

## Messengers from the Mystery

Readings: 'In the Secular Night' by Margaret Atwood  
'Put This Design in Your Carpet' by Jalaluddin Rumi  
'The God Who Only Knows Four Words' by Hafez

There once was a young man who fell in love. He was a poor boy from a poor family. When his father died when he was a teenager, this man went to work as a baker's assistant to support his family. Several years later, when he was 21, he caught a glimpse of a young woman while making a delivery. That glimpse was all he needed to fall in love. He was smitten. She didn't know he existed. She was from a noble family. Even if she knew he existed, their relationship would not work. Baker's assistants did not marry noble women.

This young man had always had a gift for poetry. He started writing poems about the woman he saw that day, poems that celebrated her beauty, poems that expressed his longing. He sang the poems as he made his deliveries throughout the city—and they were very good. Other people started singing them too and they became popular throughout the city. This newfound fame did not satisfy the young man. He wanted his impossible love.

There was a legend in his city that if anyone kept vigil, stayed up all night, for forty nights at the tomb of a certain saint, he or she or they would be granted their heart's desire. No one had ever successfully done this, but this young man was lovesick and had no better ideas. He didn't know what else to do. One night, he left work and went to the tomb. He willed himself to stay up all night, putting hope in the legend. He stayed up all night that night – and was awake all night the next night and the night after that. Somehow, he did not sleep at all for forty nights. His love was that strong.

When the sun rose on the fortieth morning, the archangel Gabriel appeared to the young man and told him to ask for whatever his heart desired. The legend was true and his wish would now be granted.

And what happens next changes this story from a run-of-the-mill fairy tale to something else. The young man was stunned by the appearance of the angel. The angel was so much more beautiful, radiant, and glorious than anything he had ever seen before, including the woman who had inspired his impossible task in the first place. He questioned his previous hopes. His heart's desire shifted. He no longer wanted the young woman's love. He said, 'If God's messenger is so beautiful, how much more beautiful must God be! I want God!' The angel Gabriel then directed the young man to a spiritual teacher who would help him know and love God. The young man rushed off and began his studies with that teacher later that day.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mindlin, Henry S. 'Introduction: The Life and Work of Hafiz.' In *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz The Great Sufi Master*. Daniel Ladinsky, trans. New York: Penguin Compass, 1999. Pages, 11-12

This is the legend of the spiritual awakening of Shams-ud-din Muhammad, a fourteenth century Persian mystic and poet who wrote under the pen name Hafez. His words were our chalice lighting this morning and read by Chris earlier. He writes that we are here to surrender to love and joy. He writes that God is constantly inviting us to dance.

Like many in the mystical tradition, he spent his life falling in love with God, with the mystery, with that love that holds us all.

Now, a second story of a mystic. This is the story of Jalaluddin Rumi, who lived about a hundred years before Hafez in what is now Turkey. Like Hafez, he was a mystic and a poet, part of the Sufi mystical tradition in Islam. Our introit this month is his words set to music. Chris read one of his poems earlier.

Rumi's story is also a love story, another love story where the object of affection switches from a person to the divine. Rumi was a religious leader in his community, a role he had inherited from his father. When he was about 37, he met the man who would change his life. Shams of Tabriz was a wandering mystic who came to his town. Shams did something that day that altered Rumi's life. Some say he asked a powerful question, a question so powerful that it made Rumi faint. Others say he set all of Rumi's books on fire or dumped them in a lake. Whatever it was, Rumi and Shams became inseparable, tied together in ecstatic friendship, in platonic love with one another. Though Rumi married and had children, it was Shams who was the love of his life.

Then, four years later, Shams disappeared. Rumi and Shams were talking at Rumi's home when Shams was called to the backdoor. He went out to talk to someone and was never seen again. He was likely murdered.

Overcome with grief, Rumi searched and searched for his beloved Shams. After a long search, he realized that he carried a piece of Shams within him and they were never really separated. Many of talk about how we hold memories of our beloved dead. Rumi took this further, he felt Shams as a real presence within him. He even titled one of his poetry collections *The Works of Shams of Tabriz*.

Over time, Rumi's love of Shams and his love for God blended together. He insisted that the love between him and Shams was the same as the love of God. They only appeared to be separate. They were actually the same love and the difference between divine love and early love is only an illusion. In his poems, one often cannot tell what sort of love Rumi is writing about – and Rumi makes no distinction between the earthly and the spiritual, the imminent and the transcendent. For him, it is all the one love that holds us.<sup>2</sup>

Two mystics. Two love stories that start as the love of another person then transform into the love of God, the mystery, the Love that is greater than all of us and holds us all.

Mysticism is one way of religious knowing, religious knowing rooted in emotion, spirituality, and love. Fred Campbell served People's Church as interim minister from 1995 to 1997. During

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<sup>2</sup> Sources for this story: Rumi, Jalaluddin. *The Essential Rumi*. Coleman Barks, trans. New York: HarperOne, 1995. Pages xix-xx and Prothero, Stephen. *God is Not One*. HarperOne: New York, 2010. Page 60-61

his time here, he led a class on 'The Four Faiths, four ways of religious knowing during his time here.

Fred defines mysticism like this. 'Your faith is mysticism if you know about the natural world but also know there is a presence, force, or power which is within, or beyond, or unifies all things. People who are mystics anchor the meaning of their living in the spiritual realm which is supported by the physical, biological, and psychological realms of knowing, but not limited to them.'<sup>3</sup> Other worthy definitions of mysticism include 'new ways of knowing and loving based on states of awareness in which [the holy] becomes present in our inner acts'<sup>4</sup> and, 'the realization of a union or a unity with or in something that is enormously, if not infinitely, greater than the empirical self.'<sup>5</sup>

Nearly every religious tradition has a mystical tradition within it, the people who seek to connect to the spiritual realm through their experience, or in the stories of Hafez and Rumi, orient their spiritual life toward falling in love with God. There are mystical elements and mystical traditions in nearly all of the world's wisdom traditions – Hinduism, Taoism, Shamanism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and more. If you look at the mystical texts from various descriptions, the efforts people have made to put words to what is seen and felt and sensed, you will find that the words are surprisingly similar across these traditions, that the mystical experience seems to be echoed and repeated with variations across time and space throughout the human experience. There is a subset of the humanity that seems to be wired this way. I count myself among them.

There are many mystics. Nearly half of Americans have had a mystical experience of some sort and even more say they have had religious experiences.<sup>6</sup> Of course, not everyone with a mystical or religious experience is primarily a mystic. Very very few people use only one form of knowing to make sense of this beckoning and baffling world.

Lest you think that most of Americans are being visited by angels, it is important to know that mystical experiences don't always involve the spiritual pyrotechnics of the story about Hafez. They often look like the quiet certainty of Rumi realizing he holds pieces of Shams within him. My mystical moments are usually moments of connection with others when I feel a larger love that I sometimes call God rejoicing. There was a time at the beach when the sun, low in the sky suddenly burst through the clouds and every being on the beach was glowing. I felt a deep assurance that all were well and all were beloved. There was the time I was with someone who started speaking in tongues. I didn't understand it. I still don't understand it, but I was present to the power and mystery surging through this woman. There are times in my work with all of you – times in worship when the music is just right and brings a feeling of ecstasy or when

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<sup>3</sup> Campbell, Fred. *Four Faiths with Fred or Four Faiths for UUs*. Page 13.

<sup>4</sup> McGinn, Bernard. *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*. New York: Modern Library, 2006. page 11

<sup>5</sup> Robert C. Zaehner, quoted in Lisy, Stjepan 'Preliminary Remarks for the Comparative Study of Mysticism: Mysticism is What Unio Mystica Is...' *Communio viatorum*. 54 no 1 2012, p 88-107. page 91

<sup>6</sup> Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Living with a Wild God: A Nonbeliever's Search for the Truth about Everything*. New York: Twelve, 2015. Page 216

someone shares something particularly heartbreaking and heartfelt and the love of this community surges to meet them and hold them. There are smaller moments when someone says the thing I didn't know I needed to hear and for that moment, I know that he or she or they is the messenger from the mystery that Rumi writes about in the poem that gives this sermon its title. These are the moments when we each become love's hands, love's feet, and love's voice.

'Love is the way messengers  
from the mystery tell us things.' Writes Rumi.

'Love is the mother. We are her children.  
She shines inside us, visible-invisible,  
As we lose trust or feel it start to grow again.'

Much of my spiritual practice is simply paying attention to the way love shines within, among and beyond us and having the presence to see that visible-invisible love. That is what mysticism means to me.

It might be a professional hazard that I sometimes find myself in spaces where people are trying to out-mystic each other. Occasionally, when religious people gather, someone shares a mystical experience and then the next person tries to share something even more meaningful and profound. Perhaps you've found yourself in these sort of weird contests or felt outside of something important when someone else describes a mystical experience because it is not your way of finding meaning. That is fine. The life of integrity actually isn't a competition. There are no timeclocks or total scores or points for artistic or technical merit. The measure is how it helps you live. A mystic Rabbi who I admire shares this passage in her memoir, 'Spiritual pyrotechnics—these nifty, fantastical tricks and experiences—go down smooth, and for a lot of people, they're valuable as access into a different way of relating to the world. They're a shiny toy that entices us to ask new sorts of questions and lower our guard, that helps us to circle the perimeter of the Divine palace and (more important) to go looking for the keys to its inner chambers. These incidents are not the keys themselves, but they often lead us closer to them. That's not a bad thing.

But the danger lies in confusing these feel-good episodes with the path itself, as did the priest in a famous Zen story: "The founder of our sect," boasted the priest, "had such miraculous powers that he held a brush in his hand on one bank of the river, his attendant held up a paper on the other bank, and the teacher wrote the holy name of... [a Buddha] through the air. Can you do such a wonderful thing?"

The master Bankei replied lightly: "That is not the manner of Zen. My miracle is that when I feel hungry I eat, and when I feel thirsty, I drink."

Spiritual pyrotechnics are fun, but at best, focusing only on this kind of encounter leaves us out of whack. At worst, it misses the point entirely.<sup>7</sup>

Mysticism matters for those who are wired that way. The experiences of love and assurance can inspire us to embody love in the world – and there are so many others living the life of

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<sup>7</sup> Ruttenberg, Danya. *Surprised by God: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Religion*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2008. Page 83

integrity who are not wired for these sorts of spiritual pyrotechnics. One of the great gifts of this community is that all of us can be here together, supporting one another in the various ways we pursue meaning, love, and joy.

I am closing today by returning to the words of Hafez that Manny read earlier. This is the full poem that he read only a piece of.

We have not come here to take prisoners  
But to surrender ever more deeply  
To freedom and joy.

We have not come into this exquisite world  
To hold ourselves hostage from love.

Run, my dear,  
From anything  
That may not strengthen  
Your precious budding wings

Run like hell, my dear,  
From anyone likely to put a sharp knife  
Into the sacred, tender vision  
Of your beautiful heart.

We have a duty to befriend  
Those aspects of obedience of our house  
And shout to our reason  
"Oh please, oh please  
Come out and play."

For we have not come here to take prisoners,  
Or to confine our wounded spirits

But to experience ever and ever more deeply  
Our divine courage, freedom, and Light!

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.