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Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

# Rise Up Nimbly And Go On Your Strange Journey

a service presented by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene and Elaine Durbin

Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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## Call to Worship

## Reading

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### **Encountering the Sufi Dance -- Elaine**

Imagine, for a few minutes, a land far from here-halfway across the world-an arid land, mountainous in part, in part desert, a harsh land, unforgiving of miscalculations weather, soil, unforgiving of human error. Beautiful in its starkness, though, in its grandeur. Imagine a very small village in a nook of a canyon in the desert, a village which some 800 years previously had enjoyed lush vegetation, a sophisticated

irrigation system and a thriving population, but now sparsely populated. Imagine being a recent arrival in this forbidding land and coming upon that small village, imagine becoming aware of a great crowd of people focused on a swirl of movement, drums and flutes. Imagine heat, a diffusion of sun, shadow, dust, energy something indefinable emanating from that swirl. Imagine becoming caught up in the energy, that mystery, imagine gradually identifying individual barefoot figures, dressed in loose fitting white swirling garments, long dark hair streaming around their shoulders, some playing drums and reed flutes, some dancing in a loose circle. The movement and passion of the dance increase, occasionally a dancer drops out, falls aside and lies there, the others continue without interrupting the rhythm. the intensity, the almost frenzy. You get caught up in this passion, want to join the dance but know it's not for you... You become aware that your companion has gone off to the side and is waiting for you... You pull away and join your companion; the dance goes on...

That was my introduction to the Darvish dance, the "whirling dervish," what I later learned was the Muslim Sufi yearning for union with God.

The year was 1965, the land Afghanistan, the village Girishk, in the Helmand Valley. I was there as a secretary with the US Agency for International Development, part of the US Department of State. My companion was an expert in rural electrification and we had gone to look at the remnants of an 800-year old irrigation system... A little later, as I began to sort things out there was time for a lot of reading and certain names consistently surfaced: Zarathustra (655-623 BCE), Alexander the Great (330-327), the Great Silk Road, the Buddha, Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, Jalladin Rumi... Jalladin Rumi...? Jalladin Rumi....

## **Rumi and Shams -- Elizabeth**

from *The Illuminated Rumi* by Coleman Barks  
[bracketed remarks added by EG]

Jelaluddin Rumi was born in the remote town of Balkh, in what is now Afghanistan, [of a scholarly family].

The meeting of Rumi and Shams was a grand event in the mystical evolution of the planet. With their friendship, categories of teacher and student, lover and beloved, master and disciple, dissolved.

Rumi, at the age of thirty-seven, had become an accomplished doctor of theology, the center of his own divinity school. He was a venusian lover of the beautiful and the good, a scholar, and artist.

Shams was a wandering dervish monk, rough-hewn and sinewy; he had no school. People spontaneously gathered around him, though... he did not want followers or fame; he only wanted to find one person vast enough in spirit to be his companion.

He met Rumi in Konya, [in 1244].

As Rumi was riding a donkey through the market-place, surrounded by a knot of disciples, a stranger with piercing eyes stepped from a doorway and seized his bridle. The stranger challenged him: "Who is greater, Muhammad or Bestami?"

Bestami was a legendary Sufi master given to ecstatic merging with God, then crying out with mystical candor that he and the Godhead were one! Muhammad was the founder of their tradition, but his greatness resided in his stature as messenger of God.

Rumi gave the approved answer, "Muhammad."

[Shams replied], "But Bestami said, 'I am the Glory!' Muhammad said, 'I cannot praise you enough!'"

As Rumi was about to reply, he realized that this was no seminary debate about the mysteries. In a dusty marketplace in south central

Anatolia, he had come face to face with the Mystery.

A doorway to eternity flickered open... And in one pure outrageous act of faith, Rumi dove through. In an instant of mystical annihilation, fire met fire, ocean ocean, and Rumi fell into pure being. Later, he would say, "What I once thought of as God I met today as a human being."

When Rumi revived, lying on the ground, he answered, "Bestami took one swallow of knowledge and thought that was all, but for Muhammad the majesty was continually unfolding."

Shams felt the depth of the answer. This was the one he had sought.

[For about four years, the two communed deeply, immersed in mystical oneness. Tragically, Rumi's jealous disciples and family assassinated Shams in December, 1247. Rumi grieved in desolation, until one day he realized that] Shams was with him, in him. Rumi embodied the Friendship. With this final illumination, he began singing the spontaneous poetry of such beauty and perfection that it is now loved and revered across the world as revelation. (Barks, 7)

**Presentation** -- Elizabeth and Elaine

*"Rise Up Nimbly"* and *"Dissolve"* --Elizabeth

Rise up nimbly  
and go on your strange journey  
to the ocean of meanings.

The stream knows  
it can't stay on the mountain.  
Leave and don't look away  
from the sun as you go,

in whose light  
you're sometimes crescent,  
sometimes full. (Barks, 24)

This is how I would die  
into the love  
I have for you:  
As pieces of cloud  
Dissolve in sunlight. (Barks, 70)

*Beware of the Charlatan!* --Elaine

John Esposito in *Islam: the Straight Path*, says:

The very characteristics that accounted for the strength of Sufism and its effectiveness and success as a popular religious force, contributed to its degeneration. That same flexibility, tolerance, and eclecticism that had enabled Islam to spread and incorporate local customs and practices from Africa and Southeast Asia and attract many converts permitted the most bizarre practices to enter and run wild... Sacred song and dance resulted not in spiritual intoxication but in drunkenness and sensuality. Awareness of the divine presence in all of creation became a justification for the assimilation of saint worship, fetishism, and all manner of magical and superstitious practices... The high ground of sound and sober mysticism sank under the weight of ignorance and superstition, contributing significantly to the decline and decay of the Islamic community. The corrosive role of Sufi excesses came to be so much regarded as a primary cause of Muslim decline that from the 17th century onward, Sufism was subject to suppression and reform by Islamic revivalist and reformist movements.

Jalladin himself would have deplored many of the practices. Listen to how we spoke of being drunk with the love of God, in a Coleman Barks' interpretation:

Those who don't feel this love pulling them like a river  
Those who don't drink dawn like a cup of springwater  
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. (33)

*Rumi's Mystical Joy* --Elizabeth and Elaine

Charlatans so often arise in areas that are deeply significant to the human spirit-the very depth and mystery of Sufi mysticism left it prey to pretenders. And yet, although a certain caution is never amiss, our lives would be denied an exuberantly rich fountain of religious joy, if we turned away from Rumi and his pragmatic, mysterious, inclusive, tragic and joyous words. Let us enjoy them.

Love, that mystical state of pure being, is only attained by a wild and unfettered devotion, only heard by the brave and open ear of the spirit:

Love comes with a knife, not some shy question,  
and not with fears for its reputation!

Love is a madman, working his wild schemes,  
tearing off his clothes,  
running through the mountains, drinking poison,  
and now quietly choosing  
annihilation.

There are love stories,  
and there is obliteration into love.  
You've been walking  
the ocean's edge, holding  
up your robes to keep them dry.  
You must dive naked under,  
and deeper,  
under, a thousand times deeper!

Love flows down.  
The ground submits  
to the sky,  
and suffers what comes.

Tell me, is the earth worse  
for giving in like that?

Don't put blankets over the drum!

Let your spirit ear listen  
to the green dome's passionate murmur. (Barks, 68)

Love is the capital-F Friend, that sublime connection represented by Shams-beyond words, beyond thought and analysis. So often, so sadly often, we feel that we have lost connection with the Beloved Friend, but its beauty is always with us, if we but pay attention.

Come back, my friend.

From the hundreds of times I lost  
the connection, I learn this:  
your fragrance  
brings me back. Inside that I become  
a feast day with aloeswood burning,

the pure empty sky around the moon.

Then I make promises.

I break them.

And same as before,

    I try

        to find you

            by thinking

                and reading

                    about finding.

No help there!

Try something different.

What was in that candle's light

that opened and consumed me so quickly?

Come back, my friend. The form of our love  
    is not a created form.

    Nothing can help me but that beauty.

There was a dawn I remember when my soul  
heard something from your soul

I drank water from your spring,  
and felt the current take me. (Barks, 114-116)

That current, that beauty beyond our thinking selves, is also beyond the  
boundaries created by official religion:

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  
composed of elements at all.  
I do not exist,

am not an entity in this world or the next,  
did not descend from  
Adam and Eve or any

origin story. My place is  
the 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. (Barks, 41)

When we are on the path to the Beloved, we are, in Rumi's metaphors,  
going to the orchard, the place of oneness and paradox and sweetness.  
There are ways to this place:

Bend, tend, disappear

This is how you change  
when you go to the orchard  
where the heart opens:

you become  
fragrance and the light  
that burning oil gives off,

long strands of grieving hair, lion

and at the same time, gazelle.

You're walking alone without feet,  
as riverwater does.

The taste of a wine that is bitter and sweet,  
seen and unseen, neither wet nor dry,  
like Jesus reaching to touch.

A new real appears without desirous imagining,  
inside God's breath,  
empty, where you quit saying  
the name and there's no distance,  
no calling dove-coo.

A window, a wild rose at the field's edge,  
you'll be me,  
but don't feel proud or happy.

Bend like the limb of a peach tree.  
Tend those who need help.  
Disappear three days with the moon.

Don't pray to be healed, or look for evidence

of "some other world."

You are the soul

and medicine for what wounds the soul. (Barks, 48)

Sometimes, Rumi just tosses at us advice about how to be one with the Friend, the Beloved-with God-and sometimes he acknowledges that we humans are forever, mysteriously, being called away from the intense pull of this glorious path:

Sometimes

I forget completely

what Companionship is

Unconscious and insane

I spill sad energy

everywhere. My story  
gets told in various ways:

a romance, a dirty joke,

a war, a vacancy.

Divide up my

forgetfulness

to any number,

it will go around.

These dark suggestions

that I follow,

are they part

of some plan?

Friends,

be careful.

Don't come near me

out of curiosity,

or sympathy.

A black sky  
hates the moon.  
I am that dark  
nothing. I hate those  
in power.  
I'm invited in from the  
road to the house  
but I invent some excuse.  
Now I'm angry  
at the road.  
I don't need love. Let  
someone break me.  
I don't want  
to hear anyone's  
trouble. I've had my  
chance for wealth  
and position.  
I don't want those.  
I am iron resisting  
the most enormous  
magnet there is. (Barks, 15)

Again, understanding how full the human heart is-shadow and light, sorrow and joy, discipline and laziness, difficulty and ease-Rumi shares with us that it is all part of the road to the orchard. Mystical joy is not achieved by pretending that we are always happy and generous and light-hearted and free of conscience' pangs; that joy comes with embracing everything in the human experience:

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 attend 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.

Welcome difficulty.  
Learn the alchemy True Human  
Beings know:  
the moment you accept what troubles  
you've been given, the door opens.

Welcome difficulty as a familiar  
comrade. Joke with torment  
brought by the Friend.

Sorrows are the rags of old clothes  
and jackets that serve to cover,  
and then are taken off.  
That undressing,  
and the beautiful  
naked body  
    underneath,  
        is the sweetness  
            that comes

after grief. (Barks, 77)

But sometimes-oh those blessed sometimes!-we simply know Oneness with The Companion. Sometimes, as mysteriously as the times in which we balk at the wonder always available to us in the very earth we walk upon, we mysteriously and joyously open to The Beloved.

No one knows what makes the soul  
wake up so happy!

Maybe a dawn breeze has blown the veil  
from the face of God.

A thousand new moons appear.  
Roses open laughing.

Hearts become perfect rubies  
like those from Badakshan.

The body turns entirely spirit,  
Leaves become branches in this wind!

Why is it now so easy to surrender,  
even for those already surrendered?

There's no answer to any of this.  
No one knows the source of joy.

A poet breathes into a reed flute,  
and the tip of every hair makes music.

Shams sails down clods of dirt  
from the roof,

and we take jobs

as doorkeepers for him. (Barks, 64)

All is one. The ecstasy of pure being, of the love that was before  
existence happened: that joy is all.

We are the mirror  
as well as the face in it.  
We are tasting the taste  
this minute  
of eternity.  
We are pain  
and what cures pain.  
We are the sweet cold water  
and the jar  
that pours.

Soul of the World,  
no life, nor world remain,  
no beautiful women and men longing.

Only this  
ancient love  
circling  
the holy black stone  
of nothing

where  
the lover  
is the  
loved,

the horizon

and everything  
within it. (Barks, 111-113)

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**Sources Consulted:**

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