past. We look at present situations in the context of what was formerly pleasurable and unpleasurable, shaping how we approach and engage what is presently

before us. We often do this not fully cognizant of this dynamic. Thus, a person who likes apples -- translation: apples were pleasant before and so now "I like" them -- will see an apple in the present moment and want it. Why: because the present apple is being viewed through past pleasurable experiences with apples. Yet, the present apple, despite its appearance, could be rotten and putrid inside. If we move through the lense of the past, we will only come to realize this by taking a bite of the apple, most often ignoring perceivable signs (i.e. it's soft, has a slight odor) that we should proceed with caution before eating the apple.

For most people, unpleasant experiences -- especially ones in which we were harmed -- tend to be more impactful in viewing the present through veils of the past. In terms of mental attachments, we tend to grasp more strongly to impressions of unpleasant experiences. We tend to be more determined and closed-minded in seeking to not re-experience (past) pains as compared to the more open approach toward (past) pleasures. When Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi mentions *Watch out that you don't regret matters of the past*, he is, in part, speaking to this more closed-minded determination avoid a repeat of pains. Since these are the stronger of mental attachments, if we can restrain the influence of these, we can restrain the less powerful influences of pleasant impressions. Just being sad or disappointed by past pains is enough to firmly place veils of the past over our perception of the present; and once we start looking through these veils, it is exceeding difficult to shift to a more expansive and liberated sight.

Therefore, if *you are a Sufi* -- are on the path that draws one toward (realization of) the Beloved -- *don't mention the name of the past*. Merely mentioning the past can place veils of the past over our

perception, and even more strongly when there is a regret. Mentioning is not limited to expressing such to others: to engage a memory of a past pain is a form of mentioning within one's own mind. Also, *matters of the past* had a specific context in Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's time: these explicitly included one's actions, activities (engaged or drawn into, and including mental activities), and possessions. Not only do veils of the past cloud our perception of the present, they become the fodder by which we project expectations and preferences upon the future: a moment of time that actually does not exist although we project its manifestation.

The past and future are clear dangers to one seeking the Beloved because, just as these veil and distort our perception of the present, they do the same to our ability to receive revelation of the Beloved:

Sobriety savours of memory of the past;
Past and future are what veil Allaah from our sight.
Burn up both of them with fire! How long
Wilt thou be partitioned by these segments as a reed?
(adapted from *Masnavi i Ma'navi*, translated by E.H.
Whinfield, p. 52)

The revelation of the Beloved -- whereby It reveals Itself to us, or even the "lesser" revelations of Its divine attributes don't happen in the past or the future. When such happens within the realm of time, such occurs in the present moment. This is inferred, in part, in the phrase *You [the Sufi] are the 'child of the moment'* -- which maybe a more suitable translation is *child of the **present** moment*. And Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi shares this as an encouragement: to be *the child of the moment during youth and old age*. This doesn't just mean to live in the present

moment during the various stages of life, from youth to adulthood to old age. This is also a call to live in the present as we encounter mental impressions of the past (*youth* being inclusive of what has happened before) and the future (*old age* being inclusive of what is to come and what we project to be coming). But how can we do this? A simple suggestion is made if we understand the traditional Sufi context of *the present moment*.

We often view the moment through measurements of time we impose upon it: we view the past, present, and future in the context of seconds, minutes, hours, days, years, etc. But these are no more than mental concepts we place upon what we call time, distinctions we impose upon the continuing seamless unfolding of creation. For example, is day really separate from night? Or are these two “states” of one continuous, ongoing cycle? Whereas such concepts of time may be useful to organizing worldly affairs, Sufis and other mystics also approach time through something more in line with the continuous unfolding of creation: the breath.

The breath is regarded as sacred in traditional Sufism. This goes back to the creation of Aadam (a.s.), the first human. The Qur’aan relates that the Beloved gathered the angels and the jinn and said:

“I am about to create man from clay [dust]. And when I have fashioned him and *breathed into him of My spirit*, then fall down before him prostrate.” (Surah 38, Verses 71 - 72, emphasis mine)

The breath of humanity comes straight from the Beloved and it is by this that we are “present” in the mind / body entity -- present: to be here

now. Sufis regard the breath as indivisible: the very breath you are “breathing” now is a continuing of the first breath breathed into Aadam. As bodies come and go, this breath continues on being inhaled and exhaled by other bodies. In fact, some mystics say we (our “lives”) exist within this breath more so than our breaths existing within us. When approached consciously, the breath (coming directly from the Beloved) can literally be a means by which the Beloved reveals Itself. And the breath, taking on the nature of its Source, is also a means to realize the “eternal now” -- another term used in Sufi literature.

In a way, one can say all that exists is the breath and that all exists in the breath. This becomes more evident when spiritually awakened ones utilize the breath to manifest great powers and “miracles.” To use Iisa (a.s.), also known as Jesus, as an example, the Qur’aan states: “And Maryam (Mary), daughter of Imraan, whose body was chaste, therefore We breathed therein something of Our Spirit.” (Surah 66, Verse 12) From this breath, the virgin Maryam was impregnated with Iisa. Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi relates in a poem:

This breath of Iisa is not like every ordinary breath,
Which proceeds from mere human joy or sorrow.
These Alif, Mim, Ha and Mim, O father,
Proceed from the Lord of humanity.
(*Masnavi* p. 352)

Alif, Mim, Ha and *Mim* are Arabic syllables that open certain Surahs of the Qur’aan, which some mystics regard as divine pointers. Some Sufis hold that Iisa spoke these (and other syllable) sounds when he performed some of his miracles. Or, as some would say, when these miracles were performed through him since these syllables -- utterances

of breath -- *proceed from the Lord of humanity*. When we inhale and exhale this breath, this present moment, with mindfulness and remembrance of its sacredness, we embrace being the *child of the moment*: the child (creation) of the Beloved Parent who breathes us into being, breathing us into the eternal now which continues on until the end of creation. (This has influenced the development of breathing exercises in some Sufi orders.) In light of this, we may see how the last lines of the quatrain provide a powerful yet simple suggestion for how to live in the present moment by consciously remembering the sacredness of each breath as we breathe:

*You are the 'child of the moment' during youth and old age,
As long as the present moment doesn't pass away.*

When we don't let this very breath we are breathing now pass away, we realize a powerful means to be free of the mental impressions that hold on to the past and project a contrived future. Just consciously breathe, just the breath -- dropping everything else, and see if all the stuff of the past and future drop away. Just breathe, just be...



The ways may vary, but...

September 10, 2015

The ways may vary, but the goal is one. Don't you see that there are many roads to the Ka'bah? For some the road is from Rum [Rome], for some from Syria, others come from Persia or China or by sea from India and Yemen. So if you consider the roads, they are beyond counting, with infinite differences. But when you consider the goal they are all in accord with one desire [aim].

The hearts of all are upon the Ka'bah. The hearts are one in their longing and love for the Ka'bah, and in that there is no room for separation. That love is neither belief nor non-belief, for it has nothing to do with the various roads. Once we arrive, this argument and war and those differences in the roads—this woman saying to that man, “You are false, you are an infidel,” and that man saying the same about her—once we arrive at the Ka'bah, we realize that such fighting is over the roads only, and that the goal of all is the same.

(adapted from *Fihi Ma Fihi*,
translated by A.J. Arberry, p. 175)

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The ways may vary, but the goal is one. This declaration is accepted in many spiritual circles -- at least in theory, not always in practice and application. For those who genuinely uphold and live this declaration, it may be encouraging to see that Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi shares this position. There may be things to be learned from how he embraced this declaration through the context of traditional Islam, lessons we can utilize to embrace, sustain, and deepen our own living of this.

Don't you see that there are many roads to the Ka'bah? We'll get into the significance of the Ka'bah below, but the reference of *many roads* is an acknowledgment of the many spiritual traditions. Although there may be similarities and a common goal among many them, there are also significant distinctions and differences. In fact, the Qur'aan states:

For each We [the Beloved] have appointed a divine law and a traced-out way. Had Allaah willed It could have made you one community. But that It may try you by that which It hath given you (It hath made you as ye are). So vie one with another in good works. Unto Allaah you will all return, and It will then inform you of that wherein you differ. (Surah 5, Verse 48)

The verse indicates that the Beloved makes a clear choice to not make humanity a single "community" -- the term is also translated as "people" and, in this context, speaks to a collective of people who share (or, as we shall see later, "inherit") a spiritual tradition. This intentional diversity is further validated by the Beloved giving to each community "a divine law and a traced-out way [road]." These are many. And there will be differences, sometimes differences that are in direct contrast with each other. In such situations it is totally acceptable to "vie one with another in good works" -- not in bad works that often lead to conflict, harm, and even war. And if we cannot "vie one with another in good works," the Qur'aan suggests the following approach: "To you be your way (religion), and to me mine." (Surah 109, Verse 6)

When we vie with one another (compete with each other) in doing good, there is only increased benefit. For example, every spiritual tradition

I've studied encourages the practice of charity: if we compete with each in performing charity, who really loses? Who is harmed? Spiritual traditions may have differing approaches and conditions for how charity is to be performed. And such differences should be honored and upheld. Each road, to be a road, has markings that indicate the borders of the road; and sometimes markings within that road that designate lanes. Without such markings, a road is not a road. And roads are designed with a specific intent: to direct one toward a destination. The varying roads of different spiritual traditions should not be diminished into an overcooked pot of mush. They can comprise a stew where carrots are still distinct as carrots, broccoli is clearly broccoli, cabbage is clearly cabbage -- all with their own tastes, qualities, and nutrients.

Traditional Islam always acknowledged an affinity with the "People of the Book:" Jews and Christians who share a common lineage of spiritual inheritance and prophets. Most animosity among these groups in the early days of Islam had more to do with politics and disagreements caused by members of these groups not living what their scriptures declare. But even with idolaters, who embraced elements that are counter to Islam, Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) and the early Muslims always sought peace and reconciliation first (and often repeatedly) before situations escalated into open conflict and sometimes war. So Islam from its early days taught and embraced respect, cooperation (when possible), and tolerance for other spiritual traditions.

But even within a specific spiritual tradition there are often differing approaches. The Ka'bah has a special significance for Muslims: it is the *qiblah*, the place toward which all Muslims turn when making the five daily prayers. Yet *for some the road is from Rum [Rome], for some from Syria, others come from Persia or China or by sea from India and Yemen.*

In Rome, a praying Muslim turns southeast, in Yemen one turns northeast. And if a person is going to make *Hajj*, the pilgrimage every Muslim should make once in a lifetime if one is able, from Syria one can travel by land but from India and China one may travel by sea and land. To use a more familiar parable: if a person is driving to New York City from Philadelphia, you want to go north. But if someone in Boston uses the directions from Philadelphia and goes north, that person will end up in Canada, not New York City. And if you're traveling from Chicago, Atlanta, or Los Angeles, different directions are needed specific to where you're coming from. Adding to that, the different temperaments of how people drive (my uncle likes to drive non-stop, my aunt likes to stop at least every two hours), you start to see how *the roads*, and how we travel upon them, *are beyond counting, with infinite differences*.

Despite these differences, all these roads are heading toward the same goal: which Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi references and views in the context of Islam. Here, some understanding of the Ka'bah and its relevance is of importance. The Ka'bah is a cube structure built by the prophets Ibraahiim (a.s.) and his son Ishma'il (a.s.) -- also known as Abraham and Ishmael. The Qur'aan states this was the first House of Worship and was built for all of humanity (Surah 3, Verse 96). Tradition holds that prior to this humans built more simple structures for worship (i.e. outdoor altars), or utilized structures built for other purposes (i.e. doing prayers in one's home) or places of nature (caves, coves, rock clearings, etc.) But the Ka'bah is the first enclosed, stationary structure built strictly for worship of the Beloved. This is regarded as a great blessing, a fruit of the Friendship the Beloved establishes with Ibraahiim -- the Beloved chooses him to be Its friend (Al-Khaliilullaah). It is through this sacred, intimate Friendship, which can only be bestowed by the

Beloved, that the spiritual inheritance of ways / roads (spiritual traditions) and guides (prophets, saints, etc.) continue to be bestowed to the children (descendants) of Ibraahiim. It is for this reason that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (and other lesser-known Abrahamic traditions) regard Ibraahiim as the (spiritual) Father of their traditions.

The sacredness of the Ka'bah, as informed by the devotion and example of Ibraahiim, plays a part in why it is the qibla (place which Muslims turn to pray) and destination of the Hajj (pilgrimage). For Sufis, the Ka'bah is more than just a physical structure, but a "place" of realized Friendship with the Beloved. The Beloved is always our Friend (some say our only Friend), even when we live worldly lives that ignore It. It creates us, sustains us, always offers Its guidance in every moment, always loves us, never taking Its presence from us as it dwells within our heart. For Ibraahiim, the building of the Ka'bah was, in part, an acknowledgment of this indescribable grace of divine Friendship. A Friendship we cannot reciprocate: a standing invitation to be drawn to Oneness with the Beloved in which there is indescribable bliss, a peace that cannot be disturbed, complete and indivisible love. Masters of many spiritual traditions hold that all of our pursuits of pleasures and achievements in this world are misguided quests for the fruits of this Friendship -- and this is often described in the varying languages of these traditions.

Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi speaks to this yearning for such Friendship in the language of Islam when he states: *The hearts of all are upon the Ka'bah.* He continues: *The hearts are one in their longing and love for the Ka'bah* -- we are all drawn to this Friendship, even if we don't realize it. But when we come to realize this longing, *in that there is no room for separation*: this is one of the undeniable bonds of all humanity. In

realizing this, we realize the opportunity for an effortless, inseparable unity. But in quest of this Friendship, most of us put more importance on the specifics of the roads we take, and the beliefs we often contrive (mentally) to validate our ways. We engage in *argument and war [over] those differences in the roads*. We even sometimes judge others, saying to them, *“You are false, you are an infidel,”* to make our path seem greater. If we can come to genuinely realize *love for the Ka’bah*, the yearning for this most sacred and intimate Friendship with the Beloved, we will realize *That love is neither belief nor non-belief, for it has nothing to do with the various roads*. Then we will drop our immature fixation and imposing of (to validate) our ways: we will realize that all differences, disagreements, and *such fighting is over the roads only, and that the goal of all is the same*. A goal beholding an endless bounty of this Friendship for all to enjoy and share, even if we arrive there via different roads and different ways.

Yet, in truth, we are already there (or here) because “the goal” is the Beloved, and the Beloved is already within each of our hearts. But for most of us, it takes a journey to realize this beyond the mental limitations by which we embrace our roads. When we genuinely realize this essential Truth, we open to the call of Friendship which draws us toward and into Oneness, and beyond...



Thou hast ceased to call

September 24, 2015

That person one night was crying, “Oh Allaah!”
That his mouth might be sweetened thereby,
And Shaytaan said to him, “Be quiet, Oh austere one!
How long wilt thou babble, Oh man of many words?
No answer comes to thee from nigh the throne,
How long wilt thou cry ‘Allaah’ with harsh face?”
That person was sad at heart and hung his head,
And then beheld Khidr present before him in a vision,
Who said to him, “Ah! thou hast ceased to call on Allaah,
Wherefore repentest thou of calling upon the Beloved?”
The man said, “The answer ‘Here am I’ came not,
Wherefore I fear that I am repulsed from the door.”
Khidr replied to him, “Allaah has given me this command;
Go to him and say, ‘Oh much-trying one,
Did not I engage thee to do My service?
Did not I engage thee to call upon Me?
That calling ‘Allaah’ of thine was My ‘Here am I,’
And that pain and longing and ardour of thine My messenger;
Thy struggles and strivings for assistance
Were My attractions, and originated thy prayer.
Thy fear and thy love are the covert of My mercy,
Each ‘Oh Lord!’ of thine contains many ‘Here am I’s.’”

(adapted from *Masnavi i Ma’navi*,
translated by E.H. Whinfield, p. 169 - 170)

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Some say that the essence of so many spiritual traditions is the cry, “*Oh Allaah,*” Oh Beloved, Oh Absolute. A cry of complete reliance, complete surrender, complete obedience to and honor of the Absolute who sustains and provides for us, always offering Its guidance and protection -- portents of Its unending Love (for us). Yet how many of us make such a call -- let alone live it -- when things are well? In many respects, we make suffering and hardship necessary to be directed back to this call.

So it was with the man in the story who *was crying, “Oh Allaah!” / That his mouth might be sweetened thereby* -- to have his mouth sweetened from the bitterness of pain and discontent. One of the challenges of making this call from this place is that, if the (unrestrained) mind reacts to unpleasant conditions, this call can become polluted by expectations. This gives room to Shaytaan (also know as Satan), the whisperer, to suggest things in our minds that will turn us away from this call.

In this story, Shaytaan whispers to the man’s expectations to receive a perceptible answer and be delivered from suffering. These are common expectations for many who call to the Beloved in hardship. Yet, when in the midst of such, countless masters advise: simply call on the Beloved. They don’t say call on the Beloved and have an expectation, for just a seemingly small expectation is enough to grant Shaytaan an open door to our minds. And Shaytaan will speak in ways that appeal specifically to our mentality. In this case, Shaytaan “compliments” the man’s austerity -- *Oh austere one!* -- while encouraging him to *Be quiet*. And then speaks to the man’s expectation for deliverance with a seemingly sound logic: since *No answer comes to thee from nigh the throne* why continue to *cry ‘Allaah’ with harsh face?* -- since no obvious answer comes, why continue to cry in the midst of suffering? Not too

many people, particularly those who are suffering, would dispute the logic of this when examined on the level of the mind.

The man succumbs to Shaytaan's reasoning: *That person was sad at heart and hung his head*, and stops crying to Allaah. By grace, Khidr appears *before him in a vision* -- this phrase indicates that the story has now moved into the mystic realm. Khidr, also known as the Green Man, is highly revered among Sufis: when he appears there is often a profound lesson he has come to share. Note how this master works: first, he asks why the man has stopped crying to the Beloved. The man replies: *"The answer 'Here am I' came not, / Wherefore I fear that I am repulsed from the door."* This not only reveals his unfulfilled expectation, but also what he adds to it: his fear that the Beloved has rejected him. This is complete conjecture on the man's part! Projections of a wounded ego that couldn't be farther from the truth! Can you see the danger of even well-intentioned expectations, especially when Shaytaan starts whispering to these?

After this is revealed, the teaching begins. Khidr first acknowledges: *"Allaah has given me this command."* It cannot be emphasized enough that the wise only do what the Beloved commands and nothing else, even if it seems otherwise -- like that Khidr has come to teach this man. Not all genuine teachers will proclaim this, but if they are truly serving the Beloved -- living the cry *"Oh Allaah"* -- this is their course. Then Khidr delivers the message the Beloved wills to be shared. It may seem that Khidr is speaking but, even if the words are shaped by the particulars of his form, the message is from the Beloved. Always look to the message: which sometimes is deeper than and may differ drastically from the form and how it is being presented. But in this instance, the message is in line with the words: *Did not I* -- the Beloved

-- *engage thee to do My service? | Did not I* -- the Beloved -- *engage thee to call upon Me?* Within this crying, and the hardship that motivates it, is the Beloved's reply:

*That calling 'Allaah' of thine was My 'Here am I,'
And that pain and longing and ardour of thine My
messenger*

To the mind (and ego), the pain that drove the man to cry probably seems like it was caused by someone else or himself. Yes, often our own and others' actions are the means by which pain manifests into our lives on the surface level. But this doesn't negate that on a deeper level these are *My messenger* -- means the Beloved uses to have us remember and return to crying and living "*Oh Allaah.*" These are the '*Here am I,*' for these are the work of the Beloved. The Beloved confirms this when Khidr says: *Thy struggles and strivings for assistance / Were My attractions, and originated thy prayer.*

As stated earlier, do we really cry to and live the call of "*Oh Allaah*" when things are well? If so, then the Beloved need not use struggles, suffering, hardships and our yearning for peace to attract us back to this simple call, this simple prayer. If we are courageous enough to be honest, many of us will admit that we blatantly ignore this call when things are going well -- even if we dress this ignorance with a "spiritual life" contrived by our minds that may have the best of intentions (and expectations) but goes beyond the simplicity of "Oh Beloved." And if the ignorance continues, it becomes further ingrained, getting a thicker skin; whereby, the Beloved may utilize more intense sufferings and hardships to attract us.

Why do we not realize these dynamics which are in plain view? A common reason is fear, which plays out in many ways. For the man in this story, the fear that the Beloved rejected his calls -- because there was no "obvious reply" -- obscures the man's realization and serves as a *covert of My [the Beloved's] mercy*. And how merciful the Beloved is! But even our (human approach to) love can be such a covert, especially when tainted with expectations. This "love" can drive us to move beyond the simple obedience of the call: that instead of doing nothing or too little, we do too much. One of the verses of the Qur'aan that continues to impress deeply within me is:

The messenger has faith in that which hath been revealed unto him from his Lord and (so do) the faithful. Each one has faith in Allaah and Its angels and Its scriptures and Its messengers - We make no distinction between any of Its messengers - and they say: *We hear [we listen], and we obey*. (Grant us) Thy forgiveness, our Lord. *Unto Thee is the journeying* -- to Thee is the end of all journeys.
(Qur'aan Surah 2, Verse 285, emphasis mine)

We hear to perceive what's being expressed. We listen: examining what is expressed more attentively to see what is the message -- particularly the message being conveyed to me in this (present) moment. And we obey: to do what is expressed and conveyed -- not less, not more.

So when masters instruct that when we encounter hardship, simply call on the Beloved: obedience is doing that and just that. Then we may see that *Each 'Oh Lord!' of thine contains many 'Here am I's*. When we genuinely realize -- beyond concepts of the mind -- that the Beloved is

here within the call and all that drives us to make and live this call; when we genuinely realize this, we see the destination is already here: “unto Thee is the journeying.” And when we arrive at the destination, we no longer need to journey -- a journey that often treads through suffering, hardship, and pain, since we often make these the only means by which we turn to cry and live *Oh Allaah*, Oh Beloved. Within this cry is all that this needed to respond to all worldly situations -- whether we are given deliverance or a clear guidance to deal with these situations. But even more, the divine intention of the whole matter is to have us be with the ‘*Here am I*’ that already is: the Beloved already being here with us. And when we realize the Beloved is always with us, even the greatest tragedies are experienced within a pure peace and bliss that cannot be disturbed...



An arrow of light - Part 1 of 2

October 8, 2015

Before becoming a Muslim, Umar entered his sister's house. His sister was chanting from the Qur'aan in a loud voice:

"TA HA: We have not sent down..."

When she saw her brother she immediately hid the Qur'aan and became silent. Umar bared his sword saying, "Tell me what you were reading and why you hid it or this very instant I will chop off your head!" His sister feared him, knowing his temper when angry, and in terror for her life she confessed, "I was reading from these words that Allaah revealed to Muhammad."

"Read on, so that I can hear," said Umar, and she recited the whole of the Surah of Ta Ha. Umar became furious, and in a rage he waved his sword, saying, "If I killed you this instant, it would be a killing of the defenseless. First I will go and cut off Muhammad's head, then I will attend to you."

In his anger, holding a naked sword, Umar set off for the Prophet's home. The chieftains of Quraysh, seeing him go by, exclaimed, "Wonderful! Umar is after Muhammad. Surely, if anyone can stop this new religion, Umar can." For Umar was a mighty and powerful man. Any army he marched against was vanquished. In fact, the Prophet had many times declared, "Allaah, succor my religion by means of Umar or Abu Jahl." For those two were famous in that time for strength and heroism. Afterwards, when Umar became a Muslim, he used to weep and say, "O Messenger of Allaah, woe for me if you had

spoken Abu Jahl's name before mine. What would have become of me then? I would have continued in error."

(adapted from *Fihi Ma Fihi*,
translated by A.J. Arberry, p. 291 - 293)

* * *

By grace, we come upon one of the most wonderful tales of conversion: when Umar became a Muslim. It remains one of the most cherished stories of Muhammad's (p.b.u.h.) Companions. Umar's transformation shifts from murderous hatred toward Muhammad to immense endearing love: a transformation few thought would be possible. Yet, as Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi states in the words preceding the above selection: "realize that in this world things happen as Allaah wills. Its is the design, and all purpose comes from It." (*Fihi* p. 291)

Let's set the stage for this story, because the conditions of that time are strong factors in what occurs. The scene is Mecca after Muhammad has begun to publicly call others to embrace Islam, including sharing revelations of the Qur'aan. At this point, the persecution of the Muslims is very intense: the leaders of the Quraysh, the Arab clan that lived in Mecca, were openly opposed to Muhammad. People known to be Muslims were physically abused and socially ostracized. Some were tortured and killed. This is why many who were Muslims kept this fact secret. In fact, it is likely Muhammad would have been murdered to stop the spread of Islam had it not been for the protection of his uncle Abu Taalib. Any attack on Muhammad would have meant bloody retaliation from Banu Hashim (Muhammad's familial group) upon the

familial group of anyone who attacked him. And Banu Hashim was very powerful, no group wanted to go to war with them.

It is within these conditions, that the story unfolds. There are varying versions of this story but we'll stick with the account Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi shares here. Umar was a huge and powerful man, known to be harsh but fair. Muhammad said even Shaytaan, who tempts the mass of humanity, is afraid of Umar's shadow -- then how much more the man himself? So surely his sister was afraid of being found out as a Muslim, especially since Umar had previously declared that he would kill any member of his familial group who converted to Islam.

Yet we should not perceive Umar's opposition to Islam as being based in impiety. His resistance was primarily based on two things. Firstly, Umar felt he had a duty to uphold the religion of his forefathers, which included polytheism. In traditional Arab society, one's personhood is based in the identity of one's familial lineage and clan, so what the preceding generations pass on in terms of religion is highly regarded. Such was cherished by Umar even if it veered from the way of their ancestral father, the prophet Ibraahiim (a.s.) -- also known as Abraham, who re-established worship of only the Absolute.

This call to honor one's forefathers was combined with Umar's wish to maintain unity among the Quraysh. In a region filled with ongoing war and conflict, the survival and prosperity of Mecca was very much tied to maintaining unity among the clan. Islam, with its refusal to accept worship of other deities, was creating dissension not only among the clan but literally within individual families, as this story illustrates. Many of the Quraysh leaders were willing to embrace Islam or allow it to have a place in society if Muhammad was willing to allow worship of

other deities, even if as intercessors to Allaah. But heeding the commands of the Beloved, as well as the example of Ibraahiim, Muhammad was not willing to concede such. Many, including Umar, viewed this as a personal decision made by Muhammad and, thus, viewed him as personally responsible for sowing division among the Quraysh.

So Umar's resistance to Muhammad and Islam was based more in social factors than points of spirituality. In fact, Umar's strong ethics and piety was a reason why *the Prophet had many times declared, "Allaah, succor my religion by means of Umar or Abu Jahl."* Umar did not use his strength for evil or personal aims, but instead for what he saw was just and right. And when he shifted from acting on what he thought was right to surrendering to what Allaah deems is right, Umar became one of the most powerful and celebrated Muslims of all time.

There is a reason why I, following the example of masters and teachers, take the time to explain these "worldly" factors. Traditionally, when these stories are told, the storyteller takes time to provide such commentary even if the texts do not explicitly share such. Following the course of Islam, traditional Sufism is a communal path, not an ascetic one -- although there may be a place for asceticism for a period of time or for rare masters and saints. But as one opens to the path of the heart in the midst of community, worldly factors have a place in the mystic journey. Therefore, Sufis don't seek mysticism in a realm beyond worldly factors but within the presence of these. How one navigates these conditions can be immense tools that turn one toward the Beloved, eventually transcending such conditions and their limitations. But the road to such may include worldly factors, such as Umar being brought to the feet of the Prophet, in part, by his conviction

to honor his forefathers and fight to maintain unity among the Quraysh.

So as Umar enters his sister's house and hears *chanting from the Qur'aan in a loud voice*, there should be no surprise why *she immediately hid the Qur'aan and became silent*. It is also no coincidence what she is chanting as he enters, the opening of Surah 20 titled *Ta Ha* which states:

{1} Ta. Ha. {2} We have not revealed the Qur'aan to you that you should be distressed. {3} But as a reminder to those who fear [live in reverence to Allaah] {4} A revelation from It that created the earth and the high heavens. {5} The Beneficent One who is established on the Throne.
(Surah 20 Verses 1- 5)

Some hold that when a surah opens with Arabic letters, such as Ta and Ha, these are mystic codes for those who know. Within in this vein, the fact that Umar enters hearing these indicates there is a mystic element to what is unfolding. But even the following lines are significant: that the Qur'aan is not revealed so that those who follow it should be distressed but as a reminder to live in reverence to Allaah. Umar came to be a living embodiment of this, yet the Beloved utilized distress (in the form of anger) to draw him toward this. Thereby, he withdraws his sword -- on his own sister! -- and threatens: *"Tell me what you were reading and why you hid it or this very instant I will chop off your head!"* Fearing for her life, she confesses: *"I was reading from these words that Allaah revealed to Muhammad."*

What follows demonstrates Umar's fairness and sense of justice: he allows his sister to read the whole surah, which in its final form is 135 verses. (As the surahs were sometimes revealed in part over stretches of time this surah may not have included all 135 verses when this incident occurred.) But after hearing the whole surah and still being enraged, he says: *"If I killed you this instant, it would be a killing of the defenseless. First I will go and cut off Muhammad's head, then I will attend to you."*

In traditional Arabia, a follower is blameless when following the commands of one's leader. And it was common knowledge, even among those who resisted Islam, that it was a duty of Muslims to study whatever portions of the Qur'aan they had access to. So although Umar publicly vowed to kill any of his kin who converted to Islam, in adhering to the codes of justice of his time, he had to first deal with Muhammad before tending to his sister. So off he went:

In his anger, holding a naked sword, Umar set off for the Prophet's home. The chieftains of Quraysh, seeing him go by, exclaimed, "Wonderful! Umar is after Muhammad. Surely, if anyone can stop this new religion, Umar can."

In the moment, this seemed to be a coming death blow to the religion we call Islam since: *Umar was a mighty and powerful man. Any army he marched against was vanquished.* And if Muhammad was killed, it is very likely Islam would have faded away. But, as stated in the opening paragraph: *in this world things happen as Allaah wills.* Even seemingly certain defeat can be transformed into a victory that expands across millennia. Umar's conversion proves to be such a victory that

continues to bless seekers of the Beloved even today. We'll explore the moment of his conversion in the next post.



An arrow of light - Part 2 of 2

October 22, 2015

In short, Umar was on his way, with naked sword, making for the Prophet's home. Meanwhile [the angel] Jibriil revealed to Muhammad, "Lo, Messenger of Allaah, Umar is coming to be converted to Islam. Take him to your bosom." Just as Umar entered the door, he saw clearly an arrow of light fly from Muhammad, and pierce his heart. Umar uttered a loud cry and fell down insensible. Love and ecstasy filled him, and he wanted to dissolve himself into Muhammad out of extreme affection, and he became nothing. He said, "Prophet of Allaah, offer me your faith and speak your blessed word, so I may hear." Having become a Muslim, he said, "Now, to correct my actions of coming against you with a bared sword, and to cleanse that act, henceforth I will give quarter to no one I hear speaking wrongly of you. With this sword I will strike their heads from their bodies."

...

Now look at what Umar planned, and what Allaah brought about from those plans. Know that all affairs turn out as Allaah wishes.

(adapted from *Fihi Ma Fihi*,
translated by A.J. Arberry, p. 293 - 294)

* * *

In the previous post Umar walked in upon his sister reciting the Qur'aan. Having vowed to kill any of his kin that became Muslim, Umar sets off to behead Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) first before killing his sister. Since she became a follower of Muhammad, the customs of that

time deemed it just to deal with the leader first. As he stormed through the streets with a naked sword, many assumed this would be the end for the blooming religion we call Islam: Umar had the strength to defeat whole armies and if Muhammad was killed it would have likely meant an end to the growing Muslim community.

So Umar clearly planned to kill Muhammad, but look *what Allaah brought about from those plans*. The hand of the Beloved was upon these events, as evidenced by the fact that the angel Jibriil *revealed to Muhammad*, “*Lo, Messenger of Allaah, Umar is coming...*” The word ‘*revealed*’ should not be taken lightly: for in a similar manner, Jibriil would come to Muhammad with the words of the Qur’aan and reveal these to him. When divine revelation occurs this indicates that the Beloved is unfolding Its Will, Its Intention. And despite what plans we have and how it may seem that we have some influence over what is happening, when this Will unfolds *all affairs turn out as Allaah wishes*.

There is a verse in the Qur’aan that states:

And when those who disbelieve devised plans against you that they might keep you in bondage, or slay you, or drive you away. They plot and plan, and Allaah plots and plans too; and Allaah is the best of plotters and planners.

(Surah 8, Verse 30)

Thus, Umar’s plan to bring an end to Islam by beheading Muhammad is overtaken by the Beloved’s plan. Jibriil states this plan when it says: “*Umar is coming to be converted to Islam. Take him to your bosom.*” We can imagine the scene as Umar enters Muhammad’s home: a look of

murderous rage upon his face, gripping an unsheathed sword. With his opposition to Muhammad publicly known, there is no doubt Umar has come to kill Muhammad. Yet his intention is instantly overcome as he *saw clearly an arrow of light fly from Muhammad, and pierce his heart*. This light is the love in the master's heart claiming its disciple -- in this case, the Prophet's love drawing one of his closest Companions, one who became a stalwart pillar of the Muslim community.

Sufis celebrate this piercing of the heart, how it renders the mind and its efforts feeble. Herein is a blueprint for Sufis who also look to have the heart overcome their minds, that the light of the master may dissolve the ego to nothingness. In traditional Sufi orders, the lineage of masters has its seed in the Prophet, passed on from heart-to-heart transmission throughout the ages. And light is inseparable: thus, the light of the master is of the light of the Prophet. And the light of the Prophet is but a ray of the Light (*An-Nuur*) of the Beloved.

When this light penetrated Umar, this powerful man with all his strength and force *uttered a loud cry and fell down insensible*. To see such a man fall to the ground without any action on the part of Muhammad is another testament to the power of the Beloved's Will. From the perspective of this world, this fall is an indication of defeat: the man on a mission to behead his enemy falls before the one he came to kill. Yet within this defeat, *Love and ecstasy filled him, and he [Umar] wanted to dissolve himself into Muhammad out of extreme affection, and he became nothing*. Traditional Sufism is explicit in stating that this *Love and ecstasy* cannot be attained through personal effort, only by Divine Grace. It is emphasized that even when personal effort is called for in one's spiritual practice, it is only as a means to restrain the ego and contribute to the removal of veils and obstacles

that impede Divine Grace. It is for this reason that the master - disciple relationship remains a cornerstone of traditional Sufism: for through love and service of the master, the Beloved may unleash Its Grace through the form of the master, like *an arrow of light* emanating from the master to pierce the disciple's heart.

In the midst of this ecstasy, we come to realize what true affection is. No words can fully describe such, and we only really come realize it by being immersed in it. But to offer an attempt at a description in terms of the "I:" affection is not what "I" seek to receive or give through the ego, instead what "I" become when Love penetrates me through another. Some would say this is the true meaning of the Beloved's instruction to Muhammad: *Take him to your bosom*. And through Muhammad's stillness, which allows his "I" to be a vessel of the Beloved's Light and Will, Umar *wanted to dissolve himself into Muhammad out of extreme affection*.

What fuels this *extreme affection*? Again, words prove insufficient but let's call it the timeless bliss of Love which is always emanating from the heart. And if the revelation of this bliss occurs by Grace emanating through the master, for many there is a wish to dissolve into the master which appears to be the source of this bliss. In such a wish there is an effortless restraint of the ego, which for Umar became so complete at the feet of Muhammad that *he became nothing*. And when the "I" becomes nothing, there is only bliss because the only the thing that veils or obscures this bliss is the "I" -- even if such plays out through the "I's" attachments to other things.

In the midst of this blissful nothingness, there is an effortless surrender by the disciple to the master. Whereby, Umar says, "*Prophet of Allaah,*

offer me your faith and speak your blessed word, so I may hear." Umar now accepts the very thing he passionately rejected and sought to destroy. And even more, he comes to not only befriend but love the one he held to be his former enemy. This is all by the Grace of the Beloved, Its Will unfolding Its Plan. The following verse from the Qur'aan comes to mind:

And hold fast, all together, to the rope of Allaah, and be not divided among yourselves; and remember Allaah's favor on you; for you were enemies and It joined your hearts in love, so that by Its Grace, you became brothers; and you were on the brink of the pit of Fire, and It saved you from it. Thus doth Allaah make Its Signs (revelations) clear to you: That you may be guided.

(Surah 3, Verse 103)

Surely, if Umar was allowed (by the Beloved) to murder Muhammad, a prophet, he would be doomed to hellfire -- something even the pagan religions of his forefathers affirmed. The realization of this became even more evident in the midst of this penetration, so Umar accompanies his surrender with repentance:

"Now, to correct my actions of coming against you with a bared sword, and to cleanse that act, henceforth I will give quarter to no one I hear speaking wrongly of you. With this sword I will strike their heads from their bodies."

Umar surely fulfilled this promise of protection. One of my favorite accounts of him doing so involved Muhammad praying by the Ka'bah: the house of worship built by Ibraahiim (a.s.) in Mecca. Muhammad loved praying by this sacred house but he had to stop because the persecution by the Quraysh became too intense. In the midst of his prayers, people would be verbally assault him, and sometimes physically as well. In fact, one time someone threw the intestines of a camel upon him while he was prostrating in prayer. But after Umar's declaration of protection, he and Hamza, a cousin of Muhammad who was also a powerful warrior, began to escort Muhammad to the Ka'bah and stand by him as he made his prayers. As much as the Quraysh were vehemently annoyed by this, no one dared to even utter an insult fearing attack from Umar and Hamza.

And so it is: the conversion of Umar, who became one of the closest Companions to Muhammad -- some say he was second only to Abu Bakr. A companionship that eventually blossomed into Umar becoming the second Khalifah, leader of the Muslim community, after Abu Bakr's death. The path to this treaded the road of an act Umar later realized to be wrong. But his journey was rooted in a piety, sincerity, and honor we should not forget, even if it was misguided. Sometimes there are qualities more important than being right. We shouldn't seek to go astray, but if we do so with such qualities, we remain within reach of the Beloved's transforming Will. And even as we bear what we perceive to be the wrongs and faults of others, we may find it helpful to remember the story of Umar's conversion: we might be witnessing another tale of human wrongs eventually being made right by the Beloved...



Why do you destroy this verse of mine?

November 5, 2015

I recited a verse but my Beloved became offended by me.
It said, "Do you weigh Me by the measure of your verse?"
I said, "Why do you destroy this verse of mine?"
It said, "By what verse will I be contained?"

(adapted from *The Quatrains of Rumi*,
translated by Ibrahim Gamard and Rawan Farhadi, p. 202)

* * *

I will use the above quatrain to explore some dynamics of praising the Beloved.

Among the most important elements of praise are the questions: what is its source and origin, and what is its driving motivation? From the perspective of the mystic, the most eloquent and stirring composition holds little weight if it emanates from selfishness or ego. The first line of the quatrain suggests the source and motivation of the mentioned verse: *I recited a verse but my Beloved became offended by me*. Granted, with the way we use language, "I," "my," and "me" may be used in a general sense by one who was a selfless vessel for the verse. But the mention of offense is an indication of ego: egos get offended and personalize their reactions to phenomena, not the Beloved who may be displeased yet unaffected and undisturbed by the things we do that are contrary to Divine Will. And it is not uncommon an offended ego to be so disturbed that it projects this offense on another, in this case: *my Beloved became offended by me*.

This dynamic of the source, origin, and motivation of praise is not always direct. Neither is it possible to construct a series of measures to consistently determine (by use of the mind) whether another's praise emanates from selfishness and ego, or something beyond. It is a matter of examining the heart. Note these words of the Beloved as It corrects the prophet Muusaa (a.s.), also known as Moses, for chastising a shepherd for what Muusaa deemed to be an inappropriate prayer:

I regard not the outside and the words,
I regard the inside and the state of heart.
I look at the heart if it be humble,
Though the words may be the reverse of humble.
Because the heart is substance, and words accidents,
Accidents are only a means, substance is the final
cause.

How long wilt thou dwell on words and
superficialities?

A burning heart is what I want; consort with burning!
(*Masnavi i Ma'navi*, translated by E.H. Whinfield, p.
123)

***Note: I'll address this classic story in the next post.*

Many caution that only those who reach the station of sainthood and beyond can consistently read the heart of others. But everyone is capable of reading if their own "I" is acting on the level of the mind and ego or is being moved by the (spiritual) heart. One clear measure of this is humility, but it's not a measure defined by external things since sometimes genuine humility seems arrogant. To determine if you're being humble requires complete, unrelenting honesty; it is a surrender of the ego, even if the actions that emanate from such are bold. And for

the Sufi, the basis of such humility is the heart since the Beloved dwells therein.

In humility of heart, we simply become a vessel for the verse -- without any expectation or preference regarding what becomes of it. Within this humility, "I" offer (or allow to be offered through me) the verse and am just as content if the Beloved accepts, cherishes, rejects, or destroys it. But if "I" look for even a mere acknowledgment regarding the verse I have moved beyond humility of heart into the realm of the mind. Even if the mind is restrained by a mental effort at humility, by holding to the "I," I make myself an entity in the presence of the Beloved. Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi regards this "self existence" an error since one of the Divine intentions of praise is to disappear into the Beloved:

Can I explain 'The Friend' to one to whom It is no
Friend?

[Or: Can I explain 'The Friend' to one who is not a
friend of The Friend?]

Verily my singing Its praise were dispraise,
For 'twould prove me existent, and existence is error.
(*Masnavi* p. 10)

The allure of the mind is such that even prophets and saints can slip into its realm, although they usually return (sometimes after Divine correction) to humility of heart. Noticing the "offense" of the Beloved and asking why It destroyed the verse suggests one is in the realm of the mind. Humility of heart would not be moved the slightest by the Beloved destroying the verse: in its selflessness, it would merely offer the verse welcoming the Beloved to do with it what It wishes. Yet in

this case, there is a beneficent reason why the Beloved destroys the verse.

And let me state before continuing, that what applies to a verse of praise can apply to any action (or non-action) of praise.

The beneficent reason for destroying the verse begins to be addressed in the Beloved's first response: *It said, "Do you weigh Me by the measure of your verse?"* If we accept that the "writer" of the verse has dropped into the realm of the mind, therein lays a great danger. The Beloved which is being praised is beyond all limitations, can never be fully encompassed. And it is by Mercy (*Ar-Rahim*) that some of Its qualities or the expression of these manifest in limited forms that can be observed. But the mind is extremely limited: there are limitations to sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell, thinking (mental association) and the other components and functions of the mind. Yet most of us live through the mind and, thereby, praise through the mind, often unaware that we're doing this. Therefore, as we praise the Beloved in this way there is a danger of limiting the unending fullness of the Beloved to the limits of what the mind can observe: to *weigh Me by the measure of your mind*. This is a blatant reduction of the Beloved.

Consider this: if we limit our "understanding" of sight to what our eyes see and have seen, are we encompassing all that can be seen? And if we really become intense in attaching to our sight -- as can occur with stirring praise -- we can become more closed off to what we have not seen as we glorify what we see and have seen. But when it comes to the Beloved, even if we were to see the whole of creation -- from the earth to beyond the seventh heaven where the Throne of the Beloved

rests; even such infinite sight amounts not to a teardrop in the ocean of endless oceans which we call the Beloved.

It is very rare that we will let go of limitations, be open to expansion beyond these, when we are pleasantly engaged in the beauties of these limitations. And there is truly unending beauty in this manifested creation. Yet as vast as it is, it is limited compared to the Beloved; and even more so, what we observe of creation. If we limit the Beloved to our (mind-oriented) limitations, but the Beloved is limitless, are we really praising the Beloved? In this regard, our limited concepts of the Beloved can become idols we praise and worship in place of the Beloved. And if our "praise" (the verse) is facilitating this, why should the Beloved not destroy our verses -- if only as to warn us of this misguided approach.

Yet we often misinterpret this warning. Instead of looking at how our tendency of reducing the Beloved should be destroyed, we become offended and defend this tendency: *I said, "Why do you destroy this verse of mine?"* -- this 'mine' is very telling. But the Beloved is clear: *"By what verse will I be contained?"* This is a response to the orientation of our praise, an orientation that seeks to contain what cannot be contained by expressions. Also, in traditional Islam, the reference "*contained*" is a call to turn to the heart. A famous hadith, which I've referenced previously in these blogs, states that the Beloved says: "Neither My heavens nor My earth contain me, but the heart of My faithful servant contains and embraces Me."

If our praise is emanating from the heart and drawing us toward -- or dare I say, into -- the heart, we will realize a greater purpose of praise is to be drawn into embrace with the Beloved. We may also come to see

that any verses (or other expressions) that come from this embrace actually originate from the Beloved, and we will not impose any personal claim upon them. In this vein, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi did not sign his name to the exceeding majority of verses that came through him; if he signed anything, he usually used the name of his master Shams, who turned him in the direction of arriving at this embrace with the Beloved. In such embrace, we will effortlessly cease to hold praise as overly important: they are means, like fruit, that can be eaten to sate a deeper hunger. But even if they are discarded because one is already full or content with fasting, what matters more is the fullness derived by being in embrace with the Beloved. This happens in the heart, not in the expression of praise on the level of the mind, even if there is great beauty to such expressions.

But if the roots of a tree belong to this world, although outwardly proclaiming praises of Allaah, all its fruits should be carried back to this world. And if both roots and fruit are in the spiritual garden, then that is “Light upon Light.”

(Fihi Ma Fihi, translated by A.J. Arberry, p. 376)



Why hast thou sent my servant away? - Part 1 of 2

November 19, 2015

A voice came from Allaah to Muusaa,
“Why hast thou sent my servant away?
Thou hast come to draw humans to union with me,
Not to drive them far away from me.
So far as possible, engage not in dissevering;
‘The thing most repugnant to me is divorce, separation.’
To each person have I allotted peculiar forms,
To each have I given particular usages.
What is praiseworthy in thee is blameable in him,
What is poison for thee is honey for him....”

(adapted from *Masnavi i Ma'navi*,
translated by E.H. Whinfield, p. 122)

* * *

The prophet Muusaa (a.s.), also known as Moses, is one of the most cherished prophets in Islam. One of his titles is *al-Kaliimullaah*, which can be translated as ‘the one who talks with Allaah.’ The Beloved would regularly descend in a cloud to earth and speak directly with Muusaa, whereas Muhammad usually received messages from the Beloved via the angel Jibriil. Muusaa is also a central figure in many key stories and occurrences in Islam: he is the prophet mentioned most by name in the Qur’aan. The story of him leading the Israelites from Egypt is repeated a few times therein, and is regarded as one of the most important stories, filled with lessons and layers of messages. In

particular for Sufis, Muusaa is a central character in one of the most mystical yet controversial stories in the Qur'aan: his brief stint as a student of the prophet Khidr.

Given this rich history, when a story involves Muusaa, many Muslims will pay great attention. It is within this context that Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's tale of *Muusaa and The Shepherd* is held in high esteem. There are many (deeper) levels to this story, particularly for serious spiritual seekers who reflect personally on the messages within it. This blog post is not able to address all these, but perhaps it can serve as an introduction to those who wish to go deeper.

I'll share a version of the story I received via oral transmission, which offers a few more details than the written translations I've encountered. This will lead into Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi's poetic commentary, the beginning of which is the excerpt that opens this post.

One day, Muusaa was walking along a path and heard a voice in prayer saying, "Oh Most High, oh Beloved, show me where You are that I may come and serve your needs. I will clean your dirty feet and mend your splintered hooves. I will comb your locking hair and oil it so that it flows freely and shines. Oh Lord, I will wash you from head to toe and pick the lice and fleas from your skin. I will fetch thee milk and water, and treats if you wish. All your Majesty will have to do is sit. I will kiss your head and rub your tiny little feet. And when dusk settles, I will prepare your bed with fresh straw, sweep away the dust and rocks to make it nice and neat. For you alone, oh Lord, I will

sacrifice all of my goats, thinking only of you, singing praises, offering endless prayers and service.”

Upon hearing these words, Muusaa became disturbed. He interrupted the shepherd to say, “What are you doing and to whom are you speaking!”

The shepherd replied, “I am praying to the Lord of All, who gave me birth and sustains my life.”

Muusaa replied, “Will you fuel your own flames in Hell! You blaspheme the Beloved to pray to It as if It is a goat. This is the Most High, who provides all needs and needs nothing from anyone -- let alone an illiterate shepherd who has not the humility and decency to learn the proper way of praying. Even the devils are pointing their fingers at you; and the angels, they cover their noses from the stench of this sin. Hold your tongue lest the earth swallow you now into the pits of Hell. You are an ignorant fool who should cut off your own head. I repent for just witnessing your evil, and tear my own robe for your shame!”

The shepherd was overwhelmed with despair. He tore his robe and ran into the desert, wailing tears of remorse. Muusaa took a moment to straighten his torn robe, knowing he was harsh. But he felt this was necessary to prevent the shepherd from committing such a vile atrocity ever again. And who would question the wisdom of a prophet?

But then a voice from the heavens spoke, a familiar voice that Muusaa heard when that cloud

would descend from the heavens and speak directly to
Its prophet.

*A voice came from Allaah to Muusaa,
“Why hast thou sent my servant away?
Thou hast come to draw humans to union with me,
Not to drive them far away from me....”*

Before continuing, let's examine some key points. First, it's important to remember the sacredness of prayer in the Abrahamic traditions. Islam is explicit in regarding prayer as one of the pillars of the way; Judaism and Christianity (which is a direct outgrowth of Judaism) hold prayer in a similar regard. It is a sacred duty of every sincere follower of these traditions to make their best efforts to learn the designated manners of prayer. In Islam, the way of prayer follows the example of Muhammad: from preparation for prayer (i.e., ablution, call to prayer), to the designated times, the sequence of words and postures, to even how the prayer is closed. Whereas the Qur'aan, which are the words of the Beloved, calls for some of these elements to be performed, the specifics of how these are done (i.e., how the ablution is performed) follows Muhammad's example. In a similar manner, the same applies to the shepherd in following Muusaa's example, the prophet of his time.

Traditional Judaism emphasizes great care in how the Absolute is referred: solely in the highest of regard and only in the rarest of instances is any name of the Absolute mentioned by voice. So when the shepherd refers to the Absolute in terms of a goat -- 'I will mend your splintered hooves, comb your locking hair, rub your little feet' -- this would be seen as an abomination. This becomes even more incendiary when the Absolute is referred to as a goat with lice and fleas.

Also, the shepherd's tone of seeking to tend to the Beloved would raise concern. The following verse in the Qur'aan addresses the topic of sustenance, of who does what for whom -- a sentiment shared by traditional Judaism:

And enjoin upon thy people worship, and be constant therein. We [the Absolute] ask not of thee a provision: We provide for thee. And the sequel is for righteousness.
(Surah 20, Verse 132)

In the eyes of some, the reduction of the Beloved to a goat becomes more offensive by the shepherd's assumption that he can do something (provide) for the Beloved. One of the lessons diligently instilled in me by my teachers is that there is absolutely nothing I can do for the Beloved: It doesn't need me for anything. Instead, I am the one in need. Until I truly realized my utter and complete reliance on the Beloved, all of my spiritual efforts were in vain: mere imitation of what surrender calls for. Many teachers regard this of such importance that they will not expose students to deeper teachings until they have come to rest within this realization.

So on one level, Muusaa is not wrong to harshly chastise the shepherd - a harshness which, although forceful, emanates from love. Just as a caring parent may yell at and scold a child for placing its hand in a fire, the prophets, saints, and masters sometimes scold seekers for reaching into spiritual fires that only further our bondage to delusion and ignorance. Yet, even for a prophet, there is a danger of getting caught up in the mind and only looking at the surface of another's actions. In being mentally disturbed by the shepherd's prayer, Muusaa neglects the

awareness of heart that realizes deeper and more relevant purposes playing out through the prayer. In this neglect, he ignores the opening to union with the Beloved occurring within the shepherd -- even through the means of this blasphemous prayer. This is why the Beloved chastises Muusaa's chastisement:

*Why hast thou sent my servant away?
Thou hast come to draw humans to union with me,
Not to drive them far away from me.*

Also of note are the words: *To each person have I allotted peculiar forms, / To each have I given particular usages.* In the ancient days, the work of the shepherd spanned from pre-dawn to after sunset, each minute engaged in care and watch of the cattle. Adhering to such a schedule six days a week (the Sabbath excluded) didn't allow much time for study. This is one of the reasons why in the Abrahamic spiritual traditions, a person or set of persons leads the congregational prayers: people who are able to devote time to learn all that is involved in prayer and religious ceremonies, so that they may lead others who do not have such an opportunity. So for the shepherd to even be engaged in prayer on his own says a lot for his sincerity. And, as circumstances dictate, not knowing the proper way of prayer, he prays in a way familiar to what he knows: in the manner of taking care of goats.

I stress that when people have the opportunity and means to learn the designated ways of prayer, they should do so. The same applies to other elements of spiritual practice: there is a duty to learn the established ways exhibited by prophets, saints, and masters which often behold a powerful grace and wisdom. But if one is in a situation, like the shepherd, where such is not available, the Beloved may overlook

what are “improper” means if one is sincerely turning toward and opening within to union with the Beloved. Thus, whereas praying to the Beloved as if It is a goat would be *poison* to Muusaa or anyone afforded the opportunity to learn the traditional way of prayer, this very same prayer is *honey* to the shepherd.

We'll continue with this story in the next post.



Why hast thou sent my servant away? - Part 2 of 2

December 3, 2015

"I created not humans to gain a profit from them,
But to shower my beneficence upon them.

...

I am not purified by their praises,
'Tis they who become pure and shining thereby.
I regard not the outside and the words,
I regard the inside and the state of heart.
I look at the heart if it be humble,
Though the words may be the reverse of humble.
Because the heart is substance, and words accidents,
Accidents are only a means, substance is the final cause.
How long wilt thou dwell on words and superficialities?
A burning heart is what I want; consort with burning!
Kindle in thy heart the flame of Love,
And burn up utterly thoughts and fine expressions.
Oh Muusaa! the lovers of fair rites are one class,
They whose hearts and souls burn with Love are another.
Lovers must burn every moment,
As tax and tithe are levied on a ruined village.

...

The sect of lovers is distinct from all others,
Lovers have a religion and a faith of their own."

(adapted from *Masnavi i Ma'navi*,
translated by E.H. Whinfield, p. 123 - 124)

* * *

We continue from the last post with the words the Beloved spoke to Muusaa (a.s.) after he drove the shepherd away with his chastisement.

The Beloved speaks to the fruits (profit) of prayer, which is part of a larger flow of beneficence: *I created not humans to gain a profit from them, / But to shower my beneficence upon them.* As stated in the last post, there is absolutely nothing we can do for the Beloved: It doesn't need us for anything. Instead, we are the ones in need. Even more than this need, part of the intention for our creation is the Beloved's will to shower Its beneficence upon us. To this end, the Beloved provides guidance to humanity that we may live in ways that are in harmony with receiving this beneficence -- prayer plays a part in serving this purpose. And neither should we limit such beneficence to the things of this world, as the end of this story illustrates.

One of the intentions of prayer is to draw us into the flow of receiving beneficence from the Beloved. But when the ego is not restrained, we often confuse this intention and the dynamics of our prayers can get messy. The wise do not encourage us to pray for divine beneficence since often the driving force of such petitioning is selfishness, which is impure. This informs why many traditional prayers often set prescribed words and direction, to avoid the selfish petitioning that can reduce prayer to a business transaction: I make my prayer to "purchase" and receive things from the Beloved.

Simply adhering to the prescribed manners of prayers doesn't guarantee purity. If we wish to become *pure and shining thereby*, we must look to the heart. The Beloved is explicit in saying:

*I regard not the outside and the words,
I regard the inside and the state of heart.
I look at the heart if it be humble,
Though the words may be the reverse of humble.*

When we pray, is our prayer outward-oriented, dwelling on words and expressions inclined toward receiving or “feeling” something (external stimuli)? Or is it a turning within whereby we may be drawn -- not moved by our own efforts -- to the heart wherein the Beloved dwells? As that famous hadith says, “Neither My heavens nor My earth contain me, but the heart of My faithful servant contains and embraces Me.” Will we be humble enough, a humility emanating from the heart, to allow and dwell within such embrace? Within such embrace is (the essence of) prayer. In this state, the Beloved prays through us -- even if the mind, which is external, is moved in ways that seem counter to humility and the prescribed manners of prayer. In this state, *the heart is substance*: the origin, cause, and determining force of the prayer. The words and expressions are *accidents*: things caused, outflows of the substance.

When prayer humbly emanates from the Beloved within the heart, a burning occurs. The Beloved calls for this: *A burning heart is what I want; consort with burning!* The fire is Love -- *Kindle in thy heart the flame of Love*; the spark of such fire being surrender. Here, we turn away from the ego, contrived conceptions of “self,” and attachments -- all externally-based -- to the inner calling of the heart. Heeding this calling, we allow the Beloved to use this calling to shape us to be as It wills for us to be. Within such surrender there is an effortless restraining of duality -- in which there is “I,” the Beloved, and often more -- to allow the dissolution of duality. This dissolution will often

be a burning upon the heart. And it will burn everything not in harmony with Love: the ego, our false sense of "I" and even the *words and superficialities*, the *thoughts and fine expressions* we contrive through the mind to serve this "I." When this burning has served its purpose to perfection, there is only the flame of Love, only Oneness, only the Beloved.

A divine intention of prescribed prayer is to turn the one praying in the direction of this burning. Making repeated prayers daily in which the "I," in particular the ego, is restrained to perform designated rites can quiet the mind enough so we can hear the calling of the heart. But there is a level deeper than designated rites: *Oh Muusaa! the lovers of fair rites are one class, / They whose hearts and souls burn with Love are another.* For those seeking what is deeper, let us not be content with an experience, or even regular experiences, of burning. The Beloved calls for this burning to be the continuous substance of our lives: *Lovers must burn every moment.* This distinguishes the lovers with burning hearts from others: *The sect of lovers is distinct from all others, / Lovers have a religion and a faith of their own.* Yet this religion (way of life) and faith will not always be understood by others -- sometimes even prophets, just as Muusaa did not realize the fullness of the shepherd's prayer.

Yet the station of the burning lover, with their own religion and faith, is not the final destination. As stated earlier, there is a station beyond this in which the lover burns away (dissolves into annihilation) and there is only the fire of Love, only the Beloved.

The Beloved's chastisement of Muusaa touches on a few more points which we won't address in this post. But after being chastised by the

Beloved, Muusaa was filled with great remorse and immediately started into the desert after the shepherd. He followed the distressed footprints in the sand. They crisscrossed in jagged directions, sometimes circling about, sometimes reversing, sometimes leading to big dents in the sand of a fallen mad man. Finally, the agitated tracks led to a man bent on the ground by a barren tree. Muusaa approached, standing a distance behind the shepherd to humbly offer his apology.

“Oh shepherd, I was gravely wrong,” said Muusaa. “Who am I to bind you to rules of worship and conforming ceremony? Your aching heart is true devotion. Your blasphemy is sincere faith. Your intention to provide a shepherd’s care to the Beloved is the light of the soul, a saving grace to this world. Unleash your tongue, restrain not your prayers. Please, pay no heed to my previous chastisement.”

There was no response from the shepherd as he remained there motionless. Muusaa approached him, hoping the worst had not occurred. As he neared, he saw a look of complete bliss upon the shepherd’s face who was frozen in ecstasy. He started to reach for the shepherd, but a voice said, “Touch him not. He is fine, he is in Union with Me. Leave him to My care, but don’t ever chase away another of my lovers into the desert of separation.”

The beneficence of the Beloved is not limited to the things of this world. Few treasures are greater than such Union. And for the shepherd, his “blasphemous” prayer became a means to be drawn to such...



Master your own wrath

December 17, 2015

The “Wedding Day” of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi

Iisa (a.s.) was asked, “What is the most difficult thing in this world and the next?” He said, “The wrath of Allaah.” They asked, “And what can save us from that?” He answered, “Master your own wrath and anger towards others.”

When the mind wants to complain, do the opposite -- give thanks. Exaggerate the matter to such a degree that you find within yourself a Love of what repels you. Pretending thankfulness is a way of seeking the Love of Allaah.

(adapted from *Fihi Ma Fihi*,
translated by A.J. Arberry, p. 424)

* * *

The Prophet Iisa (a.s.), more commonly known as Jesus, is one of the most beloved prophets in Islam. Among Muslims, especially Sufis, he is revered for the wondrous embodiment of Love that continues to emanate through his time on earth. Many also look to the prophecies of his coming return as a time in which Love will rule this earth again: that the present state of immense suffering and conflict throughout the world will come to an end.

Many Sufis turn to Iisa when looking to deepen the presence of Love in their own lives. The above text gives a simple yet powerful means to open to this. We often underestimate the potency of simple means, but examining the lives of prophets and saints reveals that “mastery” of

Love is often realized through such means. And many don't realize the far reaching impact anger has upon our ability to be a vessel for Love.

First, it may be helpful to have some parameters about what is meant by Love. A lot of times when we talk about Love we're not really talking about Love itself but how Love manifests through phenomena of creation. Even the mention of Love in the opening text refers to Love not as something we do but something realized within: *find within yourself a Love of what repels you*. Many mystics acknowledge that Love is beyond definition; some say the Absolute is Love, which certainly cannot be defined. In this regard, to be a vessel of Love doesn't entail performing acts of Love; rather removing obstacles to this Inner Reality that already is. Once these are removed, Love effortlessly flows within us and through us; and, when appropriate, moves us to action.

Most, if not all, of the barriers to this flow of Love lay in our individual identity, which most of us live through the ego. Thus, we may see why Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi says: "Your task is not to seek for Love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it." To this I would add the barriers we allow others to build within us through social conditioning and influence (the company we keep imprints certain qualities upon our minds). I remember the words of a teacher who spoke in the same vein. He said, and I'm paraphrasing, there is nothing I can teach you about Love -- this you already "know" deep within, you just need to remember this knowing. But I can teach you how to realize and address the many ways you are impeding Love from flowing through you. He stated that the most common impediment is fear, but anger is a close second.

One of the dangers of anger is that it unfailingly leads one to *the wrath of Allaah*. We should not view such wrath and anger in human terms: so often a person becomes angry because of something someone does or is perceived as doing, with the basis of this mental anger being rooted in the individual (often the ego-based) identity. Our modern concepts of anger tend to be extreme: the threshold for our standard of anger begins with physically or verbally attacking a person, or have the strong desire to do so. In ancient times, for the mind to be just slightly disturbed and turned in the direction of harm was considered anger -- even if such disturbance never expanded to become the desire to attack (i.e. disturb) someone else. Wrath was considered a more intense anger, often at such a level that is very difficult to control. But this speaks to human anger, not what is traditionally meant by the wrath of Allaah.

In examining the wrath of Allaah, it is important to remember the Absolute is unaffected by our actions: it feels what we all feel yet remains (in) a Peace (*Salaam*) that cannot be disturbed. Even as It implores us to fulfill the divine purpose of life, which is beneficent, whether we do so or not does not affect the Beloved in any way. Yet one of the laws of earthly existence the Beloved infused into creation is that you reap what you sow. And often what is reaped is more than what was sowed: just as a fruit is often larger than the seed from which it emanates. Many spiritual traditions warn that if we live a life immersed in anger and wrath, we will reap an outcome within and after this earthly life embodying such. And as the consequences of this law of existence play out, we will find ourselves in the midst a greater anger and wrath (disturbance) than what we sowed through our actions. Hell is seen as one of the fruits of such reaping -- Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, traditional Yoga, and other spiritual traditions speak explicitly to the existence of Hell in the afterlife. But even within

this earthly life, many people are deeply and widely scarred by the consequences of anger reaped from their own anger. Traditionally, anger is not limited to just physical acts, but also verbal actions and even engaging thoughts of anger -- that when such thoughts cross the mind, we mentally engage them instead of letting them pass.

Since the law of reaping what you sow has been instituted by the Beloved, only the Beloved can intervene in this law playing out. Once we sow anger, there is nothing we can do to impede the coming consequences of its reaping; although pleading for divine Mercy and sowing beneficent qualities can contribute to consequences that counteract the consequences of anger. But with such an approach, one's life becomes immersed in ongoing conflict and tension between the dualities of merit and demerit, good and evil, beneficence and harm. The tension of such dualities can become obstacles to Love -- there is a simpler, harmonious way. But since only the Beloved can intercede the coming consequences of anger sowed, this informs why it is called *the wrath of Allaah*.

Understanding these dynamics, we may see why Iisa regards the wrath of Allaah as *the most difficult thing in this world and the next*. He, like other prophets and saints, constantly reminds people that a single act of anger, and certainly a series of "seemingly small" incidents of anger, is enough to reap the consequence of ending up in Hell: a realm of excruciating disturbance. Whereas some schools of Christianity speak about Hell being a final unending purgatory, Islam affirms that people can be delivered from Hell -- there are hadiths (sayings) of Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) that explicitly state this. Yet is it not better to avoid putting our souls through such when a way to do so is available?

lisa offers a simple path to save ourselves from reaping such disturbance: *Master your own wrath and anger towards others*. This doesn't require years of ascetic practices, spiritual study, meditation, service and charity, prayer, or even the realization of advanced spiritual states. These may support the "mastery" of anger -- notably, making it easier to realize tendencies of anger as well as the innate strengths we have to master it. But if we engage these supports yet don't master our anger, we will still be subject to reaping the fruits of the anger we sow. The initial levels of such mastery begin with restraint: restraining from physically, verbally, and mentally engaging anger. To this end, the focus is on *anger towards others*, since the overwhelming majority of acts of anger are directed toward others.

In the stages of restraint, we are dealing with impressions in the mind. Such impressions can be purged by restraining from acting them out: for example, that when a person insults me, I restrain from the impression in my mind that suggests I should respond with an insult. Although it is only a suggestion, such an impression can be strong: in this example, it has been placed in my mind by social conditioning as well as by continuing to be in the company of others (mostly family and friends) who consistently act out this impression. To merely restrain from acting out an impression can be daunting, especially when the mind is in the habit of activity. To this, Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi offers specific advice: *When the mind wants to complain, do the opposite -- give thanks*. When the mind wants to insult, give praise. *Exaggerate the matter to such a degree that you find within yourself a Love of what repels you*. On the surface, this may seem crazy -- and yes, some people will affirm this perception by also deeming you as crazy if follow this advice. But saints and prophets aren't concerned with appearances and

reputations, they are concerned with removing the impressions in the mind that are obstacles to Love. Iisa gives similar advice when he says:

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Parent in Heaven. (*Book of Matthew Chapter 5, Verses 43 - 45*)

In the beginning, this may very well be *pretending*, since I don't genuinely feel the urge to compliment another when one insults me. And let me be clear, this not a call to lie or make up a compliment: instead to look beyond the mental disturbance of being insulted to praise an actual positive attribute of the one insulting me. In this way, I'm not only restraining from acting out the impression to respond to the insult with anger (another insult), but acting contrary to the impression further undercuts its hold on the mind. As impressions are diminished and eventually purged through continuing restraint, we will see how this *is a way of seeking the Love of Allaah*.

I should add that in ancient times it was implicitly understood that as you apply restraint in one aspect of life, you apply restraint in all aspects. So there was no need to say that as you restrain anger, don't undercut this progress by not restraining fear, selfishness, and other obstacles to Love. With a holistic approach of restraint, one finds that once the obstacles are diminished, more of the light of Love will shine through these into your life (including your interactions with others). And when the obstacles are removed, there is nothing you need to do for this light of Love to shine unimpeded in and through your entire life. Then you need not "love," for Love will simply Love through you.

The fullness of this inexplicable glory can come to be through simply mastering (restraining) your own anger...



A dead human living

December 31, 2015

The Prophet said, "O seeker of the mysteries,
wouldst thou see a dead human living,
Walking on the earth, like living humans;
yet that one's spirit dwells in the Heavens,
Because it has transcended before death
and will not transcend when that one dies --
A mystery beyond understanding,
understood only by dying --
If any one wish to see a dead human walking
thus visibly on the earth
Behold Abu Bakr, the devout,
who in virtue of being a true witness to Allaah
became the Prince of the Resurrected."

...

Become the Resurrection and so behold it:
becoming is the necessary condition for beholding the reality of
anything.
Whether it be light or darkness, until thou become it
thou wilt never know [come to knowing] it completely.

(adapted from *Selected Poems of Rumi*,
translated by Reynold A. Nicholson, p. 58 - 59)

* * *

A dead human living? No, this is not a post about zombies. Instead it points to the realm of the mysteries, a realm that extends beyond the

limitations of mind-based comprehension. (And I'm intentionally not addressing what the mysteries refer to in this post, but may the readers have their own sense of what these are to them.) Whereas portions of the mysteries can be taught, the fullness of such cannot: and more often the Beloved, the Only Teacher, does not teach the mysteries but instead reveals them. Prophets, masters, and saints who serve the role of teaching about the mysteries may utilize points of the mysteries within the mental realm to point (open) students to their fullness -- which extends beyond the mind. Yet many who acknowledge the limitations of the mind still seek to "understand" and live the fullness of the mysteries through the mind. Most do so not being aware of this limiting dynamic: a means by which we place and keep ourselves in bondage to the limits of the mind, and the ignorance and delusion that often accompany such.

So in the context of the opening words, there is a calling to the *seeker of the mysteries*: to be cognizant of this dynamic that may be working within us in ways we are not aware of (ignorance) or misperceive and confuse (elements of delusion). As we open to something that is beyond the mind's ability to understand, such as seeing *a dead human living*, are we open to not understanding yet receiving and becoming ("experiencing") a knowing that is not limited to the mind -- in particular, the limited "I" we construct, in part, from the stuff of my mind? This knowing expands beyond mind-based knowledge into the deepening awareness of the heart; and leads even further into the indescribable Awareness that is the Beloved Itself.

When opening to the mysteries, it is often helpful in the beginning to acknowledge and accept the mind's resistance to these. In this case, to accept the mind questioning how something can be dead and yet alive

when alive is the opposite of being dead, and vice versa. In accepting such and then contemplating why the mind is resisting, we come to realize what stuff (attachments) the mind is holding on to. It is these attachments the mind is trying to fit the endless possibilities of manifestation into -- like trying to fit a whole room into a box within that room. Our conditioned tendencies to try to fit the boundless universe into the small boxes our minds conceive are major barriers to receiving and becoming a knowing that expands beyond the mind. It is exceedingly difficult to stop doing something we don't realize we are doing: one of invitations of the mysteries is to be made aware of our limiting tendencies. Then we may restrain these tendencies as a means to having these eventually diminish and dissolve themselves. In restraint, we acknowledge these tendencies, particularly their pulls, yet refrain from engaging and acting them out. Such engagement and action are like fuel to a fire, which if stopped the fire diminishes until it burns itself out (dissolution). Thus, we come to truly realize that we have a mind but we are not the mind nor the "self" we conceive based on the stuff of the mind.

For so many people, *walking on the earth* is a fitting metaphor for our mind-based identifications, which then inform our definitions of life. The perception of activity (in the earthly realm) as directed by our individual ("I"-based) will often become the boxes we seek to fit the boundlessness of life into. This is usually accompanied by fear of the cessation of such activity, including overt actions as well as more subtle acts and engagement (i.e. thinking). But mystics of many spiritual traditions challenge us to move beyond these conceptions of life -- the metaphor *that one's spirit dwells in the Heavens* (as opposed to walking on earth) points to this. In fact, many mystics declare that what is truly life is the cessation of individually-driven activity, even if such

cessation appears to be activity to those who hold to mind-based definitions of life. Note the below words of Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi which addresses this dynamic in terms of service of the Beloved. He speaks to the distinction between those who serve through mind-based definitions of life and those who transcend such:

This is what ordinary people don't understand. When they render service in honor of Allaah's glory, their servanthood [*"I"-ness*] is still present. Even though it is for the sake of Allaah, they still see themselves and their own actions [*activity*] as well as Allaah -- they are not drowned in the water. That person is drowned when no movement, nor any action belongs to them, all their movements spring from the movement of the water.

(adapted from *Fihi Ma Fihi*, p. 83 - 84, translated by A.J. Arberry, ***italics in brackets in mine*)

Even service genuinely performed for the sake of the Beloved can happen within the limitations of the mind-based "I." Within such we may view ourselves and our service as being a vessel of the Beloved, but there is something deeper and more expansive: when we literally drown in the water of the Beloved. The metaphor of drowning has a direct connection to death: dying to our fixation with mind-based ("I"-based) activity. With the cessation of such activity, within such stillness, we are moved by the Beloved. Many experience at some point in their lives a temporary drowning. In such, although we are still immersed in "I"-based living, we are drawn beyond it. Whereas this temporary drowning regresses back to mind-based activity, there is a station in which to be "drowned in the water" becomes (our) life.

For those who are drowned, their lives may take on the appearance of activity *like living humans* as defined by the mind; but in reality, their “activity” expands beyond the mind, and its perception and understanding. The words of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) are explicit in stating this is *A mystery beyond understanding, / understood only by dying*. Only by surrendering to allow the Beloved to move our every movement will we arrive at this knowing: that there is an activity beyond activity that occurs through no activity. Even as we become (“experience”) this more expansive knowing, the mind will not be able to fit the fullness of it into the dynamics of mental comprehension. The mind’s language of duality perceives phenomena as either being or not being; for the mind, phenomena cannot be and not be at the same time - and certainly not be something beyond the range of these dualities.

There is an irony to this dynamic of mind-based resistance to the fullness of knowing. When we experience earthly death, the dropping of the mind and body, we will instantly realize this knowing that expands beyond the limitations of the mind. We will also realize that this knowing is not bound to time: it always is, was, will be, and beyond. Therefore, it is available and accessible even as we occupy a body and mind that is oriented to duality and the limitations we craft from such. Thus, one can be in the station of having *transcended before death / and will not transcend when that one dies* -- already being this knowing. To speak to the accessibility of this, Muhammad gives an example of *a dead human walking / thus visibly on the earth*:

*Behold Abu Bakr, the devout,
who in virtue of being a true witness to Allaah
became the Prince of the Resurrected.*

Abu Bakr is Muhammad's closest companion. As great as he is, he is an ordinary human -- not dressed in the grace of prophethood or superhuman qualities. For him, the means of accessing this knowing lay in devotion and piety. He had such faith in Muhammad that he never questioned anything Muhammad said or did -- some may profess to have such faith in something but will engage, even if never acting upon, the little doubts that creep into their minds at times. Abu Bakr's faith became the foundation for his obedient devotion to Allaah and Muhammad. And his devotion was combined and deepened by his impeccable piety: even prior to embracing Islam, he was known to be a person of uncompromising morality. These two components, which are accessible to us all, are means by which we can become *a true witness to Allaah* -- the fullness of this statement expands beyond what the mind can comprehend. Through these means we can become *Resurrected*: alive (life) through death to mind-based ("I"-based) activity.

We will only come to a "full" knowing of the Resurrection by becoming Resurrected: *becoming is the necessary condition for beholding the reality of anything*. Beginning with restraint of the conditioned tendencies of the mind, being open and accepting of the mind's inability to understand the fullness of Reality, to eventually surrender all mind-based initiative to activity so we may die to such activity, then we will be drowned in the water (the Beloved) which will move our every movement. As Jalaal ud-Diin Rumi states: *until thou become it / thou wilt never know [come to knowing] it completely* -- even if the mind never knows it in the way the mind seeks to know...



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