

*Doorkeepers of the heart: Sufi Women Mystics*

Sermon for 11 14 2004 by Lone Jensen

This morning I invite you to take a respite from your busy lives and put aside the insistent nagging voice that reminds you of all the things you may still have to do today, your plans for next week, the latest bad news on TV or radio, the e-mails, the noise, the speed of the idiots on the freeway, those idiots that funny enough never seem to include ourselves. In this information age we are overloaded with images, demands and distractions. We can see in living color the killing and the dying of soldiers, insurgents and civilians in Fallujah and find it hard to escape the latest of a long line of trials of the century, I am so relieved that the Scott Peterson case is over. But we can also watch a romantic old fashioned movie, escape to outer space, see men wrestle crocodiles and buy our religion on so many channels it boggles the mind. How many wonderful, inventive, entertaining and terrifying ways are right at our fingertips in which we can escape that encounter

with ourselves, the long look in the mirror! The mirror of the soul is what I mean. Who are you now at this time in your life? What is in your heart? Some Sufis would say that to know oneself fully, completely without subterfuge, is to know God. Camille Adams Helminski writes in her book *Women of Sufism* (Selected and introduced by Camille Adams Helminski, Shambala, 2003 London, Boston), from which I will quote liberally throughout this sermon: *Since the beginning of consciousness human beings both men and women have walked the path of return, of recognition and reunion with the Source of Being.* So what do you think when I say this? My beloved congregation of rational, skeptical, sensible, hard working, socially conscious and ever so outspoken Unitarian Universalists, how do you feel when I say this? Are you, like I was once, a UU mystic waiting for the courage to come out of the closet? Or does this whole God thing annoy you and make you feel left out? Well this is just an invitation and I have, I assure you, perfectly good reasons to tackle this topic. We need to balance the media image of Islam that focuses on extreme

fundamentalism, the suicide death cults and the oppression of women with another truer aspect of this religion of 1.2 billion we need to know about a tradition that honors women and counts them as prophets and saints. Sufis are the mystics of Islam. Women have always been part of that tradition.

So let us imagine that we stand at the door, perhaps an intricately carved wooden filigree door through which we can dimly glimpse the beauty within and smell the fragrance of jasmine and roses. Shall we open it? Beware though we might get a bit lost inside. Annemarie Schimmel the author of *My Soul is a Woman* puts it this way: *To write about Sufism is almost impossible. At the first step a mountain range appear before the eye-and the longer one pursues the path the more difficult it seems to reach any goal at all. In the end only a few will reach the farthest mountain only to understand that they have reached only what was already there in them selves.* She is right. There are so many paths one can take in this garden and yet they do lead to the same goal. To know oneself and in so doing know God. In the beginning Khadija the

prophet Muhammad's beloved wife listened to his revelations, dispelled his doubts and helped carry the light of a new faith.

Muhammad and Khadija's daughter Fatima is often recognized as the first Muslim mystic and delivered her father's eulogy. By some Sufi's she is regarded as their first spiritual head. She was married to Ali and the mother of Hassan and Hussein, all considered as saints by the Shi'ite muslims.

But the Sufi movements and orders grew stronger as a reaction to Islamic rulers who once they gained worldly power no longer followed the simple life but became corrupt and ostentatious. Over consumption and excess really is nothing new. It began as an ascetic movement wanting to get back to a spiritual focus.

Perhaps the most famous woman Sufi was Rab'ia al-Idawiyah (717-801) also known as Rab'ia of Basra in what is now Iraq. She was born into abject poverty but into a very religious family. While she was still young death scattered her family and to survive she was forced into slavery. But so strong was her spirit that even in her life of servitude she found time to meditate and pray by going

without sleep. The story goes that one night her master found her in prayer and saw a light emanating from her head as if a lamp was suspended in mid air above it. So impressed was he by her inner light that he offered her freedom. Ra'bia then went on a pilgrimage to Mecca where because of mishaps she was unable to make it to the center of the mosque and the Kaaba. The Kaaba is a 50 foot high stone cube that holds a black stone, perhaps a meteorite, at the center of mosque by tradition built by Abraham. But since she could not get there the Kaaba instead came to her. The story goes: *Ibrahim Ibn Adham took fourteen years to reach the Kaaba because he followed every rule and stopped at every shrine to say many ritual prayers. But when he arrived in the center of Mecca the Kaaba was not there. Have I gone blind? He asked. No, a voice answered The Kaaba has gone to meet a woman. Jealous and angry he ran to the outskirts of Mecca where he met Ra'bia. He asked her: What is this craziness you have brought to this holy place? I am not the one who is crazy! She answered. You took fourteen years to reach the Kaaba because*

*you cared only about outward appearances with your formal, ritual prayers while I with my inner prayer, I am there already.*

(Women Sufis)

What a rebuke her answer is to those who set empty rules and prohibitions above compassion in religion, who make cruel inhuman decisions, as did the Taliban, who make of human fears a prison for anyone who is not like them. No religion is immune to this as we have seen certainly not Christianity either.

In Islam you submit to God's will. For Ra'bia the union with God, the experience was paramount. She felt that so many people were following religion for all the wrong reasons. Thus she walked through Basra with flaming torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. When people asked what she was doing she answered: *I carry a torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. With these things I am going to set fire to heaven and put out the flames of hell so that the voyagers to God can rip the veils away and see the real goal.* Thus as she said you are not good because you fear hell or hope for a reward in heaven. You do what

is right because you love God and because God is love. Well from our Universalist heritage, that I can surely relate to! She also refers to herself as doorkeeper of the heart. And wrote: *O God Whenever I listen to the voice of anything. You have made the rustling of the trees, the trickling of water, the cries of birds, the flickering of shadow, the song of the thunder I hear it saying God is One.* The same is written on so many altars in our ancient Unitarian churches in Romania, in Hungary, in the Czech Republic and Poland: Egi as Isten: God is one.

Perhaps the one thing most of us think of when we say Sema are the dances. The whirling trance ceremonies are called Sema. The Melevi order founded by Melevana had female disciples and women were encouraged to participate. Sufis were often looked upon with suspicion. In Turkey Ata Turk closed the Derwish lodges. With the emphasis upon personal illumination and interpretation they can be the antithesis of a formalized regulated and restrictive religion. Yet the Sufi saints began as ascetics, and early Sufi women looked inward. Rabi'ya introduced the concept of

God as pure love, and stressed the sura verse in the qu'ran that reads: God loves Humans and Humans love God. A strand of Sufism that has been very welcoming of women in the US is the Chishti order brought here by Hazrat Inayat Khan. The biographies of many Famous Sufi male Mystics mention a mother or a mystical aunt who inspired them. Women often illiterate learned and sang the poetry of God as the beloved as they spun fine threads and went about their daily lives.

As in this poem, recited daily by the dervishes for centuries.

*Oh God grant me light, light in my heart, light in front of me, light behind me, light above me, below me, light in my ears, light in my eyes, light on my skin, light in my hair, light within my flesh, light within my blood, light within my bones, O, God increase my light everywhere O, God grant me light in my heart and light within my self. (adapted) Jajaluddin Rumi who has become very popular lately wrote: Woman is a ray of God. She is not just the earthly beloved she is creative not created.*

Once I too glimpsed the power of women within Islam. In what now seems like another lifetime I lived in Baghdad where my mother in law, a deeply religious Shiite woman took me to women's gatherings on Holy Days . One was at the time of Ahsura where women remembered Hussein, son of Ali and Fatima who was killed with his entourage and family on his way to Baghdad. It was a large room full of women of all ages clad in black. In the middle was an old woman, a holy woman perhaps, telling the story as someone had done for centuries. The women listened and then began to pray and chant and move around hitting their chests with their hands, building a powerful rhythm, crying, and dancing in a circle. The emotion and power in that room was so strong that it seemed the roof above our heads might lift and we would swirl out among the stars. There was something sacred and ancient and utterly female in the air. With my Scandinavian icy reserve I fought it but I felt it and yes, I moved too. God in Islam has no gender and no face. But there are female metaphors everywhere. Every chapter in the Qur'an begins with the words Bismillah ar-

Rhamna ar-Rahim: In the name of God, the infinitely compassionate, the infinitely merciful. Both Rahman compassion and Rahim mercy come from the same root which is the word for womb.

Sufi is a living religion. As recent as 1980 *when the grave of Sufi mystic Fahrnunissa in Konya was exhumed in preparation for a new road Suleyman Dede who was present said that after seven hundred years her body was intact and there was a fragrance of roses. She had been famous for her roses and hyachints. . In Islamic cosmology the human being has intellect, a soul and a body. The soul is a bridge between the two.*

Farsane Milani is a professor at the University of Virginia. She writes about her grandmother: *She always smelled of jasmine and wore back shoes that shined, crowned with a ribbon on top. It is grandmother I am talking about! With her jasmine scent and her world marked and bounded as clearly as her prayer rug. And as she prayed her arms would rise from the prayer rug like pillars soaring into the sky, above sadness, above storms to the heights of*

*creativity to the pinnacle of heaven, then again to the depths of submission. She always smelled of perfume and never harbored any doubts as to her choice of perfume. It's grandmother I am talking about. She knew with astonishing confidence that her life story was but her destiny that she held in her hand the keys to eternity she even knew if she wanted she could summon the Prophet Khezr to demand of him whatever she desired And how generous he was Grandmother's green Clothed Phantasm magnanimous bearer of plenty without anger without guile beyond needs beyond expectations with his blessings and gifts flowing free like the waters of an endless stream She always smelled of Jasmine and wore black shoes that shined crowned with ribbon on top I'm telling you of my grandmother. Sufi saying and writings are a treasure trove of insight and often great beauty. Yet it is the experience that is at the heart of it, that and love. Hatice Cenani Hanim told her son: *You must love people. You have inside you an unlimited wealth of forgiveness tolerance and compassion. You must spend this wealth with generosity. You must share it with**

*people and love them with their strengths and their weaknesses. Your job is to point them toward a common goal, the goal of sincerity. There are many ways to reach this goal but the easiest one is the way of love. This has long been the way of salvation for humanity. Taking this road, human beings become divine and reach God.*

Notice it is not perfect people she says we must love but people as they really are. If we do this for others as we see them with all their flaws and gifts, the things we love about them and the things we hate, if we do this with compassion we will make this a better and more peaceful world. And maybe we will then learn to love with the same compassion, forgiveness and understanding the person we see in our own soul's mirror.