



Fresh Rain

A Quarterly e-Journal of the Open Path / Sufi Way

SPRING 2016

IN THIS ISSUE: Reflections on "Community" by Carol Barrow, Kiran Rana, Ali MacArthur, Clare Lester, and Pir Elias; poems by Jeanne Rana



Dear Friends,

In our spring issue, we examine the theme "Community"—both the good and difficult sides. At first blush, could there be a downside to community? Read on to discover the complications.

Mehera Bakker searched for the quotes from Sufi Inayat Khan. Thank you, Mehera!

Carol Barrow leads the prose section with an intimate look at her process with community throughout her life. Elias examines community edges, and the ethical questions raised by separating ourselves. Kiran Rana examines two photographs on a card, and speaks to "the currency of being human." Ali MacArthur dives into the variety of communities she has lived in. Clare Lester shares reflections of an "opening the heart" exercise from her time at Croyden Hall. Jeanne Rana provided us with two poems that touch on edges as well.

In the summer issue, we'll tackle "Aging"—surely a few of us can speak to that, and I look forward to your submissions! And in the fall, let's look at "Polarity"—there is enough of that in the world this year.

As always, my gratitude to all who send offerings. Please, continue! And when you send writing, please attach a face photo separately, so we may include it with the article or poem.



With love to you all,

Amrita

editor, Fresh Rain: freshrain@sufiway.org

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Community

— CAROL BARROW



I was raised in a family that did not value community outside of its own small, disjointed clan. In fact, I think we were all afraid of the concept if it had to do with any group outside of our own. When I was young, we lived near grandparents, great-grandparents and other extended family, but children were kept separate from adults, and our weekly visits just felt like obligation to me. As I turned fourteen, the little community that we had vanished when my family moved six hundred miles away. We never built a new one. For decades I have struggled with the concept of being in community—yearning for it and feeling terrified of it all at the same time.

When I met Elias and other Sufis, I wasn't interested in being a part of any type of community. I did recognize a kind and sincere openness in the people I met, but I was mostly drawn to something in the teachings that was intangible, yet familiar—it felt like I had come home. That was all I thought I needed. But over time, I kept landing in the same places, on calls with the same Sufi friends, doing retreats with a community of people with whom I shared something in common. It was very nice. But if someone spoke of the importance of community or relationship, my stomach still squirmed. I tried my best to at least stay open to the fact that community might be a good thing for some people—just not me.

Recently, I made the decision to come face to face with whatever has been keeping an old grief so raw that I still cry when talking about it. You see, not only did my family

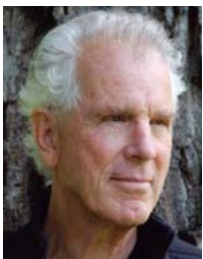
not do community, we also didn't "do grief." We did not cry. We didn't hold or care for each other.

In order to explore and move through the long-held beliefs that have kept me stuck, I realized that I needed community. I have reached out to friends, and I have employed a therapist. I now understand that going through a best friend's death at fourteen, an ex-boyfriend's suicide at twenty-one, and the stillbirth of a baby at twenty-seven without any community to provide a place for sadness, to hold me, to walk me through whatever was needed, and to mirror back to me that sadness was natural and healthy is not the ideal way to heal from loss. But it's never too late to relax into the kindness and understanding of community. Francis Weller, in his book *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, beautifully illustrates the importance and richness of grieving and the necessity of community for our healing. He says that grieving is "...an intensely interior process that can only be navigated in the presence of community." Regarding the cultural conditioning that urges us to keep our pain private, especially strong for those of us living in the West, he says "In our isolation, we deprive ourselves of the very things that we require to stay emotionally vital: community, ritual, nature, compassion, reflection, beauty, and love."

Community, ritual, nature, compassion, reflection, beauty, and love... These are common words in our community of Sufis, no? Even while continuing to declare an allergy to the word, over the last eleven years, I have been swimming in the beautiful, open, loving, and accepting community of Sufis. The love, acceptance, and encouragement of my friends here have helped me to see the strength available to face the old conditioning that has been in the way of openness to Community with a capital C—the Community that is not only comprised of friends, but of "the Friend." In truth, I never was alone. ✦ ✦ ✦

Community and Unity

— ELIAS AMIDON



We speak fondly about the idea of community. We say we want to be part of a community, and we feel lonely or meaningless if we don't belong to one. We long to belong. We count our belonging in successive scales: the intimate community we create with a love partner, the community of our blood family, the community of our close friends, of colleagues at work, of the fans of our sports team, of our religious affiliation, our ethnic or racial group, and ultimately, the community of the nation

we belong to. Our belonging in each case depends on our identification with that group: its style, its way of thinking, speaking, and acting, its beliefs, and its allegiance to itself. The diverse scales and intensities of the communities we belong to give our lives meaning and purpose. They help us survive. They give opportunities for our creativity and, at their best, nourish in us the experience of communion and love.

But for all the benefits our communities offer, they also bring a severe ethical weakness. To put it simply, *the problem of a community is its edge*. Of course, every community needs an edge, the boundary that defines it as different from what is around it. But that definition, by its very nature, excludes. A little community of popular high school girls keeps its identity by shunning less popular girls from entering its friendship.

The German nation under Hitler defined itself as Aryan, rejecting others as inferior. A religious sect requires its followers to adhere to a creed, and anyone suspected of being disloyal to that creed is criticized or cast out. The examples are endless. “Edge-protection” is how a human community—of almost any scale—maintains its continuity. By adhering to an us-them distinction—who’s in, who’s out—the group ensures its survival. A pack of wolves runs with its own, and reacts aggressively when encountering other packs that stray into its territory.

These examples are what the philosopher Henri Bergson called “closed societies.” They form everywhere in nature, and the evolution of human civilization is predicated upon them. The various scales of communities I mentioned earlier are all closed societies with their own internal self-concepts and obligations, and they are nested within each other like Russian dolls. We move from one to the other with the assurance that, in each case, there is an in-group and an out-group, with a well-defined edge in between. The “otherness” of the out-group serves to strengthen the cohesiveness of the in-group. I remember Ayatollah Khomeini stating that if the United States and Iran ever became friends, that would be the end of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Bergson points out that movement from one community identity to the next level in terms of scale—from family to friends to religious group to political group to nation—illustrates *differences of degree, though not of kind*. But at the national level this movement meets its limit. For humans to shift their sense of group identity from the national level to the level of humanity as a whole requires something new in human consciousness. With that shift we move from being bounded by the obligations of a closed society into the creative responsiveness of an open society. This same “difference in kind” occurs in the shift from believing exclusively in the dogma of a specific religion to embracing a universal spirituality, or from following the obligations of a defined spiritual path to accepting the immediacy and non-definitiveness of an open path.

As we pass from a more limited social solidarity to kinship with all of humanity, we can no longer define ourselves in contrast to an out-group. The voices and actions of the saints, mystics, and great prophets of humanity are what help us here. Jesus’ message, *Love one another*, is an example of this kind of help, as is the message of spiritual liberty given to us by Inayat Khan. These voices do



not guide us by insisting on conformity to a community’s obligations. They appeal to what is beyond these edges, to the Living Essence of the Real (God) that we share with all being. That appeal touches our hearts in a way that is completely different from the belonging we value as members of a closed society. It inspires in us a sense of unity, but a unity that is open, responsive, and alive.

We who identify ourselves with the Sufi Way and Open Path can take a lesson here. This Way, this Path, is not conceived as a closed community. The Sufi Way is an initiatic lineage; but to argue that the act of initiation makes an “edge” defining who’s in and who’s out would be missing the point of what initiation truly is.

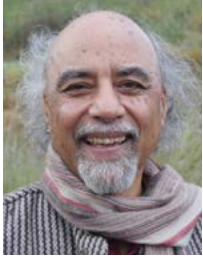
Initiation in the Sufi Way does not require allegiance to any doctrine or mode of conduct. The only requirement for initiation is sincerity. All are welcome, and there is no compulsion to remain part of the tariqah. The tariqah of the Sufi Way is the *sil sileh*, the stream of blessing that flows through time. The Open Path of the Sufi Way is just that—open—more like an unfolding melody than an institution. Its reason for being is to touch our hearts with reminders of the sacred reality we are part of, and to inspire us on the path of friendship. It is a creative path, not a club. Its gift is its openness, its freshness, and its welcome. ✦ ✦ ✦

Friendship is a word which we all use in our everyday language, and yet it could take one’s whole life only to realize its meaning.

— Sufi Inayat Khan

The Worshipper and the Tabernacle

— KIRAN RANA



I'm looking at a photograph—two actually, one on each side of a card. On one side the image is of an old woman, possibly Burmese—Thai—Chinese—Japanese. Probably Buddhist, a rosary wrapped through her fingers, a great piety in her face, an intensity of longing for her surrender to be accepted by the nameless, formless emptiness into which she wants to unite, emptying herself through a profound intimation of something greater, inconceivably great, yet humble enough to be right there—with her, for her and, in fact, her, just her, indivisible from her in that totality of emptying that at the last requires not willing not asking not calling not being not becoming just that stop-inside-a-heartbeat called resting.

The other side is the interior of a tabernacle. The eye rushes in two directions so this choice of which to record first is arbitrary. Well, not completely, there is a reason, the greater direction—so great as to stand for the All—is first because it's easier to describe. So the pen if not the eye rises to the hexagonate skylight at the center of the tabernacle roof within which are framed geometric panes of perhaps colored glass. So we know exactly where in this scheme we are to understand that God is, or comes in.

Having put God into place, with a quick but sincere genuflection the eye turns—nay, rushes—to the group gathered around the chancel organ. They dominate the foreground, these five white- or light-colored-robe-clad angels (one almost hidden behind the organ's music stand) holding ring binders of an equal provenance in their almost equal hands, a certain almost-pensive earnestness playing differently on each face as they sing. Sitting at the organ, her back to us, the choir leader or organist or worship functionary or servant of the One or human angel sits with a certain authority of experience and recognition of the need to hold it together and a little down, a little restrained, for the sake of the congregation dimly seen as bursts of light and dark in the background. The material and geometric authority of the complex 3-keyboard organ dominates the scene.

I look again. There is no difference in these pictures. The subtle glory of the woven robe that the Buddhist worshipper is wearing is no less material or demonstrative than the organ, the robes and the binders. The rosary in its demureness is the mirror reflection of the Holy Skylight. We are held by the same sincerity in the face of the same helplessness—and hope. To think otherwise is to understand less—that is the real heresy. These pictures are two sides of a single royal coin, the currency of being human.



Why is it so difficult to be a friend? The reason is that there is something in ourselves which is always against our being friendly. It is the self, the ego, which the Sufi's call Nafs. As long as this ego rules, a man cannot claim to be anybody's friend. To be a real friend is a lesson that we have to learn; today nations are against nations and races against races. When communities are against communities and one religion against another, it is then that friendship is needed.

— Sufi Inayat Khan

Community?

— ALI MACARTHUR



I've noticed that the word "community" comes up quite a lot in conversation.

It covers a multitude of groups, close or not close, who call themselves a community. I see that people love to think of themselves as part of a community. People need to feel they belong.

I belong to a choir that is a part of the "choral community" in Bristol. We love singing together and we enjoy the sense of belonging when we meet each week.

I live in a cul-de-sac of nine houses that call themselves a community (even though the most they ever say to each other is "Good morning! Bit warmer (or colder) isn't it?") But my neighbour says "Oh yes, we all watch out for each other in this little community!" Most of them are older people and they don't seem to visit each other, but they enjoy and value the sense of trust and the security of knowing that someone would notice if they didn't appear for a few days and would care enough to do something about it.

When I was young I felt that belonging to a close community was the missing element in my life, which may have been a reflection of the fact that my parents moved house a lot and I was never at one school for enough time to build lasting close friendships, especially as I was quite shy and self-conscious. So as a teenager my constant dream and desire was to live "in community"—my vision being the utopian ideal in which I imagined complete happiness and fulfillment would be found in belonging to and living amongst like-minded, loving, supportive others, participating in life together, living communally, sharing everything, caring for each other through life, laughter, sadness and sickness unto death.

My first thought about how to achieve this dream was that I would join up with one of the women's forces, either the Navy or the Air Force. Then when I was sixteen or seventeen years old I read a lot about life on a kibbutz in Israel and so I planned to go with my best friend and live on a kibbutz for a few years. In the end we didn't go because she met her future husband and pulled out of our plan and I was too afraid to do it on my own!

Later, in my thirties, I joined my first spiritual community, based on the teachings of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky. For a few years I lived in California and experienced my first

real taste of community living. We shared houses, worked together, did spiritual practice together, had meetings, had romances (!) and I developed deep and lasting bonds with people, some of which have lasted to this day, even though I left the community in 1992. After leaving I was quite addicted to living in community and almost immediately found another spiritual community in which I stayed for over nine years. I left that one in 2001 and again I still experience a sense of deep connection with many, many other "ex-students."

What I loved and appreciated about that type of community living were many of the elements about which I had dreamed and which I did find, including the sense of belonging I had searched for, the love and trust that developed amongst us and the intimacy that grew from our common aim of dedicating our lives to our idea of spiritual evolution, generosity and positivity.

The downside of those communities, and maybe of any community where people are very idealistic, is that hierarchies develop that are not necessarily healthy because they can arise from ambition and the lust for power, which can then break trust and intimacy. Interestingly, in my limited experience, I have seen that when this happens the community breaks down sooner or later, because real community cannot survive in an environment where there is no trust.

Nowadays, as part of the Sufi Way community, I find that the real sense of community is within myself. I feel a sense of trust, love and intimacy within this world-wide community, with people whom I have either met or not met; and in my experience this intimacy bears fruit as soon as I do meet with others too. But I also feel it every day, whether I am alone or with others. This is the mystery.

After all, the ultimate community is our shared Being in which we truly are not separate. If we know this at the deepest level of our sense of existence, then we can experience true community in ourselves, whether or not we are physically close to or living with others. I can look into the eyes of a person I pass on the street, who I may have never seen and will never see again, and we can experience a deep and shared recognition of us being one, albeit for a moment.

My original dream of what community is hasn't really changed, even after half a century of experiencing many different types of communities. At the deepest level I still believe that true community is based on sharing; shared trust, shared goals, shared ideals or beliefs, living with love for and awareness of ourselves and others and the wider whole.

Each of us is a miracle—and we are all part of one vast miracle. Now THIS is community! ✦ ✦ ✦

Open Path "Opening the Heart" Exercise, Croydon Hall, October 2015

— CLARE LESTER

I find myself settling within, quieting my body, quieting my mind.

I sink into wider space, my edges blur, my breath widens, deepens ... I go within finding the warm heart, the bright light at the center of my heart...

...now widened, wide and soft like gentle pink clouds puffing out of a bright blue sky.

I'm asked to get to know this heart felt sense, to let it fill the "me" that is dissolving...

to let this heart of deep peace and love, hold me, to soften into its embrace.

...I'm asked to extend this out from me, to find those I care for and give of this, to find someone in need of healing and deep loving peace

to share it ... and so I find those I love and extend this wide quality of holding ... sitting awhile with them ... a feather touch, a mist brushing the fine edges of bright light that envelops us ... where we meet without an "us" widening into a spacious heart,

and then ... on being asked to find those who need this even more ... to let this heart of deep peace and love extend even wider.

I go to the edges of my held beliefs and holding and my mind pops up with a politician who I actively dislike! Surely not!
can I extend this embracing quality of love to him?
Really??

I notice Clare's mind bouncing around trying to duck this, but this is so much bigger than Clare's mind, and "I" bypass myself and all the usual divisions I identify with and ... extend this heart of light towards him.

a wide embrace of calm is with us ... an insubstantial boundless calm, a sweet sweet light surrounds me and the one I hate.

and I find it is totally not about "me" but utterly without personality, utterly and wholeheartedly without personality,

an embracing light of love and compassion

utterly engaging, utterly neutral, utterly beautiful

and we meet there.

I am startled, and I am outside of myself, my perception has changed.

I am shaken. I am shaken to the core of my heart ... for I Love being with my "enemy" for he is beautiful.

...and I just cannot believe I am finding this.

All I can do is Laugh!

This is so much bigger than my petty wars with the world, and the wider wars of the world. In my every day I shall continue to oppose his views, but find I can no longer "hate" him, as we have now met deeply and profoundly on the wider horizons of experience, been with one another beyond the boundaries of belief. We are kin in an always present place ... this wider place....

I find I have had a glimpse of how to extend my heart beyond me, really "beyond me," of how to love beyond the terrible divisions and woe's of the world.

I have been blessed with a moment of being with this and I do not yet know if this grace will fall again but...

our world so needs us to pause and be beyond ourselves ... to care and embrace our dear and delicate world with this healing and transforming light.

Open Heartedness is to care widely beyond belief. Really!

"Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle."—a koan to sit with. ✦ ✦ ✦

In education, in religion or in anything else, the best thing one can do is to introduce the spirit of friendliness.

The essence of morals, of religion and of education is one and the same, and that is the manner of friendship. It teaches sincerity, gratitude, sympathy, tenderness, appreciation. Sufi's of all ages have named it SULUK, which means divine manner, beneficence.

The best education is beneficence: how to bring pleasure and happiness to another; one learns to understand and practice what friendship is. When one has cultivated one's heart through friendship one will naturally be inclined to be friends with others. Just as someone who has learned how to sing beautifully, will naturally sing every song that is given to her beautifully.

— Sufi Inayat Khan



winter park

sidewalk and bare branches
 one lamp post
 and tarps raised over the benches
 like a circus tent
 over a whale
 the homeless
 so cold in winter
 shopping cart pushers
 living beneath freeway onramps in Oakland
 one young woman
 with a dog and a frozen smile
 always at the corner of 12th and Castro
 if the light is red
 I grab my wallet
 wave her over to me
 “God Bless You”
 she says she’s out there
 early morning and after dark

Mary and Joseph found housing
 in a stable
 for the birth of the savior
 where does this young woman sleep?
 and is she saved
 if she is cold and hungry?

Dark of the year
 and the homeless stand out
 on street corners
 bare branches against the sky

— Jeanne Rana
 Dec 17, 2013

Animal/Angel Bliss

when my milk came in
 suckling a kind of kissing
 Animal/Angel bliss
 the boy child loved the breast
 no greater intimacy
 this bond this feeding

our deep cells remember
 our own rooting and sucking
 the gift of nourishment freely given

headlines today
 Black Lives Matter
 All Lives Matter

each mother’s son a nursing baby once
 on both sides of the protest lines
 each woman too a baby once
 all still seeking the breast
 a reflex a turn toward life
 food
 our need to suck
 and the desperate pacifiers we cling to
 alcohol exercise fast cars and sex
 and protests
 black lives do matter
 all lives matter
 and all are lost
 all are saved
 depending on your world view

every mother’s child
 matters
 and every mother
 and all are lost
 and all are saved

rain finally on the parched hills
 a kind of nursing
 a respite from drought
 the morning sparkles
 the city new born
 peaceful
 my heart soothed

I loved nursing my babies
 Animal/Angel bliss

— Jeanne Rana
 Dec 16, 2014

Meeting Each Other

With each issue of Fresh Rain we will include a few short biographical sketches and photos of Sufi Way initiates. Since many of us are scattered in different places on the globe, this is one way we can introduce ourselves to each other—along with speaking together

on teleconferences or, if we're lucky, meeting each other at a program or retreat. If you would like to introduce yourself like this, send a photo and a 200-word (or less) bio written in the first person to: freshrain@sufiway.org



Isha Francis

Mysteries abound. Who is writing about whom?

I'm around five or six, and my Nana Eva gives me a collection of bible stories; easy to read. I read them all, pretty much know all the stories and begin to imagine?

dream? hallucinate? that I am Jesus reborn. That fancy eventually fades away....

I'm about fifteen, and for no good reason that I can recall, in a very small town in the center of California, I pick up a book of Buddhist writings in our little county library. I don't remember what, just words of Buddha, whoever he was. Standing in our back yard I read something, and the world stops dead in its tracks. Nothing, absolutely nothing existed except the wonder of wherever those words took me.

Twenty years later at the second Summer Workcamp held by Murshid Fazal in Katwijk, he gives me, upon our first meeting, the task to wash the feet of everyone there. I don't do such a good job; still a lot of dirty feet and my still cold, broken heart left over at the end. A month or so later in a meeting on the stairs at Four

Winds, he gives me the name Isha, which exists in a lot of languages, including being referential to the name Isa bin Yusuf, Jesus son of Joseph.

Forty years later, I enter dear Pir Elias' Open Path and discover, wonder into wonder, my now very dear friends, Nagarjuna and Longchenpa.

David Loy says the world is made of stories. Here's one he tells:

According to a Hindu myth, the world is upheld by the great elephant Maha Pudma, who is in turn supported by the great tortoise Chukwa.

An Englishman asked a Hindu sage what the great tortoise rests upon.

"Another turtle," was the reply.

"And what supports that turtle?"

"Ah Sahib, after that it's turtles all the way down."

Stories all the way down.

Maybe my stories will meet yours along the way. After all, it's all right now.

— Isha Francis

February 17, 2016



Upcoming Programs 2016



Living Sufism

Talks and discussions by teleconference explore a Sufism that is alive now, in our hearts and how we live. The 2015-16 Living Sufism teleconference series is underway. **Sign up at sufiway.org.**



Opening to Love

Universel Murad Hassil, Katwijk, The Netherlands
Karim Noverraz and Elmer Koole
April 16-17, 2016



Open Path Intensive Retreat

(Full; waiting list only)
Two-week intensive retreat
Nada Hermitage, Crestone, Colorado
May 5 – 19, 2016



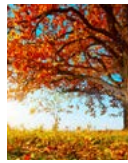
A Joyous Cosmology

4-day Advanced Open Path Retreat
Himmelreich Retreat Center, Lindau, Germany
June 30 – July 3, 2016



A Joyous Cosmology

4-day Advanced Open Path Retreat
Sparjeburd Retreat Center, Heerenveen,
Netherlands
October 20 – 23, 2016



Coming of Age

A retreat on embracing our aging and mortality
Nada Hermitage, Crestone, Colorado
Elias Amidon and Rabia Elizabeth Roberts
November 3 – 10, 2016