

Rumi: Poet of the Heart

by Laz Slomovits

Come, come whoever you are —
wanderer, worshipper, lover
of leaving. It doesn't matter.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.
Come, even if you have broken your
vow a thousand times. Come,
come yet again, come.

This was the first poem I read by Jelaluddin Rumi, the 13th Century Sufi mystic, and I knew immediately that I had a friend. In just a few short lines he made it clear that he knew me (and most everybody else!) through and through — and loved us all unconditionally anyway. There is such hope and encouragement in those lines.

Reading more of his work I soon found out that, compassionate as he was, Rumi could be equally fierce with hypocritical or weak-spirited behavior.

Gamble everything for love
if you're a true human being.
If not, leave this gathering.
Half-heartedness does not
reach into majesty.
You set out to find God,
but then you keep stopping
for long periods
at mean-spirited roadhouses.

To this day, the more I enter Rumi's world, the more I discover the many-layered richness and variety of the perspectives he gives on life.

This September 30th marks Rumi's 800th birthday. Throughout these centuries, his work has inspired, encouraged, and delighted millions throughout the Middle East and beyond. Although Rumi began to be widely known in the English speaking world only about a hundred years ago, interest in his poetry has exploded to such an extent in recent years that he has become the best-selling poet in America. Popular icons such Deepak Chopra, Wayne Dyer, Demi Moore, and Julia Cameron quote him and express gratitude for the gifts he has brought into their lives — which they share with their large audiences. There is a moving story of Leonard Bernstein, the night before he died, asking for several Rumi poems to be read to him over and over.

In 1976, Robert Bly handed Coleman Barks a scholarly translation of Rumi and growled, "These poems need to be released from their cages."

But it's not just celebrities who have embraced Rumi. You find his poetry quoted in a huge variety of places — in books on creativity, psychology, and business, in self-help and spiritual books, on calendars, bookmarks, greeting cards. Calligraphers decorate his lines on hand made paper, illustrators paint his passionate images of love, dancers whirl to his mystical metaphors, and musicians improvise while poets recite his ecstatic verses. In recognition of his world-wide influence, UNESCO has designated 2007 as The Year of Rumi.

Rumi was born in 1207, near the city of Balkh, in what is now Afghanistan. During his childhood his family moved a number of times, fleeing before Genghis Khan's armies, finally settling in Konya, Turkey. One of the first legends about Rumi comes from this time of traveling. It is said that a great poet and teacher, Fariduddin Attar, recognized Rumi's greatness even as a boy. Seeing the young Rumi walking behind his father, (Bahauddin Walad, a highly respected theologian and mystic, and head of a medrese, a

dervish learning community) Attar said, "Here comes a lake, followed by an ocean."

After his father's death, when Rumi was still in his early twenties, he became head of the medrese, quickly gaining a reputation as a great scholar, with many students. However, he himself continued to study with several renowned teachers, to deepen his understanding both on an intellectual and mystical level. He also married, fathered four children, and from the letters one of his sons preserved from this time, we know that he was actively involved in the practical affairs of the life of the community, as well as guiding it spiritually.

With all his knowledge and growing fame, it is said that Rumi knew his studying was incomplete and limited; he longed for deep transformation, not just more learning. Legend has it that, at the same time, a wild mystic, hermit and wanderer, Shams of Tabriz was praying to meet someone who yearned for God in the same passionate way he did, someone who could hold what he had to give. He asked inwardly again and again, "Who will be my friend?" Finally, a reply came in the form of a question. "What will you give?" Shams replied instantly, with no hesitation, "My life." "Your friend is Jelaluddin Rumi in Konya."

There are many stories about their initial meeting. In my favorite one, Rumi, then thirty seven years old, was sitting by a fountain in a square in Konya, reading to his students from rare books that included his father's writings on divine love. Suddenly, Shams pushed through the crowd and knocked all his books into the water. Rumi cried out, "Who are you and what are you doing?" Shams replied, "It's time for you to live what you've been reading about." Seeing Rumi looking despairingly at the precious books in the water, Shams reached into the pool and brought one up — dry. In some versions of the story Shams proceeded to restore all the miraculously dry books to Rumi — who now understood the dryness of mere intellectual knowledge. In others versions, when Shams offered to retrieve them, Rumi turned away from the books and said, "Leave them". Either way, the incident was symbolic of Rumi's initiation into a whole new level of experience, leaving behind his old way of perceiving the world.

Shams and Rumi secluded themselves for many days at a time, completely absorbed in sohbet, mystical conversation. Andrew Harvey, a contemporary Rumi scholar and translator says, "A massive transformation of Rumi's heart and whole being now began to take place in a transmission from Shams' heart to his. Shams knew he had very little time and that Rumi had to be utterly remade so that the revelations he was destined to transmit would be potent in him."

Part of the reason Shams knew he had little time was that he was twenty or more years older than Rumi. But another, more compelling reason, was the growing jealousy of Rumi's disciples, seeing the great influence Shams had on their teacher. Shams was forced to flee from Konya to Damascus. Rumi, overcome with grief at the separation, sent his son, Sultan Velad, to bring Shams back. But the jealousy and hatred of Rumi's students soon flared up



again, and this time when Shams left — some say Rumi's disciples murdered him — he did not return.

This is when the Rumi whose poetry has come down to us through the centuries begins to emerge. According to legend, holding on to a pillar in his courtyard, Rumi began to turn around and around the pole, (this later became the basis of a core practice of the Mevlevi order of Sufi whirling dervishes) spontaneous poetry of intense longing pouring out of him. Students copied down his lyrics as he kept spinning in his grief. He traveled twice to Damascus, hoping against hope that he would find Shams. It was on his second trip, several years after Shams' disappearance, that a great revelation came to Rumi. He suddenly understood, experienced at the core of his being, that he and Shams were one — he carried Shams within himself. In a poem from that time Rumi expresses their total merging in an unbreakable bond of soul friendship. "Although I am far from you physically, without body or soul, we are one single light...I am him, he is me, O seeker."

This theme of union comes up again and again in Rumi's poetry in a wide variety of ways. It's in his gorgeous images of the lover and the Beloved,

Lovers don't finally meet somewhere
they're in each other all along.

in the powerful lines denouncing all divisions of religion that cause conflict between people,

Two hands, two feet, two eyes, good,
as it should be, but no separation
of the Friend and your loving.

Any dividing there makes other untrue distinctions like “Jew,” and “Christian,” and “Muslim.”

in the advice he gives us on how to live a fulfilling life,

Let the beauty we love be what we do.

in the sublime images of our intimate connection with nature,

What was said to the rose that made it open was said to me here in my chest.

and most often, in the metaphors for the longing human beings feel to be one with God. Perhaps the most famous of these is the metaphor of the nay, the reed flute.

Listen to the story told by the reed, of being separated.

“Since I was cut from the reedbed, 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.”

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don't go back to sleep!

The poetry kept flowing out of him for the rest of his life, for nearly 30 more years, along with a rich panoply of teaching stories and discourses. The sheer volume of his prolific writing is awe-inspiring — and with all the translations that have been done recently, it is estimated that still only about a third of his work has been rendered into English.

The person who is perhaps most responsible for Rumi's fame in America is his foremost translator, himself an eminent poet, Coleman Barks. He in turn credits Robert Bly, poet, translator and author of the classic book about men, “Iron John”, with starting him on what has become his life work of translating Rumi. In 1976 Bly handed Barks a scholarly translation of Rumi and growled, “These poems

need to be released from their cages.” Bly himself had done a number of translations of Rumi, but since the late 1970's Barks has published book after book of versions of Rumi poems.

I've read Rumi's poetry off and on for many years, but since I heard, five months ago, about Rumi's 800th birthday coming up, I've felt drawn to immerse myself in his work, to read from his poetry almost every day, and to set some of his poems to music. Certain lines have started to come up spontaneously to guide and inspire me. For example, one poem begins,

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.
Don't go back to sleep!

Some mornings, when the pull to stay in bed is stronger than the knowledge that getting up to meditate and to work on a new song will be much more uplifting, those lines have actually bubbled up through the lethargy and have gotten me out of bed. Of course, like most of Rumi's poems, this one works on more than one level; going back to sleep can happen in a lot of ways, as we move through our daily lives — and Rumi wants us awake all the time, on all levels of our being.

I'm not the only one on whom Rumi has had this kind of effect. Coleman Barks says, “I find, as I explore the world of Rumi's work, that I keep discovering those qualities with which I need attunement.”

Hosain Mosavat, poet, photographer, instrument maker and former teacher, was born in Iran, but has lived in the Ann Arbor area for more than 50 years. He first heard Rumi the way many children still do in parts of the Middle East — his mother sang Rumi poems to him as lullabies. Later, Rumi's poems inspired him to start writing his own poetry — a practice he maintains to this day. When asked how Rumi's poetry has affected his life, he replies like a poet: “It has made me go through life with a sword in my heart, which severs love from that which is not love.”

Gernot Windfuhr, Professor of Iranian Studies at the University of Michigan, first encountered Rumi as a student in Germany. He has seen the power of Rumi's influence not just in his own life, but in the lives of thousands of students who have been in his classes — many of which include a focus on Rumi — in the forty plus years he has been teaching. As a scholar, he is aware of subtleties of Rumi's artistry which, as he says, “are impossible to render in translation.” And yet, he sees that what comes across to everyone is Rumi's “profound depth of longing, which is probably unsurpassed.”

Domenic Tamborriello is a clinical social worker, who is also the primary organizer of RumiNations800, an Ann Arbor celebration of Rumi's 800th birthday, September 28-30. He said, “No one has braided the rope of the human with the rope of the divine like Rumi. Every poem is a love poem to God, or as Rumi would say, to the Beloved. He can find the presence of the Beloved in a drop of the ocean and help us become both that drop and the ocean itself.”

As I talked with people about Rumi, it seemed that everyone — poet or not — gave amazingly poetic answers, Rumi's deep influence shining in their replies. Mahmoud Moallemian is a member of the Academic Computing

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and Network services at Michigan State University. Born in Iran, he has lived and worked in the US since 1982. “Rumi's poetry has taught me that love and tolerance are essential parts of living, especially in today's world.” And then he begins to quote Rumi by heart,

From love thorns become flowers...
From love vinegar becomes wine...
From love fury turns to mercy...

And he continues reciting, each line beginning with, “From love...”

Everyone I asked about Rumi responded by talking about love in one form or another. Sepideh Vahidi, Iranian singer, painter and graduate student in Fine Arts at the University of Michigan, summed it up most simply, most eloquently. When I asked her, “What are the two or three most important teachings of Rumi — to you, personally?” She replied, “To be in love, to be in love and to be in love.”

Rumi's love knew no boundaries.

The clear bead at the center changes everything.
There are no edges to my loving now.

I've heard it said there's a window that opens
from one mind to another,

but if there's no wall, there's no need
for fitting the window or the latch.

It was, and is, a love meant to dissolve what separates us from each other and from God — whatever our conception of God is. When Rumi died, on December 7th, 1273, his funeral procession included Christians, Jews, Moslems, and members of other faiths, all coming to honor the man who taught and so fully embodied universal love, a love that transcended religion, race, nationality and all the other artificial barriers humans put up between each other. This may be why, 800 years after his birth, he continues to inspire people all over the world — perhaps now more than ever — with a bright hope; that we can each live our lives in touch with our divine source, and from this core of our being, share with each other a profound vision of oneness.

Laz Slomovits is one of the twin brothers in Ann Arbor's nationally known children's music duo, Gemini. Laz gives heartfelt thanks and credit to Coleman Barks, both for his magnificent translations, as well as for the stories of Rumi's life, on which much of this article is based.

Rumi Comes to Ann Arbor - This Fall!

A Celebration of Rumi with Various Performers

Sept. 7, 7 p.m. at Ann Arbor Public Library • Local lovers of Rumi's poetry, both Persian and American, give a many-faceted presentation of his work through poetry, storytelling, dance, and music. Audience members encouraged to bring their favorite Rumi poem to share at the end of the evening. Performers include poets Hosain Mosavat and Domenic Tamborriello; musicians Laszlo Slomovits, Laurel Federbush, Lisa Warren, and Sepideh Vahidi; storytellers/reciters Ahmad Baratloo and Mahmoud Moallemian; and dancers Shirley Axon, Nancy Heers, Diane Macauley, and Linda Sinkule. This is a free, “pre-event” leading up to the RumiNations 800 celebration (see listing below). Free. Call 327-4265; gemini2200@comcast.net.

RumiNations800: A Rumi Celebration! with Coleman Barks, Robert Bly, and others

Sept. 28-30 • A weekend celebration of the 800th birthday of Jelaluddin Rumi, 13th century Persian Sufi mystic, considered by many to be the world's greatest poet of spiritual life. In recent years, through the work of many translators, Rumi has become known for his magnificent poems on timeless themes of love, inner wisdom, and the spiritual journey, as well as peace and mutual respect between religions and nations. For costs, call Domenic Tamborriello at 734-649-7092; www.ruminations800.com.

Sept. 28, 7 p.m. • Canadian filmmaker Tina Petrova's docudrama “Rumi – Turning Ecstatic” followed by a Q&A session with the filmmaker. Also includes a performance by Tamir from NYC of dramatic readings and dance interpretations of Rumi. \$25 or \$15 students at Rackham Auditorium.

Sept. 29, 7 p.m. • Poetry reading with Coleman Barks and Robert Bly, accompanied by musicians David Darling on cello and Marcus Wise on tablas. \$50 premier seating, \$30 general or \$20 students at Rackham Auditorium.

Sept. 30, 1 p.m. • Closing program includes talks by Robert Bly and Coleman Barks about Rumi's writings on peace, as well as presentations by local musicians, poets, and dancers. \$25 or \$15 students.