



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Experiencing the Divine Mystery”

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Centering Thoughts:

In whichever direction you turn, there is the Face of God. Qur'an 2:115

*All religions, all this singing, is one song. The differences are just illusion and vanity.
The sun's light looks a little different on this wall than it does on that wall,
and a lot different on this other one, but it's still one light. Rumi*

*You have no need to travel anywhere. Journey within yourself, enter a mine of rubies
and bathe in the splendor of your own Light. Rumi*

Reflection:

Mystics believe that knowledge of, or union with, God, the Divine, or Ultimate Reality, is possible only through direct experience and inspiration. God must be felt within the heart, not the mind. Language, an intellect's path to understanding, can never describe the ineffable – what cannot be described. Instead, spiritual practices of self-surrender and contemplation offer a path to communion with the mystery, one of many names for God or Ultimate Reality.

Sufism, the mystical tradition in Islam, has existed nearly as long as Islam itself, which began after the Prophet Muhammad heard God's word through Archangel Gabriel early in the 7th century. Islam means submission or surrender to God, but it also means peace, and is linguistically connected to *salaam*. Peace comes with surrender to Allah.

Many of you have heard me respond, “Go deeper,” when you share your belief statements or spiritual understanding. I mean to encourage you to move past the surface level in order to connect with your core Truth, those foundational beliefs upon which other beliefs are built. Delving into deep spiritual territory is the Sufi path, too.

If you can imagine a bicycle wheel with spokes, it will help explain Sufism. The circumference of the wheel, the outer circle with the tire, represents our ordinary lives. It's all the things we do every day in the physical or material world, as well as all the things that identify who we are—our gender identity, ethnicity, profession, parental status, etc. Sufis consider these our false identity, it is not who we really are, or why or how we came to be here.

The spokes of the wheel connect this outer circle to an inner center or core that Sufis identify as Ultimate Truth, Reality, or Allah, Arabic for God. The wheel contains an infinite number of spokes because they believe infinite paths lead to the center. Perhaps you are here today because you travel a path seeking a Truth beyond the ordinary, material world.

Although orthodox Muslims deny there are multiple paths, another Hodja Nasruddin story illustrates why Sufis disagree: Someone once asked the wise fool, “Why do people go off in different directions when they leave their houses in the morning?” Without hesitating, the Hodja responded, “If everyone went in the same direction, this would throw off the balance of the world!”

It’s foolish to ask the question and foolish to think the world needs our help to balance it. But the underlying Sufi message reveals a truth about God. Diversity is inherent and intended in God’s creation. As Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī, the well-known 13th century Persian poet, theologian and Sufi mystic, said, “All religions, all this singing, is one song.” Our Gathering song, “Come, Come Whoever You Are,” was inspired by Rumi’s words.

At the wheel’s center, not only will we commune with God or Truth, we’ll connect to our own divine center because Sufis believe God is One and you and I are One with God. This is our true identity, this answers the question “Who am I?” We are part of God. But Sufis warn not to think we *are* God. Humans are a spark of the Divine, part of God’s creation, but not God. In this Sufis, and all Muslims, share the early Unitarian belief in the unity or oneness of God.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, in his book *The Garden of Truth* (garden being a metaphor for paradise and truth referring to God) sums up Sufi teachings. He writes: “The Sufi path leads from the desert of outwardness, forgetfulness, selfishness, and falsehood to the Garden of Truth, wherein alone we can realize our true identity and come to know who we are.” [page 6]

To get to this center of Ultimate Truth or direct union with God, Sufis may participate in at least one unique spiritual practice, made visible by whirling dervishes. Spinning in circles mirrors earth and the universe’s spinning through space, all God’s creation. Dervishes, humble servants of God, hope to enter into a trance-like state of ecstasy where all material reality falls away, allowing their union with the Divine.

The Sufi path to personal union with the Divine that lies both within us and that surrounds us, that exists everywhere we turn, is a path few but the most passionate travel. But Sufis are passionate. They believe God is love and therefore the mystical path they follow leads to the heart and to love. Only through the sacred heart, not the mind, will we make real our spiritual oneness with God, the Beloved. Andrew Harvey, in his book *The Essential Mystics*, writes of their passion, it “embraces, as Muhammad did, the whole reality as a manifestation of the divine and that seeks to burn out in the Flame of Love.” [page 138]

This love is a consuming love that compels them to live joyfully in service to God and others.

By whatever name we choose to call ultimate reality, be it God, Truth, Universe, Spirit, Love, or simply Mystery, and whether we’re UUs or Sufis, we can choose whether to connect to our true self, our inner Source, or not. We can live on this outer, surface level of activity, or we can walk a path that adds an experiential or felt spiritual dimension to who we are.

I believe our first source, though not numbered 'first', holds that primary place because we free-thinking UUs most rely upon it. Our religious authority is our own experience of life and death and all the other mysteries we encounter. If something doesn't make sense to us, we reject it. And when I say 'sense' I'm referring to all our senses, not just our rationality. It may not make rational sense, but spiritually, I'm revel in the mystery. I welcome the unknowing. I recognize the limitations of our rational minds and language to express the ineffable. Poets like Rumi express it so much better than ordinary, factual language.

Before I close with a poem by Rumi, I ask your indulgence. Please rise in body or in spirit for a moment. Sitting will be fine, but I think this exercise will be more powerful standing.

Now raise your arm up and point to the sky. Metaphorically, what is the sky? Heaven, the abode of the gods, that which is beyond human knowing. Now, with your other hand, point down to the earth. Metaphorically, what is the earth? (And I'm not referring to the underground or Hell.) Earth is our grounding, our connection to the physical, created world and all that materially exists. Close your eyes for a moment in silence, and know you are connecting your soul or spirit with your grounded, earthly body. And in the silence, perhaps you'll feel that spark of the divine run through you. (*silence*)

Thank you. You may be seated. And now for Rumi's poem, "The Guest House". I invite you to listen closely to hear the Sufi message beneath the metaphors. Whose guests are we? Who or what is the Beyond? And, keeping in mind that inspiration and direct experience of the Divine is the Sufi goal, what is each new arrival, each visitor?

"The Guest House"

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 entertain them all!
Even if they are 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 whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Whatever path you follow, may yours be similarly lived with joy and passion. And may you share your compassion here and everywhere you go. May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Have you had a direct experience you might describe as a divine connection? Share.
2. Does ‘God being one with all things and all things one with God’ resonate with you? Explain.
3. ‘Love’ is a driving ethic for Sufis. How might (or does) love motivate your actions?