

Rumi and Spiritual Pilgrimage
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Before I tell you briefly about Rumi, I want to let you know there is an excellent fictional account written by Elif Shafak called The Forty Rules of Love that I would recommend.

Rumi writes:

“Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and frightened.
Don’t open the door to the study and begin reading.
Take down a musical instrument.
Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.”

Mevlana Rumi was a Sufi, living in the 1200’s, He was first a religious scholar, teaching, meditating and helping the poor. As sheikh of the dervish learning community in Konya he was famous throughout the Persian Empire for his teachings and sermons.

When he was 37 years old Rumi met Shams of Tabriz, a wandering dervish. The two of them developed an intense passionate friendship. Shams was not with Rumi long-jealousy of their ecstatic connection, and resentment from students and family caused Shams to leave Konya for about a year, but Rumi loved Shams and grieved their separation so traveled to Damascus and brought him home. Four years after they met Shams disappeared and it has been strongly suspected that Rumi’s son, along with students from the school, killed Shams.

Shams changed Rumi’s life. Rumi’s love for Shams and the intensity of his grief when Shams first left, and then later disappeared, transformed him from a scholar into a mystical poet.

Like all of us who have grieved the loss of someone we love, he began to listen to music and then started the practice of whirling in place for hours at a time, establishing the prayerful practice of the whirling dervishes.

Rumi lives on in the hearts of Muslim mystics, particularly the Sufi tradition. Each year approximately 1.5 million people pilgrimage to Konya for the Shebi-arus, the celebration of Rumi’s union with God (which Westerner’s would call death).

The real question about Rumi’s legacy is in regard to what his inspirational and enduring message has been. Obviously his message has been different for each culture and individual, but I want to attempt to explain how Rumi has changed my life.

I first started paying attention to Rumi while reading a book by Rebecca Parker, one of our Unitarian Universalist scholars. She described a new way for us to approach our

religious life. Most of us raised in the protestant tradition have learned that part of our religious commitment is to work to relieve poverty and injustice in the world, to try to end suffering and make things right. Parker suggests a change in focus; she suggests that we fall in love with the world with such an intensity that we are compelled by love to make the world whole, and she quotes Rumi: "There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground." The visual image of kissing our earth, of being lost in a love for this world, was life changing for me.

Rumi offers a way to learn to love this life. His poetry reflects the intensity of his love for Shams, but both he and Shams take this to a much higher spiritual level- they see their relationship with each other as a model for the way we should love the divine.

They present a more holistic understanding of God than I am used to, recognizing that there is a spirit of life or life force that is in all things in the world, making everything holy. Shams and Rumi move our relationship with God, the Spirit of Life, out of the intellectual, scholarly evaluation of God to a spiritual, mystical level where we just experience being in love with this life force.

When you read Rumi's poetry it is easy to first think this is just love poetry, until you realize that when he talks about his beloved he is talking perhaps about Shams, but also about God. "When you are with everyone but me, you're with no one. When you are with no one but me, you're with everyone. Instead of being so bound up *with* everyone, *be* everyone. When you become that many, you're nothing. Empty."

Rumi demonstrates this ability to get lost in an intensely loving relationship. Even the act of whirling is a way of meditation, and causes an internal focus that eliminates the mind chatter and distractions of the world. This becomes a practice of focusing on loving the divine in the world.

(At this point there is an interlude with these three poems read. Ideally, with quiet Zikr music in the background):

Let me share some of Rumi's poems

Not Here

There's courage involved if you want to become truth. There is a broken-open place in a lover. Where are those qualities of bravery and sharp compassion in this group? What's the use of old and frozen thought? I want a howling hurt. This is not a treasury where gold is stored; this is for copper. We alchemists look for talent that can heat up and change. Lukewarm won't do. Halfhearted holding back,

well-enough getting by? Not here.

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.

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

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

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

Only Breath

Not Christian or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu
Buddhist, sufi, or zen. Not any religion
or cultural system. I am not from the East
or the West, not out of the ocean or up
from the ground, not natural or ethereal, not
composed of elements at all. I do not exist,
am not an entity in this world or in the next,
did not descend from Adam and Eve or any
origin story. My place is placeless, a trace
of the traceless. Neither body or soul.

I belong to the beloved, have seen the two
worlds as one and that one call to and know,
first, last, outer, inner, only that
breath breathing human being.

Pilgrimage:

This past December, just 3 weeks ago, I went on a pilgrimage with 16 others associated with Starr King, the UU seminary I am now attending. We traveled with the provost of our school, Ibrahim Farajaji, who is a Sufi Shaker, to Konya, Turkey, to honor Rumi's death.

What does it mean to be on a pilgrimage? Many religious traditions include the act of pilgrimage. Buddhists visit the eight sites where Buddha had significant life changing events; Muslims go on pilgrimage to Mecca and other sites that are locations significant in the formation of their religious tradition. We know Christians and Jews have pilgrimages to Jerusalem. In New Mexico there is a regular practice of walking the 90 miles from Albuquerque to Chimayo in pilgrimage. Just this past summer my daughter Cody participated in a traditional pilgrimage walking across northern Spain on the El Camino de Santiago, joining 216,000 others who walked all or part of the 500 mile journey.

The purpose of a religious pilgrimage is to participate in a journey, ideally in veneration of someone we have identified as inspiring a reverence within us. The pilgrimage has both a mental and physical component.

Physically, we are taken from the comfort of our home and surroundings and placed in areas of un-familiarity; we have different beds or no beds, different foods or no food, and we are deprived of familiar family and friends, left to rely on strangers. Ideally, the physical act is a remediation- learning to be content with a more simple way of living with basic food, accommodation and forms of travel, learning to endure discomfort while practicing patience and loving kindness.

The mental aspect of the pilgrimage is a reflection on our thoughts, speech and actions, evaluating how we embody the spiritual message of whoever inspired our pilgrimage.

The pilgrim is not an ordinary tourist who travels to visit inspiring sites, but is someone more on an internal journey, traveling to visit their own spiritual path and identify if their own life contains spiritual sites. I have a note to myself on the margin of an article written by a Buddhist about pilgrimage, written two weeks ago when I was in Istanbul. It reads: "Revere the Buddha for his journey- but the real journey is to find our own path. It's not that I want to be Buddha... I want to be my self more- free of the pressures of my culture... I am not on a pilgrimage for Rumi or Sufism, but to locate, identify and start my own mystical and spiritual experience."

I am sure a number of you have taken a pilgrimage at some point, although you may not have recognized the journey at the time. I have taken several pilgrimages in my life, but did not identify these as pilgrimages until recently. My first pilgrimage was when I turned 50 years old and traveled to India and the Himalayas by myself. It was

an uncomfortable journey for me as I felt vulnerable and unsafe at times, but I came home changed by my experiences in Buddhist temples and the natural shrine of Kanchenjunga, the third highest peak in the Himalayas.

This pilgrimage, to be in Konya at the time of Rumi's Shebi-arus, was a deliberate pilgrimage into discomfort. I spent 2 weeks in a country where the language had no mental connection or recognition for me. The mosque's and temples had little familiarity or religious connotation.

The acts of reverence we engaged in were deeply unsettling: before I entered a room where there was a tomb or holy person I was asked to stop and bow with my hand on my heart, then I would kiss the doorframe before entering, step over the threshold without touching it, sit on the floor either cross-legged or kneeling for up to an hour at a time, frequently bowing down and kissing the floor.

I was also part of ceremonies and zikrs where there were acts of devotion and worship that threw me into a state of disorientation: each evening in our guesthouse there was a zikr, which was a party attended by over 100 people, crammed into a room that comfortably held 35 people. The zikr included drumming, whirling, singing, swaying and bowing in unison to the music, but all in an act of reverence to Allah.

So what was my pilgrimage about? Why did I take myself on this uncomfortable journey?

First I would say that I think it is important that I place myself in uncomfortable settings at times. It shakes me out of complacency and challenges me to think differently, I am forced to review my life and assess whether I am doing what I really want to be doing.

This pilgrimage was also an opportunity to explore spirituality. Recently I have been challenged to expand my understanding of myself, identifying myself as more than just my mind, body and emotional self, which is the traditional triad that Western society uses to describe our personalities.

Dr. Rangimarie Turuki Pere, a New Zealand Maori leader, wrote about how she understands her identity using the eight tentacles of the octopus of wisdom. These eight tentacles include: Psyche (or life force), our personality (our uniqueness), our physical dimension, social dimension, intellectual dimension, cultural dimension, emotional dimension and our spiritual dimension, and she states that she believes that right now, we are each a spirit taking a physical journey.

Her description of understanding ourselves in terms of eight dimensions made me realize how narrowly I define myself, and how I often don't acknowledge the different aspects of myself that have an impact on me.

Dr. Pere's understanding that we are Spirits experiencing a physical journey challenged me to think more about myself as a spirit. I am coming to an appreciation of a more spiritual aspect in myself and in others, and I want to familiarize myself with this more.

So this pilgrimage was a time to be immersed in intense spiritual practices, compelling me to establish my own spiritual practice.

One other reason to take this pilgrimage was a desire to honor Rumi, whose message of love has inspired me.

The Shebi-arus is a pilgrimage for lovers of love. It is a place where people go to learn that delving into love deepens our spiritual selves as we learn to love the world and the spirit of life in the same passionate way we love our lovers.

Is this uncomfortable? Yes- because it requires me to step out of my intellectual, distant, cerebral construct of the term 'God' and find a way to connect with a sense of the divine in an intimate way, and it also requires me to examine how well I love the people around me.

Let me end with a few thoughts:

First, I am not alone in recognizing this spiritual journey I have started. This is something many people across this country and around the world are coming to identify as crucial, and we, as a religious tradition, need to embrace this new path, and find a way to help the journey.

One of the acts of pilgrimage is learning to venerate others, and that is a term most of us in Western society are unfamiliar with. If we learn a reverence for our life, our world and those we love, we change ourselves. Perhaps if we could become more comfortable by sitting with the ideas of reverence and veneration, then gratitude and appreciation would be spontaneous acts in our communities.

Finally, I would like each of us to think about a pilgrimage that has changed our lives. Think about a time you were uncomfortable but were challenged to change the way you respond to the world, or were challenged to think of yourself in a new way. It is important to identify our pilgrimages and honor our individual journey.

Let me close with another poem from Rumi:

"The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don't go back to sleep.
You must ask for what you really want.
Don't go back to sleep
People are going back and forth across the doorsill
Where the two worlds touch.
The door is round and open.

Don't go back to sleep."

