

On Risk and Rumi [Edited Transcript]

A Sermon by Cynthia J. Alby
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Opening prayer:

There is a community of the spirit. Join it, and feel the delight of walking in the noisy street, and *being* the noise. Drink all your passion, and be a disgrace. Close both eyes to see with the other eye. Open your hands, if you want to be held. Sit down in this circle. Quit acting like a wolf, and feel the shepherd's love filling you. Be empty of worrying. Think of who created thought! Why do you stay in prison when the door is so wide open? Move outside the tangle of fear-thinking. Live in silence. Flow down and down in always widening rings of being.

Sermon

I would like to open with a few words from Rumi, "Gamble everything, if you're a true human being. Half-heartedness doesn't reach into majesty. You set out to find truth, but then you keep stopping for long periods at mean-spirited roadhouses."

Many of us have a tendency to get waylaid at mean-spirited roadhouses; we have a tendency to lounge at the bar. Rumi explores the image of the tavern in a number of poems, and it is an apt image. Think about what bars are like: sometimes they are places where we get stirred up with a kind of muddled happiness. Sometimes they are places where we wallow in the guilt or hurt which we somehow crave. But they are also places where we are transformed like grapes are transformed into wine because eventually we sense how unfulfilling the life of wallowing is. I think a lot of us have become stuck in such places in our lives. They are unfulfilling and we recognize that we need more, but we just can't seem to get out. Mostly we try to get out by taking baby steps, but as Rumi says, "Half-heartedness doesn't reach into majesty." Leaving the tavern is scary; it requires a leap into the unknown. Where is the tavern in your life?

Today I want to talk about what happens when we are unwilling to leave the tavern, what is likely to happen if we do, and what goals are worth risking everything for.

Another image Rumi uses for the place we wallow is the lake. Here is a wonderful story Rumi uses of three fish trying to decide if they should leave the lake:

This is the story of the lake and the three big fish that were in it, one of them intelligent, another half-intelligent, and the third, stupid. Some fishermen came to the edge of the lake with their nets. The three fish saw them. The intelligent fish decided at once to leave, to make the long, difficult trip to the ocean.

He thought, "I won't consult with these two on this. They will only weaken my resolve, because they love this place so. They call it *home*. Their ignorance will keep them here." When you're traveling, ask a traveler for advice, not someone whose lameness keeps him in one place. Sometimes there's no one to talk to. You must just set out on your own.

So the intelligent fish made its whole length a moving footprint and, like a deer the dogs chase, suffered greatly on its way, but finally made it to the edgeless safety of the sea.

The half intelligent fish thought, "My guide has gone. I ought to have gone with him, but I didn't, and now I've lost my chance to escape. I wish I'd gone with him." Don't regret what's happened. If it's in the past, let it go. Don't even *remember* it.

He mourns the absence of his guide for a while, and then thinks, "What can I do to save myself from these men and their nets? Perhaps if I pretend to be already dead! I'll belly up on the surface and float like weeds float, just giving myself totally to the water." He bobbed up and down, helpless, within reach of the fishermen. "Look at this! The biggest and the best of the fishes is dead." One of the men lifted him by the tail, spat on him, and threw him up on the ground. He rolled over and over and slid secretly near the water, and then, back in.

Meanwhile, the third fish, the dumb one, was agitatedly jumping about, trying to escape with his agility and cleverness. The net, of course, finally closed around him, and as he lay in the terrible frying pan bed, he thought, "If I get out of this, I'll never live again in the limits of a lake. Next time, the ocean! I'll make the infinite my home."

Rumi doesn't pull any punches in this story. He calls the fish who remains in the lake, "stupid." I think most of us stay in the lake, not because we are stupid but because we are afraid. But if we keep to this image of the lake, we will notice that the lake isn't just an unfulfilling place, it's actually a dangerous place. It is a place that will eventually suck the life out of you. And finally, like the third fish, you will find yourself saying, "If I get out of this" but it will be too late. I find the dying words of the fish so poignant: If I get out of this, I'll never live again in the limits of a lake. Next time, the ocean! I'll make the infinite my home! Those words are poignant because I, as the reader, know that for him, and perhaps for us, there will be no "next time." Where is the lake in your life?

The second fish, meanwhile, is nearly ruined by regret. So often we feel that it is too late for us. We could have left for the ocean, but that opportunity has passed. Now we're too old, too set in our ways, we have responsibilities you know! But over and over Rumi says that it is not too late. You aren't in the frying pan yet! Other times what holds us in the lake is that feeling of safety it provides. The first fish scoffs because his friends believe that the lake is their home. Many of us become trapped by the belief that home and the safety it offers is something outside of us.

What is keeping you in the lake? Fear? Regret? The fears of those around you who aren't travelers themselves? Remember the opening prayer today when Rumi asks, "Why do you stay in prison when the door is so wide open?" Why do you stay in prison? Is the door really closed?

You may be wondering, what if I did leave the lake? What is it like out there? Rumi does not soften his description of the first fish's journey. He admits that, "like a deer the dogs chase, the intelligent fish suffered greatly on his way." The trip to the ocean is described as "a long, difficult trip." Rumi describes his own journey in the poem *Burnt Kabob*:

Last year, I admired wines.
This year I'm wandering inside the red world.
Last year, I gazed at the fire.
This year I'm a burnt kabob.
Thirst drove me down to the water
where I drank the moon's reflection.
Now I am a lion staring up totally
lost in love with the thing itself.
Don't ask questions about longing.

Look in my face.
My heart, I'd say it was more
like a donkey sunk in a mudhole,
struggling and miring deeper.
But listen to me: for one moment
quit being sad. Hear blessings
dropping their blossoms
around you.

In the midst of the journey he often feels burnt, helpless, mired in mud. But the journey is a blessing. One of my favorite quotations from Rumi is, "You should wish to have one hundred thousand sets of moth-wings so you could burn them away, one set a night." In burning, he is able to see something so much bigger than himself. In his own words: you abandon kingdoms because you want more than kingdoms. But he never suggests that you won't get burnt along the way.

Perhaps you recognize your tavern, your lake, your prison, and you are willing to take the risk, set out on the journey. What gamble is worth pursuing? Rumi uses the image of wine here. He says there are many wines and we must choose carefully:

Don't think all ecstasies are the same!
Every object, every being, is a jar full of delight.
Be a connoisseur,
and taste with caution.
Any wine will get you high.
Judge like a king, and choose the purest,
the ones unadulterated with fear,
or some urgency about "what's needed."
Drink the wine that moves you.

Here are many goals which do not lead out of the lake. If I decided to work overtime and buy a new car, I am unlikely to experience anything more than the brief, muddled joy of the tavern. So many goals aren't ultimately fulfilling. Rumi gives us some clues, though, to help us differentiate between worthy and unworthy wines. Avoid the ones adulterated by fear or neediness. Perhaps I want the car to assuage my fears that I am not financially my neighbor's equal. Or perhaps I work to be thin because I fear that I do not attract the attention I need. Instead, Rumi advises, "Drink the wine that moves you."

For Rumi, our *first* goal should be to move outside the tangle of fear-thinking and be more open. And for him, the *ultimate* goal would be the understanding that there is no reality but God. I think here, most of us are hoping for some perfect understanding of the ultimate reality. I hesitate to call that a goal, however, because I believe we find it, not by actively seeking it, but by leaving the lake and allowing the river to take us where it may. As Rumi says, "I will search with all my passion until I learn that I don't need to search." But in between openness and perfect understanding, there are certainly many goals worth pursuing. What pursuits move you?

The one problem with the image of the lake is that it suggests that we leave it once and then we are on our way. So I will return to the image of the tavern - a place we often escape only to return again. The trick is to stay out. The trick is to keep walking into the night, to keep finding new ways to walk away from fear, regret, and the need for safety. We walk out when we take a relationship to a new level or leave a destructive relationship. We walk out when we approach our job as a calling rather than a drudgery, when we use our position to uplift ourselves and others, or when we leave a job that is strangling us. We walk out when we engage in activities that nourish us or those around us and abandon activities that are not truly fulfilling. We walk out when we set aside time to contemplate that which is bigger than ourselves. As Rumi says:

Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

And,
When you do things from your soul
The river itself moves through you.
Freshness and a deep joy are signs of the current.

And,
Be dizzy and wandering like Abraham
who suddenly left everything.
The alchemy of a changing life is the only truth.

What is it that brings you freshness and a deep joy? What are the ways you can walk out? Where would you like to wander?

In summary I would say that our tendency, as humans, is to lounge at the bar, to stay within the safety of our lake. But when we don't take risks, we end up frying in remorse. When we do take the plunge, we flail in the mud, we burn, but at times we sense ecstasy, and our hearts swell to hold more. There are many goals worth pursuing, and you will know them because they are the ones that move you and bring you a deep joy.

I would like to end with some final words from Coleman Barks, a great translator of Rumi:

To a frog that's never left his pond, the ocean seems like a gamble. Look what he's given up: security, mastery of his world, recognition! The ocean frog just shakes his head.

Closing Prayer:

Inside this new love, die.
Your way begins on the other side.
Become the sky.
Take an axe to the prison wall
Walk out like someone suddenly born into color.
Do it now.