

## “Happy Birthday, Dear Rumi”

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Eight hundred candles shed a lot of light. We're so illumined by the life and work of Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi, born eight hundred years ago today in the village of Wakhsh not far from the city of Balkh, in what is now Afghanistan. Rumi took the spiritual to ecstatic levels, as a Sufi poet and storyteller. His words brim, shine, pulsate, haunt, radiate, and awaken us to universal truths where everything, simply everything is ripe with metaphor. From taverns and wine-vats to melting snow and rising moons to clever parrots and thirsty fish, we hear in his words attentiveness to every droplet of human experience.

Not unlike Ralph Waldo Emerson, who preached in 1838 to the graduating seminarians of Harvard Divinity School that “the soul ... invites every man to expand to the full circle of the universe, and will have no preferences but those of spontaneous love,” Rumi danced with the far circles of the universe and was transformed by unbidden and spontaneous love. Not unlike Henry David Thoreau, who wrote in a letter from Concord in 1848, “My only integral experience is in my vision. I see, perchance, with more integrity than I feel,” Rumi saw from his center. Each and every seeker, who sees and stretches and sets out on the endless journey for which such seeker is insatiable, bears the legacy of our honored guest of the morning. Not unlike those of us who are gathered here this morning seeking, yearning for a deeper and wider something more than we brought through the door, Rumi embodied the restless spirit of wonderer, wanderer. Ever hungry, ever thirsty, the images poured forth from this insatiable soul:

...I have a thirsty fish in me  
that can never find enough  
of what it's thirsty for!  
Show me the way to the ocean!  
Break these half-measures,  
these small containers.”  
 (“A Thirsty Fish,” *The Essential Rumi*, 19)

He didn't start out this way, or did he? Rumi biographer Annemarie Schimmel writes that his father, Baha'uddin Walad, was “a jurist and preacher with mystical inclinations,” though he never practiced as a Sufi. We know little to nothing of his mother, except that her name was Mu'mine Khatun. Rumi was one of several children, and we know little to nothing of them. As a five-year-old, Rumi and his family left their village in the wake of a siege and moved to Samarqand and then to Aleppo or Damascus in what is now Syria. There the young Rumi studied Arabic poetry. But the family was to migrate again, this time to central Anatolia, the present-day Turkey. It was here in the town of Laranda, that his mother died. Thus far, we know only that Rumi was a scholar, with no particular inclinations for the mystical.

At 18, he married a young girl who had migrated with them. A year later his first son was born. Sultan Walad is the child who became the faithful conveyor of his father's life and work. The young family moved on to Konya, a city of Anatolia that became home as much as any singular site could possibly be for Rumi. Here his second son, Ala'uddin, was born, and here his father died. Rumi succeeded his father as teacher of “traditional theological sciences.” As a

young scholar of Islam, he was steeped in the suras of the Koran, whose verse laces the poetry yet latent inside the young Rumi.

“Ho-hum,” we might say in response to Rumi’s respectable life thus far as a religious scholar and family man. Then it happened. It was an October day in 1244. Rumi had just turned 37. On his way home, he met a stranger, a wandering dervish who posed a question to the illustrious professor that made him faint. What was the question? There are many versions, but one that seems to have prevailed is that the stranger asked him with a gaze that pierced him, who was greater, Muhammed the Prophet or Bayezid Bistami, a Persian mystic, each claiming a quite different identity with regard to Allah. As ever, the question soared in comparison with the answer, if the answer came at all, since poor Rumi passed out cold. The encounter recalls that of Saul of Tarsis en route to Damascus to persecute the early followers of Jesus. A voice rang out that shocked Paul right off his donkey. According to the New Testament Book of Acts, it was Jesus, asking him why he was persecuting him. Saul became Paul, and an early movement of marginalized Jews became Christianity. Both were transforming moments, one marking the birth of a religious movement of epic import, the other unleashing mystical epiphanies that transcend religious particulars.

Who was this stranger? Shamsuddin of Tabriz, commonly known as Shams’*e* Tabriz, a Sufi dervish. As a Sufi, Shams affirmed divine love in every dimension of being and transcended religious dogma in a mystical attentiveness to matters of the heart. Rumi scholar Coleman Barks translates dervish as “doorway” and describes the turn practiced by Sufi dervishes – often referred to as whirling dervishes – as a means of becoming “an empty place where human and divine can meet.” The way to wholeness is an ecstatic letting go in the direction of that empty place, the doorway. Shamsuddin translates as “Sun [s-u-n] of Religion,” and that he was for unsuspecting Rumi. In an instant, the axis of Rumi’s being had shifted. Like Saul becoming Paul, he was transformed from Rumi the scholar to Rumi the ecstatic mystic. Though it may be redundant to speak of an ecstatic mystic, ecstatic he was. Hear his words:

O my soul, where can I find rest  
 but in the shimmering love of his heart?  
 Where can I see the pure light of the Sun  
 but in the eyes of my own Shams’*e* Tabriz?  
 (as translated in Jonathan Star, *God’s Breath*)

This was not an ancient “coming out,” not to negate for one moment how momentous it is for any person to do so in the terms of sexual identity. It was rather a coming face to face with the radiant sun-like truth of his truth. Yet Rumi took Shams home with him, to live with his family. Imagine, your spouse or your partner, says to you, “I have a guest here.....” and you know that far more than a guest has arrived. Rumi’s son, Sultan Walad would later write:

“After meeting Shams, my father danced all day and sang all night.  
 He had been a scholar – he became a poet. He had been an ascetic  
 – he became drunk with love.”

They were lovers, but not in the confined way that we might think of lovers. Tell that to his family, Sultan’s later observations aside! We might guess that Shams was intuitive. Scholars speculate that Shams sensed the hostility of Rumi’s family and students. Without notice, he disappeared. Maulana was shattered, shattered but not broken. His poetry began. His stories began. He was reaching out to the inner Shams. His truth was pouring forth word after word after word, even as he searched tirelessly for the missing Shams.

How is it for any of us who long for a something or someone who was a defining presence for our own inner truth? How is it for any of us who are restless spirits in search of a home, mythical or otherwise, that once was? For Rumi, the news was good. Eighteen months later, word came that Shams was in Damascus. It was Sultan Walad, Rumi's eldest son, who went – willingly, we trust – to escort Shams back to Konya. Back he came, and this time, the two soul-friends agreed that Shams would marry a local woman.

Nonetheless, the two were practically inseparable. The family envy welled, especially from Rumi's younger son, Alaeddin. The story goes that on the night of December 5, 1248 – and I find myself in stark amazement at the specific dates attached to these happenings – Shams was called to the back door, interrupting his conversation with Rumi. He never returned. The scholar Annemarie Schimmel reports matter-of-factly that Shams was murdered by arrangement of Alaeddin. Again, Rumi was shattered. Again, Rumi wrote, profusely and under the “pen name” of Shams'e Tabriz. His soul-friend was lost. He *became* his soul-friend. Grief and love spun together in the poetry that followed.

For Love has grasped my hem and drags it  
as a hungry man clutches the edge of the tablecloth  
(from the *Dīwān* 3073 as translated in  
*Rumi's World*, Annemarie Schimmel)

poured from his longing that poured into his verse.

Hear again those final words of our earlier reading:  
Out of yourself – such a journey  
    will lead you to your self,  
It leads to transformation  
    of dust into pure gold!  
Leave bitterness and acid,  
    go forth to sweetness now!  
For even brine produces  
    a thousand kinds of fruits.  
It is the Sun of Tabriz  
    that does such wondrous work,  
For every tree gains beauty  
    when touched by the sun.  
(from the *Dīwān* as excerpted and translated in  
*Rumi's World*, Annemarie Schimmel)

Once “touched by the sun,” Rumi was forever radiant and reckless with love. Steeped as he was in Islamic scholarship and verse, he was as the current saying goes, “a fool for love.” From the words of our scholar turned poet:

Those with intellect run away from the dead ant out of caution;  
Lovers trample heedlessly on dragons!  
(from the *Dīwān* as excerpted and translated in  
*Rumi's World*, Annemarie Schimmel)

“The goal of Sufism,” writes Rumi scholar Jonathan Star, “is to know love in all of its glorious forms; and every prophet, every practice, and every form of worship that leads toward love is, in essence, Sufism.” While grounded in the qualities embodied in the eight prophets – Abraham, Ishmael, Job, Zacharias, John, Jesus, Moses, and Muhammed – Muhammed is

believed to hold the God-given key to the full store of life's treasures. (Schimmel) The Sufi sees God's glory reflected everywhere.

With such vision, it is possible to find another soul-mate, and this Rumi did in Saladin Zarkub, a local goldsmith. The story is told that Rumi was walking amid the goldsmiths' marketplace of Konya and was mesmerized by the ringing of their hammers. It was only natural – Rumi's natural – to take in hand his old friend, Saladin Zarkub, and dance through the streets. Saladin became, in Schimmel's words, "the faithful mirror that he desperately needed to find his way back to himself." The poetry that followed commonly named his new friend, but the intimacy of spirit was not nearly as intense as that known with Shams' e Tabriz. All the while, Rumi was a family man, if not quite father or husband of the year. He lost his first wife, and he married a young Christian woman, Kira Khatun, with whom he had a boy and a girl. It was the early 1250s. Our friend Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi was in his early 40s. He continued to teach and write, sing and pray and dance his way farther down his path that never stopped winding.

His disciples – and he did have them in plenitude – broached him about the prospect of writing a "mystical mathnawī," or "rhyming couplets." Specifically, his favorite student, Husamuddin Chelebi, asked for a didactic poem that would benefit all his students. Rumi responded with the first verses of the *Mathnawī*, which may well be deemed his *magnum opus*. It began with the The Reed Flute's Song. Again, hear the longing:

Listen to the story told by the reed,  
of being separated.  
"Since I was cut from the reed bed,  
I have made this crying sound.  
Anyone apart from someone he loves  
understands what I say.  
Anyone pulled from a source  
longs to go back.  
At any gathering I am there,  
mingling in the laughing and grieving,  
a friend to each, but few  
will hear the secrets hidden,  
within the notes. No ears for that,  
body flowing out of spirit,  
spirit up from body: no concealing  
that mixing. But it's not given us  
to *see* the soul. The reed flute  
is fire, not wind, Be that empty."

It continues into the last stanzas:

But if someone doesn't want to hear  
the song of the reed flute,  
it's best to cut conversation  
short, say good-bye, and leave.  
(from the *Mathnawī* as excerpted and translated in  
*The Essential Rumi*, Coleman Barks with John Moyne)

The *Mathnawī* grew into six volumes of verse and story and theory and even humor. Recall the tale told earlier of “The Merchant and His Clever Parrot,” humor in the service of what must be done to break free, humor in the service of life and death and life, humor and longing embodied in the knowing of parrot to parrot. Epic in proportion, pearl-like in its particulars, the *Mathnawī* was dictated to Rumi’s student, Hasamuddin, over the last years of his life, beginning in 1256. Two years later, in 1258, his friend Salahuddin Zarkub died. All the while, Rumi’s bond with Hasamuddin grew into a soul-bond that led Rumi to entrust his young friend with the legacy of the then secret order of the *Mathnawī*.

In the autumn of 1273 Rumi fell ill. He would not recover. Yet he quipped that “The earth is hungry. Soon it will receive a fat morsel!” even as he comforted his friends with the reminder that death “is a curtain for eternal grace.”

(*Dīwān-i kabīr* 911, as translated in *Rumi’s World*, Annemarie Schimmel).

It is told that all of Konya – Muslims, Christians, and Jews – came to his funeral. It was the time of the Crusades. It was a time of widespread sectarian violence. All of Konya came to his funeral. Such was the reflection of Rumi’s life and commentary. Had he not said,

“I go into the Muslim mosque and the Jewish synagogue and the Christian church and I see one altar.”

(as translated in *The Essential Rumi*, Coleman Barks)

I wonder. I wonder if they danced as they longed for the presence of their friend.

“Dance,” he had bid them.

Dance, when you’re broken open.

Dance, if you’ve torn the bandage off.

Dance in the middle of the fighting.

Dance in your blood.

Dance, when you’re perfectly free.

(as translated in *The Essential Rumi*, Coleman Barks)

Why not dance our life away and back again as we celebrate his birth and his life. Happy Birthday, dear Rumi! Happy Birthday, to us all!

Amen.

**Sources:**

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