

# **I'll Meet You There**

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)

Unitarian Universalism

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## **Readings**

from *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition*  
by Seyyed Hossein Nasr

What most of us are doing here in this world is living in a daydream called ordinary life, I the state of forgetting what Christ called the one thing necessary, that is, the Divine Reality. And we are in such a state because we have forgotten who we are. All we need to do is to wake up and realize our primordial nature, which is always there although buried deeply within many layers of the dross of forgetfulness. The Prophet said, "Man is asleep and when he dies he awakens." Sufism is meant for those who want to wake up, who accept dying to the ego here and now in order to discover the Self of all selves and to be consumed in the process I the fire of Divine Love.

What we should be doing here is discovering who we really are while we can.

from the writings of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Islamic scholar, Sufi master, and poet  
Jelaluddin Rumi (translated/interpreted by Coleman Barks)

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.

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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.

\*

Come to the orchard in Spring.  
There is light and wine, and sweethearts  
in the pomegranate flowers.

If you do not come, these do not matter.  
If you do come, these do not matter.

## Sermon

Huston Smith, the renowned scholar (and practitioner) of world religions died at the age of 97 on December 30. Here are a few words from Smith relevant to my theme today:

Sufis, the mystics of Islam, do not want to hear about God at gossipy second hand. Most mystics don't want to read religious wisdom; they want to be it. A postcard of a beautiful lake is not a beautiful lake, and Sufis may be defined as those who dance in the lake. What drew me to the Sufis was in fact their dancing, how they pray not merely with their minds but with their bodies. I made a pilgrimage to Konya, where the poet Rumi and his fellow Sufis had whirled their bodies into prayers to God. And later I learned to dance that way myself.

Speaking of dancing, have you seen the movie "La La Land"?

I haven't seen it yet, but I intend to. I gather from one review that the opening scene of the film shows a panorama of gridlock on a Los Angeles freeway. We hear bits of radio from one car and another and another... and then music kicks in, people begin to get out of their cars and begin to dance... and before long everyone is dancing... no longer fuming in their separate steel cages, but separateness dissolving in the dance.

Well, when the Sufi master and poet Jelaluddin Rumi wrote eight hundred years ago that "out beyond ideas of wrong doing and rightdoing there is a field" he probably did not have the L.A. Freeway or a movie musical in mind. But he was the founder of the Mevlevi Sufi order with its central practice of dissolving the separateness of ego through the whirling dance mentioned by Huston Smith. So the dancing part of that movie scene might not have been so foreign to Rumi.

As for us? Well, most of us have danced at one time or another – whatever the variety, from square dancing to ballroom to whatever form of moving to music, most often in the company of others, with a partner or in a mass at the center of the dance floor. And for a time... we too have met on that dance floor which has become Rumi's field, as the dancers become one.

But dance is by no means the only way for Sufis or anyone else to meet in that field beyond wrongdoing and rightdoing.

The dance of conversation can create such a meeting. In fact, another Sufi practice is what is called *sohbet*. The Rumi translator Coleman Barks says there is no precise English equivalent for *sohbet*, but that something like "mystical conversation on mystical subjects" might do. And though that may sound abstract, inaccessible, my experience is that any good flowing conversation – between two people or in a room like our Parish House parlor – can become *sohbet*. In fact I believe we have had this experience often in that parlor, as we share honest, open reflections from the heart about some ancient scripture or some poem. For moments or for an hour or more we become

not ten or twenty minds and hearts, but one... lifted up out of our purely individual minds and hearts... reminded, I would suggest, of another more complete dimension of who we actually are. In that field again.

Sometimes a personal one-on-one conversation, even one that begins quite uncomfortably, can at a certain point drop down into this same territory. You are having some sort of argument or dispute with another person, each of you holding your ground, unrelenting... and unpleasant... until finally one of you, maybe you, maybe the other, simply stops pushing his or her point, mostly just listens... until the other, might be you, might be the other, simply begins to lose steam. And then? You both stop and maybe wonder what was so important to get you both so worked up. You both realize – and perhaps say it out loud, or just sit with the maybe surprising realization – that your relationship is more important than who is right and who is wrong, that in fact part of who you are *is* the relationship. Once again in that field “out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing... “where even the phrase *each other* doesn’t make any sense.”

Like two fighters in the ring, falling exhausted, if unintentionally, into each other’s arms. Or like two teams after a game shaking hands down the line and really meaning it when they say “good game, good game, good game...”

Because it was only a game after all – and in the end both teams grateful for the game and for each other (after all, no game without each other...).

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing, rightdoing, winning, losing.

Well, it seems to me that the extraordinary current popularity of Rumi, this 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi master, steeped in the tradition of Islam, scholar and ecstatic mystical poet... just might hinge on the deep truth we intuit in those frequently and widely quoted lines I’ve been repeating this morning. Because in the midst of so much division and divisiveness, so much anger and even hate abroad in the land, we really need to find this field, to meet there, to lie down in that grass and know we are part and parcel of each other.

The first chapter of Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s book on Sufism, *The Garden of Truth*, from which we heard earlier, is titled: “What It Means to Be Human: Who Are We and What Are We Doing Here?” It begins with this sentence:

Wherever we are and in whatever time we happen to live, we cannot avoid asking the basic questions of who we are, where we came from, what we are doing here, and where we are going.

The Iranian born Nasr (now a professor at George Washington University and one of today’s pre-eminent scholars of Islam and of Sufism) goes on to note that such questions, as most of us well know, often rise to prominence when we are young and trying to figure our lives out, but then commonly (and understandably) recede as we get swallowed up by the fullness of early adulthood, work, family, and so on.

But the questions do not usually go away altogether. They lurk for most of us, sometimes re-emerging with surprising force at one or another transition period in our lives or at the moment of some loss or challenge.

And they are, of course, the sort of questions that have given birth to all of the world's wisdom traditions, the perennial wisdom in one form or another – among these traditions Hindu Vedanta, Buddhism, contemplative Christianity, as well as Sufism, this mystical or esoteric thread within Islam. Who are we? What are we doing – or meant to be doing – here?

The “answer” given by Sufism? You heard Nasr's iteration in the first reading. To put it slightly differently: Sufism affirms that we all come from God and are meant to worship and serve and love God to whom we all will return. Or as another early Sufi philosopher and poet, al-Ghazali put it, “Human perfection resides in this, that the love of God should conquer the human heart and possess it wholly...”

Now, if we trip over the traditional theological God-language, the contemporary Sufi teacher Kabir Helminski offers a helping hand. He writes that “God” can be understood as “Reality, Source of Life...” which means, he goes on, that “The ‘love of God’ is our essential relationship with what is most real.”

This is still all pretty abstract, and the Sufi path, like the spiritual or mystical path of every wisdom tradition, is just that, a *path* rather than a philosophical formulation. So the answers to questions of who we are and what we are doing here or what we are meant to be doing here... the answers are to be found by walking (or dancing...) a path, one or another path that helps us to align with *how things are*, with Reality (with a capital “R”), with the Tao of Taoism, with Buddha nature... or with the God of the Middle Eastern theistic traditions.

After all, whatever words we use, doesn't it make all the sense in the world that we would do well to strive to discern how things really are, what the world really is, who we really are, and then to live accordingly, in some measure of harmony with how things are?

Call this “love of God” – or call it aligning with the Tao – or call it the deepest sort of realism: all this might be the same thing, and might be the most important task of our lives, the best thing we could do with our lives.

By contrast, thinking we already know who we are and taking at face value cultural norms for what the purpose of our lives is might be the worst thing we could do. Scholar of Sufism William Chittick makes this very point and then goes on to note that all the “failed attempts to understand the self” through biology or psychology or through the lenses of economics or politics “go a long way toward explaining the historically unprecedented blood-letting of the twentieth century.”

In other words, a misunderstanding of who we are or our assumption that we already know who we are – separate, alone, and just out for ourselves – may be responsible not only for personal suffering, but for suffering on a mass scale.

So, put yet another way, the path of Sufism is simply a path of remembering who we are. This, because, as I've been suggesting, the analysis of the human dilemma in Islam and most emphatically in Sufism is that we have forgotten who we are, forgotten

that there is no such thing as an individual self utterly separate from everything else, forgotten that we live in relation to, in fact part of, the Real, named in Islam Allah, which is simply the Arabic word for God.

With this in mind, the central practice in Sufism is precisely the *practice* of remembrance – the Arabic is *dhikr* – most often simply through the repetition of the name of God... or one or many of the ninety-nine traditional “names” or qualities of God, as ongoing meditation.

The idea is that through such repetition we are naming who we really are, naming that God, Reality, lives through us – the light of God within each of us, as the Quakers would put it; or call it cosmos/universe expressing itself through us, if that’s easier off our tongues.

And so, whether in the dance, in extraordinary moments of sacred conversation, or in private meditation, through repeating names of God, of Reality... the veil (to use a word the Sufis frequently employ in this context) is lifted... at least a bit... at least for a moment... and we get a glimpse of who we are, sharing this field – a real field, not of grass or wheat or barley, but of love and knowledge – and sharing this field with... well, everyone and everything.

And surely we – each of us and more and more of us together – need to be in this sort of field more often – which doesn’t mean we never stand our ground, on principle, whether personally or politically, but somehow at the same time standing in this field of shared life and love.

Sufis in fact in general do not withdraw from the world of ordinary life, responsibilities of work and family. Instead, they are meant to engage thoroughly in life, seeking in daily life and through community service to develop moral and social virtues that reflect the divine reality that we are.

Well, this begins to lead to next week’s sermon, as we honor Martin Luther King, Jr., when I plan to talk about the “moral arc of the universe” of which King often spoke (paraphrasing the 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian abolitionist preacher Theodore Parker). For bending that moral arc towards justice is what we *know* we must do once we have discovered our ground in that field, met one another there, seen the face of God (another common Sufi phrase) in every face.

So may it be.

More now, this historical moment, than ever.

So may it be.