

The Healing Spirit of Rumi

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Sufi Heart; photo, Cetta Kenney

In September 2009 my wife and I arrived in Istanbul, once the shining capital of two great empires and still a major center of religious and cultural life. Our plan was to spend a week in that magnificent city, then travel south and visit the historical cities and sites along the Mediterranean coast, and afterward venture inland to the heart of the country, where we would visit Rumi's tomb in Konya and go hiking in Cappadocia, and finally return to Istanbul. But as Mary Ann and I examined more carefully the great distances between places, we realized that our journey was much too ambitious for three weeks, so we reluctantly concluded that we wouldn't have the time and energy to travel to Konya. Yet while my surface mind accepted the likelihood of not going there, my heart pressed for finding a way.

Over the next two weeks we visited the majestic mosques and museums of Istanbul, explored the crumbling temples and towers of Ephesus, roamed the ruined churches of Selchuk, and frequented the seaside shops of Fethiye. It was now time for the last leg of our journey, so we boarded an overnight bus scheduled to arrive

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the next morning in Goreme, one of Cappadoccia's most famous hiking centers. We were exhausted from our exhilarating travels and soon fell asleep in the comfortable reclining seats. The big bus stopped every couple of hours to give us a bathroom break, but once on board we immediately fell asleep again.

**My heart woke me up!
It's beating wildly! It must
be telling me we have to
come back here and visit
Rumi's tomb!**

In the middle of the night after drifting into a deep sleep I was suddenly awakened. My heart was beating wildly. What was going on? It was pitch black in the bus except for the glow of the driver's dash board. I looked out the window and could tell we were on a major expressway in a large city. Scanning the traffic signs, I saw the word "Konya". Could we be in Konya?, I wondered. My heart began beating even faster, and I continued watching the signs above the expressway and on the surrounding buildings. The word Konya appeared again and again. I leaned forward and asked the driver,

"Are we in Konya?"

"Yes, this is Konya."

I was amazed because when we had looked at our map it appeared that Konya was far from the route connecting Fethiye and Goreme. Excitedly I turned to Mary Ann, whose eyes were now open. "We're in Konya!" I said.

"Really?"

"Yes, Konya. My heart woke me

up! It's beating wildly! It must be telling me we have to come back here and visit Rumi's tomb! This may be our only opportunity. Who knows? We may never be in Turkey again."

**I knew what I really wanted:
to visit Rumi's tomb**

"We'll try to find a way to fit it in," Mary Ann said, sleepily. "Maybe we can stop here on our way back to Istanbul."

"Yes, let's do that for sure."

"We can talk about it in the morning. Let's get some sleep."

Mary Ann closed her eyes and quickly fell asleep, but I was too excited to sleep. Looking outside, trying to peer into the darkness beyond the halogen-lit highway, I remembered a fragment of one of Rumi's quatrains, "The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you. Don't go back to sleep. You must ask for what you really want. Don't go back to sleep." I knew what I really wanted: to visit Rumi's tomb. But where was his burial site? What did it look like? I imagined it was a simple, humble tomb housed in a small, modest building, probably the very place where Rumi had lived, studied and taught for many years. I imagined there would be lit candles placed around the tomb, and a few handfuls of devotees standing or bowing in fervid yet quiet prayer. Perhaps some were holding hands in a circle and quietly chanting *zikr*. I wondered how far the site was from the central bus station. Would we be able to walk there or have to take another bus? Before embarking on our trip, I had assumed Konya was a quiet rural town far from any major city.

Whatever it was like when Rumi lived there in the 13th century, it was now a large urban center with many modern buildings.

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Eventually my mind relaxed, and I drifted off to sleep. In the early morning we arrived in Goreme and that afternoon discovered that it lived up to its reputation as a hiker's paradise. The area is replete with hills and valleys studded with fantastic cones, columns and "chimneys" made of hardened volcanic ash. These stunning structures have been sculpted by floods, wind and rain. Some of the hillsides looked like giant scallop

shells or colossal pipe organs, while the terrain varied in appearance from cascading waves of rose and golden rock, to mounds of pure snowlike stone, to rows of grey rocky teeth, to expanses of lime egg carton protuberances, to lumps of ashy mashed potatoes. Carved into some of the cones and columns, as well as into the hillsides, are ancient homes and churches, many built by early Christians who fled Roman, Muslim and Persian persecutors and hid themselves in this remote region.

On our second night in this dusty quiet town I had an amazing dream. Mary Ann and I are in a country in the Middle East or Asia. We are outside near a body of water, perhaps a river, sea or stream. Thousands of other foreigners are also there to witness a demonstration of how the local monks turn the water into some kind of soup. We sit down near the water's edge next to a young couple with a baby. The water near us seems to form a stream or pond. Mary Ann goes off to get something while I establish our place near the couple. The woman is friendly and smiles at me. When Mary Ann returns, we try to replicate what we have witnessed the monks doing. Mary Ann puts some ingredients, either broth or pellets, into the stream. They cause the water to change to a broth, but the broth seems very thin to me. I hear someone say, "You need to mix it or else it will stay at the surface." Another person then says, "No, it's the kind that automatically mixes into the water." I sense that the second person is probably right, but I also see that the continuous flow of the water steadily dilutes the



Cappadocia; photo, Cetta Kenney

broth. I say to Mary Ann, “I think we need to partition off part of the water so that the broth maintains its concentration.” She seems dubious about this, but I explain the principle of dilution to her, and she agrees to try it. We partition off part of the water and then add the ingredients. The broth concentration increases and is sustained. Perhaps we even taste the broth.

I also learn that the monks are able to transform the stream into a weapon of war: they can make an enemy’s stream undrinkable, perhaps
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even poisonous. At a later point in the dream I am with one of the Asians and ask him the vernacular name for the monks. He tells me the name. I then ask him if they do spiritual healings. He

says they do. Finally, I ask if I can see one. He says that the healings are sacred and special and that they don’t show them to foreigners. Then he pauses and

looks at me and seems to change his mind. “Follow me,” he says as he stands up and starts to walk. I realize he is about to take me to a spiritual healing in progress. I am honored and excited by this prospect. As I follow him,

I consider whether I should tell him I have participated in spiritual healings before as well as led various healing rituals. I am reluctant to reveal my participation in these rituals because I don’t want him to think I am a shaman, and yet I am aware I have led some powerful rituals and in a way have acted like a shaman even though I don’t consider myself one. I have also received healings from African and Indian shamans. As I consider whether to reveal my own involvement in spiritual healings, I wake up, perhaps because Mary Ann bumped me as she was turning over in bed. I was sorry the dream didn’t finish because I was looking forward to witnessing the



Healers; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

spiritual healing and learning from it. Perhaps I would also have asked for a healing for myself. When I told Mary Ann the dream, she said it sounded important and encouraged me to write it down.

In reflecting on the dream I realized that maybe it was part of my calling to become a spiritual healer, but that would require both further training and formal initiation. I acknowledged that I was a bit frightened by the prospect of becoming a healer, and yet I sensed that it might be something I should – perhaps even must – do. I have led spiritual healings and other transformative processes in my classes on Kabbalah, interfaith spiritual direction, and transpersonal psychology, and many students have said how healing and transformative the processes were. At this juncture in my life, it seemed a matter of whether or not I wanted to go to the next step and apprentice with a master healer. I vowed to pray about this. Indeed, as I was writing down the dream, I prayed that God please show me if spiritual healing is part of my calling, and if so, with whom I should apprentice or how I should further my training and initiation. In the prayer I also expressed my deep desire to meet a shamanic healer in Turkey. As I concluded the prayer, I realized I needed to tell Mary Ann that it was essential that we go to Rumi's tomb. It struck me that Rumi was not only a great spiritual master and poet but probably also a shaman. "He is one of the great spirits that has walked and worked on this planet," I wrote in my journal. "Perhaps I will even receive an initiation from his spirit!

. . . Allahu Akbar. Halleluyah."

The next day Mary Ann and I discussed our return trip to Istanbul. Our hotel owner had told me it was possible to leave early in the morning for Konya, arrive around noon, spend a half day at Rumi's tomb, and then catch an over-night bus to Istanbul. That is exactly what we decided to do.

How thrilling and moving to be approaching the home and burial place of such an amazing human being.

On Friday morning we took the early bus to Konya and arrived in the central bus station three hours later. From there we caught a *dolmush* that took us on a winding route through the city. After about forty minutes we began seeing signs for the Mevlana Cultural Center. That must be it, I thought, it's probably a cultural center, a museum and a mausoleum. How excited I felt! We were actually going to visit Rumi's tomb!

The *dolmush* let us off near a huge, intricately designed building that I assumed was the Mevlana center. It had a large silver dome attended by an array of smaller domes and a handful of towering minarets. As we approached the awesome edifice, my body was trembling and eyes tearing up. How thrilling and moving to be approaching the home and burial place of such an amazing human being. Soon we discovered that the building was not the Mevlana Museum but a famous mosque, the Selimiye Camii, built by Sinan, the famous Ottoman architect. A man told us that the museum was just behind the mosque.

We walked around the mosque, and once on the other side, saw a long line forming in front of a nearby complex of buildings. Scanning the line, I could see from the faces and clothes that there were people from Europe, Asia and Africa. I approached a woman near the front of the line and asked her if this was the Mevlana Museum. She said it was. From her accent, I could tell she was probably German.

We got in line and waited briefly to enter the center. After paying a nominal fee, we entered the courtyard. The complex consisted of ornate stone and wood buildings on two sides, as well as a row of less elaborate stone buildings

I felt like a pilgrim who had finally arrived at his holy destination.

with domes and towers, and an open area leading into a garden. Standing out against the pure blue sky above the ornate buildings was an impressive spiky minaret, and nearby was a gorgeous turquoise turret – a fluted cylinder topped by a fluted cone and decorated at their juncture by dark band filled with golden Arabic calligraphy. The courtyard had two fountains and was crowded with people, some taking pictures. I wanted to refrain from being a tourist and to instead remain a pilgrim.

“Would you like to go directly to Rumi’s tomb?” I asked Mary Ann.

“Yes. It’s too crowded out here. Let’s find the tomb.”

A sign revealed that the tombs were in the brown building directly to our

right. Entering the arched doorway into the cavernous vestibule we saw a magnificent display of Arabic calligraphy on the walls and vaulted ceiling.



Courtyard, Rumi's Tomb, Konya, Turkey; photo, Cetra Kenney

“Look at those leaves above the door,” Mary Ann said excitedly, as she pointed to several framed leaves embellished with calligraphy. “They must have inspired Bektas!”

“Yes, I hadn’t realized that this kind of work dated back so far.”

In Istanbul we had met a Sufi artist named Bektas who did calligraphy on dried leaves – mostly divine names written in flowing, golden ink. Indeed, we had purchased a beautiful leaf with Allah written in gold and embellished with a white and brown trim.

As we moved from the vestibule into

the main chamber, I was dazzled by the golden walls and massive pillars supporting the high vaulted ceilings. Their surfaces were decorated with extraordinary calligraphy as well as dazzling floral and geometric designs. From the ceiling hung large lamps and chandeliers, and on either side of the chamber were dozens of tombs of different sizes bedecked with colorful cloth covers and topped with braided cloth hats. The dressed up tombs looked like regal, embroidered tents. Placards revealed that this was not just the place where Rumi was buried but where his relatives and leaders of his Order had also been entombed.

I felt very close to Rumi's spirit.

"I am in awe," Mary Ann said softly. "There's so much love in here!"

"Yes, so much love and beauty and reverence!"

I felt like a pilgrim who had finally arrived at his holy destination. This was a wonderful and a strange feeling for I had never before thought of myself as a pilgrim. I associated the word "pilgrim" with Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Galilee. Though I had taken several spiritual journeys to Israel and India, I had not considered myself a pilgrim. I was a seeker, an explorer, a worshipper, but not a pilgrim. But perhaps I was – for I had undertaken these journeys to holy places with the intention of deepening my spiritual life.

My sense of being moved – of my heart breaking and body trembling – increased as I entered the mausoleum and slowly processed toward Rumi's

impressive tomb at the far end of the chamber. I walked quietly, meditatively. Hundreds of other devotees walked ahead of me, all silent or quietly praying.

At last I stood before Rumi's tomb. It was a massive marble sarcophagus set upon a silver platform and covered with a black velvet quilt embroidered with verses from the Qur'an. My being became very still. I waited to feel Mevlana's presence more deeply and then prayed silently for the spiritual qualities I associated with him: an abiding passion and love for God, a trusting willingness and ability to suffer for the sake of that love, an unceasing capacity to find meaning and value in that suffering, a poetic power to express my adoration of God and inspire others to love and serve the Source of All, and a wisdom that transcends any single tradition.

I felt very close to Rumi's spirit. I sensed that he would help me achieve my spiritual aspirations. As a Jew I was raised to pray directly to God, not to a living or dead person. Though I knew there were famous rabbis who had contacted the souls of departed sages and saints for spiritual advice and support, I had never been encouraged to engage in that practice and indeed had rarely done so.

I turned to Mary Ann. Her face was still and peaceful, and she appeared to have just finished her prayers, which must have been very profound too. We proceeded to the nearby tombs of Rumi's father and son and silently took in their presence for a little while. Then we entered the adjacent chamber where the museum was. I was amazed to see Rumi's vestments and hats, some

of his original manuscripts, and one of his prayer rugs. Wow, that rug must have witnessed some pretty awesome revelations – and absorbed some pretty incredible energy! Perhaps it still was permeated by the scent of Rumi's body and the salt of his tears. For a few moments I longed to open the locked glass cabinet and touch and smell the graced carpet!

For several minutes I stood in rapt prayerful silence listening to the mesmerizing voice of the muezzin as it was broadcast from the loud speakers on the towering minarets.

In the adjoining chamber was an exhibit of Korans and prayer books from the period, many beautifully illuminated with gold calligraphy and intricate designs. Mary Ann realized that some of the designs were similar to those she had made when decorating birthday cards! Had she seen them somewhere during

her training as a Sufi or had she just spontaneously invented the very same designs as these medieval calligraphers? She didn't know, but she became excited about learning more about Islamic calligraphy.

Several tiny Qur'ans, not much bigger than a postage stamp, were on display in the glass cases. The accompanying placard explained that these miniature Qur'ans had been created by scribes so devoted to honoring Allah that some had even gone blind carrying out this loving but difficult work. How few people today, I thought, are willing to sacrifice their eyesight for the sake of creating such holy and beautiful works! The Jews are called the People of the Book, but I could see that these Muslim scribes loved their Qur'an as much as the Jewish scribes loved their Torah.

We were so inspired by the exhibit that we made a second round before deciding to leave. Upon re-entering the courtyard, Mary Ann immediately went off in search of a restroom, and I walked over to the small fountain where I said I would wait for her. Just as I began to



Rumi's Tomb, Konya, Turkey; photo, Cetia Kemney

reflect on the amazing beauty and sanctity of our shared experience, I was suddenly startled by a loud tremulous voice chanting, “Aaaaaaallaaaaahuuuuuuuuu Akbar! Aaaaaaallaaaaahuuuuuuu Akbar!” The call to prayer had begun at the nearby Selimiye mosque. What amazing synchronicity! For several minutes I stood in rapt prayerful silence listening to the mesmerizing voice of the muezzin as it was broadcast from the loud speakers on the towering minarets. The chanted Arabic words mixed with the soothing sounds of the nearby fountain and with the cacophonous voices of the visitors bustling around the courtyard. Into this rich sonic fabric was woven the successive calls to prayer of muezzins at other nearby mosques. The Oneness is all this!, I thought.

During the dance the right hand is raised with palm up to receive from God, while the left hand is pointed downward with palm down to give away to others whatever gifts from God are not needed for oneself.

After the prayer concluded, I noticed a group of tourists standing around a guide. I walked toward them and overhead the guide saying that Rumi’s Order was open to anyone, whatever their faith or lack of faith. Indeed, in the mausoleum was one of his famous quatrains that said: “Come, come, whoever you are. Wanderer, idolator, worshipper of fire. Come even though you have

broken your vows a thousand times. Come, and come yet again. Ours is not a caravan of despair.” Yes, I thought, this is the grand openness and ecumenical spirit I loved so much about Rumi. I had previously read a different translation of this quatrain but hadn’t realized that it was the message Rumi announced to individuals considering involvement in his Order. I had taken it as a more general invitation to the spiritual life. The guide explained that persons interested in joining the Mevlana Order had to go through demanding physical and spiritual trials to become initiated. For instance, they had to kneel on a sheep’s pelt for three days in prayer and meditation to reflect on whether they wanted to join the Order. If they decided to join and were accepted, they would have to go through 1001 ordeals! I was surprised and a bit disappointed by the rigor and regimentation of the Order and wondered if the strictness had been initiated by Rumi or by his followers.

I also discovered that novices learned to do the *sema*, the whirling Sufi dance, by putting their toes around a nail pounded into the ground or a board. During the dance the right hand is raised with palm up to receive from God, while the left hand is pointed downward with palm down to give away to others whatever gifts from God are not needed for oneself. I remembered that the Rabbinic Sages had given a similar significance to the Hebrew letter “Hey”: the left upper portion of the letter is open to receive from God, while the lower portion is open to allow the divine energy to flow to others. “Hey”

is the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet and symbolizes the five-fingered hand that gives and receives. When “hey” is accompanied by an apostrophe, it stands for “HaShem”, “The Name” – the Eternal One whose holiest name is Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey, the tetragrammaton, the unpronounceable Name that scholars approximate as “Yaweh” and that traditional Jews replace with the name “Adonai,” which means “Lord”. The Name is associated with divine compassion, the most revered quality of God.

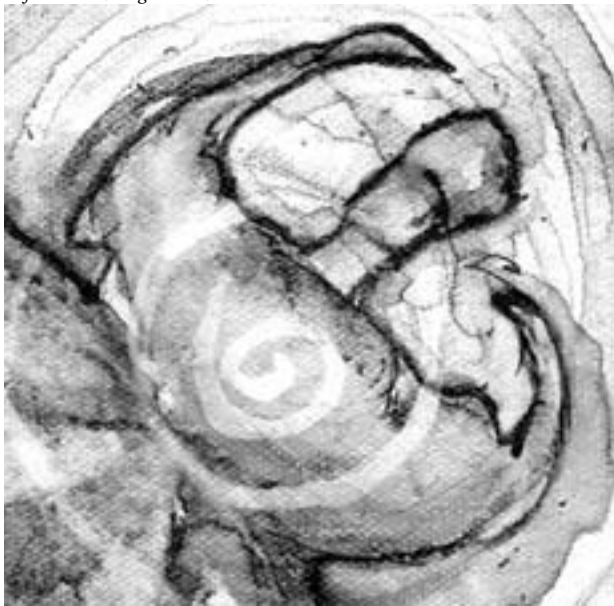
The guide said that Rumi did not feel a mausoleum was necessary for his renowned father or for himself. It was enough that they would both be buried under the open sky. But when Rumi died, his son consented to the request of his father’s followers that a mausoleum be built over the graves of his father and grandfather. Over the years the tombs of other family members and Order leaders were added.

We visited another building in the complex that contained wax figure reconstructions of the dervishes engaged

in their daily activities. All of the men wore tall conical hats, wide skirted garments, long outer coats, and trimmed beards. The hat signified the tomb, the skirted garment the death shroud, and the outer coat the grave. The clothing is a constant remind to transcend worldly attachments and to attain and sustain spiritual consciousness. Two men were cooking food, a handful of men were sitting in a circle listening to their teacher, one man was sitting alone studying an open book, and one man was whirling on a wood platform with another man thoughtfully looking on. The dervishes reminded me of the Masons with their costumes, their passion for study and their stages of mystic initiation.

Before coming to the Mevlana center I had experienced Rumi mainly through his poetry and stories. I had also sometimes thought of him when I participated in *zhikrs*. It was a different matter, however, to learn about his organizational efforts in building the Sufi Order. I was both inspired by his accomplishments and a little put off

Sufi Dancers; original art, Lonnie Hanzon



by the Order's strictures and structures. In a way our visit both intensified and humanized his presence in my life.

Upon leaving the complex we shared our experiences. Both of our hearts were filled with joy, gratitude and inspiration. Though we didn't have much time before catching our bus to Istanbul, we wanted to visit the tomb of Rumi's great teacher and friend, Shams of Tabriz. An official of the Mevlana center told us that the tomb was nearby, but finding it proved to be quite challenging. After consulting with several street vendors,

I realized that knowing such great ones in the spirit may be enough, more than enough.

we finally located the shrine next to a square where children were playing. Taking off our shoes, we entered the building, which was surprisingly small and unadorned by comparison with the impressive Mevlana center. Several women were sitting in prayer before the tomb. I prayerfully expressed my appreciation to Shams for his influence on Rumi and prayed that I too would meet and befriend someone so powerfully intoxicated with God. While I am grateful that many of my friends are lovers of God, and that all of my spiritual teachers have been remarkable people, a part of me still wants to befriend someone with Sham's life-changing power. I am not seeking a guru – indeed, I am not looking for someone to advise me on how to live my life – but I would greatly value a spiritual friendship with an

extraordinary human being like Shams or Rumi.

Two hours later we boarded our bus to Istanbul, and on Sunday morning were on our return flight to San Francisco. As we headed home, I pondered my encounter with Rumi and my yearning to have a friendship with a great spiritual being. Rumi had known Shams for only a brief period, no more than four years, but their spiritual companionship continued to grow after

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Sham's disappearance. Indeed, loss and longing dramatically intensified Rumi's love for his departed friend. Eventually, the two became as one in spirit. I realized that knowing such great ones in the spirit may be enough, more than enough. I have loved the spirit of Moses, I have loved the spirit of Rabbi Akiva, I have loved the spirit of the Baal Shem Tov. In recent years I have come to love the spirit of the Buddha, and the spirit of Jesus, and the spirit of Jelaluddin Rumi. Mevlana is one of my beloved spiritual teachers, and now he feels like one of my beloved spiritual friends.

As I reflected on my dream about the healing broth, I realized I did not meet a living spiritual healer in Turkey, but I surely met a great healer in the spirit: I met Rumi. My encounters with



Spiritual Healer; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

his spirit through his writings and at his tomb have brought me closer to Allah-Adonai – the Great Mystery that is known by many names and transcends all names. That closeness is, I believe, the ultimate spiritual healing. Jewish tradition says that it is a great mitzvah to “m’karev” someone – to bring him or her closer to God. Rumi has performed many great mitzvahs by *m’kareving* me and millions of other souls!

When I returned home, I discovered that Rumi had much to say about spiritual healing. For him the essence of healing is love, divine love. The spiritual healer, like the spiritual teacher and friend, is a lover of God and all God’s creation. The true healer is also an empty mirror that allows the sufferer to see his human wounds and flaws as well as behold his glorious divine self. Rumi emphasizes that it is never the human healer who does the healing but the divine light and love that enter the soul wound of the sufferer – a wound that

has been prayerfully faced by the sufferer and prayerfully tended by the healer. The healer’s most powerful practice is sincere and fervid prayer!

Am I called to be a spiritual healer? If being a healer is helping bring others closer to the divine, then certainly I aspire to accomplish that great mitzvah. Of course, aspiration is not accomplishment. Only a great lover of God and God’s creation can be an effective healer. Through my teaching, counseling, writing and community leadership I try to support – in an open, nondirective and nondogmatic way – the spiritual exploration and growth of individuals from diverse backgrounds. Whatever the exact nature of my calling in this life, my challenge is always to deepen my love, to polish my mirror, and to lovingly serve God and God’s creation. The healings that my students, clients and community members experience are gifts from the Source of Life. I am just a caring companion trying to lend a hand.