



Fresh Rain

A Quarterly e-Journal of the Open Path / Sufi Way

WINTER 2021

IN THIS ISSUE: Essays by Chris Covey, Pir Elias, Yona Chavanne, Viv Quillin, Binah Taylor, and Kunderke Noverraz; Poetry by Ayaz Angus Landerman, Sharif Stannard, and Leslie Gabriel Mezei



Dear Friends,

This Winter season's theme began as "Doing the Beautiful," but then I asked our writers to broaden what the phrase means to them. They expanded it to include: the Beautiful; Being the Beautiful; Noticing the Beautiful; Beauty: being, noticing, welcoming; welcoming Beauty; seeking the Beautiful; the Call of Beauty; Beauty, Seeking or Finding Beauty, Beauty Arising, Being in Beauty; Where do I find the Beautiful?

Chris Covey, Pir Elias Amidon, Binah Taylor, Yona Chavanne, Viv Quillin, and Kunderke Noverraz contributed prose pieces. Mehera provided the quotes from Sufi Inayat. The poets are Ayaz Landman, Sharif Stannard, and Leslie Gabriel Mezei. Thank you all for your beautiful contributions!

For Spring, let's take up the theme of **Patience**. A great deal of patience has been demanded of us this year. How did and do we manage? Strategies? Successes and failures? Also, we need new theme ideas for future issues; please send them to me!

Thanks to all who offer poems and essays for Fresh Rain. Please consider writing for future issues. I look forward to reading what you send; it inspires me.

With love for each one of you,

Amrita

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The Splendor of Loss

by Chris Covey

Losing capacities you once took for granted changes the way you see the world. Few would look there to find a path to Beauty. Banging your head against the walls of what is, in a futile attempt to escape through the back door of what was, only brings exhaustion, frustration, and dark certainty. That somehow you are diminished.

I used to love the feeling in school that I might be the smartest person in the room. But after a severe traumatic brain injury just shy of age eighteen, I couldn't do a lot of things like I used to anymore. For several years my memory gave out often—very inconvenient during my university studies. Or I would crumple onto the floor with sudden debilitating, mind-cleaving headaches, like my head had been clamped to a lightning rod. On a mountaintop. In a mother of a thunderstorm.

I gradually succumbed to inactivity after years of competitive sports and love of the outdoors. Oh, I tried to “get it all back” for a while with regular swimming and running. Tried to pretend I could work off the injury. But I paid dearly for every attempt. I hurt all the time, far too much to ever speak of it. My head sat cockeyed on my neck, and my ribs got stuck in my spine at every sudden movement, making ordinary breathing almost comedically agonizing. My body didn't seem to remember how digestion, sleep, or energy production were supposed to work.

I fantasized about going back in time and changing details that could have prevented the accident. I retreated inward, spending my energy on appearing as normal as possible at work or with friends and family. The longer it went on, the more connections had to be cut, the less presence I could offer. I could feel myself falling, and falling, and falling, a little more each day.

There was a night at age twenty-five when I didn't think I could take it anymore. Nothing in my life was working and I couldn't explain the mess to anyone. I didn't want it anymore. Not like this. I wept, distraught like never before. But I was so worn down, I lacked the resolve to do anything about it. So I lay on the floor of my room in the deep dark of night, doing my best to sob without sticking a rib. And then I saw it. The pinpoint of light far above me. It was the mouth of the well into which I had fallen. And I was writhing on the dry sandy bottom.



Bottom. I had hit bottom! There was no further down to fall! Elation swept through me, and swinging an arm from face to floor, I struck a book nearby. It was Hafiz's *I Heard God Laughing*. And then the real laughter came. Rolling uncontrollable waves of healing hiccups and barks interspersed with snot and sobs. It still seemed far away, but I had a way to back into life.

My obsession with what used to be gradually gave way to realizations about new things I was learning. There were even unexpected blessings to this hard-forking path that I had never wanted. And they shaped the life I have now. The life I love and wouldn't trade. Before my accident, you never would have found me in a yoga class. But that's where I met my wife after a friend dragged me there—half out of pity and half to hook me up with Masami. It was the greatest of successes.

I wouldn't be honest if I didn't mention that I made a lot of other messes in my life as the old patterns continued to play out. We still have to unwind the knotty ball of string before we get to roll it up more neatly. But I learned how to turn toward my mistakes and stumbles, little by little, how to take care of them a little better each day than yesterday. And it's in that subtle turning toward my life as it is that Beauty gets to jump up and slap me in the face with its horizon-sweeping grin every morning, afternoon and night.

I never knew I had so much love inside me.

Human Being

by Elias Amidon

(first published 5-31-2020 as *Notes from the Open Path*)

How marvelous this creature, the human being! What a wonder and privilege it is to be one!

I know it doesn't always seem that way—we humans can be vicious and cruel, short-sighted, selfish, and petty—so to say that we're marvelous can sound absurd. But perhaps in this strange, nervous, pandemic time when we've had to pull back from close contact and have become so wary of each other, perhaps it would do us good to remember, for a moment, the miracle at the heart of what a human being is.

This miracle is a constant theme in Sufi teachings and poetry. Ibn 'Arabi, the great 13th Century Sufi mystic and metaphysician, described the human being as a *barzakh*, an "isthmus." Human-being is an isthmus between the seeming polarities of matter and spirit, body and soul, the dense and the subtle. Like the Isthmus of Panama where the vast continents of North and South America meet, the isthmus that is human beingness is "the Towering Station" amongst all barzakh. Ibn 'Arabi:

*The barzakh is between-between,
a station between this and that,
not one of them, but the totality of the two.
It has the towering exaltation,
the lofty splendor,
and the deep-rooted station.*

This is what Rumi calls "the majesty that lives in the deep center of everyone." I suspect it is a majesty that lives in the deep center of everything, in the tree and the mountain, the rabbit and the hawk, but in the barzakh of human being it can be known, and once known it becomes a source of wisdom and loving kindness. Rumi:

*You are a joining point of sky and ground,
soul as witness, green compassion.*

The binary name human being itself reveals the miraculous barzakh we are. Human is a word derived from humus, earth—the human is an earthling. Our extraordinarily complex and wondrous bodies are born of the earth—skin, bone, blood, and brain—a living system of matter and energy. The second part of our name, being, points to the ineffable quality of the creature we are: call it spirit, or presence, or awareness. Our nature of being awareness cannot be objectified in the way our earthling bodies can. Together, the two words suggest the barzakh we are: human-being—"a station between this and that, not one of them, but the totality of the two."

It's fairly easy to sense this in the moment: first you can know yourself as body, manifested as the sensuous organism of matter that you are, and you can know yourself as a locus of awareness, an ineffable presence, clear and ungraspable. You are human, being. An isthmus "between" matter and spirit, it is in this "Towering Station" that the seeming duality of matter and spirit can be recognized as not-two. As Rumi invites us:

*Come out here where the roses have opened.
Let soul and world meet.*

This is the miracle of human-beingness. In the place of meeting, in what Rumi calls "the spirit-form we are," a wondrous alchemy becomes possible. Our spirit-being enlightens our earthling-nature, and our earthling-nature gives clear spirit a field of sensate beauty and impermanence in which to love and play, become attached, suffer, and with any luck, recognize "the towering exaltation" within which it arises.

One of the most profound and beautiful expressions of this earth-spirit-human-being miracle can be found in the concluding passage of Rilke's Ninth Elegy. Here, in Stephen Mitchell's translation, Rilke is praising to the angels the "Things" of the earth, and reveals how they become "invisible" in us, in our love and amazement and gratitude:

*...And these Things,
which live by perishing, know you are praising them; transient,
they look to us for deliverance: us, the most transient of all.
They want us to change them, utterly, in our invisible heart,
within—oh endlessly—within us! Whoever we may be at last.
Earth, isn't this what you want: to arise within us,
invisible? Isn't it your dream
to be wholly invisible someday?—O Earth: invisible!
What, if not transformation, is your urgent command?
Earth, my dearest, I will. Oh believe me, you no longer
need your springtimes to win me over—one of them,
ah, even one, is already too much for my blood
Unspeakably I have belonged to you, from the first.
You were always right, and your holiest inspiration
is our intimate companion, Death.
Look, I am living. On what? Neither childhood nor future
grows any smaller . . . Superabundant being
wells up in my heart.*



Al Hay!

by Yona Chavanne

*Elle est retrouvée.
Quoi? L'éternité
C'est la mer
Allée avec le soleil*

It's found again.
What? Eternity.
That's the sea
gone with the sun.

– Arthur Rimbaud

In troubled times, it might be more difficult to open to beauty, to welcome it, stay with it.

As a young girl during summers, I often sat on a terrace upon a hill some two hundred feet high, overlooking the Mediterranean sea. The sun was scintillating over the salty water, wavelets—so many tiny dancing, vanishing flames!—appearing and disappearing as the great sea called them back in, then sending them out again.

I could sit and sit for a long time under the almond tree, always entranced, always amazed.

It seemed like a Divine performance, although I wouldn't have thought or said this then.

Beauty is Light. Daylight. Or more subtle at night. As Murshid Fazal once said:

“Darkness is not the opposite of light.” Dark velvet starry blue night. Moonlit sky.

Loving all shades of light, perceiving, praising, contemplating.

Without light, without sun, no life on Earth. No roots, no tree, no animal, no human.

Light makes One.

Beauty needs openness, needs presence, liberty, and our presence, so needed these days.

Beauty is celebration. Joy and self-effacement dancing together.

Shouldn't we, specially in troubled times, remember the beauty of our fugitive lives?



“Happiness only lies in thinking or doing that which one considers beautiful. Such an act becomes a virtue, goodness; that goodness is beauty.”

— Bowl of Saki, December 31st

The Call of Beauty

by Viv Quillin

"Pssst hey, look up, I'm here!" I can't resist this enticing whisper, and there is Beauty inviting me to notice, as I raise my head in the homeliness of home. "I'm the table, and the one who designed it, the carpenter who made it with care. The tree that the table was made of, I once rustled in the wind and, long before that, I grew from a tiny seed. Here I am again in the engineering miracle of the computer that you are working on. It's all made from our earth." All these beautiful riches surround me in my home, inseparable from their shadows. As the tree grows taller, it takes light and also nutrients from the earth which then starves the grass growing beneath it. The hungry elephant sometimes tears out a grove of small trees for lunch. Here is the beauty of desire for life, the greed of every living cell to not only survive but to have abundance.

When the first lockdown was announced in Britain, I gave myself a project which was to fall in love with my home. It has always been easy for me to experience what we call "The Natural World" as a kind of beautiful sanctuary. I've stepped outside and breathed more deeply. Now I'm practicing stepping inside, into this warm, dry home which has been created by the work of many humans using care, technical skill, love of beauty, and probably some greed too. It's led me to see beauty in this lust for comfort and plenty. There is also the beautiful part of me that won't be at ease until we all have this.

Since I was first conscious of noticing, some murmuring part of me has yearned to have a world without any



human influence, as if we are intrinsically bad. I've experienced humans and most things that are made by humans as a bit out of place and wrong. Especially shiny, hard things like cars and televisions. The decision to see if I can fall in love with home seems to have meant falling in love with the beautiful way that we think and feel. It's a challenge for me to do this without lots of "Yes, but" arguments going on in my head about the damage that our existence can create. Yet the elemental forces of Earth, Wind, Fire, and Water in all their magnificence and beauty, devour each other and much else in order to survive and thrive.

The Call of Beauty slips under my radar of oughts and shoulds. It invites me to enjoy anything and everything. It demands nothing from me, simply revelling in itself, and perhaps in me.



What is beauty? One sees beauty of form, and beauty without form; beauty of thought, beauty of feeling, beauty of ideal. Not only does one see beauty in flowers and fruit and trees, but one sees still greater beauty in imagination and thoughts. One feels one could give all one's wealth or life for a beautiful thought or a beautiful dream.

There is a saying of Majnun, the great lover of Persia. "Oh Majnun," they said, "your girl is not as fantastic as you think. You are sacrificing your life; you grieve for ages and ages for that girl, but she is not so beautiful." Majnun answered, "You should see my Leila with my eyes; it is the eyes of my heart you need. My heart has made my Leila." That is called an ideal, and the ideal of perfection makes it beauty.

— From book VII, *In an Eastern Rose Garden*

Wayfaring on Beauty's Road

by Binah Taylor

Beauty is central to being alive! Her broad church crosses all borders, finds expression in infinite variety, uplifts what seems ordinary, charging it with potential. As I gaze with pleasure on bluebells carpeting a dappled woodland, their blue fire shimmering, is it my seeing that invokes beauty, or is beauty directing my gaze? Does nature know how beautiful she is? I know when I am in beauty, I can love more—and that beauty's truth is both powerful and tender. It is a calling, inseparable from love; and the aesthetic, beauty's natural home in the human world, is often where I seek inspiration and guidance. For this, I thank the many artists and artisans, known and unknown, whose creativity has brought me closer to beauty's grace. Last week, reading tributes to the composer Harold Budd, who recently passed, I was both moved by how much his exquisite compositions were appreciated and reminded how his music touched something in me at a pivotal time of change.

Back in 1988 I was curating an installation, "Latest Flames," in Santa Monica for Brian Eno—an artist with a far reach, both musically and visually. Indeed, it was the beauty of his sound and light structures that compelled me to help bring this installation to L.A. After a hard day navigating typical pre-opening glitches, Brian gave me a CD of Harold Budd's *The White Arcades*, which he had produced, and said, "This will be good company on your drive back home." As I threaded my way through the unlit curves and twists of Laurel Canyon, majestic sounds poured from the speakers, thrilling me with their celestial murmurings while I climbed the hills in my unwieldy van. It felt like the notes themselves were wings, becoming my guardian in the face of dark fog's deception. (I have felt this "love holding" too in our Sufi zikrs and musical tunings—sound opening my heart, bringing light into the unseen unknown.) That night, held by the atmospheric merger of soundscape and landscape, I made it safely home, feeling both refreshed and altered. Something had happened during that journey—the music had opened an internal portal allowing me to connect with myself differently.

Melodies from *The White Arcades*, which I have been listening to after reading of Harold's passing, are sounding within me as I walk across Brighton to meet friends. Trying to mimic the distinctive bells with humming has set up an inner vibration which shifts my perception of the somber outer landscape. Seeing through the eyes of beauty, I feel buoyant. This inner walk, with its own space and climate, has warped time and given me freedom—a precious commodity in these times.

On the way back, I pass by Lee's antique/junk shop,



chockablock with all sorts—chandeliers, bric-a-brac, wooden furniture, some weird taxidermy—bound together by dust. I look in the window to see if I can spot Lee and wave to him. Then I spot some bowls on one of the tables. Their translucent glaze catches my eye, as well as their simple yet elegant shape. I have to pop in.

After an exchange of greeting—we have not seen each other in years—I pick up one of the bowls.

"Where?" I ask.

"South Vietnam, they're Chinese. I was cycling through the countryside, looking for a B&B listed in a guidebook which turned out to be non-existent. Then I found a family who took me in."

Lee talked about discovering the pottery locally, much of it carefully stacked and stored for centuries in this rural area that had once been strategic for China.

"I fell in love with the people, this family—and their daughter." He laughs. "She has two kids who wanted a dad because their real dad had buggered off."

I'm touched by this tale of serendipity and uncontrived harmony: the aesthetic beckoned, and with that he found love, familial warmth and the expansiveness of a different culture.

He watches me cradling one bowl then another.

"Are you interested?"

After some gentle haggling to arrive at agreement, I leave the shop with two bowls, apparently Ming (but who knows) which are functional. "Even good in the dishwasher!" Lee exclaims, although he does not recommend.

At home I contemplate the bowls but decide to eat my kimchi shitake omelette out of a serviceable pasta dish. They seem just fine as empty bowls, companions signifying love and commitment across time and cultures. Their beauty feeds my aesthetic, just as they are.

Love and beauty for me are indistinguishable, partners forever.

Doing the Beautiful in the Mediterranean—*Vive la Convivialité*

by Kunderke Noverraz

It has been nine years since I and my husband Karim moved to France and began a new life in an old farmhouse in Provence. For Karim who is from Geneva, the adjustment was relatively easy but for me, a Dutch woman, it has been more challenging at times. I had to learn the French language and integrate with an unfamiliar culture, opening myself to new values and perspectives in the process.

We live in a farming and herding region; vineyards and lavender fields dot the mountain sides and goat and sheep herders roam with their flocks. Here one does not find the sophistication and wealth of the Côte d'Azur nor its restaurants and famous artists. The original population of farmers and herders has, however, been supplemented by an influx of city-dwellers in search of an alternative life in beautiful nature. Most of these newcomers have a low income and live simply but this does not impede their *joie de vivre* and their passionate pursuit of the arts. Singing, dancing, writing poetry and prose, making music, and painting are all flourishing and have led to the formation of communities throughout the whole region. And so it is with those who feel drawn to spirituality and who have been attracted to our monthly evenings of Sufi music, poetry and *zikr*. Before the Covid crisis struck, a group of people from all over our area would gather at our house for a heartfelt exploration of Sufi teachings and poetry and singing *zikr* together.

From the moment we started hosting these evenings, I was struck by the strong association with food! People

would make a special effort to cook something delicious to share and put much love into its preparation. Coming from England, I was used to shared meals of ready-made supermarket foods but this is definitely not what one expects in Provence! Home-made savory and sweet tarts and pastries, breads, soups, salads, tapenades and dips are brought in for a delicious meal with much laughter and enjoyment. And yes, much discussion about food: praise for each dish so lovingly prepared, endless discussions about ingredients and recipes and flavor! At first I felt uneasy about this approach to our Sufi evenings. To my way of thinking, meditation should not be followed by gastronomic pleasures, and certainly not by wine and what I deemed superficial conversation! I was remembering the drinking of mint tea in total silence after the musical meditations of murshid Fazal, and felt troubled. But gradually I realized that the aim of these meals was about creating deep feelings of friendship and community rather than about a continuation of meditative discussion and silence. Conviviality is of the highest value here and people see no contradiction with spirituality and especially not with a spirituality that emphasizes love and beauty as much as Sufism does. It is their way of “doing the beautiful” both in terms of culinary creations and in terms of human relationship and I had to ask myself: “Who am I to judge that this is inferior to another form of art or spirituality!”

Thinking further about this I have realized that this holds true for all the Mediterranean cultures. There are, for instance, the Italians and their love of food and the wonderful communal meals of Turkey, Morocco or Syria! And ours is certainly not the only Sufi center where the sharing of food cooked with love has become an important



facet of the group culture. It has always been true for the Sufi communities of the Middle East and North Africa.

Historically, dervish lodges have functioned as reliable centers of hospitality for the many Sufi travelers and have provided regular meals for the poor. In fact, the provision of food to the poor and to guests was a central feature of many orders. This tradition continues and, even though many of the larger lodges in Turkey and Iran have been closed, hospitality on a smaller scale is still there. The Koran says: "A Guest is a gift of God" and in that spirit I myself have often been welcomed and invited to sit down with the Sufi community to share a meal prepared in a spirit of loving service and gratitude for what Nature provides.

The abundance of food-related metaphors in the poetry and stories of Rumi are illustrations of the importance attached to the kitchen in the Sufi order he founded. For instance, his poem "Chickpea to Cook" is an analogy of the process of transformation required of a novice, and the metaphor of passing from raw to cooked to burnt is a reference to being increasingly consumed by Divine Love. Both the cooking of food and the cooking of the human soul are seen as experiences and expressions of love.

In addition there have always been the big Sufi celebrations associated either with the death of a Sufi teacher or with important events in the Islamic calendar. Those who have been to Konya in December know how Rumi's death is marked by feasting as well as prayer and zikr. The town erupts in gaiety as people from all over the world meet and spirituality, music and food mingle in

an ecstatic mix that celebrates life and welcomes the guest as a representative of the Friend. The atmosphere is filled with Love and it is an experience of doing the beautiful that most will not forget, and many come back to year after year.

Seen in this context it was not difficult to value our small Sufi gatherings of zikr and a meal differently, and to have more respect for those who wish to honor each other and the gifts of nature in this way. After all, giving thanks for the generosity of nature need not be reserved to a festival, and welcoming the Friend can be translated into the many small acts of kindness and generosity that creating a community entails.

But now of course, in COVID times, our Sufi meetings are no longer taking place, and we wonder when we will see our friends again. No doubt this has been challenging for many people and we all have to find our own solution to continue the threads of creativity and community and how to retain our gratitude for God's bounty in these bleak times. How do I myself do this during these days in December which are normally marked by celebrations? The answer is obvious: like a true Provencal, I will cook wonderful meals for Karim and myself with love and gratitude for all that we are given and I will gather virtually with friends, in deep appreciation of the fact that it is possible to meet in this way.

From my farmhouse in Provence I raise a glass for the festive season and wish you all: Santé, Buon Appetito, Ashk Olsun, and Blessings for the New Year.





Be Beautiful

We are all here
 For different reasons
 But the same cause
 Into the cauldron of songs
 And sorrows
 To soften and disassemble
 This longing
 Here to work the breach
 Where work has the authority
 Of something beyond
 Trimming shards of darkness
 Into moments
 But not the sort of moments
 That pass
 Rather the sort of moments
 In which we let ourselves
 Be beautiful

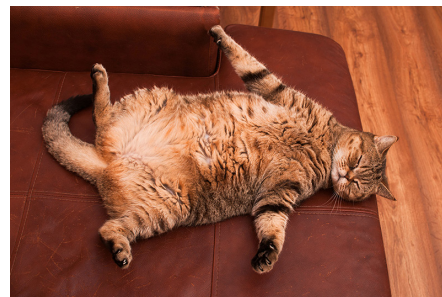
— Ayaz Angus Landerman

Moments of Beauty

Three hours of sleep and I suddenly wake
 I must get up!
 I must get up NOW!!!
 Bladders are like that.

Small dark clouds are drifting across the moon
 Painting rich patterns of light and shadow on my eyes
 In a show of beauty seemingly made for me alone.
 Nature is like that.

Bonnie is sleeping peacefully on a chair
 I rub her neck and she rolls onto her back
 "Rub my tummy Dad," she purrs.
 Cats are like that.



I return to bed and try to sleep
 But soon I am up again, seeking pen and paper
 To write these words.
 Poems are like that.

Moments come spontaneous, unexpected, unannounced,
 Not caring if I even notice.
 But when I do, they offer gifts of beauty and joy.
 Our Friend is like that.

— Sharif Stannard

Prayer for Humanity

My prayer for
 Unity in Diversity.
 Our greatest need,
 Our saving grace.

The mystics,
 Spiritual traditions,
 Focus on unity,
 We are all one.

We are all part of
 One Being,
 By whatever name.
 Unites us all.

Our challenge: Diversity,
 Many facets of the diamond
 Of our amazing existence,
 We must celebrate it.

Not hate the differences,
 Nor fight over trivialities,
 Or for resources.
 There's enough for all.

Praise our Mother Earth,
 Celebrate our one life.
 Work together for all,
 For a New Normal.

Male and female equally endowed.
 Colors do not matter.
 All lives matter!
 Black, white, yellow, brown.

Religions can get along
 In the interfaith movement.
 Learn from each other,
 Enhance our own.



The spiritually independent
 Unite in interspirituality.
 With one mysterious spirit
 Connecting us all.

Now the pluralism movement,
 Works hard for diversity,
 All inclusive,
 Embracing all.

We honor all religions,
 Spiritual paths,
 All movements
 For a better life for all.

Feminism, Anti-racism
 Environmental movement.
 Peaceniks, utopians,
 And many more.

We pray for all humanity,
 And all other beings
 Sharing this green earth with us,
 We must cherish and save her.

May we emerge from calamity
 To a new dawn,
 As we all practice
 Love, harmony, and beauty.

Unity in Diversity.

—Leslie Gabriel Mezei

The Arrangement Of The Sacred

Beauty is the arrangement
Of the sacred
In service of revelation
It begins perhaps
As the story
Of the rose and silver moon
Then in the silent way
Of small beauties
Continues
The way light falls
On the edge of things
And in the tender
Ruthlessness of a
Perfect physics
Until finally
By grace alone
Revealed as
Sweet Emptiness
Herself
And the end of all
Longing



— Ayaz Angus Landman

Upcoming Programs 2021



Coming Home

Awakening through Aging and Dying
Online retreat
Spring 2021



The Invisible Offering

New Eden Retreat Centre
The Netherlands
September 1–5, 2021



Enter Into Silence

Walking retreat in the Moroccan desert
November 6–17, 2021



with Pir Elias Amidon and Friends

SPRING 2021

*A retreat with online teachings and conversations,
online small group discussions, written
materials and individual practices*

**2-hour webinar sessions each Saturday and Sunday
over 4 weekends, April 17–May 16, 2021**

