

## A Spirit on Fire Rumi & the Love of God

by

Todd F. Eklof

September 25, 2004

"Drink all your passion and be a disgrace."1 "I have a thirsty fish in me that can never get enough of what it's thirsty for!"2 "A fire has risen above my tombstone hat. I don't want learning, or dignity, or respectability. I want this music and this dawn and the warmth of your cheek against me."3 "A mouth is not for talking. A mouth is for tasting this sweetness."4 "This love I have for you makes everywhere I look blaze up. The tip of every feather burns."5 "Beheaded Lovers don't complain. They live underground, like people in lava cities."6 "Give yourself a kiss... if you want to hold the beautiful one, hold yourself to yourself. When you kiss the beloved touch your own lips with your own fingers. The beauty of every woman and every man is your own beauty."7 "There is some kiss we want with our whole lives, the touch of Spirit on the body."8 "Love is a musk. Don't deny it when you smell the scent!"9 "The power of love came into me, and I became like a fierce lion, then tender like the evening star. He said, 'You're not mad enough. You don't belong in this house.' I went wild and had to be tied up. He said, 'Still not wild enough to stay with us.'"10 "If anyone wonders how Jesus raised the dead, don't try to explain the miracle. Kiss me on the lips. *Like this. Like this.*"11 "When lovers moan, they're telling our story."12 "Your father and mother were playing love-games. They came together, and you appeared!"13 "What was in that candle's light that opened and consumed me so quickly?"14 "There is a passion in me that doesn't long for anything from another human being."15 "If I get lazy and cold, flames come from my Ocean and surround me."16 "Stay in the spiritual fire. Let it cook you."17 "Don't stop at my mouth! Don't listen to anything I say. I must enter the center of the fire. Fire is my child, but I must be consumed and become fire."18

These eighteen sayings of Rumi come effortlessly by quickly scanning a thin collection containing only 43 of his odes, an indistinguishable drop in the colossal ocean of his countless works. During the last twelve years of his life alone Rumi wrote one long continuous poem, the *Masnavi*, containing 64,000 lines of poetry. Translator Coleman Barks says, "It has no parallel in world literature."19 He goes on to note, "It surges like an ocean around many subjects. It is self-interpreting, visionary, sometimes humorous commentary on the health of the soul and on Qur'anic passages; it is full of folktales, jokes, and remarks to people physically present as the poems were being composed."20

Obviously it would be difficult to confine the contents of such a large body of work to only a few themes and ideas, but that which I appreciate most about Rumi's poetry, as the few verses I've just read indicate, is his use of fire and sexual passion as spiritual metaphor, and his insistence that such passion is an integral part of the spiritual journey. This is a refreshing contrast to the tendency of Western religion to treat the passions of the body as if they must be controlled and repressed. The apostle Paul, for instance, wrote, "do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their

passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness..."<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere he said, "...if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."<sup>22</sup> And in his letter to the Galatians he insisted, "Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh... those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."<sup>23</sup>

In sharp contrast to Rumi's *Sufi* teachings, Christianity insists we must crucify our passions, strip them of their flesh and hang them out to dry! We should not be surprised, then, that this same religion treats crucifixion and passion synonymously, commonly referring to Christ's crucifixion as his Passion, as in the sadly popular Mel Gibson film, suggesting the only passion of any worth is the passion that has been made to suffer and is put to death. Like most Christian reflection upon the historical Jesus, the passion of his flesh, of his life, seldom gets a mention. Instead, his passionate teachings about God's love and the love of others are crucified with him and all that's left is the image of a dead man on a cross, an inanimate figure whose passions have been extinguished.

Yet if we truly manage to rid ourselves of passion, we rid ourselves also of meaning, of creativity and of life itself. In the words of Rumi, "Those who don't feel this Love pulling them like a river, those who don't drink dawn like a cup of springwater or take in sunset like supper, those who don't want to change, let them sleep."<sup>24</sup> On a macrocosmic level we might liken the passion within each of us to the great Flaring Forth that gave birth to the entire Universe fourteen billion years ago. In scientific terms we simply call this passion, *attraction*. As cosmologist Brian Swimme explains, "At this cosmic scale, the basic dynamism of the universe is the attraction each galaxy has for every other galaxy. Nothing in all science has been established and studied with greater attention and detail than this primary attraction of each part of the universe for every other part."<sup>25</sup> We might also accurately call this attraction the Universe has for itself, passion. At its deepest and most basic level, the Universe is comprised of the sort of irrepressible passionate love Rumi refers to when he says, "Give yourself a kiss... if you want to hold the beautiful one, hold yourself to yourself." Brian Swimme, referring to this passion as *allurement*, insists that "if we are going to think about love in its cosmic dimension, we must start with the universe as a whole. We must begin with the attraction that permeates the entire macrostructure. I'm speaking precisely of the basic binding energy found everywhere in reality."<sup>26</sup>

In the human this binding energy, this attraction, this allurement, manifests itself in our passion to love others and otherness. The same fire that gives birth to the whole Universe impregnates each of us with a spark. Jewish mysticism often celebrates the Divine Spark that motivates each of us to passionately pursue everything about our world, from the invisible God to the human lover, from spiritual enlightenment to the simple pleasure of eating our favorite desert. Yes, even the act of eating a piece of chocolate cake demonstrates God's love and passion. As the *Kabbalah* says, "Sparks of holiness intermingle with everything in the world, even inanimate objects. Even by eating, you bring forth sparks that cleave to your soul."<sup>27</sup> According to this tradition, as the sparks in

my body cling to the sparks in the chocolate cake, Divine passion is fulfilled. "When you eat and drink," it says, "you experience enjoyment and pleasure from the food and drink. Arouse yourself every moment to ask in wonder, 'What is this enjoyment and pleasure? What is it that I am tasting?' Answer yourself, 'This is nothing but the holy sparks from the sublime, holy worlds that are within the food and drink.'"28

What a contrast to the Western notion that we must suppress our appetites in order to be like God. Instead, we have been taught to fear our passions and treat them with suspicion and disdain. If we should ever let them out, we will be changed into some base perverted creature completely devoid of the Divine Spark. We are afraid of our passions lest they transform us into some godless beast like a werewolf or a fiend like Mr. Hyde. Yet the mystical tradition of Rumi, like other mystical traditions, insists it is the other way around—that it is only in unleashing our passions that we are transformed into the image of God. As the Christian mystic Hildegard of Bingen wrote, "I, God, remain hidden in every kind of reality as a fiery power. Everything burns because of me."29

Yet there is no real reason for fearing such passion. For like the burning bush encountered by Moses, this divine fire burns but does not consume, it blazes but does not injure. Again, as Hildegard put it, "God says: I am the supreme fire; not deadly, but rather, enkindling every spark of life."30 Describing her own awakening, her own encounter with the burning bush, Hildegard said it was like a "burning light of tremendous brightness coming from heaven pouring into my entire mind. Like a flame that does not burn but enkindles, it enflamed my entire heart and my entire breast, just like the sun that warms an object with its rays."31 It is Hildegard who also described the Holy Spirit as a "Burning Spirit."32

This is, with little doubt, the same experience Rumi spoke of when he insisted, "I must be consumed by fire!" Rumi experienced this burning as that which enkindles but does not injure. As in Moses' encounter, we must ask, is God the fire that engulfs but does not consume the bush? Or is God the bush that is not consumed by fire? Or is God both the bush and fire, the flesh and its passion, the body and its cake? Is God what happens when both body and soul are ignited by the same passion that permeates the entire Universe?

Rumi's poetry often alludes to the play of the human and the Divine, sometimes using the Arabic word, *fana* which means *annihilation into God*. Coleman Bark says, "*Fana* is the streaming that moves from the human out into mystery—the annihilation, the orgasmic expansion, the dissolving swoon into the all."33 Indeed, it is only in being consumed by our passions that we achieve Union with the Divine, Oneness with God, the same way two lovers lose themselves in each other during a moment of ecstasy. Rumi said, "When I press my hand to my chest, it is Your Chest."34

Perhaps it is this innate passion, this cosmic allurements, this Divine Spark within each of us that is once again attracting us to this amazing 13th Century poet; that has, as Bill Moyers pointed out, made Rumi "the most popular poet in America."35 We hunger to express our repressed passions, the Divine within us, and it is Rumi who permits us to stop crucifying ourselves, to take our passions off the cross where they have been made

to suffer and die. As Andrew Harvey has pointed out, Rumi's message may never have been more needed than it is today, nearly 800 years since his birth. "As fears of an environmental apocalypse grow, and the terrible dangers that afflict humanity on every level become more and more inescapably clear, Rumi's work will become increasingly important for its testimony to the divine origin and purpose of human life... Increasingly, it will become clear that Rumi is not only humanity's supreme mystical poet but also one of its clearest guides to the mystical renaissance that is trying to be born in the rubble of our suicidal civilization."<sup>36</sup> Perhaps our species lives in such "suicidal" despair precisely because we have hung our passions on the cross and no longer feel any value in living. Fundamentalist Christianity has called us to take up the cross, and now our entire culture, our entire world, is stuck and dying. We are no longer drawn toward the inherent beauty and mystery of Nature, so we don't mind hanging her on the cross with us. We have no passion for our neighbors or strangers, so we don't mind nailing them to the cross too. Again, as Harvey warns, "Unless the vision of Rumi and other great mystics from the major traditions possesses the spirit and hones the motivation of millions of human beings and initiates them into the sacredness of human life and the holiness of Nature, humanity will destroy the world in a bitter frenzy of ignorance, pride, and greed."<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, it is the teachings, the passion of Rumi, a spirit on fire, that calls us off the cross and back into the flesh where the human and the divine meet, intertwine and create a better place for us all. According to Brian Swimme this is the only way we can prevent ourselves from taking our world and each other for granted. "Why don't we suffer intolerable boredom with every person, forest, symphony, and seashore in existence?" He asks. "The great surprise is the discovery that something or someone *is* interesting. Love begins there. Love begins when we discover interest. To be interested is to fall in love. To become fascinated is to step into a wild love affair on any level of life."<sup>38</sup> Or, in the words of Rumi himself;

My soul's a furnace; it's happy with fire.  
It's enough for a furnace to be the house of fire.  
For love, like for a furnace,  
There's always something to burn—  
If you don't see this,  
You're not a furnace.<sup>39</sup>

---

1 Rumi, *Like This*, versions by Coleman Barks, Library of Congress Catalog # 89-092393, 1990, p.35.

2 *Ibid.*, p.11.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, p.14.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*, p.15.

8 *Ibid.*, p.16.

9 *Ibid.*, p.31.

- 10 Ibid., p.20.
- 11 Ibid., p.23.
- 12 Ibid., p.24.
- 13 Ibid., p.41.
- 14 Ibid., p.28.
- 15 Ibid., p.37.
- 16 Ibid., p.55.
- 17 Ibid., p.13.
- 18 Ibid., p.59.
- 19 Barks, Coleman, *The Soul of Rumi*, Harper San Francisco, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 2001, p.7.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Romans 6:12-13.
- 22 Romans 8:13.
- 23 Galatians 5:16-17, 24
- 24 *Rumi*, ibid., p.18.
- 25 Swimme, Brian, *The Universe is a Green Dragon*, Bear & Company, Santa Fe, NM, 1984, p.43.
- 26 Ibid., p.45.
- 27 Fox, Matthew, *One River, Many Wells*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, NY, 2000, p.64.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid., p.70.
- 30 Ibid., p.70.
- 31 Ibid., p.71.
- 32 Ibid., p.70.
- 33 Barks, ibid., p.8.
- 34 *Rumi*, p.49.
- 35 Harvey, Andrew, *Teachings of Rumi*, Shambhala, Boston & London, 1999, p.xiii.
- 36 Ibid., p.xiv.
- 37 Ibid., p.xv.
- 38 Swimme, ibid., p.47.
- 39 Harvey, ibid., p.111.