



How can I know You  
when You are the inwardly hidden  
who is not known?  
How can I not know You  
when You are the outwardly manifest,  
making Yourself known to me  
in everything?

-Ibn Arabi

## Introduction

### The Story of this Book

The journey of this book in many ways parallels my own journey on the Sufi path. In 1972 I travelled to Turkey after seeing the Mevlevis perform their *sema* ceremony in remembrance of God, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The founder of the Mevlevi Dervish Order, was a 13th century poet and Sufi mystic, Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi. At the time, Rumi had barely been heard of in Europe and the United States and was primarily known in Turkey, Iran, and other Muslim countries. Today his *Mesnevi* is read world-wide and the wisdom secreted within his work inspires young and old alike.

I journeyed to Konya, in Central Turkey, a city of one traffic light, from New York, a city with a hundred thousand traffic lights. I experienced the Mevlevi Turn, *zikr* ceremonies, and prayer, and met several dervishes and sheikhs who instilled in me a desire to know Islam and the Sufi tradition.

During a “spiritual birth” in the U.S. Rumi’s poetry touched the hearts of seekers of truth. When I returned to New York I approached Macmillan Publishers with the idea of preparing a book of words and photographs depicting what appeared as a highly visual form of prayer that included centuries old sacred music. The editor was intrigued, but did not fathom what I was saying, until I removed my jacket and began to turn in his office high above Third Avenue in New York City. He got it. And I received his support in producing a book on Rumi and the

Whirling Dervishes, that remains in print some forty years after that meeting.

Much has changed in the world since I was first introduced to Rumi, but the relevance of his message has not diminished. In fact, as he has been repackaged as a new age poet, it is even more important now to shed light on the true message of his teachings: to see the signs of the Creator in everything, our surroundings and ourselves, and to recognize that we are being called to unity, devotion, and service. How would I handle the challenge of keeping a good deal of the texts from the first book while creating a wholly new book, based on new information, thoughts, and ideas, which would be more appropriate for today's seekers and reflected my own personal growth?

I wrote the first book on roomy in the early seventies, and did a revised edition in 2003. Since then more information has been uncovered and made available, to the extent that I wanted to improve and correct some of the original passages. For example, the work of Shems-i Tabriz, Rumi's *sohbet sheikh*, was now available, and it cast a new light on the spiritual relationship between him and Rumi. I carried out additional research and spoke to dervish sheikhs versed in Mevlana so that I could compose new content and integrate it with some of the content written for the original. Somehow the experience of creating and directing several documentary films on the dervishes over the years enabled me to weave early material with new material and still have a comprehensive conclusion that flowed like a river of thoughts emerging from one source. The result is that a new book was written and integrated with the first book.

*The Whirling Dervishes* sought to document and provide historical context for phenomenon that captured my attention

and I woke something in my heart. This book seeks to reaffirm that the foundation of Rumi's message is Islam and that while one can be a Muslim without being a Sufi, one cannot be a Sufi without being a Muslim. For those of us who read and learn from Rumi, the chief question must be how we integrate his teachings into our daily lives. This is the question that drove the composition of this book.

I retained the essay on dervish music, written by Nezih Uzel, a Turkish dervish musician, that was published in the first book, intact. Music was in Nezih's heart, his eyes, his ears, his voice and hands. At times one felt while listening to him play the *bendir* and chant a loving phrase to the Prophet Mohammed that he became music. It surrounded and permeated him.

"Nezih was a secret treasure that was difficult to explain or to open because he protected himself by opposites," said Kudsi Erguner, a fellow musician who came from a long line of *ney* players. He played music weekly at Turkish Radio and Television and during the night he entered the *zikr* circles of various *tekkes*. After the doctors took all the toes of his right foot in 2010 because of diabetes, he said to me; "My whole life I am trying to understand what it is to be a dervish. Now I am beginning to learn." When I saw him a few weeks before he died in 2012 he confided in me, "The game is over for me. I am now living in overtime."

I am not a heavily inclined digital person, but perhaps an analog person trapped in a digital world. Having said that, I acknowledged the necessity and immediacy of obtaining information via digital means. I pondered on how I could make this book traditional, unique, and relevant to today's digital audience. My work with documentary films, precise cuts to

create meaning and movement led me to the idea of using QR Codes to briefly cut away from written content and offer the reader additional visual and audio content, not included in the book, that would appear on their phone. The QR Codes are an invitation to explore interactive material in the book that can enhance both meaning and visual experience, but is brief enough for the reader to return to reading.

My hope is that readers of this book are inspired to adopt Rumi's teachings into their own lives, and to strive to live the core of his message. Mevlana has left us a treasure, and it is for us to decide how we will use that inheritance.

Shems Friedlander  
Exeter, New Hampshire  
March 16, 2017

Rumi is talking.  
“Why are you slumbered-bound,  
like clay the earth caressing?  
In movement shall be found  
the key to every blessing.”

# A Love Letter from Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi

I am the bird of the heavenly garden  
I belong not to the earthly sphere,  
They have made for two or three days  
A cage of my body.

For 743 years, men in black cloaks have performed a *zikr* in the form of a whirling dance in a continual remembrance of their Creator.

The Sufi poet and mystic Jalaluddin Rumi learned the *sema* from Shems-i Tabriz but it was his son Sultan Veled who standardized the dervish order known as the *Mevlevi*s. Since Rumi's passing in 1273 the *Mevlevi*s have made a kinetic *zikr* that was stylized by Sultan Veled on the basis of the moments established by his father.

With the overthrow of the Ottoman Empire in 1924, the 'Mevlevi Turn' was interrupted for over 25 years. All the *tekkes* in Turkey were closed and it was against the law to be a dervish. In 1954 a small group of dervishes led by Sadettin Heper convinced the local government in Konya that it would be harmless to introduce the Turn 'as a historical tradition' to the new culture of Turkey. UNESCO invited the *Mevlevi*s to Paris in 1964. During this, their first European trip, Selman Tuzon and Suleyman Loras sat on the Sheikh's red post as nine *semazens*

turned to the music of several dervish musicians. This event signaled the beginning of a widespread interest in the West in the remarkable works of Rumi.

Since then the *sema* has been performed in Konya on December 17th to honor the *Shebi Arus*, the Wedding Night of Jalaluddin Rumi (the night of his passing).

The turners pass the post and bow to the Sheikh. Their tall honey-colored felt hats representing their tombstones are tightly pulled over their ears, symbolizing the tying down of their lower selves. In the Sultan Veled Walk they trail the Sheikh around the *semahane* still wearing the black cloak that reflects their attachment to the world, the box of their actions. Before they begin to whirl, each lets their cloak fall and, like a fledgling bird, unfolds and stretches out his arms as the long white *tenure*, the shroud of their future, engraves a circle in the air. With each turn they invoke the Name of Allah, and perhaps for a moment experience their death before dying.

When the seed of love is planted in the heart of a believer, only Allah knows where it will bear fruit. The *sema* is a spiritual field where one can plant seeds of faith.

A person without faith is like a man who arrives at the marketplace after dark. In the darkness, this man cannot tell what he is buying. There are all kinds of people among the sellers. He pays his money and stuffs whatever they give into his sack. He does not examine what he is getting. That man has paid his money, but he has no idea what he purchased. Back home, he empties his sack. He thought he had bought a rope, but finds he has a snake. The honey proves to be tar. The meat is a stinking carcass. All his money has been wasted, and he has bought

himself a heap of trouble in the bargain. The human being entering this world is like a man going to market in the dark.

Listen to the words of the *Sufi* poet.

To market we came  
From our mother's womb,  
We bought a shroud,  
Then back to the tomb.