

Veteran of the Wars of Love

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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“Veteran of the Wars of Love.” If you didn’t read the newsletter blurb about this sermon, and you are here anxiously waiting to hear a steamy story about Alison, veteran of the wars of love, you’re going to be disappointed. My real topic is the 13th century Sufi mystic poet, Rumi, and I realized belatedly that I should have put his name in the title: “Rumi: Veteran of the Wars of Love.”

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase each other doesn’t make any sense.*

Seven hundred and ninety-nine years ago last month, the best selling poet (literally) in the English language, Jelaluddin Rumi, was born. His family was from Afghanistan, which was then part of the Persian empire, but they would later flee the invading Mongol armies and emigrate to Konya, Turkey, sometime in the early 1200s. The name Rumi means “from Roman Anatolia.” The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has declared 2007 “International Rumi Year,” with festivities to begin in the same town of Konya where he lived so long ago.

I am so glad we have some younger members in the congregation this morning, because I want to tell you how lucky you are to be learning about Rumi at this time in your life. When I was your age it was a big thing to receive a copy of *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran for my 16th birthday. I never even heard about Rumi until I was somewhere in my 40s, and now I know what I was missing. You, on the other hand, will be at an advantage in your lives, getting acquainted with this wonderful poet and his wisdom so early.

Why are people around the world reading this man’s poetry, all these many years after his life? And why is he worth talking about in a Unitarian Universalist worship service? Partly, I think it’s because of his passion – for love, for life, for paying attention to feelings. We live in a largely dispassionate world, where the intuitive parts of our human nature are too often rationalized or ignored. Rumi has told me that it’s OK to feel wild and crazy and passionate about living.

Here is one of his poems called *Burnt Kabob*. Rumi’s original work did not have titles, sort of like the Emily Dickinson poetry we heard about two weeks ago. It’s the translators who have given some of these names – probably just for convenience. Also, I would like to add, please do remember that Rumi is often speaking metaphorically. In this poem he is not literally a wandering drunkard.

*Last year, I admired wines. This, I’m wandering inside the red world.
Last year, I gazed at the fire. This year I’m burnt kabob.*

*Thirst drove me down to the water where I drank the moon's reflection.
 Now I am a lion staring up totally lost in love with the thing itself.
 Don't ask me questions about longing. Look in my face.
 Soul drunk, body ruined, these two sit helpless in a wrecked wagon.
 Neither knows how to fix it.
 And my heart, I'd say it was more like a donkey sunk in a mudhole,
 struggling and miring deeper.
 But listen to me: for one moment, quit being sad.
 Hear blessings dropping their blossoms around you. God.*
 (Essential Rumi, Coleman Barks, p. 7)

Rumi was a Sufi. He practiced Sufism. Sufism is the mystic branch of Islam and has been around almost as long as Islam itself. There is a mystic branch in most of the world's major religions, nearly identical in their understanding that we are all parts of an interdependent whole, elements of a universal harmony. The Sufi believes "that there is nothing but God, that only the Divine exists, and that any sense of individuality or separateness is an illusion." (Essential Sufism, James Fadiman, p. 23)

These ideas may seem very familiar to us as Unitarian Universalists. The mystic emphasis on the divine unity of all life appeals to us, particularly in light of our seventh principle (respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part). But for some in the Muslim world, Sufism was and is a sore subject. "Sufis have not adhered to any one school of Quranic interpretation or jurisprudence, [they care little for dogma and institution] and this has made [Muslim] fundamentalists of all ages very nervous, even up to the present day... Some Islamic countries [actually] outlaw the practice of Sufism." (The Sufi Book of Life, Neil Douglas-Klotz, p. xx)

The Sufi path would have us let go of that which limits us, particularly our minds, and open our hearts to a wider dimension of feeling.

Admit It and Change Everything

*Define and narrow me, you starve yourself of yourself.
 Nail me down in a box of cold words, that box is your coffin.
 I do not know who I am.
 I am in astounded lucid confusion.
 I am not a Christian, I am not a Jew, I am not a Zoroastrian,
 and I am not even a Muslim.
 I do not belong to the land, or to any known or unknown sea.
 Nature cannot own or claim me, nor can heaven, nor can India, China, Bulgaria.
 My birthplace is placelessness, my sign to have and give no sign.
 You say you see my mouth, ears, eyes, nose – they are not mine.
 I am the life of life. I am that cat, this stone, no one.
 I have thrown duality away like an old dishrag, I see and know all times and worlds,
 As one, one, always one.
 So what do I have to do to get you to admit who is speaking?*

One of the books I looked at doing research for this sermon was quite defensive in insisting that Rumi was a staunch, solid, Muslim, and had not grown away from his true faith in the process of his mystical transformation. The poem I just read to you, according to this author, cannot be authentically attributed to Rumi. In addition, in the opinion of Ibrihim Gamard, the relatively recent popularization of Rumi has entailed several sacrifices, among them “a lack of accuracy of the meanings of his words and teachings, and a deliberate minimization and omission of verses that express his profound Muslim piety as a dedicated follower of the prayerful daily life exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad.” (Rumi and Islam, p. xiii)

While we might tend to dismiss this defensiveness as sour grapes at Rumi’s popularity, nonetheless we should consider that at least some of what Gamard is saying may be true. For me, however, these admonishments cannot diminish the beauty of this huge volume of poetry, no matter how loosely it might have been translated. The validity and value of what we know as Rumi’s poetry is in its effect, in the power it has to effect us, personally, and transform our lives. He is, regardless of any possible criticism, the best selling poet in the English language....

Rumi’s poetry is about Love, with a capital L.

*Those who don’t feel this Love pulling them like a river,
Those who don’t drink dawn like a cup of spring water
Or take in sunset like supper,
Those who don’t want to change, let them sleep.*

*This Love is beyond the study of theology, that old trickery and hypocrisy.
If you want to improve your mind that way, sleep on.*

I’ve given up on my brain. I’ve torn the cloth to shreds and thrown it away.

*If you’re not completely naked, wrap your beautiful robe of words around you,
And sleep.*

Sufi love is a love broader than the limits of human love, although for Rumi the love between people is all a part of Divine Love. His poetry speaks of eating and drinking, touching and kissing, in this world, but more than in this world. To love at all is to seek a larger love, but always a love grounded in reality. This is Rumi’s key to successful transformation. As our world becomes more difficult, almost daily, to conceive of as a loving world, perhaps the great popularity of this 800 year old love poetry, comes from its insistence on remaining grounded in reality. Andrew Harvey describes Rumi as “the canniest, shrewdest, most unsentimental, and sober of teachers, very un-New Age in his refusal to deny the power of evil, his candor about the limits of all worldly and earthly enlightenment, his Jesus-like suspicion of all forms of wealth and power, and his embrace of the sometimes terrible and prolonged suffering that authentic transformation must and

does demand.” (Teachings of Rumi, p. xv – xvi) This suffering, this painful transformation, amidst the beauty we also know, these are the wars of love.

Religion, no matter what the details, is about reconnection with The One Love. Our torture, our original human sin, is thinking we were ever separate, without love, in the first place. This journey toward wholeness, this transformation from unloved to Beloved, is not an easy journey. The struggle comes in trying to love all of life, the realities of life – much of which are very hard to love. The wars of love are the struggle to love *all* of what is, not just what is easy to love. Andrew Harvey writes: “Rigorous, fierce, authoritative Rumi, the veteran of the wars of Love, is what our spiritual renaissance ... needs to listen to and learn from.” (p. xvi) Transformation will never happen amidst a world filled with laziness, fantasy and denial. In the wars of love, we are all veterans to some degree.

Rumi’s gift to us is his witness to the raptures, revelation, and yes, terrors and interminable sadness, that we will encounter on a path that must, determinably, through all the thorns, seeks to find the love that is hidden. In *Love Dogs*, which I read to you earlier, Rumi wrote: *Your pure sadness that wants help is the secret cup* into which your insights, your personal salvation will slowly come.

The way of love is not a subtle argument.

The door there is devastation.

Birds make great sky-circles of their freedom. How do they learn it?

They fall, and falling, they’re given wings.