

*The Rumi Prescription and the Sacred Heart of Islam*

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May 17, 2020

In one of his shortest poems, the 14<sup>th</sup> century Sufi poet Hafiz muses that, “The great religions are the ships, poets the life boats. Every sane person I know has jumped overboard.”

For nearly two decades now, a very large ship called *Islam* has sailed into the harbor of our lives and hooked onto the moorings of our collective national consciousness. The gangplank has been lowered for us to come aboard and look around, but the ship is so vast and complicated, that we become easily lost between decks.

We’re not sure whether Muslims are primarily ordinary devout people of peace and virtue as our many Muslim neighbors demonstrate, and as Islamic Councils suggest in widespread ad campaigns or press releases. Or, whether they’re violent and vengeful fanatics like Isis suicide bombers, Taliban marauders and 9/11 hijackers? If they are both, then what is this great theological ship known as Islam?

And, if we jump overboard onto one of Hafiz’s lifeboats, what might we find at the poetic, mystical heart of this fascinating, allegedly strident faith?

In an editorial some years ago for the *New York Times*, the renowned and formerly condemned Muslim author Salman Rushdie noted that the difficulty non-Muslims experience in sketching an accurate picture of Islam can be located in the distinction between a practicing “Muslim” and a radical “Islamist.”

As a starting point, one could argue that Islam, which means *submission* or *surrender*, defies modern Western conventional wisdom, in that it collapses the barriers that many people erect between inner life and public action, religion and politics, and between morality and daily existence.

Despite the diversity of customs and practices, a basic commonality is provided by the overall structure of the Islamic *religion*. The fundamentals include belief that *Qur’an* (the Muslim scripture) is the final revelation of God to humanity dictated to his messenger Mohammed in the year 610; and an adherence to Islamic law or *shari’ah*, which prescribes specific guidance about religious observance and daily life -- everything from dietary restrictions to pet ownership to sexual practices. We’ve heard much about

the fundamentalist edge of shari'ah law since Ayotollah Khomeini led Iran in the 1980's.

In the main, a faithful Muslim follows the five pillars of Islam – 1. affirming the oneness of God by reciting a creed known as the *shahadah*. 2. turning towards Mecca and praying at five designated times daily, 3. paying alms or *zakat* to support the community, 4. undertaking the pilgrimage or *hajj* to Mecca once during a lifetime, and 5. fasting from dawn to dusk during the holy month of Ramadan (the Muslim “Lent”) which began on April 23<sup>rd</sup> this year and ends on May 23<sup>rd</sup>.

Muslims are also meant to undertake a “jihad,” but this actually refers to an inner exertion of faith, not a bloody insurrection. On that score - An “Islamist,” on the other hand, is a member of an insidious fanatical and violent political movement who adheres to what Rushdie calls a “mulch of belief.” Just after 9/11, Rushdie mused about a paranoid, non-theological Islam, in which the religion has been reduced in a half-examined way to a jumble of customs, opinions, and prejudices, such as: the oppression of women, a loathing of modern Western society, and the prospect of leveraging terrorism for eternal life in a Paradise crowded by compliant Virgins, serving up endless honey cakes.

The hateful extremism Rushdie sketched for us has, alarmingly, been the fastest growing version of Islam worldwide, with bloody warfare, bombed out countries, and wanton terror as its modus operandi, and a refugee crisis of epic proportion as its byproduct.

Some argue that Islamist regimes are becoming friendlier to democracy – an outcome few of us saw coming- with parties in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco winning the right to form governments in free elections. We've witnessed some unexpected Islamist vows to honor international treaties, and some formerly unimaginable alliances are coalescing between the West and the 50 plus mostly *non-violent* Islamist parties in the Middle East.

Although it roars, the more hardcore Islamism speaks nothing of the personal, private faith of most Muslims. It is all ego and no heart! It perverts the intended purity of sacred submission by crouching in stern obedience to a distant, punishing Deity rather than surrendering to the embrace of a sacred Beloved. It is alienation rather than union.

Yet, deep in the sacred mystical heart of Islam lies another truth; that despite the thousands of ways it is cloaked or hidden or twisted, or veiled in enchantments or perversions, the Beloved Presence dwells within, like a sweet melody within a hollow reed.

Listen to the words of the 13th century Persian poet Rumi, who is more popular today in translation than he was, even in his own time.

**Buoyancy by Rumi**

Love has taken away my practices  
And filled me with poetry.

I tried to keep quietly repeating,  
No strength but yours,  
But I couldn't.

I had to clap and sing.  
I used to be respectable and chaste and stable,  
But who can stand in this strong wind  
And remember those things?

A mountain keeps an echo deep inside itself.  
That's how I hold your voice.

I am scrap wood thrown in your fire  
And quickly reduced to smoke.

I saw you and became empty.  
This emptiness, more beautiful than existence,  
It obliterates existence, and yet when it comes,  
Existence thrives and creates more existence!

The sky is blue. The world is a blind man  
Squatting on the road.

But whoever sees your emptiness  
Sees beyond blue and beyond the blind man.

A great soul hides like Muhammed, or Jesus,  
Moving through a crowd in a city  
Where no one knows him.

To praise is to praise  
How one surrenders  
To the emptiness.

To praise the sun is to praise your own eyes.  
Praise, the ocean. What we say, a little ship.

So, the sea-journey goes on, and who knows where!  
Just to be held by the ocean is the best luck  
We could have. It's a total waking up!

Why should we grieve that we've been sleeping?  
It doesn't matter how long we've been unconscious.

We're groggy, but let the guilt go.  
Feel the motion of tenderness  
Around you, the buoyancy.

I'm grateful to Char Tarashanti for presenting a sampling of the rich and exquisite works by Rumi, who like his Persian contemporary Hafiz, stands among the great poets from the mystical tradition of Islam known as Sufism.

Of course, *all* religions have a heart and a mystical core; a place where merger or union with the sacred (or Beloved) is the highest goal. These include the Kabbalah in Judaism, the contemplative practices of Christian ascetics like the Desert Fathers, the meditative foundations of Buddhism, and the devotional center of Hinduism.

Within mysticism, including Sufism, we find a treasure trove of simple wisdom that we might apply to our own contemporary spiritual development and practice. But there is a catch – the willingness to confront and examine our egos and consider how they may be keeping us in exile from our hearts.

The Sufis believe that the outward laws of Islam can only be realized spiritually on an inward path of devotion through prayer, chanting, whirling dance, poetry, and other mystical practices. For instance, during Ramadan, fasting is shallow unless it is embodied as an internalized prayer. Even in its most traditional form, Islamic prayer is considered a method for purifying the heart.

Yet, in Sufism, this drive to transcend separation and merge with the Beloved is so intense and so intoxicating, that Sufis often described themselves as “drunk” with devotion. As Rumi declares: “Love has taken away my practices and filled me with poetry. I used to be respectable and

chaste and stable. I am scrap wood thrown into your fire and reduced to smoke. I saw you and became empty.”

Don't you love his imagery of humankind's separation from its own divinity? “The sky is blue,” he writes, “and the world is a blind man squatting on the road. But whoever sees your emptiness sees beyond the blue and beyond the blind man.” Such intimacy with the divine, such enthusiastic submission may make you squirm a bit. It certainly isn't how many of us would describe our relationship with the sacred – a surrender so complete that our identities melt away.

Now, to be clear, I'm not advocating surrender to arbitrary religious rules or dogma, or supplication before an omnipotent Deity. Yet, it may be helpful and even liberating for some of us UU's who reside more often than we might in our heads, to learn that this Sufi form of annihilation (or *fana*) is meant to lead to a revival (or *baqa*) of an enhanced self.

Union with the Beloved isn't intended to destroy our natural capabilities, but fulfill them. It's a win-win situation, even for the most ardent Humanists in the pews. You see, a Sufi who has ripped away petty distractions and obscuring egotism to discover the Divine presence at the heart of his own being experiences *greater* self-realization and self-control. We might call this “empowered surrender.” One becomes more fully human and is restored to the pure joy of existence.

As Rumi prescribes: “It's a total waking up. To praise is to praise how one surrenders to the emptiness.” The Taoist would characterize this process as surrender to the moment in order to enter fully into the natural flow of one's existence.

This union, this exquisite surrender, brings an end to sadness through a reunion with the deeper self one is meant to be. The Divine is not a distant, external judge to petition for mercy (as we encounter traditional Ramadan prayers), but one with the ground of each person's being. In some Islamic prayers, we find “transgressors perishing in a sea of sin.” In contrast, Rumi reminds us that “just to be held by the ocean is the best luck we can have.”

Does it surprise you then, to learn that in the 1830's, the Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson, along with Margaret Fuller and their fellow Transcendentalists, relished the enthusiasm, the deeply loving God, and intoxication of the senses they found in the Sufi poets? “Hafiz had no peer,” Emerson stated, although he strove for a similar type of union with the sacred as it lives and breathes in all existence in his own famed writings such as *The Oversoul*. And, like Rumi, he yearned to hear the whisper of the Beloved that renders all talk worthless.

## **One Whisper of the Beloved by Rumi**

Lovers share a sacred decree –  
To seek the Beloved.  
They roll head over heels,  
Rushing toward the Beautiful One  
Like a torrent of water.

In truth, everyone is a shadow of the Beloved –  
Our seeking is His seeking,  
Our words are His words.

At times we flow toward the Beloved  
Like a dancing stream.  
At times we are still water  
Held in His pitcher.  
At times we boil in a pot  
Turning to vapor –  
That is the job of the Beloved.

He breathes into my ear  
Until my soul  
Takes on His fragrance.  
He is the soul of my soul –  
How can I escape?  
But why would any soul in this world  
Want to escape from the Beloved?

He will melt your pride  
Making you thin as a strand of hair,  
Yet do not trade, even for both worlds,  
One strand of His hair.

We search for Him here and there  
While looking right at Him.  
Sitting by His side we ask,  
"O Beloved, where is the Beloved?"

Enough with such questions! –  
Let silence take you to the core of life.

All your talk is worthless  
When compared to one whisper of the Beloved.

Admittedly, for us wordy religious types, maintaining silence in order to hear Rumi's "whisper" can be challenging. And, yet, consider how your heart might open wider than it has ever opened before if you allow yourself to surrender into a more intimate experience with a Beloved Presence as you personally understand it?

We can discover from the Sufis, the healing effects of expanding rather than contracting our hearts so that they are big enough, forgiving enough to hold everything and everybody. To be sure, this will be a challenging endeavor.

Can you imagine what it might feel like to live with such an expanded heart? Wow! Undoubtedly, this heart expansion may stretch some muscles that have tightened from lack of exercise and may leave you feeling achy as your tender heart core is exposed after being walled off by sorrow or ego or fear or intellectualizing, or past hurts. Sometimes it feels wonderful to ache, though, doesn't it?

Hafiz asks: "What do sad people have in common? It seems they have all built a shrine to the past, And often go there and do a strange wail and worship. What is the beginning of happiness? It is to stop being so religious *like that.*"

As Rumi suggests, it could be "a total waking up!" Or, as Hafiz tells us, it could very well hasten the "beginning of happiness."

### **"With That Moon Language" by Hafiz**

Admit something:  
Everyone you see, you say to them,  
"Love me."

Of course you do not do this out loud,  
Otherwise,  
Someone would call the cops.

Still though, think about this,  
This great pull in us  
To connect.  
Why not become the one  
Who lives with a full moon in each eye?

That is always saying,  
With that sweet moon  
Language,  
What every other eye in this world  
Is dying to  
Hear.

Why not, indeed? Why not become the one who “lives with a full moon in each eye; the one who is always saying with that sweet moon language, what every other eye in this world is dying to Hear?” I wonder: What are you dying to hear?

Your willful separation from partners or family or friends or community will not comfort you or keep you warm at night or ease your sense of isolation in the world, especially in this lockdown state. It will not erase your fear or lead to contentment. To everyone you see, you say, “Love me.” And why shouldn’t you? You deserve to be loved. But first, you must love openly; and you must love yourself for the sacred being of worth and wonder that you are.

In essence, the Sufi path is about loving and nurturing the divine spark within you (your inherent worth and dignity) as you would nurture a partner, becoming your own beloved in the best sense – not as a form of narcissism, but rather as sacred self-care. This may not lead to the ecstatic trances of whirling dervishes, but it could free you to be more compassionate or grounded or authentic. It could open you to newer, deeper experiences of connection with yourself, with the Sacred, and within your human relationships.

Salman Rushdie has warned in his article that by moving farther and farther away from its own heart, “Islam has become its own enemy.” Too often, we become our own adversaries, as well, when we alienate ourselves from the inner resources we possess for turning our lives towards joyfulness.

Many of us have all the ingredients we need for a feast, and yet we fast, even when it isn’t Ramadan. Hafiz understands this well and so I’ll give him the last word.

Salaam and Blessed be.

### **“To Build a Swing.” by Hafiz**

You carry all the ingredients  
To turn your life into a nightmare—  
Don’t mix them!

You have all the genius  
To build a swing in your backyard  
For God.

That sounds like a hell of a lot more fun.  
Let's start laughing, drawing blueprints,  
Gathering our talented friends.

I will help you  
With my divine lyre and drum.

Hafiz will sing you a thousand words  
You can take into your hands,  
Like golden saws,  
Silver hammers,  
Polished teakwood,  
Strong silk rope.

You carry all the ingredients  
To turn your existence into joy,  
Mix them, mix them!"

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