

Living Sufism Presentation: 'Pathfinding', 28th October 2018

This Presentation on Pathfinding is by Binah Taylor

Welcome Everyone!

Before sharing some stories about pathfinders and their pathfinding, I'd like to begin by offering some thoughts on how we might define a path and to consider the paths we have taken in our lives. For instance do we think of a path as a direction, a passage, a way that gives us purpose and meaning? Is it something that gives structure to our lives? Shapes our identity? Is it a commitment to someone or something?

And which paths really matter?

However we define or describe them some will change the course of our lives, while others may serve as tributaries to the main artery of our purpose or direction. Probably for many of us the significant paths are those of love and loving, work and careers, creative endeavours, service to others or some ideal, becoming parents, rooting – giving us a place we call home. And then there are those that I think of as inner paths – of transformation, of spiritual guidance, of solitude, pilgrimages as part of a quest – although it can be argued that any significant path has inner meaning, is nourished by and nourishes our inner life.

Our paths are mirrors, reflecting the drivers in our lives and our place in the world

If we did an inventory of our paths it would be interesting to see what patterns emerge, what qualities or themes dominate. Some paths I expect were slipped into like an easy coat without much forethought. Our socialisation tends to put certain paths our way so we can fulfill our culture's expectations – some of these may have felt perfectly fine but others not at all. Searching for something different or more meaningful usually means taking risks and may incur disapproval from others - but well worth it if it generates more aliveness.

And so to pathfinding - what is pathfinding, what does it involve? For me, pathfinding describes the process of opening ourselves to a path which is not yet known to us, and which may be calling us. When we engage in pathfinding – when we activate our Pathfinder - we are coming into contact with the unknown and this means letting go of what we know to make a clear space for this new path.

The poet TS Eliot speaks to this beautifully in his Four Quartets:

In order to arrive at what you do not know

You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance

In order to possess what you do not possess

You must go by the way of dispossession

In order to arrive at what you are not

You must go through the way in which you are not
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not

When we are plunged into the unknown it can be disorienting and bewildering. We can feel lost and vulnerable and the temptation is to close off. In this space which we may experience as dark, and which we could also call the unconscious, we need different tools from our usual cognitive faculties: Here, intuition is our light; dreams our guide; and our inner practices of stillness and emptying bring awareness while strengthening resilience. Creative imagination – and creativity in its broadest sense – can open up the way forward. We stay well connected and grounded in our body because that is where our so-called gut feelings give us important information.

Why would we engage with pathfinding? We have a nice quiet life and things are going tickety-boo. Well, that may be fine but it may not be enough and there is no room to grow. Or the path doesn't fit any more. Or it has been taken away from us by the actions of others or a change in circumstances. I shall be giving examples about how these shifts are made during this talk..

I first came across the name, the concept of Pathfinder when I saw the film of the same name which was released in the US in 1989. The film was set in medieval Finland and depicted a Sami tribe who had to relocate as they were under threat from another tribe. Their shaman was tasked to find a place of safety, while a young tribe member acted as a lure in distracting the enemy to allow his people safe passage. This film captured my imagination, not only because it was a gripping story and well done, but because at that time I was working intensively with Fazal Inayat-Khan, my Sufi teacher – who encouraged me to be a pathfinder to help my family relocate to a healthier and safer environment. It took months to overcome obstacles as we negotiated change. It was a collaborative process with my then husband and our two children. Including them made it more complicated but much more meaningful. At first the kids did not want to move. But then they got into it and were even having dreams about this mystery new location. The place we arrived at was not where we had initially thought but it was the one place that spoke to all of us and was definitely right. The film and that experience has stayed with me, and I have used what I learned from that subsequently.

What gives the impetus to make the shift and leave behind what is familiar and face the unknown? What activates our Pathfinder? In the example I have just given it was to be in a better place with a time limit involved due to the kids' schooling. However, we had been contemplating a move for some time. So even

if we are aware our path no longer fits, there is a gestational period it seems where seed thoughts are taking root and we are moving towards the ripeness of the moment to enable the shift. Many years ago I worked in a refuge for abused women and children. For the women, coming to the refuge - shelter as it is known in the US - was a huge step for them. Typically it meant leaving most if not all their belongings and a complete break from everyday life. They felt shame because now it was known they had been victims of violence and abuse. For each woman the catalyst to act was different, but as they told it, it usually required increasing awareness over time with someone to help them take stock of the abuse and its impact. They had to come to terms with the relationship not getting any better and most likely worse. Seeing the impact on their children would provide the impetus to act. For some the danger was imminent and real so they had to leave. Others felt that leaving – especially where there was extreme control – would put them and the children in more danger, and there is evidence to support that. Their path was to stay put, keep their heads down, wait until there was a clear opening. For the women who were able to respond to the ripeness of the moment, they said having a place to go helped them face the unknown – we were their lighthouse. The refuge may have been a temporary respite for some but for many it was a portal into a new world and way of being, where they felt valued and respected. It was fantastic to see how quickly they blossomed in this environment. Some women would visit years later to say how

significant the refuge had been in helping them take an entirely new path in life. They may not have seen themselves as Pathfinders, but they were.

That moment of realising we have to shift or act decisively can bring about an emotional catharsis, anything from giddy relief to an emotive outpouring of grief and anger. This can be expressed clearly through the body: I recall vividly the moment I decided to leave South Africa. My political activities resulted in my flat being raided after which I received word I was on the house arrest list. I wrestled with feeling guilty if I stepped away from the struggle, yet I did not want my life to be defined in this way. At the moment I made the decision waves went through my body: I started shaking all over and barely made it to the loo to throw up. After that I began to laugh and cry interchangeably. Then everything cleared and I felt calm and focused. The way opened up – London was calling and I responded. As if by magic resources were mobilised, friends took me into hiding so I was safe, and a few weeks later I was on a plane to London to embark on a whole new path in my life. I had just turned 21. It was a most useful lesson in letting go and putting trust in the unknown. My family did not speak to me for years, but I never regretted leaving. It opened so many doors for me, including my being introduced to Sufism, one of the most significant paths in my life.

In telling you my story about fleeing South Africa, I think about the millions of refugees who have left their homes or place of birth because it is intolerable or

dangerous and the incredible hardships and dangers they face in their quest for a better life. My journey was far easier and privileged in comparison. Several years ago Social Services asked me to assess a young Afghan man of about 20 years of age who had just become a dad. His father had been killed by the Taliban after which he had to flee for his life. According to him, the journey to the UK was not something he had been planning, it was determined in that instant by his father's untimely death with the family gathering what meagre resources they had to give him a chance. He made his way to the UK, hiding by day travelling at night, ducking headlights and jumping lorries, surviving situations where he thought he might die or be killed. He was even held and deported by the UK authorities on arrival but astonishingly he made his way back a second time. I asked him what kept him going during these dangerous crossings. He said (counting on his fingers): one, faith in Allah who 'watches over me'; two, never give up; three, go back not an option. He had faith in his heart and a cloak of hope. What struck me was he had not imagined this journey nor did he have any idea of the UK (he actually thought he was going to Italy which was equally unknown). A proper Pathfinder he was – his intuition switched on with radar for danger and spotting opportunities.

As with this Afghan man who lost a father, a family and a village, our path in life may be taken from us even as we wish it were not so. We lose a beloved partner or someone very dear to us, we face a life-changing or terminal health condition,

we can no longer stay in the home we love or it no longer exists, our circumstances change so dramatically we cannot continue in the same way. These events come as shuddering jolts, shock followed by waves of grief accompanied by intense anxiety. Joan Didion's book, 'The Year of Magical Thinking' articulates poignantly what the mind does with grief and loss. 'Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends' she says, describing the impact of her husband's sudden death by heart attack. 'When half awake, I tried to think why I was alone in the bed....Then in the morning I would wake and feel the 'fell of dark, not day'.' Here she quotes the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins who wrote:

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer no man fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there,
I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
And I have asked to be where no storms come.

Mourning becomes the path, there is no alternative but to be on it as best we can and be open to learning from it, trusting something new will emerge, just like nature. David Whyte talks about Heartbreak as 'not the end of the road or the cessation of hope...[but] in the depth of its impact as well as in its hindsight, [we] see it as its own reward.'

I had my own heartbreak when I experienced a deeply painful separation from my long-term partner. He delivered the news suddenly while at our home in Senegal over Christmas. Shock led to numbness which got me through the new year, and I was able to make it back to England by using a tried and tested trauma response – switch off the feelings (well, I was already numb) and act normal. I paid for it later, but by that time I was plugged into my therapeutic network and writing my way through pain. I managed to go to work and do the essentials, but the nights and weekends were for grieving. I would sit still for hours in the dead of winter, only getting up to practice tai-chi when I could summon the energy. There was a kind of beauty to my largely solitary existence and its quiet rhythm of breath and pen. If there had been a motion sensor in my room it would not have registered. To give structure and direction to my sitting I signed up for an online Mindfulness course with Jack Kornfield, whom I admire and respect, although his voice started to grate by Module 4 and I switched him off. But it helped, especially the exercises on compassion. As the months rolled by and spring came then summer then autumn things got better as they usually do but not that much better and I had to acknowledge I was pretty stuck on my mourning path. Part of it was the package of loss included the house we had bought together and the villagers for whom I had much affection and missed. However, I had agreed to his keeping the house and I was left with the question of where to now – because that had been our future together

Then I had a dream of an open, empty road, which was both scary and compelling.

It was beckoning me to step on it.

So I took myself off to Mali.

Both to help me through my mourning and to open myself to a way forward, a direction as to a future home.

After staying a week in Bamako with a Bambara family, I left at the first Call to Prayer and travelled alone by bus to Segou, which is in the heart of Mali.

On a whim I visited a centre where textiles are woven and cloths dyed, called Bogolan or mud cloths, using traditional methods. It was open workshop day. I remember being reluctant to participate in making a design, but there was something in the man's gesture as he beckoned me that took away my resistance. This is what I wrote of our encounter:

I sit before an artisan cum professor

An elder of indeterminate age

He writes in chalk on the floor

Root words, symbols of divination

So I understand

Bowls of liquid sit before me – crushed leaves for ochre, boiled bark for sienna,
muddy slip and dried balls of indigo

This maestro dips cloths into the vegetals infusing the loomed cotton
With the eyes of a child I drink the magic of nature's chemistry
But it is the symbols informing designs which captivate me
In this ancient language of the nomadic Fula
Each cloth a different story
An oracle
Straight line for the clear path
Two parallel lines, difficult to walk together (I know that well)
Zig-zag for avoidance
Cross for cross-roads, possibilities and decisions
Circle with the dot for hope
Circle within circle for the moon and stars
Two camels' feet for the voyage
Entranced, I lean forward
Fortuneteller to my wish to know
Mirror held to me these past 13 months, with my camel's feet guided by moon
and stars
Alone
I have traced the cross
Across continents
Inner and outer journeying leaving marks in the sand
Water of sea and river my cradle

Emptying and revisioning, decisions mine and not mine

Sampling and discarding

Reflecting and searching

What next, to emerge from the liminal?

He smiles, hands me a cloth

Invites me to draw the next chapter of my story....

Anni Albers, a textile artist originally trained at the Bauhaus, also saw the power of textiles and the messages they convey. She said: 'We learn courage from artwork. We have to go where no one was before us. We are alone and responsible for our actions.'

The trip to Mali was pivotal in helping me accept my path of being alone. I learned to trust and relish travelling alone as well. A year after that trip I found a place to live in a village in Southern Spain – and this house did indeed call me, in a dream with a very recognisable key. But most importantly I think my trip to Mali led me back into contact with the Sufi Way after some years. I was welcomed and I am most grateful.

In sharing these stories I don't wish to suggest pathfinding is about the necessity of making enormous journeys, having to relocate, face dangers, etc. Opening ourselves to a new path is essentially an internal experience and can be very

subtle in its outward expression. The shift may not be overtly apparent from the outside: we live in the same house, drive the same car, do our grocery shopping as before, but something inside has significantly changed. We may have opened ourselves to something much deeper and profound so that our sense of who we are and our relating have changed radically. The fact we did not have to go half way round the world to achieve that is a cause to cheer. After all, inside of us there is plenty of space in which to roam.

Again, I draw on TS Eliot's Four Quartets – and I think these words will be familiar to you but no less for that:

With the drawing of the Love and the voice of this Calling

We shall not cease from exploration

And at the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started

And know the place for the first time.

Through the unknown, remembered gate...

Not known, because not looked for

But heard, half heard, in the stillness

Between two waves of the sea...

As I prepared for this talk it struck me our very existence here begins with pathfinding – we are called, nudged, pulled to make our way into this life, leaving the security of our womb home to embark on a journey that is unknown and takes all our strength. When we successfully emerge – whether we do so by natural means or by Caesarean - and meet our parents eye to eye, skin to skin, breathing independently, we have entered our first path in this life. It may be the most dangerous path we take – to be so vulnerable yet undertaking an arduous journey from one world to another. This first experience creates I believe a template which can inform transitions we make and take throughout our life. And one day, we shall be pathfinding our way back out. Hopefully, all we gathered from pathfinding in our life here will serve us well.

I hope the stories in this talk have provided some inspiration to reflect on your own pathfinding – past, present and yet to come – as well as giving some useful tools to engage with pathfinding. To take it further, if you would wish to do so, I am offering a Pathfinding Chilla.

I now bring this talk to a close with a lovely poem by the Spanish poet Antonio Machado, 'Caminante No Hay Camino, Wayfarer There is No Way':

Wayfarer, the only way

Is your footprints and no other

Wayfarer, there is no way
Make your way by going farther
By going farther, make your way
Till looking back at where you've wandered
You look back on that path you may
Not set foot on from now onward.
Wayfarer, there is no way;
Only wake-trails on the waters.

Pathfinding Chilla:

1. This is a Pathfinding chilla; designed to help you look at your life path today and think deeply how you want it to be.
2. In preparation, think about the path you are on, and reflect on whether you would like either to clarify the path you are on or to find a new path for yourself. Notice if you are open to fresh possibilities.
3. As the next step in your chilla, choose and visit an art museum. Once inside allow yourself to wander intuitively rather than targeting certain exhibits or collections, especially if you are familiar with the museum. One of the artworks holds a secret for you about your way forward. You are to find this piece of art, which you will recognise because it compels you, grabs your attention, says: 'look at me'.
4. Sit with the artwork for at least an hour or more, until it reveals to you the secret about your path. You may make notes about what comes up, but allow at least 30 minutes to silently and fully receive your vision.
5. After that, and as soon as possible, make a record of your experience. This can include writing, drawing or whatever media allows you to express what you have experienced.
6. Over the next three days begin to take steps in your life to follow the instructions embedded in what was revealed by the artwork.

Some comments about undertaking this chilla:

1. When you visit the museum give yourself time to look around. A museum can be labyrinthine in its design and often crowded, resulting in time taken up getting from one section to another.
2. When you do find an artwork, be prepared so you can sit with it for at least an hour.
3. You can return if you wanted to view the artwork again.
4. I recommend you go sooner rather than leaving it close to when we next meet. Partly because you may wish to revisit the artwork, as well as giving yourself enough time to process and debrief your experience.
5. There were several reasons I chose an art museum: there is usually good access should there be any mobility issues; typically there is a broad range of artworks on view – painting, sculptures, photographs, room installations, videos/digital art, sometimes even performance art.; and usually a lot of the art can be viewed free of charge or at a minimal cost.

Please note:

1. This chilla, like all the chillas that will be offered, is voluntary and self-care is essential throughout the process. Should you engage with this chilla you take full responsibility for your engagement.
2. Debriefing a chilla experience is an important part of the chilla. This can be done with one of our group of guides or other trusted people in your

life. If you feel lost, talk to a guide. Contact details of the guides are on the website.

3. At the next meeting of Living with Sufism, which will be 25th November, the first half hour will be dedicated to hearing from individuals who wish to share their experiences of undertaking the Pathfinding Chilla.

I wish you all the very best with furthering your pathfinding.

Thank you and Good luck!

