

“THE CRY OF THE NIGHTINGALE”

Fethullah Gulen – A Modern-Day Rumi?

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Sometimes voices from long ago are so powerful and so full of life and truth that they resonate throughout the ages, as if neither time nor distance could prevent their arrival. They are carried down from century to century waiting to find a modern-day figure who can understand both the message and the messenger.

In this paper I will focus on the similarities between 13th century Sufi poet, Jalal al-Din Rumi and 20th century Turkish scholar and voice for peace, Fethullah Gulen. I will try to show how Gulen is the perfect messenger for Rumi's ideas. The points of comparison will be their early background and education, their Sufism, their message of tolerance and love. Some of the questions I hope to address are – Have Rumi's words found a voice in Fethullah Gulen? How is Gulen awakening us to the truths of Rumi's message of love and service to God and love and service to one another? Is Gulen a modern-day Rumi?

About 700 years ago in Anatolia, present day Konya, Turkey, spiritual master and poet Mevlana Jalal al-Din Rumi uttered this lament, “I want a heart that is split, chamber by chamber by the pain of separation from God, so that I might explain my longings and desires to it.”¹¹⁵ Rumi spent his entire life searching for those who shared similar longings, whose love of God was as unquenchable as his, a mirror to his soul.

The opening verses of his most famous work, the Mathnawi, Rumi's “Song of the Reed” speaks it best of all:

Listen to the song of the Reed,

How it wails with separation:

‘Ever since I was taken from my reed bed

My woeful song has caused men and women to weep.

I seek out those whose hearts are torn by separation

¹¹⁵ www.wikiquote.org/wiki/Jalal_al-Din_Muhammad_Rumi

For only they understand this pain of longing.
Whoever is taken away from his homeland
Yearns for the day he will return.
In every gathering among those who are happy or sad,
I cry with the same lament.
Everyone hears according to his own understanding,
None has searched for the secrets within me.
My secret is found within my lament –
But an eye or an ear without light cannot know it...¹¹⁶

Recently in an interview with Turkish journalist Nuriye Akman , Turkish spiritual leader and poet, Fethullah Gulen said, "I am looking for a person who is troubled on the inside; one with whom I could talk about the Islamic world, the situation in Turkey, and share my troubles. I am searching for a troubled heart."¹¹⁷ He goes on to say that he has many close friends yet none with whom he can share everything. "A friend in thought needs to be like you; needs to burn inside like a fireplace; have a strong bond with Allah, yet remain humble. I should confess that I am lonely." Gulen seems to echo Rumi's plaintive cry of separation from the Source, of being a stranger in a strange land in his poem,

"The Cry of the Nightingale:"

The moment when flowers are dancing,
The nightingale sings in gardens secluded.
Each of its tunes sounds like the whistling wind
To those seen as foreigners in their native land.
It cries like my ceaseless wails and laments,
Each resonates, high and low through slopes.

¹¹⁶ Jonathan Starr, "The Song of the Reed," *Rumi in the Arms of the Beloved* p.21

¹¹⁷Zaman newspaper, Tuesday, March 30, 2004

It bemoans all night until the sun rises,
Each breath comes out as a burning sigh.
On virgin trees untouched by man's hand,
It groans unceasingly for a lifetime,
And sheds tears, full of grief; but who is there
To appreciate it, to sympathize with its pains?"¹¹⁸

There seems to be a sympathetic chord in their laments and more and more their names are often mentioned in the same breath. If Jalal al-Din Rumi and Fethullah Gulen were to have met face to face on the ancient streets of Konya 700 years ago, or today on the busy streets of Philadelphia, would they recognize each other as kindred souls that could hear and understand each other's deepest longings?

Though both Rumi and Gulen are prolific writers and poets, this will not be a focus in this presentation. Suffice it to say that both poets are Muslims whose words express their deep yearning for re-union with the Eternal Beloved; their profound gratitude for the beauty that surrounds them as reflections of their Creator; their abject poverty and nothingness in the face of their Lord. The teachings of the Qur'an, the Hadiths, and the Sunnah provide the basis of their lives and their works. In his book, *Advocate of Dialogue*, Gulen states that, "Poems like entreaties, express the ups and downs and enthusiastic and sorrowful moods in one's inner world. To the extent that individuals are concentrating on exalted truths, they become like divine breaths." ¹¹⁹ In their writings Rumi and Gulen are spiritually oriented and speak the universal language of the soul, exemplifying these "divine breaths."

EARLY BACKGROUND AND EDUCATION

Rumi, who was descended from a long line of sultans and religious scholars, was born in 1207 in Balk, present-day Afghanistan, during very turbulent and chaotic times. The Seljuk Empire was suffering internally from political and religious corruption, and externally from Crusader attacks from the west, and Mongol attacks from the east. Rumi left his homeland as a young boy with his family and began to travel throughout Muslim lands, finally settling in Anatolia, present-day Konya in Turkey.

¹¹⁸ www.slife.org/index.htm POEMS

¹¹⁹ Gulen, *Advocate of Dialogue*, p. 8

Rumi's father taught him the importance of working towards acquiring divine attributes through self-purification by reading the Qur'an, fasting, and detaching himself from anything that prevented knowledge of God. He learned about love and compassion through the example of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) who treated all people with kindness and respect, regardless of race, religion, or social standing. From his father he also learned that there are two kinds of knowledge – conventional, which is learned, and true knowledge, which can only be obtained through grace of God. He inculcated in Rumi a sense of Divine love, piety, abstinence, humility, generosity, service, and remembrance of God – the basics of the Sufi path.

Throughout his life, Rumi was rarely without a teacher or a guide, and he emerged as a highly respected spiritual leader and university professor. People came from all over to listen to him speak, to engage in dialogue, and to seek his counsel. Despite his grand reputation, he was dissatisfied and said, "Haven't you heard my name in the world? I am nothing, nothing, nothing."¹²⁰

Fethullah Gulen was born 700 years later in 1938 in Erzurum, eastern Turkey during a time of radical change for his country. The decades before his birth saw the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the fall of both the sultanate and caliphate, the founding of the Turkish Republic by Kemal Ataturk, the shutdown of the Sufi orders and tekkes, the replacement of Shari'a (Islamic religious law) by Civil Code, and Arabic script by the Latin alphabet – a convergence of monumental changes. It was to become a violent century that suffered through two World Wars, the atomic bomb, and escalating terrorism.¹²¹

Like Rumi's, Gulen's family tree can also be traced back to a noble lineage and long succession of religious scholars, yet he lived humbly and continues to do so. Gulen's earliest teachers were also the members of his family. He speaks with great veneration of his great-grandfather Molla Ahmed and the Sufi qualities that he learned from him such as asceticism, combining knowledge with piety, eating and sleeping little, and service to others. From his mother, who had reportedly memorized the Qur'an and taught it to the villagers, he learned the verses. His father taught him Arabic, initiating him into profound love of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

He studied further under prominent Islamic scholars, receiving special training in religious sciences from Muhammad Lufti, a famous Muslim and spiritual master.

¹²⁰ Zaman, Nuriye Akman interview with Sheikh Sefik Can, Jan. 31, 2005

¹²¹ Gulen, *ibid*, "Introduction," p. ii

Gulen says that “while studying religious sciences, I read other books and studied Sufi practices. For me, impacts of the religious sciences and Sufism always produced the same rhythms.”¹²² Later Gulen became acquainted with some of the students of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and the teachings in his *Risale-I Nur*. It was through this that Gulen began to realize the importance of combining the positive sciences with spiritual education. In his opinion one without the other is comparable to a bird that is trying to fly with only one wing. Gulen was to become a teacher of both minds and hearts.

Distinguished in his education, Gulen began teaching at age 15. As a young educator, his teaching was so highly respected that his students became an active force for change – a generation willing to serve his ideas on the importance of combining intellectual enlightenment with pure spirituality, and wisdom with continuous activism. As such, they, and now their students, have opened over 500 schools both in Turkey and abroad. Like Rumi, Gulen emerged as a highly trusted and respected spiritual leader, intellectual, voice for social justice, and like Rumi people come from all over to listen to him, to engage in dialogue, and to seek his counsel.

Both Rumi and Gulen were educated in the positive sciences and Islamic tradition, deeply rooted in Sufi values.

THEIR SUFI PATHS

Volumes have been written about both Rumi and Gulen as Sufis, yet it bears mentioning here because everything they did in their lives is related to their understanding of what Sufism is. To begin with, neither joined a Sufi Order, though Rumi is said to have started the Mevlevi Order of the Whirling Dervishes. Gulen says, “Rumi, the Master, was not a pupil, a dervish, a representative...among traditional Sufis. He developed a new method colored with revivalism and personal individual reasoning by taking the Qur’an, the Sunna, and Islamic piety as his reference points.”¹²³ Theirs is a Sufism founded in the truths of the Qur’an, yet with an openness and appreciation of the spirituality of other religions that are also focused on the absolute love of God. Each had teachers of the Sufi way – a defining addition in their lives because from the beginning they were trained to serve others, and to forget themselves except in the purification of their own hearts. They were each instilled with a sense

¹²² Gulen, *ibid*, p. 14

¹²³ The Fountain, “Mevlana Jalal al-Din Rumi,” July-Sept. 2004, issue 47

of awe and majesty of our Creator and the importance of living their lives only to please Him and ultimately be reunited with Him.

In his book "The Secret of Secrets" Hadrat Abd-al-Qadir al Jilani says that Sufis live humbly eating and drinking little. Both Rumi and Gulen follow this practice, not as an end in and of itself, but as a means of getting closer to God. To many they are the best examples of the ideal Sufi, yet neither wishes to be revered as a saint or esteemed as someone of extraordinary spirituality. They share such Sufi qualities as humility, piety, and their nothingness. Rumi wrote:

"I have become a servant, become a servant, become a servant;

I have bowed and doubled myself up with serving you.

Servants and slaves rejoice when they are emancipated

Whereas I rejoice when I become your servant."¹²⁴

Gulen never calls himself a Sufi saying that one is not a Sufi in name, but rather in spirit and heart. He strives to be no more "than a humble servant of God and friend to all."¹²⁵ For Gulen, knowing one's "impotence, poverty, and nothingness" is the path to annihilation in God. "Fun, games, and pleasure are not in my nature. Even when I was young I was doing something like riyazat (esoteric self-realization)...I do not want to do something if it's not useful...that's why I sit inside and read the Koran or say my daily prayers and zikr."¹²⁶ For Gulen, Sufism is a lifelong process of spiritual development. It is "...annihilation of the ego, will, and self-centeredness by God and the subsequent spiritual revival with the light of His Essence."¹²⁷

Rumi's son, Sultan Valad said that Rumi used to pray to meet one of God's hidden saints and then be transformed by him. Rumi's prayer was answered when he met a wandering dervish named Sham-I Tabriz, who became the perfect mirror to his soul and transformed him from educated scholar to ecstatic mystic. Of the relationship between Rumi and Shams, Gulen says the following, "two skillful and acute spirits came together, like two oceans merging into one another. By sharing the Divine

¹²⁴ 'Ibada, 'Ubudiya, and 'Ubuda (Worship, Servanthood, and Deep Devotion) Sizinti, Aug. 1993, Vol. 15, Issue 175

¹²⁵ Gulen, *Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism*, "Author's biography," vol. 1, 2004

¹²⁶ Zaman interview with Nuriye Akman, March 28, 2004

¹²⁷ F.Gulen, *Sufism*, vol. 1 p. xiii

bounties and gifts received from their Lord, they both reached peaks that most people would not be able to achieve on their own accord. Through their spiritual cooperation they established camps on the peaks of knowledge, love, compassion, and joy for God. As much as they enlightened those of their own age, they also influenced all centuries to follow..."¹²⁸

Without some understanding of the Islamic mystical tradition of love, most notably the love between master and disciple, it would be difficult to describe the love between Rumi and Shams without making it seem trivial and mundane. Kabir Helminski quotes Murat Yagan who compared Rumi's meeting with Shams to Abraham's meeting Melchizedek saying, "A Melchizedek and a Shams are messengers from the Source. They do nothing themselves but carry enlightenment to someone who can receive it, someone who is either too full or too empty. Mevlana was one who was too full. After receiving it, he could apply this message for the benefit of humanity."¹²⁹ This proved his teacher Sayyid Burhaneddin's prediction that one day Rumi would "drown men's souls in a fresh life and in the immeasurable abundance of God...and bring to life the dead of this false world with...meaning and love."¹³⁰

Shams was able to awaken Rumi's love of the real Beloved and so inspired him that for 10 years after Shams' disappearance, Rumi wrote a collection of lyrical and mystical poems called the *Divan-I Shams*, telling of his love for his teachers and friends, most especially Shams. On a much deeper level, however, we come to understand that the love, the longing, the pain of separation he was speaking of is none other than yearning for God. Later in the *Mathnawi*, which is said by many to be among the greatest spiritual poetry ever written, he emphasized the importance of loving one another and of being examples of love for each other. Much of what Rumi wrote was taken from the Qur'an, the Sunnah, and other sources in Arabic and Persian literature. His verses urge men to follow ethical, moral, and spiritual values. For Rumi, love is the soul of the Universe, the ground of his being, but this is not a transient, ephemeral love. He is talking about pure, absolute love of God. Even though his writing seems to be about human situations and feelings, the deeper significance is that it should be translated into love and yearning for the Divine. His message is one of dissolving our own egos and surrendering completely to God.

Rumi's Sufi approach has captivated the hearts of spiritual seekers everywhere not only because of its depth and beauty, but also because of its Truth. His works capture this Truth and overflow with the message of love that has endured throughout the ages.

¹²⁸ Fethullah Gulen, "Foreward," *Fundamentals of Rumi's Thought: A Mevlevi Perspective* p. xi

¹²⁹ Helminski, *Rumi Daylight*, p. 10

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 11

THEIR MESSAGES OF LOVE AND TOLERANCE

Jalal al-Din Rumi, a scholar, preacher, husband, father, mystic, and poet awakens us to the fact that not only is God the Beloved of mankind, but also that mankind is the beloved of God. He wrote:

“ Never, in sooth, does the lover seek without being sought by his beloved.

When the lightning of love has shot into this heart, know that there is

Love in that heart.

When love of God waxes in thy heart, beyond any doubt, God also

Hath love for thee.”¹³¹

Rumi based his view of the world on the principle of love and believed that loving another in the name of God opened the path to the Absolute (Love). The name Rumi has come to signify love and ecstatic flight into the infinite. His devoted students and disciples called him “Mevlana” which means “our Master.”

As one of the best selling poets in North America, Rumi’s message of love and tolerance, representing Islam as a religion of peace and brotherhood, is beginning to be heard today by spiritual seekers as a positive model for interfaith dialogue in this troubled world. His religion was Islam, yet he was an advocate of unlimited religious tolerance, and accepted Muslims, Jews, and Christians with the same loving eyes and heart. In return he was respected and revered by people of all faiths. Interestingly enough Gulen’s words describing Rumi as inspiring duality of one foot in his own faith tradition while the other roams freely to the faiths of others can also be applied to Gulen himself.¹³² Though many today have read about or heard about Rumi, few feel the pain of mankind, or have a heart burning with love of God, or seek an era of love, tolerance and peace as much as Fethullah Gulen. Few understand and exemplify the depth of Rumi’s message as Gulen does.

This Turkish scholar, spiritual leader, teacher, author, and peace activist is a modern day legacy bringing us Rumi’s message of a love that embraces all of humanity; that says love of God is the essence of everything. According to Gulen, “A soul without love cannot be elevated to the horizon of human perfection. Even if he were to live hundreds of years, he could make no advance on the path to

¹³¹ William Chittick, “ *The Sufi Path of Love – the Spiritual Teaching of Rumi*,” p. 209

¹³² Kurtz, “Gulen’s Paradox,” *Muslim World*, p. 328

perfection. Those who are deprived of love, entangled in the nets of selfishness, are unable to love anybody else and die unaware of the love deeply implanted in the very being of existence.”¹³³

In his preaching, poetry, and teaching he hears not only the laments, but the hopes and dreams of humanity. He bears his own sorrows, but those of others crush him, feeling every blow delivered at humanity to be first delivered to his own heart. His beliefs and feelings are so profound that his preaching is often accompanied by his tears. For Gulen, there is no time to waste in trying to change the world into a place where love and peace replace hatred and violence. Everything in his life has been dedicated to this end. Esteemed by many as charismatic spiritual intellectual, Gulen has shown no interest in achieving political power, personal acclaim, or sainthood. In fact, he shuns it, preferring to remain quietly behind the scenes inspiring others by his example. Gulen firmly believes that true religion preaches love not hatred, tolerance not judgment, compassion not callousness, peace not war. According to Gulen, true religion leads people to a life of virtue and perfection.

Some might wonder how this humble intellectual, this Sufi, this scholar of Islam has been able to so effectively impel literally millions into service for humanity, a service that is not limited to nationalistic ideals but one that extends to schools and interfaith foundations all over the world from Turkey to Malaysia to Siberia to South Africa to the United States. Gulen teaches that only through education can we raise generations who will understand and practice tolerance and love of fellow human beings. A man is truly human when he learns and teaches and inspires others. Students who have been fortunate enough to live and study with him say he is deeply loved and respected because he practices what he preaches, expecting much more from himself than of others. Those who love him and follow him call him Hocaefendi, which means “Master Teacher.” He says that a true human being has to be so completely dedicated to serving others that he feels tiredness only when his heart stops beating. Gulen has often stated that it is not enough to just speak of love and tolerance without taking positive action – action that expects nothing in return.

A pioneer of interfaith dialogue for over 30 years, Gulen believes that “dialogue is not a superfluous endeavor, but an imperative...that dialogue is among the duties of Muslims to make our world a more peaceful and safer place.”¹³⁴ To this purpose, he has met with world spiritual and political leaders. In his meeting with Pope John Paul II he proposed working together to build understanding between Islam and Catholicism. He has sometimes been criticized as one who is betraying Islam by being so accepting of other religions, but Gulen believes there is much more that unites mankind than what separates. The bridges between cultures, religions, races all exist – they just need to be rediscovered.

¹³³ www.fgulen.org/a.page/life/biography/a756html

¹³⁴ Saritoprak p. 336

Gulen has dedicated his life to studying, writing, teaching and working tirelessly towards strengthening the bonds between people of different cultures and religious beliefs.

In effect, Gulen has been able to take Rumi's message of universal love and tolerance and bring it to life by applying the mystical to the practical. Rumi and Gulen are like "brothers" whose system of thought and philosophy are derived from the same source. Read on the deepest level, Rumi's poems speak of much more than just the simple images such as a rose, a cup, a tavern, a garden, a reed, a nightingale convey - they are a handbook for finding God. Gulen understands this handbook and exemplifies his legacy as a way to get along not only with God but also with our fellow men. Like Rumi, Gulen is living a life deeply rooted in love and passion for God. Through their constant remembrance of God, they have become like shining beacons beckoning people to true love found in Divine Presence.

Rumi became the elevated human he was in part because of the friends and guides who accompanied him along the way. They were God's bestowal and tremendous blessing. Filled with the light of the Divine, they beautifully reflected it to Rumi. Yet Rumi died still longing for his ultimate reunion with the Eternal Beloved, his return to the "reed bed."

Gulen claims that he has yet to meet the person who really understands his soul's deepest longings. In his loneliness, his nightingale asks if there is anyone to hear his cry, to witness his tears, to feel his pain. Though it might appear that no single nightingale has answered his call, there are thousands, maybe millions, surrounding him who have heard his message of love and tolerance and have responded by dedicating their lives to spreading it. One of the Hadiths states, "When I love my servant I become his eyes, his ears, his tongue, his hands and his feet. He sees through me, he hears through me, he speaks in my name, his hands become mine and he walks with me." (Hadith) Fethullah Gulen is one such beloved servant.

Fethullah Gulen is the perfect modern-day messenger, a voice for peace awakening a sleeping humanity to Rumi's message of compassion and love through understanding and dialogue.

Undoubtedly Rumi's and Gulen's legacy will live on in the voices and actions of the inspired followers of Hocaefendi, "a humble servant and friend to all." It seems that the cry of Gulen's nightingale is being heard and answered.

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