



In The Heart

COLEMAN BARKS ON

The drab brick building in Athens, Georgia, where I meet Coleman Barks is sandwiched between two car-repair shops. "This used to be a restaurant famous for its slaw dogs," Barks says after I've stepped with surprise into a clean, spacious, well-appointed room in his new workplace and guesthouse, which still smells of fresh paint. "It's been a crack house and a whorehouse. It's been a machine shop. And it's been a beauty parlor. I'm thinking of maybe calling it the 'Inner Beauty Parlor.'"

Barks is a private person who avoids admirers and the curious. "One appointment ruins the day," he explains in his gentle Tennessee accent. "I love having nothing to do." His initial wariness gives way to animation as he takes me on a tour of the place, which has the feel of a bachelor's lair, with its big bed and large-screen television in the windowless downstairs.

This is the house that Rumi built. Born eight centuries ago this year, the Persian mystic is now one of the best-selling poets in the United States. That astonishing fame is due in large part to Barks, who has spent much of the past thirty years rendering thousands of Rumi's poems into an English that captures the deep humanity and sublime divinity of the poet's verse.

A poet in his own right who has published six books of poetry, Barks taught literature at the University of Georgia for thirty years before retiring. His journey with Rumi began in 1976, when friend and fellow poet Robert Bly gave him a copy of a stilted academic translation of Rumi's poetry. "These poems need to be released from their cages," Bly said. Barks had never heard of Rumi, and he did not speak or write Farsi (nor does he now), but he accepted the challenge, using existing translations and his own poetic talents. That work led him to Philadelphia, where he became a student of Sri Lankan spiritual teacher Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, who provided Barks with a living example of Sufism, the mystical Islamic tradition of which Rumi was an adherent. All Muslims believe they will be reunited with God after death, but Sufis use esoteric practices to encounter the ineffable in this life. Barks's Rumi project eventually grew into a series of books — now numbering nineteen — that shocked publishers by catapulting a thirteenth-century Persian poet onto the bestseller lists. It's no small irony that a Persian Muslim is one of America's most popular poets at a time when relations between the U.S. and Iran — and the Islamic world as a whole — are so strained.

Jelaluddin Rumi was born September 30, 1207, in the ancient trading city of Balkh in what is now Afghanistan, during a time of war, social upheaval, and spiritual questioning. In the West,

Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, and Saint Francis of Assisi were remaking Christianity; in the Holy Land, Europeans were fighting Muslims; and in the East, the medieval world of Islam was at the height of its intellectual and artistic vigor. When Rumi was five, his father took his family west to avoid Mongol invasions, passing through the great city of Baghdad before settling at Konya in what is now Turkey. When Rumi was thirty-nine, he met the mysterious Shams, an older mendicant who was to have a profound influence on Rumi's life and work. Legend has it that Rumi and Shams first met beside a fountain in Konya. Rumi was talking to his students with his father's spiritual notebook, the Maarif, open beside him. Shams apparently interrupted the conversation by pushing the precious text into the water. When Rumi demanded to know why Shams had done this, Shams reportedly replied, "It is time for you to live what you have been reading of and talking about."

This was the start of a passionate friendship between the two men. At one point Shams disappeared — or, some say, was killed by Rumi's jealous followers. The brokenhearted Rumi ultimately composed forty-five thousand verses in honor of his lost friend. He also produced works of theology and philosophy, including the massive six-volume Masnavi, which is called the "Persian Koran" for its lyricism and wisdom. Rumi died in his bed in Konya on December 17, 1273.

Barks's interpretations of Rumi sometimes irritate both liberal academics and conservative Islamic theologians, who say he has catered to a New Age market by downplaying the religious and patriarchal aspects of the poet's huge corpus in favor of the universal and the sensual. Most scholars, however, give Barks credit for breathing life into poems that are notoriously difficult to translate into readable English, and for making Rumi virtually a household name in the West.

Barks has a grizzled beard and wavy eyebrows, and he drives a pickup truck. There's little of the media star about him, despite the fact that his books of Rumi's poetry have sold more than three quarters of a million copies, earning him the attention of everyone from Iranian imams to journalist Bill Moyers. Rumi's poetry, Barks writes, "is God's funny family talking on a big, open radio line."

Lawler: Rumi's poetry comes to us out of Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam that's still mysterious to many in the West. How much do you need to know about Sufism in order to appreciate Rumi?

Barks: All I know about Sufis is that my teacher, Bawa

RUMI, SENSUALITY, AND THE PATH WITH NO NAME

ANDREW LAWLER

Muhaiyaddeen, was one. His presence was beyond religious categories. Likewise, Rumi dissolves boundaries. People from all religions came to Rumi's funeral. When asked why, they said, "He deepens us." His presence was poetry, and his friendship with Shams made everybody feel more alive and more in a state of praise and grief. Everything was sharpened and deepened by this longing. That's so easily misinterpreted as New Age vagueness, but I don't think that's fair, because I've met at least one person — Bawa Muhaiyaddeen — who could be in a universal place beyond the categories of religion, and even beyond the categories we have for love.

Rumi's poetry is love poetry, but it's a poetry of a kind of love we may not even know yet. It's beyond our ideas of mentoring or romance or even friendship. It's a place beyond the synapse of relationship. "Fall in love in such a way that it frees you from any connecting," Rumi said. All his poetry is about love as a region, not a relationship. The Sufis say that human reality is the heart, and we're walking around in it. When somebody asked Bawa what reality was like, he said it's like you're driving a car, and you're inside driving, but you're also the landscape you're going through. Evidently that makes sense when you're enlightened. [Laughter.] At one point Rumi was out walking in Damascus, looking for Shams, and then he realized that he didn't need to look; he *was* the friendship. Then there's no one missing, no separation — and, suddenly, no more country music, either! "Oh, she left me. Oh, I left him. Oh, she left me again. Oh, she came back!"

Lawler: Rumi grew up in a highly disciplined household, son of a great thinker and theologian. Is that discipline necessary for any spiritual seeker?

Barks: Rumi does say you should submit to a daily practice of some sort. It's like the knocker on the door: if you keep knocking, eventually some joy will look out the window and see who's there.

Lawler: What is the source of Rumi's poetry?

Barks: Rumi and Shams met in that mysterious place we call the heart. It's difficult to explain; it has to be lived. Any claim that I might have in this area comes from having met Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, who lived at their level of enlightenment. He once asked me, "Will you meet me on the inside or on the outside?" With my typical English-teacher evasiveness, I said, "Isn't it always both?" I should have looked in those eyes and said, "Inside."

Lawler: What is it about Rumi's poetry that makes it so appealing to Americans today?

Barks: We have been somewhat prepared for Rumi by our own national poets, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson: our odd couple, with their extensive inner dialogues and ecstatic visions. Also I feel there is a natural expansiveness in the American soul that is willing to receive what Rumi is giving. Fluid yet formal, lyric and narrative, his poetry is like



COLEMAN BARKS

some wild mixture of Miguel de Cervantes, John Milton, James Joyce, John Coltrane, and Robin Williams on lunch break with the crew. Americans have a native hilarity that mixes well with Rumi's sense of humor.

Lawler: How did you become a poet?

Barks: I've never thought of myself as anything but a writer. When I was twelve years old, I kept a little notebook of words that I loved: *azalea, halcyon, jejune*. I just liked the taste of them. I was getting my tools ready. Then I began writing short stories in high school and won some contests there, and I kept on writing in college, and I've just always kept on with it.

Lawler: Your father was headmaster of a prep school in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Did your home life feed that exploration of writing?

Barks: We ate every meal, three meals a day, with four hundred people in a big dining hall. I ate with my father and mother and brother and sister and five other people at the table. Among the tables around us were several magnificent English and Latin teachers who were storytellers and writers. There was also a group at the school called the "Round Table" that met every two or three months and discussed a book. It was a very literary place.

Lawler: Did religion enter the picture in your childhood?

Barks: We were Presbyterian, but I was sort of a river mystic. There was a curve of the Tennessee River near the school, right across from Williams Island. It was a very beautiful spot. People have been living in that place for fifteen thousand years. That's where I learned about beauty, just watching that river. There are three mountains there — Elder, Signal, and Lookout — and you could yell at Elder Mountain and hear your name come back. And it was perfectly all right at any time just to wander off from the family and sit by the river. My sister had her own spot out on the bluff where she went. We would see her out there, and we realized that you shouldn't go and talk to her when she was out there. She was doing what I did — just looking at the river.

Lawler: So your family allowed for creative expression and reflection?

Barks: I grew up in an ecstatic family. Anybody at any time could burst into song for any reason. My mother would just dance around the house, singing. I recall those two minutes at the end of the day when a golden light would fall across the floor, especially in April. I would lie down in it and hug myself. One time when I was doing that, I told my mother, "Mama, I've got that full feeling again." She said, "I know you do, honey." Rumi says just being sentient and in a body is cause for rapture, and I think his reminding us of that is one reason why he's so popular.

Lawler: Rumi calls grief and joy "the double music" of life. What has this looked like in your life?

Barks: Both of my parents died in 1971, within six weeks of each other, of unrelated causes. I went into a period of griev-



ing in which I felt as if I had blinders on. It also opened me out into a new freedom with bursts of creativity. My dreams became lucent and spectacular. Grief and joy very much did feel like two wings on the bird of my consciousness during that time.

Lawler: I was struck in your first book, *The Juice* (Harper & Row), by your fascination with the body. One poem is called “Big Toe”; another is “Tongue.”

Barks: Rumi says there’s a great wisdom in the body. You’ve got to listen to it and do what it tells you to do, as a student walks behind the teacher, because this one knows the way more clearly than you. This also comes down to us through Whitman.

Lawler: If that’s so, then why are you so quick to dismiss the idea that Shams and Rumi were lovers?

Barks: I seem to have been forced to make that pronouncement. Some members of the gay community like to claim that Rumi and Shams were lovers in the physical sense. I don’t believe they were. Rumi’s poetry teaches us about a friendship, a love in a place that is beyond sex.

Lawler: But why couldn’t Rumi and Shams experience love on all levels, including the physical? As you make love, Rumi says, so will God make love to you.

Barks: Rumi’s so honest, I feel he would have mentioned it. I think we would have descriptions of sexual acts. When I claim that his friendship with Shams was beyond touch and time, beyond teacher and disciple, beyond lover and beloved, beyond longing, I’m not being afraid of the erotic. They met in the heart.

Lawler: So many of the Rumi poems you’ve chosen to translate are the sensual ones. Why?

Barks: When I first began translating or rephrasing, I was in my thirties and forties, and I was drowned in sexual energy. Now, at seventy, my libido is less strong, and the poems are becoming less sensual. Maybe that’s not the right word, because they’re still delighting in the senses, but they feel less driven by sexuality.

(end of excerpt)