

The Sufi Path of Love:

*The Journey of a Seminar in the Johnston Center for Integrative Studies
University of Redlands (Spring 2017)*

By Fran Grace¹

We were a group of travellers on the path of Love. We met at night, “stepping out of the circle of time and into the circle of Love” (Rūmī). Arriving one by one, every Wednesday at 7 p.m., we crossed a threshold from the outer to the inner, from the one to the oneness. Shoes removed. Gadgets off. Hearts open. Silently joining hands, we moved in a circle, singing:

Come, come whoever you are/
Even though you’ve broken your vow a thousands times/
Come, come again...

Adapted from the poem by Rūmī, this song is one of the Dances of Universal Peace sung by Sufi practitioners around the world. We who danced together in the Sufi Path of Love Johnston Seminar did so during a time of tumult in the world. How had human beings forgotten that we belong to each other? In Rūmī’s masterpiece *The Masnavi*, he uses the metaphor of the reed cut from the reed bed and how it cries its lonesome song, longing to return to its source. In our class, we sought to hear the cry of the *anima mundi*, world soul. Sufi teacher Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee in the “Introduction” to the book *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*, sums up the sense we had as we danced:

The world is not a problem to be solved; it is a living being to which we belong. The world is part of our own self and we are a part of its suffering wholeness. Until we go to the root of our image of separateness, there can be no healing. And the deepest part of our separateness from creation lies in our forgetfulness of its sacred nature, which is also our own sacred nature.

Sufism is a path of “remembrance.” We studied many time-honored ways within Sufism of “remembering” our “sacred nature.” One night, led by Johnston student Meggan Austin, we shared our dreams. In Sufi group dream practice, sometimes a dream comes through an individual as a message for the group. When Amber Rose Bauer shared her dream, we sensed it was for all of us.

I was with my close friend. I didn’t want to go near the ocean. I was afraid of the scary creatures in there – sharks, etc. I was afraid of getting hurt. But my friend encouraged me, and I stepped into the water. I looked down and saw a clam. I picked it up and was working very hard with my hands to get to the pearl. I got frustrated because I couldn’t get to the pearl. The muscle of the clam was too

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strong. I knew the pearl was in there, but it was hard to get to because of what covered it over. I was pulling and pulling, trying to get the clam out of the way so I could get to the pearl.

The class members resonated. Yes, the Quest is frightening and difficult! They each had their tale to tell. They referred back to the first book we read for the class, the famous twelfth-century Sufi poem by Attâr, *Conference of the Birds*. A group of birds goes on a Quest, through seven valleys and many tests, to meet their “King Simorgh.” The goal is one, the paths many:

Every pilgrim takes a different way
and different spirits, different rules obey...
Our pathways differ - no one ever knows
the secret route by which another goes.

The journey is hard, and many birds turn back or stop short. When thirty of the birds arrive to their goal, they find a surprise. The tale turns on a word play. “Simorgh” means thirty. The journey of the thirty birds to meet “King Simorgh” is, in the end, a journey to find *themselves*, their own inner Self. What a paradox – the longest journey is also the shortest, a few inches from “head” to “heart.”

In class member Alexei Billings’ rendition of this Sufi story, “The Bird’s Journey,” we meet “a lonely fowl who was on the brink of discovery.” The little finch is leaving its nest for the first time. We sense his bravery. Facing many challenges of aloneness and togetherness, he realizes that “his breath unifies him with the wind, the trees, the magic, and the animals around him who are all breathing, just like him.” Although “he often forgot about the journey he was going on, and often had to start over,” the love of friends helped him to find himself. Alexei was sharing with the class members what they had meant to him.

Sufism uses the phrase “hidden treasure” to refer to the pearl inside each of us. Why “hidden”? Because it gets covered over by our conditioning, skepticism, anxiety, self-doubt, greed, egotism, etc. We “forget” who we really are. In Sufism, the most profound turning point for a human being is when they “remember” their real nature, their hidden treasure, their pearl, their inner gold. This crucial moment is called *tauba*, the “turning of the heart” toward Something that is given Ninety-Nine Names but has No Name. The students called It whatever they called It. One thing certain: Once remembered, It is not soon forgotten.

*Never turn away from love, not even love in a human form,
for love alone will free you from yourself.
~ Jâmî, Sufi Saint*