

The Mystical Poetry of Hafiz  
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What Shaped Hafiz?

*It is said that when he was twenty-one and working as a baker's assistant, Hafiz delivered some bread to a mansion and happened to catch a fleeting glimpse of a beautiful girl on the terrace. That one glimpse captured his heart, and he fell madly in love with her, though she did not even notice him. She was from a wealthy noble family, and he was a poor baker's assistant. She was beautiful, he was short and physically unattractive – the situation was hopeless.*

*As months went by, Hafiz made up poems and love songs celebrating her beauty and his longing for her. People heard him singing his poems and began to repeat them; the poems were so touching that they became popular all over Shiraz.*

*Hafiz was oblivious of his new fame as a poet; he thought only of his beloved. Desperate to win her, he undertook an arduous spiritual discipline that required him to keep a vigil at the tomb of a certain saint all night long for forty nights. It was said that anyone who could accomplish this near-impossible austerity would be granted his heart's desire. Every day Hafiz went to work at the bakery. Every night he went to the saint's tomb and willed himself to stay awake for love of this girl. His love was so strong that he succeeded in completing this vigil.*

*At daybreak on the fortieth day, the archangel Gabriel appeared before Hafiz and told him to ask for whatever he wished. Hafiz had never seen such a glorious, radiant being as Gabriel. He found himself thinking, "If God's messenger is so beautiful, how much more beautiful must God be!" Gazing on the unimaginable splendor of god's angel, Hafiz forgot all about the girl, his wish, everything. He said, "I want God!"*

*Gabriel then directed Hafiz to a spiritual teacher who lived in Shiraz. The angel told Hafiz to serve this teacher in every way and his wish would be fulfilled. Hafiz hurried to meet his teacher, and they began their work together that very day.<sup>1</sup>*

To dispose of some biographical information before commenting on this account: Hafiz was born Shams-ud-din Muhammed, and gave himself the name "Hafiz" which can be translated as "Memorizer" perhaps because he learned the Quran by heart. He lived about the same time as Chaucer, born about 1320, and died about age 69, in 1389. He lived about 100 years after Rumi. He, too, became a renowned Sufi master, in Shiraz, where he lived nearly all his life.

*When he died he was thought to have written an estimated 5,000 poems, of which 500 to 700 have survived. His Divan (collected poems) is a classic in the literature of Sufism. The work of Hafiz became known to the West largely*

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<sup>1</sup> Henry S. Mindlin, in Introduction "The Life and Work of Hafiz" to *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz The Great Sufi Master*, translations by Daniel Ladinsky, 1999, New York, ARKANA Published by the Penguin Group, 11-12.

*through the efforts of Goethe, whose enthusiasm rubbed off on Ralph Waldo Emerson, who translated Hafiz in the nineteenth century. Hafiz's poems were also admired by such diverse writers as Nietzsche, Pushkin, Turgenev, Carlyle, and Garcia Lorca....*"<sup>2</sup>

Now to comment on the pivotal account of what shaped Hafiz: It's revealing to reflect on the parallel of the mystical and the erotic, and the mystical and the crazy.

First the erotic: the story tells of the roots in sexual yearning – Hafiz falls in love with an image of a young woman. But, after 40 days of austerity, he confronts an even more beautiful image in the guise of the archangel Gabriel, and the promise of an even more beautiful God. The young woman is long forgotten; now the yearning is for God. I associate Hafiz's image of God with the loving force that animates life – that gives life kick and vigor. This is an image that has its roots in the erotic.

I can only give you a taste of Hafiz in my limited time. I urge you to whom this taste is exciting to read more in *The Gift* as translated by Daniel Ladinsky.

Here's a poem titled "You're It."

God  
Disguised  
As a myriad things and  
Playing a game  
Of tag.  
  
Has kissed you and said,  
"You're it—  
  
I mean, you're Really IT!"  
  
Now  
It does not matter  
What you believe or feel  
  
For something wonderful,  
  
Major-league Wonderful  
Is someday going  
To  
  
Happen.<sup>3</sup>

I love the metaphor, "God kissed you..." because it implies a physicality to our ultimate experience that is refreshing. No God in the sky, God barely earthly – so much a sky God – rather a God that kisses.

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<sup>2</sup> Frontispiece to *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz The Great Sufi Master*, translations by Daniel Ladinsky, 1999, New York, ARKANA Published by the Penguin Group.

<sup>3</sup> *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz The Great Sufi Master*, translations by Daniel Ladinsky, 1999, New York, ARKANA Published by the Penguin Group, 30.

I also love the line “Now it doesn’t matter what you believe or feel, something wonderful – major-league wonderful – is going to happen.” It suggests to me the radical openness to life that union with the sacred prepares. There’s an excitement and delight – an openness to spontaneity, the unexpected - that comes with realization of one’s harmony with the heart of life.

There’s also a kind of craziness. Going back to the story that records Hafiz’s transformation – it’s crazy to spend forty days in the cemetery, keeping awake – if it’s even physically possible! Everything about our egos sputters, “Nuts!” All the self-defenses go into code red, “What me, losing myself in the divine! Are you deranged?”

Hafiz titles another poem “The Seed Cracked Open.” Seeds don’t want to be cracked open. Something within us wants to persist in our own form, thank you very much. We resist the millstone. We would be crazy to invite being cracked open!

Here’s the poem:

It used to be  
That when I would wake in the morning  
I could with confidence say,  
“What am ‘I’ going to  
Do?”

That was before the seed  
Cracked open.

Now Hafiz is certain:

There are two of us housed  
In this body,

Doing the shopping together in the market and  
Tickling each other  
While fixing the evening’s food.

Now when I awake  
All the eternal instruments play the same music:

“God, what love-mischief can ‘We’ do  
For the world  
Today?”<sup>4</sup>

“I’s” don’t like being transformed from the “I” to the “We.” They resist. They say “Nuts!” And yet...Hafiz, and the many spiritual teachers, invite.

There’s a poem that more directly speaks of the transformation of our little egos.

Love is  
The funeral pyre  
Where I have laid my living body.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 35.

All the false notions of myself  
That once caused fear, pain,

Have turned to ash  
As I neared God.

What has risen  
From the tangled web of thought and sinew

Now shines with jubilation  
Through the eyes of angels

And screams from the guts of  
Infinite existence  
Itself.

Love is the funeral pyre  
Where the heart must lay  
Its body.<sup>5</sup>

For forty years Hafiz studied under the instruction of his teacher, Attar. (Transformation is seldom instant! – we ever so slowly accustom ourselves to the purifying fire), Hafiz captures the relationship with his teacher, Attar, in a poem, which implies the persistent struggle and the final realization.

My Master once entered a phase  
That whenever I would see him  
He would say,

“Hafiz,  
How did you ever become a pregnant woman?”

And I would reply,

“Dear Attar,  
You must be speaking the truth,  
But all of what you say is a mystery to me.”

Many months passed by in his blessed company,  
But one day I lost my patience  
Upon hearing that odd refrain  
And blurted out,

“Stop calling me a pregnant woman!”

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 69.

And Attar replied,  
 “Someday, my sweet Hafiz,  
 All the nonsense in your brain will dry up  
 Like a stagnant pool of water  
 Beneath the sun,

Though if you want to know the Truth  
 I can see so clearly that God has made love with you  
 And the whole universe is germinating  
 Inside your belly

And wonderful words,  
 Such enlightening words  
 Will take birth from you

And be cradled against thousands  
 Of hearts.”<sup>6</sup>

Who would have thought it? October, 2009, we are holding the words of Hafiz against our hearts.

#### Sermonette II: Love of the Divine

I  
 Have  
 Learned  
 So much from God  
 That I can no longer  
 Call  
 Myself

A Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim,  
 A Buddhist, a Jew [I would add, “a Unitarian Universalist”].

The Truth has shared so much of Itself  
 With me

That I can no longer call myself  
 A man, a woman, an angel,  
 Or even pure  
 Soul.

Love has  
 Befriended Hafiz so completely  
 It has turned to ash

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 92 – 93.

And freed  
Me

Of every concept and image  
My mind has ever known.<sup>7</sup>

I love this poem because it points to a truth that has been widely known. At some point realized beings recognize each other, regardless of the particular path that they have followed. We get a hint of that in our attuning ourselves to each other's hearts. Even when words spoken may be hurtful, we can go beneath to recognize the heart-state that the words may be coming from. We can honor the good intentions – the good heart – which try to express themselves in words, even when the words are painful.

I also love this poem because it expresses a heart that is connected to all being, no longer separated by the stories. Stories are, paradoxically, the only means that we can express ourselves, and they box us in.

I both love, and am terrified by Hafiz's last line, "Love has befriended Hafiz so completely it has turn to ash and freed me of every concept and image my mind has ever known." I am drawn to that kind of love. And my little ego is terrified, as I mentioned earlier, for I have banked on the concepts and images of my mind." I have put my faith on the stories and values that I tell myself. They make me who I am.

I live with the tension between particularizing and universalizing. On the one hand, I'm proud of the Buddhist – UU path that feeds my soul. On the other, I acknowledge its limitations – the very thing that defines me may separate me from another being. (Buddhism talks about discarding the raft that has carried one across the river.) Hafiz's invitation is to authentically live the interdependent web – and glory in it!

I will share a couple of poems more. The next poem points to the way we limit ourselves by being afraid. Fear, I would offer, is a human, very human response, to the realization that life is so very fragile. Yet, fear doesn't need to eat our souls up. Fear can be overcome. To use the metaphor of this poem, we can live in a much more expansive room throughout our lives.

Your Mother and My Mother

Fear is the cheapest room in the house.  
I would like to see you living  
In better conditions,

For your mother and my mother  
Were friends.

I know the Innkeeper  
In this part of the universe.  
Get some rest tonight,  
Come to my verses tomorrow.  
We'll go speak to the Friend together.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 32.

I should not make any promises right now  
 But I know if you  
 Pray  
 Somewhere in this world—  
 Something good will happen.

God wants to see  
 More love and playfulness in your eyes  
 For that is your greatest witness to Him.

Your soul and my soul  
 Once sat together in the Beloved's womb  
 Playing footsie.

Your heart and my heart  
 Are very, very old  
 Friends.<sup>8</sup>

Here's another poem that points to the specialness that each person is. In a sense it's a poetic way of expressing our first principle, "the inherent worth and dignity of every person."

If God  
 Invited you to a party  
 And said,

"Everyone  
 In the ballroom tonight  
 Will be my special  
 Guest,"

How would you then treat them  
 When you  
 Arrived?

Indeed, indeed!

And Hafiz knows  
 There is no one in this world

Who  
 Is not upon  
 His jeweled Dance  
 Floor.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 47.

How would we treat one another were we to realize that each person (including ourselves!) is a special guest, invited by God to the big dance of life? Reflect on the neutral people of your lives – the attendants, the grocery store checkout clerks, the gas-monkeys, the hotel maids, the waitresses – reflect on how they are invited by God to the dance. In the Hindu tradition there is the wonderful expression of “Namaste.” “I honor the divine in you.” Clearly this can become pro-forma, empty, but it is also an invitation to remember. Hafiz’s words are such an invitation. Will we live accordingly?

I want to leave you with one last poem. (There are so many more...)

Every  
Child  
Has known God,  
Not the God of names,  
Not the God of don’ts,  
Not the God who ever does  
Anything weird,  
But the God who only knows four words  
And keeps repeating them, saying:  
“Come dance with Me.”  
Come  
Dance.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 270.