

## **Come, Come Whoever You Are**

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Unitarian Church of Vancouver

Last July, when Diana and I were in Berlin, we went to a photo exhibit in an old urban villa that had been transformed into a contemporary art gallery. Join with me in your mind's eye in tour of the exhibit. Enormous black and white photographs of Sufi dancers, or whirling dervishes, by the Turkish artist Mehmet Gunyeli filled the galleries. Two examples of these photos are on the cover of the order of service. What's missing, of course, is the sheer scale and lustrous quality, the beauty of Gunyeli's gallery mounted photographs. You'll have to use your imagination.

Before we proceed further into the gallery, a few words about Sufis. A Sufi is a generic term for an Muslim mystic; a person dedicated to a disciplined path of intense devotion, meditation, and study of the Qur'an and the sayings of the prophet Muhammad. The Sufi believes that behind the apparent separateness of things in the world, there is only one transcendent divine reality. "Whichever way you turn, there is the face of Allah," it says in the Qur'an. (Sura 2:115) As well, the Sufi believes there is an outward or literal meaning of scripture and Tradition, and inward spiritual meaning and depths; again as it says in the Qur'an: "He is the First and the Last, here is the Outward and the Inward [way]. (57:3) While observing the precepts of the faith, the Sufi seeks out these depths through study, discipleship and spiritual practice. One of those devotional practices pioneered by a Turkish Sufi tradition called the Mevlevis is a whirling ritual (*sama*) full of mystic symbolism that can, at times, induce ecstatic states as the whirler pivots on the left foot, while concentrating on the divine. The photos I saw in the exhibit in Berlin were of men performing this dance.

Museum and gallery exhibits include written texts. And in the Berlin photo exhibit of Sufi dancers my eye was drawn immediately to a passage printed on the wall. It started out like this: “Komm, komm, wer du bist/Heiden, Feuerverhrer, Liebhaber zu verlassen.” The words were attributed to the 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi master and poet Rumi, and I knew enough German to recognize these words as the opening line to a well-loved song from our hymnal that Unitarians sing as a round. Let’s turn to our hymnals #188 and read the words: “Come, come whoever you are/wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving. /Ours is no caravan of despair. /Come yet again come.” Notice at the bottom that the words are “adapted from Rumi,” and set to music by the Unitarian Universalist minister Lynn Ungar.

However, the words of the poem in the photo exhibit wall text had a variant reading. It starts out: “come come whoever you are,” so far so good, but the rest of the line read: “*heathen, fire worshiper*, lover of leaving.” I have discovered that there are a numerous versions of this poem; that’s the way things go with both the art of translation and adaptations of traditional or folk lyrics. The German version more accurately captured Rumi’s 13<sup>th</sup> century environment—he was born in 1207 in what is now Afghanistan, grew up in a devout Muslim home; his own father was a noted scholar and mystic, and the family migrated over time from their home, through Iran and settled eventually in the western region of what is now the nation of Turkey.

It was a world of Arabic, Persian and Turkic languages, populated by Shi’a and Sunni Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Zoroastrians; the latter are the so-called “fire worshipers” mentioned in the German version. The “lovers of leaving” correspond to populations on the move—both physically and spiritually—a lively world of religion and commerce of many nationalities congregating to pilgrimage sites and markets, and traveling by caravans and shore hugging ships. This was the age of pilgrimages, of Chaucer’s pilgrims on their way to

Canterbury, of pilgrims in Spain on their way to Santiago de Compostela; an age of devotion and faith in saints and miracles—both profound and earthy—celebrated in verse and song. I'm particular fond of Spanish pilgrim song of this era where a chop of meat stolen from some pilgrims comes to life in response to their pleas to the Virgin Mary:

“and they searched through the house” the song goes, “calling to Holy Mary/ that she reveal it to them;/ and they heard it in a trunk (where it had be hidden).../jumping back and forth;/ and they ran into the streets/ and called to many people,/ who saw that miracle.../Mary does not allow/ losses to befall/ those who desire/ to undertake Her pilgrimages.” (from *Cantigas de Santa Maria*. Thanks to Nick Epperson for introducing me to this charming 13<sup>th</sup> century song.)

I like that image of a jumping piece of meat. So here we are in an age of pilgrimages, caravans, piety and commerce, of people on the move taking leave of homes both domestic and spiritual and setting forth on the open road. Rumi's verse rang out to all these people of his age—and beyond. *Why don't we sing it together? (Come, come...#188)*

And now back to the Berlin photo exhibit, the text on the wall attributed to Rumi, and an unexpected surprise. The verse that started out with the familiar invitation: “Come, come whoever you are...” continued down a path I had never seen or sung. The next lines read: “Come, though you've broken your repentance [or vows] a hundred times/Ours is the door of hope/come as you are.” (*“Komm auch wenn Du Deine Reue hundertmal gebrochen hast/Unser ist das Tur der Hoffnung/ so wie Du bist.”*) “Though you've *repented*, though you've *broken your vows* a hundred times/Ours is the door of hope...”—*that's not in our hymn #188!*

There I was standing in the gallery, thinking, “What's going on here?” And critical, suspicious person that I am, I immediately thought: ah, hah—Unitarian self-censorship! What's this about repentance, broken vows?

“Sing out praises for the journey,” that's what we sang together in our opening hymn. Makes you want to jump on a camel, join the joyful caravan of raucous pilgrims, and head out on

the open road. Now *there's* an expression of a deep-seated Unitarian sensibility and personality. Ours is a "pilgrim church...on an adventure of the spirit," James Luther Adams wrote; and we like it like that don't we? Non-dogmatic, open ended, radically welcoming—or so we claim; it says it right there in our Seven Principles: we covenant to encourage one another "to spiritual growth" and "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning." I don't see any words about vows or repentance, do you? Why start out on the caravan when you have one foot stuck in the past, with being reminded of broken promises, of repentance—and, god forbid—lingering ***guilt?***

Maybe Rev. Ungar, in adapting words of Rumi for a hymn about lovers of leaving and members of a joyful caravan, maybe she just wanted to stress the progressive, questing openness that has been a hallmark of Unitarianism. And at the same time, by emphasizing the aspect of nonjudgmental welcoming in the verse of Rumi: "come, come *whoever you are*"—wanderer, worshiper, the hymn reminds us of the profound tradition of Universalism that also pulses in the heart of our faith tradition. Remember, ours is an amalgam of two theological, historical and spiritual sensibilities—Unitarian, that stressed the oneness of god or nature best discovered and appreciated through reason and ethics; and Universalist, that religious impulse that cleaved to the belief in the ultimate redemption and belovedness of all creation, a belief best apprehended by a radiant heart full of love.

I think that Lynn Ungar's version of Rumi is a brief, beautiful epitome of the twin strands of our Unitarian and Universalist faith. It was, no doubt viewed that way, and accepted as such by the Hymnbook Resources Committee that put together our *Singing the Living Tradition* hymnbook published in 1993.

But for me, a nagging question remained from my gallery visit in Berlin and the quite different version of this verse "adapted" from Rumi with its evocative words of heathen, fire-

worshiper, failed repentance, broken vows. Was the simplicity and beauty of our hymn purchased by an act of censorship? Of snipping out lines from a classic text at the price of some feel-good, moral uplift on a Sunday morning? That's a high cost to pay.

I decided to do some digging and find out the story. It turned out to be something of a journey from enchantment, to disenchantment, to re-enchantment.

I tried to contact Rev. Ungar and the Hymnbook Commission to no avail. I tracked down books on Rumi and the story of the transmission and reception of his extraordinary literary works. I discovered, and this wasn't surprising, given what we learned a couple of weeks ago about the Tao, that it was those Unitarian Transcendentalists—Emerson, Thoreau, William Alger and others, working primarily from German translations, who first introduced Rumi and other classic Persian poets like Hafiz to readers in North America. (see Leigh Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2005, 82-85; Franklin Lewis, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West...*, OneWorld, 2000, 569-70)

However, try as I might, I couldn't find anywhere how this particular poem—"come, come whoever you are..." entered into the English speaking world. It's not in R.A. Nicholson's classic six volume translation of Rumi's poetry. It's not cited in Franklin Lewis's encyclopedic study of Rumi's life. I couldn't find it anywhere in the now famous, very loose renditions of Rumi sprung on to the poetry scene by Coleman Barks in the 80s and 90s. (see Barks, *Delicious Laughter...* Maypop, 1990, *The Essential Rumi*, Harper Collins, 1995) It was Barks and Robert Bly whose advocacy of Rumi in those decades that made this 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet, according to the *Christian Science Monitor*, the best selling poet in North America. With great hope, I turned to the endnotes of Philip Novack's well-documented 1994 anthology called *The World's Wisdom: Sacred Texts of the World's Religions*. He includes numerous Rumi poems; and there, under the title "Caravan of Joy" was a slightly different version of our poem. But turning to the endnotes, unlike all the other notes about Rumi citing specific sources, it just said "Traditional." (Novack, p. 416,

41 f) And in Annemarie Schimmel’s groundbreaking work on Rumi in the 1970s, you find one reference to the opening lines of our poem, but again without citation; she just says: “Does not Rumi’s mausoleum bear the inscription: “Come back, come back, even though you have broken your repentance a thousand times...” (Schimmel, *The Triumphant Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi*, Fine Books, 1978, p. 302. According to the sufi scholar Ibrahim Gamard, it’s not an inscription, rather, it is a framed calligraphy in Turkish translation of the quatrain and hangs on the wall of the mausoleum. Personal communication with Epperson, February 28, 2010.)

So what we have is a folk, or traditional poem, attributed to Rumi, adapted and cited over and again from Sy Safransky’s “New Age” collection called *Sunbeams: A Book of Quotations*, (1990, p. 67) to Novack’s *Sacred Texts of the World’s Religions*, to our hymnbook *Singing the Living Tradition*, to a photo exhibit in Berlin. That’s the way folk tradition works.

In a sermon delivered in 2006, the Rev. Ann Schranz, told Unitarians in Santa Cruz that she got a hold of Lynn Ungar, the composer of our little hymn, and asked her about the back story to “Come, Come, Whoever You Are.” Ungar said “the words are by Rumi. I left out [his] line ‘though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times’ because I couldn’t figure out how to write a five-part round that made any sense.” It was Rev. Mary Grigolia, who serves a UU Fellowship in North Carolina, that “figured out how to put [that line back] in...” (see Rev. Ann Schranz, “Promise Making and Promise Breaking, UU Fellowship of Santa Cruz County, August 20, 2006)

So, as things turned out, it was *Steven Epperson* who didn’t know that there *is* a Unitarian version out there that includes the line “though you’ve broken your vows.” It may be missing from our hymnal—but it appears that there was no nefarious plot to spruce up Rumi by censoring his words. Just a minister who loved a poem and couldn’t make all the words fit into a simple, lovely round. I’ve subsequently learned that a number of you, as well as my colleagues in ministry, have heard and sung Rev. Grigolia’s version that includes the line missing from our little hymn #188. *Let’s sing this version together shall we?*

So is this the end of the story? And at this point you may be wondering “why is he going on about this?” Well, for me, it has to do with a distinction between what the comedian Stephen Colbert calls *truth and “truthiness.”* Our Fourth Principle says that we covenant to affirm and promote a “search for truth”; doesn’t say anything here about “truthiness,” or wanting to make-believe-truth. In Berlin, I was shocked to think that perhaps words had been removed from a poem in order to “make nice” in our hymnal and for up-lifting hymn singing on Sunday mornings. *I will own* the fact that all of this digging might seem excessive and driven by a touch of cynicism. But I have had some terrible experiences in my life with censorship, with the excision of words, though true, because they didn’t happen to suit the temper of the times or the dictates of religious potentates.

End of story? Not quite. I contacted the Mevlevi Sufi Order whose leaders trace their authority and lineage 33 generations directly back to Rumi himself, from the 21<sup>st</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. *Rumi is not the author of the poem “Come, Come Whoever You Are.”* In published articles and personal communications, I have learned from the Sufi scholar Ibrahim Gamard what may be, for now, as close as I can get to the truth behind “Come, Come Whoever You Are...” It goes like this. According to Mr. Gamard, the poem was written by a Persian “Sufi poet named Abu Sa’eed Ibn Khayr who died in 1048—over two hundred years before Rumi. The poem does not appear in any manuscripts of Rumi’s poetic works.” What happened is that the librarian (Necati Bey) at the Rumi mausoleum in Konya, Turkey, found the poem in an old manuscript, and without searching for its origin, declared his belief that the verses were by Rumi. “So strong was the ensuing enthusiasm for the [poem], that the absence of evidence that it was composed by Rumi was ignored.” Both Mr. Gamard and the recently deceased scholar and chief spiritual teacher of the Mevlevi order have written that many “contemporary Turkish scholars

know that it is not authentic,” but because western, secular readers *want* to “view Rumi as a universal and tolerant mystic” everyone conveniently ignores the truth. (Ibrahim Gamard, personal communication with Rev. Steven Epperson, February 26, 2010; see also Gamard, “Western Views of ...Rumi’s Muslim Identity,” and “The Popularization of Rumi,” [www.dar-al-masnavi.org](http://www.dar-al-masnavi.org). “This is already known by everyone.” See Nuriye Akman, “Interview with Sheik Sefik Can,” Rumi Forum, 25 January 2005. Hereafter: Interview) As well, it is a fiction cultivated by the Turkish government which has lavishly rebuilt Rumi’s tomb and mosque, in large part, for the purposes of promoting Western tourism to Turkey by Rumi enthusiasts and pilgrims. (The same anti-clerical, secularist government that outlawed the Mevlevi Sufi order in 1925—part of its widespread campaign against nearly all forms of public expression and institutions of Islamic belief. That’s another story.)

In the early 1960s, a British student of mysticism named Timothy Reshad Feild, learned this poem from his Turkish Sufi teacher Bulent Rauf. Feild moved to Los Angeles in 1975 to start a Sufi school, and published a book called *The Last Barrier*, (Harper and Row, 1976) where our poem “Come Come Whoever You Are,” attributed to Rumi, appeared on the title page.

(Gamard, personal communications.) From there it was picked up and embraced enthusiastically by Robert Bly, Coleman Barks, the New Age editor Sy Safransky, and many thousands including Rev. Lynn Ungar and the Unitarian Hymnbook Commission which published it in 1993; it’s become part of the zeitgeist, a well-beloved poem in the repertoire of the landscape of the “New Spirituality.” *That’s* how “Come Come Whoever You Are” ended up in North America and in our hymnbook.

(According to Mr. Gamard, the rendering “wanderer, “lover of leaving” and “caravan” has “no basis in the original Persian, but was added to the British version.” Personal communication with Epperson, February 28, 2010. It has been translated more accurately in the complete translation of Rumi’s quatrains, “The Quatrains of Rumi” translated by Ibrahim Gamard and Rawan Farhadi, Sufi Dari Books, 2008, p. 609 in “Appendix I: Quatrains Not By Rumi”: “Return (in repentance), return! Whatever you are, return!/Even if you are an unbeliever or a Magian or an idol worshipper, return!/This court of ours is not a court of despair./Even if you have broken (your) repentance a hundred times, return!” One additional translation of the quatrain: “Nobody, Son of Nobody: Poems of Shaikh Abu Saeed Abil-Kheir”--Renditions by Vraje Abramian/Hohm Press, Prescott Arizona, 2001, p. 4: “Come back. Come back, no matter what you think you are./An idol worshipper? A non-believer?/Come back./This gate, no one leaves hopeless./If you have broken your vows ten thousand times,/Come back. Citations courtesy of Ibrahim Gamard.)

To wrap this up, a couple of observations. First, I’m going to contact the Hymnbook Commission in the hopes that if they publish a second edition of the hymnal, Ibn Khayr, not

Rumi, will be cited as the author of “Come, Come Whoever You Are.” As well, I think it is worth noting that Rumi was a devout, practicing Muslim, a man who wrote “I am the servant of the Quran for as long as I am living. I am dust on the path of Muhammad, the Chosen One.”

(Interview) Nothing is gained by stripping a person of their particularity, their unique, if perhaps off-putting personality and beliefs in order to make that person more palatable to our contemporary tastes. While the Mevlevi Sufis appreciate the world-wide interest in Rumi, they fear we will misunderstand this poem, thinking, in the words of their leader Sheikh Sefik Can, that Rumi “tolerates and accepts everything that Allah does not accept...To understand the [poem],” he said, “one has to think deeply. [But] because no one can bear that, it [is made] suitable to everyone’s path.” (Interview)

Which brings us, in the end, back to the poem and the journey we have taken in this sermon. I think this path embodies so much of what I value in our liberal, progressive faith. It is a religion that exhorts us, in the words of our opening hymn, to “Sing out Praises for the Journey.” It begins with an original kind of enchantment for a seemingly simple, beautiful poem. However, it continues from there to an examination of discrepancies, disjunctions, attribution, context, and history. What was once innocent appreciation becomes tinged by critical appraisal that may entail a kind of disenchantment. But do we dissect only to kill? Must knowledge of astronomy extinguish the awe a young person first felt in marveling at the beauty of the night sky?

Perhaps a little wiser now, we return to our version of Ibn Khayr’s poem, not Rumi’s, ready to be re-enchanted by its simple, profound invitation: “Though we’ve broken our vows a thousand times, come, yet again, come.” And *THAT*, my friends is *utterly* in keeping with the emotion and wisdom that runs through and illuminates the entire mystical literary vision of Rumi and his poetry; and that is, above all things, the enduring, saving power of love.

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