

"The Conference of the Birds"

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Our religion celebrates wisdom from all the world's religions as well as our own. Since the holy month of Ramadan comes to an end this week, this service honors the Islamic faith. Observing this month of fasting and prayer is one of its pillars, or core spiritual practices.

You could argue that our own faith doesn't really have any core spiritual practices – at least none that we all hold in common. Maybe debating things and having coffee hour (which I sometimes joke is our version of communion) could count. Maybe. As in many faiths, developing spiritual practices and committing to a spiritual path can be difficult for us. In lives that are so over-scheduled and busy, it can be really tough to commit to our spiritual health in the same way we commit to our physical and emotional health.

It is fitting and timely today, near the end of the month of Ramadan, to talk about the great Sufi poem and fable "The Conference of the Birds." This wise poem is all about the importance of committing to a spiritual journey.

First let me give you a little background on Islam and on Sufism, in case you're not familiar with either one. That way you can keep up with our 4th and 5th graders, who are studying world religions this year. The prophet Mohammed founded Islam early in the 7th century, after experiencing a series of revelations that are captured in the holy book of Islam, the Quran.

Many people today think of Islam as a violent religion. In fact, one root of the word "Islam" is "salaam" which means "peace." Another root of the word Islam means "surrender." The spiritual practice of surrendering to divine will and authority is core to Islam - a Muslim is one who surrenders to God.

Islam is a way of life. Its five pillars are the basic practices of this living faith. The first pillar is reciting "There is no God but God (which in Arabic is "Allah"), and Mohammed is his prophet." The second pillar is salat, praying five times a day. The third pillar is fasting during Ramadan. The fourth pillar is paying zakat, a sort of tax to support the poor. The fifth pillar is

making the hajj, a pilgrimage to Mecca that you make once in your life, so long as it's not a physical or financial hardship.

Sufis are mystical Muslims. In fact, Sufis consider Mohammed to have been the very first Sufi, so you could say Sufism was there from the beginning. In the earliest years of Islam, the Sufis functioned as missionaries and spiritual masters, contributing richly to Islamic life. Sufis engage deeply in spiritual practices as they seek to live in constant love and adoration of the Divine.

Sufis give up material things. The word "Sufi" literally means "wool" because early Sufis, in their voluntary poverty, wore coarse woolen clothes. In order to keep detaching from what they call "the body of desire," Sufis often eat and sleep little. This leaves more time for prayer, meditation, and chanting.

Have you ever heard of a whirling dervish? They are Sufi Muslims. In fact, another word for Sufi is "dervish" which means "poor." In one school of Sufism, masters sometimes have their students perform a spinning, whirling dance. The spinning sends you into an ecstatic state, and connects you to God.

Sufism is open to both men and women. In fact, one important Sufi "saint" is the 8th century mystic and poet, Rabi'ah al-'Adawiyah, a woman. She taught that we should give our lives over to constant contemplation and love of God. Sufism followed her teachings, emphasizing loving the Divine about all things.

Islam is traditionally a very intellectual faith. Scholars are its leaders. Knowledge is very important to them. In fact, it was Muslims who protected the works of the ancient Greek and Romans until Europeans were civilized enough not to destroy them as pagan. We owe the Renaissance largely to Muslims.

The Sufi branch of Islam emphasizes the heart, and so is more like Universalist branch of our religious family tree than the Unitarian line, which placed greater stress on the intellect. Sufis believe that the intellect is not a faculty that can reach truth or observe the Sacred. In order to love God, Sufis believe you must purify your heart until it becomes like a mirror, reflecting God's attributes.

The author of the Conference of the Birds, Farid ud-Din Attar was a Sufi scholar who lived in the 12th century. He traveled extensively, studying in monasteries and collecting the

writings, stories, and legends of devout Sufis. Some say Attar had a deeper understanding of Sufi ideas than anyone else of his time.

The Conference of the Birds sets out what Attar learned in all his journeying. It is a rich work, which merits more study and meditation than I can capture in just one sermon. So I'll focus on what we can learn from it as we strive to create and commit to spiritual practices to sustain our own journeys.

"The Conference of the Birds" shows that its author truly understood two things - the perils of the spiritual quest, and human nature. Attar understood the many ways humans engage avoid that quest. Much of the poem deals simply with the big step that is deciding to undertake a spiritual journey, the journey of purifying the mirror of your soul so it can reflect the divine more clearly.

The poem begins with a conference of birds, coming together to solve a problem. They know that every other country has a king, but wonder why the kingdom of the birds has none. They ask, "Who should be our ruler?"

One bird, the Hoopoe, speaks up in answer. You need to know that the Hoopoe (a species of bird) holds an honored place in Islam. Legend has it that after King Solomon finished building the temple in Jerusalem, he went on a pilgrimage to Mecca. Mecca is a dry place, and Solomon soon needed water. So he called upon the Hoopoe, who can find water even in the driest of places, for help. Sure enough, she found water for Solomon, who then comes to prize the Hoopoe above all other birds.

So when the Hoopoe speaks, the other birds listen to what she has to say. In this, the Hoopoe represents the Sufi master. She says they already have a true king who, "lives behind the mountains ... His name is Simurgh..... He is the sovereign lord and is bathed in the perfection of his majesty.... The wise cannot discover his perfection nor can the man of understanding perceive his beauty."

The birds are very excited to learn about this king, and they chatter. Of course there is a catch, as there always is in spiritual journeys. The Hoopoe says this glorious king is close to us, but we are far from him, a nice little mystery. She says the way to him is long and arduous, dangerous and taxing, but that the glories of this king make it all worthwhile.

The conference resolves to go find the Simurgh. You'd think the rest of the book would be about the journey, but Attar knows humanity too well. He writes, "But when they began to

realize how long and painful their journey was to be, they hesitated, and in spite of their apparent good-will began to excuse themselves."

The birds come up with some wonderful excuses for why they cannot embark on the spiritual journey. The nightingale says he can't go because of his love for his partner. The parrot wants to hold onto this life, while the peacock would rather dwell in a past paradise. The duck is interested only in water, which symbolizes plenty. The partridge is attached to precious stones. The humay is too proud and ambitious. The hawk is caught up on the trappings of status. The owl, like the partridge, is obsessed with material things. The heron is obsessed with the ocean, and the sparrow excuses herself as being unworthy.

The Hoopoe sees through all these excuses. She even upbraids the sparrow for false humility. After each remonstrance, she tells a story or two to illustrate her point. No doubt these stories and legends are among those that Attar collected.

Following all these scoldings and lessons, the Hoopoe says that whoever prefers the Simurgh to his or her own life must struggle with self. To embark on this spiritual journey you must not take this life too seriously. In her words, "He who loves sets out with open eyes towards his goal, making a plaything of his life."

She says that the Simurgh is a love beyond all other loves, a treasure beyond all other treasures, a paradise such as no one has dreamed. She says that in order to find this love, this treasure, this paradise, you have to surrender all that you have here, give over your old way of living, and seek the highest good. This is the Sufi way.

The Hoopoe says that to be worthy of seeing the Simurgh your heart must be a bright mirror, made pure through spiritual practice. The Hoopoe says, "...by his abounding grace he [the Simurgh] has given us a mirror to reflect himself, and this mirror is the heart. Look into your heart and you will see his image." The king is close to us but we are far from him. We can find his image in our hearts, but we have to purify our hearts to perceive this, and that is a long and arduous journey.

Thinking she has them at this point, the Hoopoe talks more about their proposed journey. She talks about how this love will challenge them. She says, "Love is a cruel pain that devours everything. Sometimes it tears the veil from the soul, sometimes it draws it together. An atom of love is preferable to all that exists between the horizons, an atom of its pain better than the

happy love of all lovers. Love is the very marrow of being; but there can be no real love without real suffering."

She's not always a great saleslady, the Hoopoe, is she? Still the birds decide to draw lots to see who will lead them on the journey, and (of course) the Hoopoe wins. So now you'd think the rest of the book would be about this spiritual journey. But Attar knows human nature too well for that, too. One does not embark on such a journey lightly, or without more than a few false starts.

The birds have another collective case of the jitters, probably because of that beautiful but scary speech about love. One bird questions the Hoopoe's authority, why should she tell them what to do? So the Hoopoe reminds him of the whole Solomon thing and that shuts that bird right up.

Another bird says she is afraid. The Hoopoe says it is better to lose your life in the quest than to languish in place. Another says she is full of faults. The Hoopoe says to ask for grace, and not to lose heart. Still another talks about his faults, and she replies that if we were perfect God would not have to send prophets. In other words, Source understands that we have faults and tries to help us.

Finally, after addressing the excuses and questions of twenty-two more birds, the Hoopoe begins to describe the journey of the seven valleys. Remember that I said the Sufis believe in order to love the Divine, you must purify your heart? According to Sufi tradition, there are seven stages in this process, which more or less correspond to the seven valleys in "The Conference of the Birds."

The first valley is the valley of the quest where you meet every sort of trial. She says you will have to learn to detach from "the body of desire" in order to go on. When you detach, you will begin to see the glory of the divine, which leads you on.

The second valley is the valley of love. The Hoopoe says "To enter it one must be a flaming fire...." There is no holding back from this love, you have to abandon (or surrender) yourself fully to it. The Hoopoe says that to survive the valley of love you need to abandon your reliance on reason, because "if you look at things with the eye of ordinary reason, you will never understand how necessary it is to love."

The third valley is the valley of understanding. The Hoopoe says it is more important to understand with the heart than to know with the mind. She says, "It is necessary to have a deep and lasting wish to become as we ought to be in order to cross this difficult valley."

The fourth valley is the valley of independence and detachment. Here you enter into a new reality through detaching from the world. You no longer have the wish either to possess or to discover. Your world becomes interior, you become filled with a blaze of power, and you become self-sufficient.

The fifth valley is the valley of unity. Here, the Hoopoe says, "Everything is broken into pieces and then unified." There may seem to be many beings, but in reality there is only one "all make one that is complete in its unity." Hence in the story, the lover tells his mistress they are one

The sixth valley is the valley of astonishment and bewilderment. Here you can feel sadness and dejection. Attar knows that journey of the heart or spirit is not linear. There are places where you will feel you like have stopped, or gone backwards, but you have not. In the sixth valley, you feel that you are in love, but know not with whom. Your heart feels both empty and full at the same time. The Sufis teach that at this stage in the purification process, whatever you might be feeling, you are an object of contentment by God.

Finally, the seventh valley is the valley of deprivation and death where you have surrendered so fully to love of the Divine that you intentionally become one with it. According to Sufi teaching, in the seventh stage, your soul becomes transparent and your heart becomes a mirror. Your spirit has been taken over and actually becomes the love, the clarity, and the splendor of the Sacred.

Seeing the vision of this great union, this great love, finally, in the last pages of the poem, the birds take flight. It can take so much to convince us to commit to a spiritual path! Attar was a wise man, indeed.

Most of the birds who undertake the full journey are lost along the way. Of the thousands that set out, only thirty make it to the last valley, and they are thin and bedraggled. By the time they knock on the door of the palace of the King, they have lost most of their feathers and even their wings. The king's chamberlain meets them at the door and tests them even further before admitting them.

And when they enter into that place, what do they discover? They learn that they are the Simurgh and the Simurgh is them. You see, "Simurgh" literally means "thirty birds." The king is close but you are far away.

When the birds truly love and completely surrender to the Divine, they come to know themselves as one with It. All distinctions are lost. The birds find themselves beautifully renewed, full-feathered once again, re-energized, glorious mirrors of the glorious Simurgh. And so ends the tale.

As a poet and mystic I love it, probably because The Conference of the Birds is so poetical and so mystical. It is also so true to my own experience. Those who take have set out on that spiritual journey recognize the process of avoidance and excuses. It is difficult to commit to our spiritual growth.

Those who have embarked on that path also recognize how dangerous it feels. Attempting to purify ones heart leads you so deeply into the valleys of the self. It requires great courage, honesty and integrity. It calls forth incredible compassion and love. It is a great risk to love something so much greater than the self.

When we consider how much we may have resisted undertaking a spiritual journey to the heart, we can see Attar's wisdom. When we consider how dangerous an undertaking it is, we appreciate Attar's compassionate concern.

When we sense how fulfilling it might be to make our hearts smooth mirrors to reflect all that is Sacred, to feel that awesome unity with all creation, our hearts may agree with the Hoopoe about how necessary it is to love.