

RUMI

This sermon is rumination about the medieval Islamic mystic, Rumi. The word ruminate means “to chew over, to go over in the mind repeatedly and slowly.” Let us ruminate upon Rumi who became totally focused on the transcendent, on what he considered to be God. Rumi’s method was to slowly repeat various aspects of being alive with awe and close attention, to ruminate upon life and the world in most of its aspects as transcendent. So often we gulp down our food, our information, even our relationships, scarcely savoring what we are consuming. Rumi would have us savor each bite, each day, and every friendship, to ruminate upon what you are consuming.

Rumi is the paramount mystical poet of Islam in the Persian language. Among mystically minded Muslims, Rumi’s *Mathnawi* is known as “the *Qur’an* in Persian.” Commentaries, imitations, and works relating to it or inspired by it abound in various languages throughout the Muslim world. Rumi inspired his own Sufi order, the Mawlawiya [meaning our Master]. Europeans called Rumi’s Order the Whirling Dervishes because of the prominent role of ritual dance in the Mawlawis’ weekly observance of sacred music. Rumi’s works have been widely read on American campuses and purchased by many thousands of non-Muslims throughout the world in recent years. He has opened millions to mysticism.

There are mystics in all religions and philosophies. A mystic emphasizes the immediate awareness of the transcendent, and/or seeks continuing harmony with God and/or union with God. The attainment of this union is a matter of grace, but the process demands a life committed to this aim. There is a sense in which, as St. Martin observed, “all mystics speak the same language and come from the same country.” Most human beings probably have some mystical experiences, like most of us enjoy music, but confirmed mystics are like those people who are totally caught up in making music, whose souls become the music. Mysticism does demand a deep interior life, but most people who achieve mystical union are directed back into a life of intense and productive service.

Here are Evelyn Underhill’s traditional stages in most mystical life journeys. First, **awakening**: when the person moves from restlessness and uncertainty to a joyful vocation of connection with transcendence. Second, **purgation**: when the individual purifies the self to make room for the transcendent. Third, **illumination**: when the individual glimpses the transcendent and develops a heightened perception of the world. Fourth: **dark nights of the soul**: when the individual faces the reality that illumination is not a permanent state, and faces up to her/his own continuing imperfections and continued separation from those transcendent moments. Finally, **union**: when the individual fully becomes part of the transcendent, finding an enduring sense of being a portion of the infinite. *The Song of Solomon* is probably the most mystical book of the *Old Testament*; the *Gospel of John* perhaps the most mystical in the *New Testament*. Famous mystics include Augustine, Meister Eckhart, Thomas a Kempis, but also more contemporary figures like Henry Thoreau, Ralph Emerson, Walt Whitman, William James, Thomas Merton, and Henri Nouwen.

The Sufis are the **Islamic** mystics. Certainly there were Sufis from the beginning of Islam, Muslims who sought total reliance on God and who expressed their desire for union with the transcendent in meditation and poetry, dance, music, and repetition of scripture. Al Ghazzali was perhaps its greatest medieval Islamic philosopher, and Rumi was certainly its foremost medieval poet. The Sufis reached their peak of popularity in the Mogul and Ottoman empires from 1500-1800, when probably 80% of all Muslims supported the Sufis. The Sufis had many famous schools, and Sufis spread Islam into areas around the world where engagement with other religions was pervasive: India, Indonesia, and Africa. Because Sufis are open to other religions and inclusive in their lives and ideas, Western colonialism weakened the Sufis and laid them open to criticism, particularly from the rise of the Islamic fundamentalism in Saudi Arabia called the Wahhabis. The Wahhabis rejected many of the Sufi doctrines, like separate traditions, veneration of saints, and ecstatic communion with God. The Wahhabis blamed the Sufis for the weakening of Islam. Both groups opposed Western colonialism, but they did so from very different frameworks. Because many of the Sufi minority remain so liberated in their lives and thoughts, and readily make connections with soul mates from other spiritual traditions, there is a sense of continuity between many Islamic Sufis and Unitarian Universalism. The Sufis are now a threatened minority within the Islamic world, yet many Muslims still have mystical tendencies. Just as Unitarian Universalists are a threatened minority within the Western world, yet many Westerners have some rather Unitarian Universalist beliefs and practices.

Rumi at birth was named Jalal-ad-Din. He was born in Balkh, Afghanistan, in 1207 A.D.. His father, Baha-ad-Din Walad, was a theologian, jurist, and mystic with some royal blood. When Rumi was a child, they were forced through court intrigue to emigrate. They ended up thousands of miles to the west in Konya, Turkey, about the time Rumi turned 13. His father became a professor of theology in an Islamic seminary there. Rumi took on the name Rumi, because his adopted region was Roman Anatolia, so Rumi means 'of this Roman' region.' Rumi's father showed a startling sensual freedom in stating his union with God. Rumi was taught his father's secret doctrines and the doctrines of other Islamic mystics. At his father's death, when Rumi was in his late twenties, he took over his father's role as the sheikh in the dervish learning community in Konya. Like most Islamic mystics, he was married and had a family. His life seemed to be the normal life of a religious scholar: teaching, meditating, helping the poor, until late in 1244, when he was 37.

It was then that he first met the dervish, Shams of Tabriz. Shams had been wandering throughout the Middle East searching for someone; a voice came to Shams telling him of Rumi, and he sought him out in Konya. Shams asked Rumi: "who was greater, a renowned Sufi mystic or Muhammad?" Rumi replied: "Muhammad is greater. The mystic took a gulp of the divine and stopped there, whereas for Muhammad the way was always unfolding." They became inseparable. Rumi neglected his students and his family, and this made Shams uncomfortable; so, he disappeared. After this, Rumi turned into a mystical artist: listening to music, became a poet, sang, and whirled around hour after hour. He heard Shams had gone to Damascus and sent his son to bring him back. They fell at each other's feet and renewed their mystical conversation. As part of Rumi's household again, Sham's presence caused jealousies again. Shams was murdered soon thereafter by people in Rumi's inner circle.

After Sham's death, Rumi called his writings the writings of Shams of Tabriz. Rumi found another companion, Saladin Zarkub, a goldsmith. Saladin became the Friend to whom Rumi addressed his poems, not so fiercely as to Shams, but with quiet tenderness. When Saladin died, Husam Chelebi, Rumi's scribe and favorite student assumed the special role. Rumi wrote a great deal, but his most famous and massive work is called the *Mathnawi*, which shifts fantastically from theory to folklore, from jokes to ecstatic poetry. For the last twelve years of his life, Rumi dictated the six volumes of this masterwork to Husam. Rumi died in December of 1273, at the age of 66.

Now, let us consider some of the thoughts of Rumi within Evelyn Underhill's five traditional stages of the mystic's life journey. The first stage is **awakening**: when the person moves from restlessness and uncertainty to a joyful vocation of connection with transcendence.

Rumi says: "In the tavern are many wines...the wine of the intellect's agility, the fine port of stories, and the cabernet of soul singing. Being human means entering this place where entrancing varieties of desire are served. The grape skin of ego breaks and a pouring begins. Fermentation is one of the oldest symbols for human transformation. When grapes combine their juice and are closed up together for a time in a dark place, the results are spectacular." The point here is that desires are not inappropriate, but that we each need to approach our desires with care and discipline; they need the fermentation of rumination.

Later Rumi says: "The soul is here for its own joy. The mind is for learning what people have done and tried to do. Fierce attention, clear discernment, helpful teachers, simple strength, honesty with oneself, all these help us to clear the ego and dig under our false premises toward one-pointedness. Don't care about ownership, and stop trying to turn a profit from every human exchange." The point here is that the nurture of the soul is its own reward. Mature people move beyond selfishness or simple tit-for-tat relationships.

Later Rumi says: "Be patient. Respond to every call that excites your spirit. Ignore those that make you fearful and sad, that degrade you back toward disease and death. There are two types of people on the path: those who come against their will, the blindly religious people, and those who obey out of love. The former have ulterior motives. The former memorize the prooftexts of conformity and repeat them. The latter disappear into whatever draws them to God. The way you make love is the way God will be with you." Every way in which people love breaks through into transcendence. It is love that is the act of faith.

"Never say or think I am better than...whoever. I go into a Muslim mosque, a Jewish synagogue, a Christian church, and I see one altar....The miracle of Jesus is himself. Christ is the population of the world. Cynicism steals the energy of life. When you fail to respond to human warmth or to the love in the world, your non-responding breed violence and coldness, praise dries up with foolish people who refuse to change." So, we each are spiritual in different ways, and yet our awe is about the same transcendent truths. Those truths are recognized more often in the ordinary loves, friendships, and communities of our lives than they are in sacred scriptures or official places of worship.

The second stage of the mystic's life journey is **purgation**: when the individual purifies the self to make room for the transcendent.

"No one is grown up if you are still in the middle of lust and greed. The fighting of mankind is totally futile....Beliefs, desires, and comforting habits so often imprison. Have the patience to expand your capacity to love and feel peace....Four birds keep you from loving: the rooster of lust, the peacock of wanting, the crow of ownership, and the duck of urgency. A true person is calm and deliberate. Keep your intelligence white-hot and your grief glistening, so your life will stay fresh....False satisfactions simulate passion. They taste cold and delicious, but they just distract and prevent you from the search. Run from false remedies that dilute your energy. Keep your energy rich and musky." For Rumi, the process of mystical purgation is not a process of escaping the world or purging yourself of passion, but rather learning to be in the world but not quite of it, developing the ability to re-direct your passionate energies toward transcendent goals.

"Ali got the best of a knight, and as he stood over him with his sword, the man spit in his face. Ali dropped his sword, relaxed, and helped the man to his feet. Why have you spared me? Ali replied: I am God's lion, not the lion of passion. I have no longing except for the One. When a personal reaction comes, I do not go along with it. People are full of anger, lust, and greed. These passions move the rubbish around, but they do not touch our true nature. Your impudence was better than any reverence because in that moment I was you, and you were me. I give this opened heart as God gives gifts. The poison of your spit becomes the honey of human friendship." When the other warrior faced death with defiance, Ali realized that there was no reason to kill him and many reasons to spare his life.

"We should always ask for discipline. One who has no self-control cannot receive grace. And it's not just himself he hurts. Undisciplined people set fire to the landscape. There are many who don't pray, and yet their whole souls resonates reverence often. Irreverence and the lack of discipline rob our souls. Whatever makes you cold toward others is pampering greedy energies inside of you. Suspicion and greed when majesty arrives is the worst arrogance. If that inner Sun, that grace by which existence exists, came even a little closer to us, everything would be scorched. We need to find the thorns in ourselves, and learn to pull them out; this will make a more peaceful world." Rumi asks us to take the motes out of our own eyes, to overcome our own enslaving cravings and false power trips, and to have appropriate reverence for the beauty, truth and goodness that exist in reality.

The third stage of the mystical journey is **illumination**: when the individual glimpses the transcendent and develops a heightened perception of the world.

"Don't think all ecstasies are the same. Don't get drunk with ego or arrogance. Be a connoisseur, and taste with caution. A candle is made to become entirely flame....Don't be satisfied with stories, how things have gone with others. Unfold your own myth. Start walking, your legs will get heavy and tired, then comes a moment of feeling the wings you've grown beginning to lift you off the ground....Because a child does not understand a chain of reasoning, should adults give up being rational? If reasonable people don't feel the presence of love within the universe, that doesn't mean that love is not there." We each have lifted moments, periods of illumination, when we forget that we are a dwindling candle, and realize that we are part of an eternal flame.

“Ways of worshipping are not to be ranked. It’s not God that’s glorified in acts of worship. It’s the worshippers! God does not hear the words, God looks inside at the humility; that broken-openness is the reality....Love religion has no code, doctrine, or rules of worship. Your loving is the truest devotion. Through your love a whole world is freed....A strong intention can make two oceans the size of a blanket, or 700 years the time it takes to walk to someone you love....What nine months does for an embryo, forty early mornings will do for your gradually growing wholeness....A saint is a theater where the qualities of God can be seen....He lay back on the ground laughing and died. He opened like a rose that drops to the ground and died laughing....Any solitary practice, a walk before dawn, a poem every morning, sitting on the roof at sunset, gives depth and expands the soul’s action. Anything you do every day can open into the deepest spiritual place, and give you freedom.” For Rumi, illumination can arrive out of any repeated act of love, peace, or inclusive affirmation.

The fourth stage of the mystic’s journey are her **dark nights of the soul**: when the individual faces the reality that illumination is not a permanent state, and faces up to her own continuing imperfections and continued separation from her transcendent moments.

“The real truth of existence is sealed until after many twists and turns of the road. Knowing depends on the time spent looking. Existence does this switching trick, giving you hope from one source, then satisfaction from another. A true seeker must get completely empty, the tears come, and his habitual stubbornness dissolves....The water of life is here. I’m drinking it, but I had to come this long way to know it....Open your hands, if you want to be held....A prince is just a conceit until he does something with generosity....Half-heartedness doesn’t reach into majesty....First comes knowledge, then the doing of the job. Much later, perhaps after you’re dead, something grows from what you’ve done....The universe came into being gradually....Little by little a person reaches forty and fifty and sixty, and feels more complete. Progress comes through continued slow movement.” Rumi knew that life was mostly work, search, and confusion, even for the most enlightened. We persevere because we recognize even in the darkest nights of our souls, the most depressed periods of our lives, that we are islands adrift in the ocean of God, that we are portions of an eternal flame.

The final step of the mystic’s journey is **union**: when the individual fully becomes part of the transcendent, finding an enduring sense of being a portion of the infinite.

“I am so small. How can this great love be inside me? Look at your eyes. They are small, but they see enormous things....Something opens our wings. Something makes boredom and hurt disappear. Someone fills the cup in front of us. We taste the sacredness....Dance, when you’re broken open....Dance, when you’re perfectly free....Awe serves for strangers. Close-hugging love is for friends. Tragic knowledge, grief, life as gradual subtraction all happen, and you need to learn from them, but the essential clarity are love, laughter, and companionship.” Rumi’s mystical union faces the realities of life, the tragic complexity of this world, but dares to grasp its sacredness, the light inherent in the darkness, the dance within the chaos. Rumi’s way is based upon love, laughter, and companionship.

Rumi's mystic, Sufi path assumes the need for a spiritual community and clearly asserts that the object of a deep interior life is to empower a life of intense and productive service with other people and for the world that has blessed us with our existence. "Every prophet sought companions. A wall standing alone is useless, but put three or four walls together, and they'll support a roof and keep the grain dry and safe. You may, sometimes, be happy enough going alone, but with others you'll get farther and go faster. When the ink joins with a pen, then the blank paper can say something. Love is not possible without a beloved."