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**Reading Rumi in a Pandemic:
Poetic & Healing Insights for Today**

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In Persian-speaking parts of the world and in families who trace their lineage back to ancient Persia—modern-day Iran—the thirteenth-century Islamic mystic Rumi (1207-1273) has been one of the most widely read poets for *centuries* (Keshavarz 13). In the English-speaking world, we are late to the game, but we have finally started to catch on to the phenomenon that is Rumi. Indeed, translations of Rumi by Coleman Barks (1937-) have been **“the best-selling poetry (of any kind) in North America for at least two decades”** (World Literature Today).

Among the most popular of Barks’ Rumi translations is “Out Beyond Ideas”:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I’ll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.

Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
doesn’t make any sense. (Barks 36)

I love the way Rumi gently invites us to let go of limiting concepts in our human language and cultural conventions. Rumi beckons us to meet him in a field that sounds like what our UU Seventh Principle calls “the interdependent web of all existence” where we can realize that, in a certain sense, “even the phrase *each other* / doesn’t make any sense.”

If you like that poem, I highly recommend the David Wilcox album titled Out Beyond Ideas that sets mystical poems from many different world religions (including multiple Rumi poems) to music. As for me, I love that poem “Out Beyond Ideas,” and I love Coleman Barks’ translation; but I should also acknowledge here at the top that Barks does not know Persian. Instead of translating Rumi from the original version (which is often both rhymed and metered), Barks begins with literal translations of Rumi into English from the nineteenth-century and paraphrases them into contemporary free verse. The results are often powerful, and remain connected to the original text, but Barks does also frequently strip out references to Islam that are woven throughout the original text.

To give you just one example from the poem we just heard, a more literal rendering of Rumi would be out beyond ideas of “religion” and “infidelity.” While Barks’ substitution of “wrongdoing and rightdoing” retains the ethical spirit of the text, it elides the religious content of the original. **And if you are curious to explore translations of Rumi that hue closer to his Muslim identity, I recommend The Rumi Collection by Kabir Helminski.**

Along these lines, I should perhaps mention that the fairly minor issues with Barks’ translations should not be confused with the much more egregious issues some of you may be familiar with regarding Daniel Ladinsky’s alleged translations of Hafez (1315-1390), another famous

Persian poet, who lived about a century after Rumi. In the words of one critic:

Ladinsky claims that Hafez appeared to him in a dream and handed him the English “translations” he is publishing.... It is not my place to argue with people and their dreams, but I am fairly certain that this is not how translation works.... I do like Ladinsky's poetry. And they do contain mystical insights.... They are just not Hafez. They are Hafez-ish? Hafez-esque? So many of us wish that Ladinsky had just published his work under his own name, rather than appropriating Hafez's.... (Omid Safi)

I'll have to schedule a future sermon on Hafez, but I wanted to bring in Ladinsky as a reference point on the scale of problematic translations; his appropriation of Hafez is vastly more troubling than Barks' arguably quite authentic paraphrases of Rumi.

Speaking of dreams, though, I will briefly share the story of how Coleman Barks came to help popularize Rumi for the English-speaking world. Sometime in the 1970s, the poet Robert Bly handed Barks a copy of Rumi's poetry translated by A.J. Arberry (1905-1969). It turns out that Arberry was a much more gifted scholar of Arabic, Persian, and Islam than he was a poet. Bly, sensing that there was something more there, said to his fellow poet Barks that these poems by Rumi needed to be “released from their cages.” What he meant by that is that the English translations to date had been too wooden, too literal—and that rendering them into contemporary free verse might actually help English readers get closer to the mystical heartbeat of Rumi's original writings.

Interestingly, not long after that encounter, Barks too had a dream. “He was sleeping on a cliff near a river. A stranger appeared in a circle of light and said, ‘I love you.’ Barks had not seen this man before, but he met him the following year, at a Sufi [Islamic mystical] order near Philadelphia. The man was the order’s leader.” So although Barks does not speak Persian, it is significant that he has had both his own mystical connections to Sufism as well as direct relationships with modern day Sufis (The New Yorker).

Now, having given you some background on the modern translations of Rumi, let me tell you a little more about the poet himself. Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī (Persian: جلال‌الدین محمد رومی) was born a little more than 800 years ago in 1207 in what is now present-day Afghanistan (Keshavarz 4-5). Since his given name of Muhammad was so popular, his father gave him the nickname *Jalāl ad-Dīn*, which means “Splendor of the Faith.” As he gained prominence as a spiritual teacher, he was often called *Mowlana*, meaning “master” or “teacher.” And although Rumi is the name by which he is almost universally known today, few, if anyone, called him Rumi during his lifetime. “Rumi” refers to a region in Turkey, where he lived most of his adult life (Helminski x).

Rumi was born into a long line of jurists and religious scholars (Helminski x), and when his father died, Rumi, at the young age of twenty-four, took over his father’s teaching and preaching (Keshavarz 5). And for almost a decade and a half, his career continued to grow and succeed as was expected. Then everything changed in the year 1244.

Rumi was thirty-seven years old when he met the wandering mystic Shams of Tabriz (Gooch 113). They had an instantaneous connection and “lived together in near seclusion for at least the next three months” (116).

Although there is no record of a physical component of their relationship, there was undeniably a deep spiritual and emotional connection.

Here's a poem Rumi wrote years later that speaks to the impact Shams had on him, and also to the effect that Rumi, in turn, has had on so many readers of his poetry:

The sufi opens his hands to the universe
and gives away each instant, free.

Unlike someone who begs on the street for
money to survive,

a sufi begs to give you his life. (Helminski 221)

Shams opened Rumi up from being a fairly standard religious teacher to becoming the beloved mystic that he is known as today. Shams challenged Rumi to visit the local Jewish neighborhood to buy wine, even though alcohol is forbidden in Islam. He had Rumi come with him to speak with women in a tavern frequented by Armenian Christians (118). Shams also introduced Rumi to music, sung poetry, and whirling dance (121). For those of you familiar with the Christian tradition, these **transgressive acts subverting social purity codes** sound a lot like similar acts by the historical Jesus, who was known to be unafraid to associate with tax collectors and prostitutes.

After three years, however, Shams disappeared one night, never to return. Some suspect foul play by disciples of Rumi who were jealous of Shams influence, but there is no way to know for sure (Helminski xv). Regardless, the paradigm shift within Rumi was permanent. Before he met Shams, "solidity and certitude of knowledge were his guides; after, the confusion, uncertainty, and turmoil of love gave direction" (Keshavarz 6).

As Rumi later wrote, **“The intellectual runs away, afraid of drowning; the whole business of love is to drown in the sea”** (Helminski 181).

Rumi lived almost three decades after the sudden disappearance of Shams, and during that time he wrote **“more than 35,000 verses, the largest collection of mystical lyrics in the widest variety of metrical patterns ever used by any single Persian poet”** (Keshavarz 7). And in so doing, he experienced himself as channeling Shams. Indeed, he titled his three major poetry collections, not after himself, but *The Collected Shams of Tabriz*, *The Complete Shams of Tabriz*, and *The Shams of Tabriz Ghazals* (Gooch 184).

And when Rumi died at the age of sixty-seven, his universal mystical appeal was already clear. And the interfaith relationships that Shams inspired him to explore had already borne fruit. At Rumi’s funeral, there was an unexpected

appearance of religious leaders from all the other faiths practiced in town, as well as their faithful.... Rumi had been spending more time in the Greek [Orthodox], Armenian [Christian], and Jewish districts than was realized, teaching and conversing. “Whatever we read in our sacred books about the prophets, we beheld in him,” one said. A Greek priest said, “He was like bread, Have you ever seen a hungry person run away from bread?” (Gooch 296)

I love that image of Rumi as bread. It makes me think that for some of the folks he encountered, they didn’t even know they were spiritually hungry until they met him—and then they found themselves thinking, **whatever he has, I want more of that.**

Along those lines, I want to leave you with five quick snippets of Rumi inspired by the writer Melody Moezzi's [The Rumi Prescription](#). As an Iranian-American living with Bipolar Disorder, Moezzi writes movingly about how short quotes from Rumi have been literally life-saving for her at various points. They have been like rocks that she could grab onto when the flood waters of adversity threatened to sweep her away. And as we each seek to navigate our way through the physical distancing requirements of a pandemic, some life rafts from Rumi might well be in order.

If this sermon leaves you curious to explore further, I encourage you to get a copy of *The Essential Rumi* by Coleman Barks. But in the meantime, I offer you these five short verses that might be of use to you in the coming days and weeks. Notice if any one of the following five verses particularly resonates with you during this season of your life. If so, perhaps write it down where you can revisit it in the coming days.

The first is **“Quit keeping score if you want to be free. / Love has ejected the referee”** (Moezzi 53; Helminski 220). Do you find yourself sometimes keeping score—whether competing with a friend, family member, or colleague (the proverbial “keeping up with the Joneses” or maybe keeping a list of grievances? While I don’t think the takeaway here is to make ourselves a doormat for repeated abuse, I do think Rumi is inviting us to consider that sometimes keeping score can be toxic. Is there a relationship in your life in which you may feel led to stop keeping score and lean in to love? *“Quit keeping score if you want to be free. / Love has ejected the referee.”*

Second, remember the poem, “Guest House,” that Jen read at the end of our Spoken Meditation? “This being human is a guest house. /

Every morning a new arrival. / A joy, a depression, a meanness... /
Welcome and entertain them all” (Barks 109)! What might it mean for you
to “**Welcome every guest**” (Moezzi 101)? Importantly, I don’t think this act
of internal hospitality means that these emotional guests need to stay
forever. Rather, Rumi is cautioning us against repression. As the saying
goes, “What we *resist*, persists. But what we *feel*, we can heal.” What
emotion is knocking on your door that you may need to open to, knowing
that sometimes “the only way out is through”?

Third, “**Quit being a drop. Make yourself an ocean**” (Moezzi 184;
Helminski 217). This quote reminds me of a line from Leonard Cohen that,
“If you don’t become the ocean, you’ll be sea sick everyday.” And this
image also connects to that first poem we read inviting us to lie down in
that field “out beyond ideas.” If this pandemic has reminded us of
anything, it is how *interdependent* we truly are. In the coming days, how
might it help to remember that you are not alone; you are part of a vast
interdependent web? “*Quit being a drop. Make yourself an ocean*”

Fourth, “**Open your hands / if you want to be held. / Sit down in
this circle.**” (Barks 3; Moezzi 207). As I have said at the beginning of each
of these Zoom Sunday Services, during this time of physical distancing,
social connection and social solidarity remain as important as ever. If you
are feeling isolated, what might you feel led to do or join in the coming
weeks to make some new connections: “*Open your hands / if you want to
be held. / Sit down in this circle.*”

Fifth and finally, “**Why seek pilgrimage at some distant shore, /
when the Beloved is right next door**” (Moezzi 238)? Sometimes we find
ourselves in a toxic situation, and in that case, the grass truly may be
greener elsewhere. Other times, I hear Rumi inviting us to sink deeper into

the life we already have. What is already present in your life—that regularly makes you feel grateful, energized, and more fully alive—that you might savor and appreciate even more than you already do? “*Why seek pilgrimage at some distant shore / When the Beloved is right next door.*”