

Rumi, Grace & Human Friendship by Tami Simon

Tami Simon: Welcome to Insights at the Edge produced by Sounds True. My name is Tami Simon. I'm the founder of Sounds True. And I'd love to take a moment to introduce you to the new Sounds True Foundation. The Sounds True Foundation is dedicated to creating a wiser and kinder world by making transformational education widely available. We want everyone to have access to transformational tools, such as mindfulness, emotional awareness, and self-compassion, regardless of financial, social, or physical challenges. The Sounds True Foundation is a nonprofit dedicated to providing these transformational tools to communities in need, including at-risk youth, prisoners, veterans, and those in developing countries. If you'd like to learn more or feel inspired to become a supporter, please visit soundstruefoundation.org.

You're listening to Insights at the Edge. Today is a rebroadcast of one of my favorite episodes. I hope you enjoy.

You're listening to Insights at the Edge. Today my guest is Coleman Barks. Coleman Barks is a leading scholar and translator of the 13th century Persian mystic, Jalaluddin Rumi. He taught poetry and creative writing at the University of Georgia for 30 years and is the author of numerous Rumi translations and has been a student of Sufism since 1977. His work with Rumi was the subject of an hour-long segment in Bill Moyers' Language of Life series on PBS. With Sounds True, Coleman Barks has released the audio programs I Want Burning: The Ecstatic World of Rumi, Hafiz, and Lalla, a CD called Rumi: Voice of Longing, and also a brand-new, beautiful, three-CD collection which is a collaboration between Coleman Barks and cellist David Darling. It's called Just Being Here: Rumi and Human Friendship.

In this episode of Insights at the Edge, Coleman Barks and I spoke about the relationship between Rumi and his teacher, whom he called The Friend, Shams Tabriz, and how Coleman received insight into this friendship based on his own relationship with a Sufi teacher named Guru Bawa, Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. We also spoke about how Coleman first began translating Rumi and how the translation process involves Coleman falling into a type of trance as part of the process. Finally, Coleman and I spoke about grace, and as part of our conversation, we listened to some new pieces from the recording Just Being Here: Rumi and Human Friendship. Here's my very heart-opening conversation with Coleman Barks.

Coleman, I want to begin just by saying I'm so happy to be speaking with you, because even though we've known each other for a long time, I've never had the chance to have this kind of conversation with you about your work. So thank you.

Coleman Barks: You're welcome. Thank you.

TS: To begin with, I wanted to talk a little bit about the process of translation, and your process, what you go through when you take a poem—a poem that was originally written in Persian and then translated into English by somebody else—then you turn it into a Coleman Barks translation. Can you tell us how that process goes for you?

CB: Well, it's a little mysterious. I go into a kind of a trance, reading the poem in its scholarly translation, and try to—well, [there's] nothing marvelous about it, it's just kind of a trance that any reading involves—where I try to feel what spiritual information is trying to come through Rumi's images and then I try to put that into an American free-verse poem in the tradition of Walt Whitman and many others. So that's the general liniments of the process.

TS: Do you ever have a concern, you know, how much of this is Coleman and how much of this is Rumi? "Am I taking too much poetic license here?" How do you sort that out?

CB: I try to—I don't make up images. So I take his images and then try to expand on them. This is not poetry that is word-for-word, of course, and you wouldn't call it even faithful, because I don't know the original language, you know? I don't know Farsi, I did not hear Rumi's name until I was 39 years old, way too old to learn the language. Besides, I'm lazy. [Laughs]

I just love the medium that I go into to do this work. It feels like a different kind of something outside the mind. I call it the "heart of the soul," but it's somewhere different than my ordinary mentality. It just gives me great pleasure to be able to enter that region of consciousness. It feels like I'm almost being able to breathe underwater, you know? It's just some kind of—it is a breathing way of—a new way of being in the rapture of being in a body. Rumi says just being sentient, and in a form—in a body—is cause for great great joy. And I agree with that. That part is in my DNA, I just love being alive. And Rumi did too. And I think that's why we gravitate toward him, because he restores the ecstatic dimension of consciousness, and we may have forgotten about that some.

TS: Now, when you say that you don't make up images but you work with images that are in the original, I would think it would be tempting that, you know ... one image leads to another image ... that they can cascade.

CB: That's the form of his odes, his ghazals. They are just one image after another, usually. And they each are expounding some kind of psychic process, like emptiness, or whatever the moth flying into the flame means—you know, disappearing into one's love. He is amazing at exfoliating the imagery of that, that idea of surrender. I don't help him, I don't make up the images with him, I may be guilty of that sometimes, but I can't think of one right now.

TS: You mentioned that you didn't even hear Rumi's name until you were in your late 30s. I'm curious, when you heard his name or you read your first Rumi poem, did you immediately go up into flames or something like that?

CB: [Laughs]

TS: I mean, the karma of your life was about to be forever changed.

CB: That's certainly true, but not exactly the first one. That was a Robert Bly conference, where he thought it would be a great afternoon writing exercise to take a Rumi poem and a scholarly translation and rephrase it into free verse. And so we did that for an afternoon, and he gave me the book, he said, "These poems need to be released from their cages," meaning, the cages of the scholarly language, and made more alive and more free. I've been trying to do that, now, for 34 years. But it was after I got back to Athens, Georgia, and got to working alone with the poems that I really felt the freedom—something very new was happening, and also something old and deeply familiar to me. I don't know how to explain that, but that's the way it felt. It was like a huge form of relaxation, you know, it's what it felt like.

TS: I'm curious if there was a moment when it dawned on you, "I'm going to be spending a lot of time working on these poems; this is really going to become the focus of my life."

CB: I worked on them, just as a practice, for seven years before I even thought of publishing them. It didn't occur to me that there would be an audience for this. Well, maybe that's not entirely true, but it was in the back of my mind, I guess. I didn't publish a book from 1976 when I started until 1984, when *Open Secret* came out. Then it became apparent that these were useful to people, and so I was going to keep doing it anyway. But it's a different thing when you have an audience for what you do in your solitude. Finally, HarperCollins got a hold of it in 1995, and now about a million and a half copies have been sold, so it's a publishing phenomenon that nobody quite understands.

TS: I'm interested, you said that it's different when you're aware of an audience, or when there's an audience for what you're doing. What changed? What changed once it was clear there was an audience for these translations?

CB: Well, I got some very educated feedback and some beautiful critiques by people who

know this material and these states of awareness much better than I do. And I found a Sufi teacher, too, doing this work. But what I was thinking about was Apir Valait Khan [ph] gave these poems a good reading and said, “The poems used to be more sensual, and more sexual, but now they don’t seem to be that way.” And I said, “Yeah, that’s because I was more sensual and sexual when I was doing them.” [Laughs] So of course the voice of the translator does come through—I have to use my own experience and my own voice to do these translations. What I try to do, of course, is to make a valid and a lively poem in American English, and I’m not interested in a scholarly translation. I’m very grateful for the scholars, because they have allowed me to do this work, but I can’t continue that kind of language, I have to make it more alive, more vibrant.

TS: Now, you said, Coleman, that when you started doing these translations of the Rumi poems, there was a sense of familiarity and relaxation into the process. I’m curious, in your inner world, what your relationship with Rumi and Shams feels like?

CB: [Pauses] Now, I want to be sure not to tell you any lies, here. [Laughs]

TS: That’s good, I appreciate that, thank you. Take your time, I’m happy to wait for the truth.

CB: [Laughs] Rumi and Shams, in my own life?

TS: Yes, what are your relationships like inside of you, with them? Do they feel like legends, do they feel like friends that you have? What [does] it feel like?

CB: More like that. My teacher Bawa Muhaiyaddeen once told me, he said, “Rumi and Shams are, to me,” talking about himself, “are not literary figures. They’re not people in a book. I know them, like I know you.” And so that gave me a sense—he allowed me, I think, entrance into the vast identity of those two in friendship. If I hadn’t met him, it wouldn’t be the same. My access to the poems would not be as intimate as it feels now. I’m glad you asked that.

TS: And tell me a little bit—when did you meet Bawa Muhaiyaddeen?

CB: Maybe in a dream, you know, and then a year and a half later I met him in this more solid world, but I have had several precognitive dreams. It’s just, to me, a mysterious fact of existence that the mind and dream consciousness can go forward in time and see

something, a scene maybe, that will become apparent on the retina two years afterward. I don't know how that happens, but it has been my experience, not a lot of times, but it has happened.

So that's what happened with him, that he was able to come to me in dream consciousness. The dreams became lucid—I woke up inside the dream, and became aware that I was dreaming, but I was still asleep. And in the dream that I met him, I was sleeping out on a bluff above the Tennessee River where I grew up, and where the school was where I grew up, where my father was the headmaster, just five miles north of the Chattanooga, on the Tennessee River. It was night, and I woke up inside the dream, and a ball of light rose over Williams Island and came over me, and clarified from the inside out, and a man was sitting in there, with his head bowed, and a white shawl over his head. He raised his head and he said, "I love you," and I said, "I love you, too." And the whole landscape filled with dew, or moisture, and the moisture, somehow, was love. It was just spread out through the landscape. I felt the process of the dew forming. This is all very mysterious, but it did, as far as I know, happen to me.

And then, a year and a half later, I met him in Philadelphia and he said, this Rumi work, that it had to be done, and I assume that meant he was going to help me with it. And I think he has, in some mysterious way, been part of the process.

TS: Did you know, when you had the dream, that it was an important dream?

CB: Oh gosh, yes. Yes. I'd started writing my dreams down in the early 1970s and now have about 90 dream notebooks. I still write them down. Yes, it felt like—I've never had a man appear in a ball of light before! [Laughs] Nor since, even. He could visit me in the dreams, and he did, and I would go up to Philadelphia and I would start telling him the dream, and he would say, "You don't need to tell me that, I was there." So he had the ability to do that. There are people who are on other planes of existence. I just got really lucky and met one of them.

TS: After you had the dream, did you seek him out?

CB: No, no.

TS: So it just happened by chance that, a year and a half later, you met this person?

CB: Well, it was somewhat connected to this work, very much. I sent some of these versions, translations, to a friend of mine, who was teaching law at Rutgers University at Camden, and he read them to his torts class, and a man came up out of the audience, Jonathan Granaw [ph], and Jonathan said, "Who did those poems?" And Milna Ball [ph]

gave Jonathan my name and Jonathan started writing to me, and he said, "There's this teacher in Philadelphia that I think you should meet." And so, on one poetry reading jaunt up there, I stopped into Philadelphia and met Jonathan and met this teacher, and I realized that he was the one who was in my dream. And nobody would know that except myself and him. But he's such a distinctive-looking person with these magnificent, deep eyes that he's very recognizable. That's the way the meeting actually happened.

TS: Did you feel there was something in your relationship with Bawa Muhaiyaddeen that was similar to the relationship between Rumi and Shams, and that that's part of what gave you an appreciation of that, a teacher-student dynamic?

CB: It felt very deep, and still feels deep, at least since he died in 1986, it feels like it's become more like a friendship than a teacher-student thing. So, yes, I did feel that. That's a lot to claim, but I feel that, yes.

TS: It's wonderful that you bring up the "friendship" word. You've just published, through Sounds True, a three-CD collection along with David Darling, the cellist, called Just Being Here: Rumi and Human Friendship. And in just a moment I want to hear a piece from that three-CD collection. But maybe you could say a few words as a way of introduction about this central idea of friendship, Rumi and human friendship.

CB: Well, he said that a friendship can change from being a relationship. It is that, it's very specific, and Shams Tabriz is an actual person, from an actual town, and it is a specific relationship, but it can widen and broaden out to include and become a kind of atmosphere that one walks within. In one of his startling metaphors, he said "what was just a person is now a holiday without limits." Suddenly the person in the relationship becomes something like a day off, just a great sense of freedom and expansion, like a holiday. So, in another place he said Shams had become what anybody says—just any kind of conversation going on, it's like he's overhearing his beloved, it's become part of the fabric of his life. Maybe we should hear part of that three-CD set.

TS: Yes, and I do think you might have some precognitive abilities as well, because the track that I've cued up, which you wouldn't know, is called "Holiday Without Limits."

CB: [Laughs] Who's in charge here?

TS: Exactly! And this is from Just Being Here: Rumi and Human Friendship. Let's listen.

[Music and poetry]

TS: Coleman, it seems to me that it has so many layers of meaning, that you created a collection of translations with music on Rumi and Human Friendship with someone who is, in fact, a dear friend of yours, David Darling, the musician. Talk a little bit about that process of working together and how it informed a record on friendship.

CB: David Darling and I have, for a long time, wanted to make something with the cello and his music and Rumi's poetry and maybe some of my own poetry that has a kind of orchestral feel to something more vast than the single instrument. So he has created this music, and he would put something on, like a track, and then I would just feel what poem might go with that music. And it seems to work out pretty well. Sometimes it would happen that way, and sometimes I would start reading the poem and he would put the music with it, but it worked both ways, first the poem then the music, and vice versa.

His delight in the process and the poetry and then, of course, in the music is apparent throughout. He's got great freshness and joyfulness about him. I just really enjoy his presence, and I think he likes to hang out with me, too. So we enjoyed being in his sound studio in the woods of Connecticut and putting this together. It was not work; it was very much play. And we loved doing it.

TS: I think part of what's underneath my question is I'd love to understand more what friendship means to you, Coleman Barks. Part of the project, you're exploring Rumi and human friendship, but I'm also interested in knowing what it means for you.

CB: Well, what can you say? It's the opening of the heart, and some kind of feeling of a new way of being, that is—as I say in the notes—a new way of breathing, maybe. That's not so fearful and not so sad. When you meet a new friend, the world has more light in it, doesn't it? Things become more spontaneous, and more full of laughing and freedom and novelty, somehow. All that is apparent in this three-CD set. I hope it is.

TS: One of the comments you made in the liner notes that I thought was interesting was you were talking about how, in Rumi's poetry, the sun is often a central image in understanding human friendship.

CB: "Shams" means "the sun," so whenever sunlight is mentioned, or the dawn coming up, it's always a reference to Shams and his friendship and his love for him, and their love for each other. It's one of the great images. It's like a little secret he tells, in his poems, that the world is always asking you to open up and be more loving. The candle's taken by its burning is telling you; the moth by going into the candle is telling you to do that; and music and wine is always telling you to give up the bouquet and the names and all and just run wild and anonymous, through the human brain.

At the end of a poem I didn't put in this collection, he says, "Everything begs with the silent rocks for you to be flung out like light over this plane"—the presence of Shams Tabriz. So light itself—and probably seeing itself and hearing and seeing—just being alive, is, for him, the presence of a friend, the friendship, the beloved. You can't say much about that mystery, but it's certainly central to whatever religion is in these poems. It's a religion of deep friendship and light and music, too, I think. Also the image of a flute comes in, and the emptiness that has to happen for the flute to make music, and the emptiness of the flute player. And those two emptinesses are somehow related to love, and the merging of the emptinesses are related to this new kind of love that Rumi and Chams are bringing to us. I think it's new, even though it's eight centuries old, I don't know that we've lived it out yet. It's a new kind of way of being, and a depth of inwardness and joy and sharing. But when you try to start talking about it, it just disappears, almost. [Laughs] So the best way to talk about it is through poetry and with music. So let's listen to another one.

TS: OK. We'll listen to a piece, this is called "Raggedness." And this is also from Just Being Here: Rumi and Human Friendship. Maybe you can introduce it for us, Coleman.

CB: Well, this is [about] lots of changes that happen in a student-teacher relationship. You'll see, "I was dead, and then alive." So it's all about the continuous changing nature of a relationship, where maybe a teacher's involved, but nobody knows who's the student and who's the teacher. It keeps changing back and forth. OK, let's hear it.

[Music and poetry]

TS: I love that, it's so beautiful, Coleman.

CB: That image of the flowing shadow of the ground as being silky. It's just gorgeously fresh, isn't it?

TS: Yes.

CB: It's so new.

TS: One of the things I'd love to hear more about, if it's OK, it's a little personal, but I've never heard you talk, really, about your relationship with Bawa Muhaiyaddeen —Guru Bawa, it's easier to say that. You've told us now a little bit about the initial meeting in the dream, and then when you first saw him. But I'm wondering how that relationship

progressed for you, and then at the time of his death and now after his death, 20+ years, what that's all like for you?

CB: He used to come in dreams after he died, but he hasn't in several years now. I don't know what that means. But I still feel very close to him, and I love to go and visit his tomb where he's buried, outside of Philadelphia. Feels very good to be there.

He came in a dream once. He was teaching me to take tiny little sips out of a glass of water, I think. So tiny, like a little bee or butterfly drinking. And I said, "What does this mean?" And he says, "You want to be wise too quickly. Just take one sip of wisdom and assimilate that." So that was good advice. Don't be in a hurry with the wisdom. Just take it—don't get greedy with it. I don't know that I've learned that yet. In the same dream, he was teaching me to bow all the way down. He said my back was a little stiff, I needed to bow all the way down. I think I know what that means: a little too much pride. So I need the full prostration. I'm sure other incidents would occur to me, but they're just not right now.

TS: Gives me a feeling, thank you. You mentioned, Coleman, in your own writing and translating of Rumi's poetry, that you began as a practice, and I'm curious if you have any suggestions for people in terms of listening to your readings or engaging with your Rumi translations, the books, how they would approach it as a type of practice.

CB: I have a little practice that I have done—I didn't today—but I like to listen to Stephen Mitchell's translations of Rilke, I have the text, I have the Duino Elegies out in front of me, so I listen to Stephen read his translations of them. And I just wait with a blank piece of paper to see what might come to me, ideas for writing or for my life or whatever, and that seems to be—to listen to poetry, with the text there and a blank piece of paper next to that, just to see what you might want to put down as an inspiration from the poetry being read out loud. There's a great connection, I think, between a voice saying the poem and your eardrum and your writing ability, too. So it's a very intimate thing going on, I think, between a spoken voice and a listening ear.

Rumi has a poem about listening. He says, "You should give more of your time to the deep listening." There's an implied practice there, that you can go deeper into your own inwardness, your own soul and heart, by listening. I don't really have a practice except writing the poetry, my own and these rephrasings of Rumi. That's the only thing that I'm really faithfully attentive to every day. I don't do meditation. Oh, 20 minutes here or there, but not so you'd call it a practice. I do the writing every day, I give time to that. I would recommend to anybody that wants to do writing that you don't wait to be inspired, try to coax inspiration out of you. And you can do that listening to any number of Sounds True productions.

TS: All right, Coleman. OK.

CB: You do good work, Tami.

TS: I want to end by listening to a piece from one of my favorite CDs, Coleman. This is from almost 20 years ago that we recorded this—15 years ago. It's called I Want Burning: The Ecstatic World of Rumi, Hafiz, and Lalla. In just a moment we'll hear that, but before we do, I want to say how happy I am to be speaking with you, especially—some of our listeners may know this, some people may not—but you had a stroke.

CB: I did, in February.

TS: Yes, less than a year ago, and you're doing so fabulously!

CB: Well, yes, I can hear glitches and halts in my voice, and I'm sorry about that, but it's just the way of the world, the way of the body. But I'm very, very lucky to be able to speak with any fluency at all. So I'm proud to be here.

TS: I'm wondering if the experience changed you in any way. I mean, all experience changes us, but how this experience changed you.

CB: It makes me feel more fragile, more broken-open, less glib, as they say, less proud of myself. It ought to make things funnier, [Laughs] but I don't think it does. Having a stroke is a strange experience because it doesn't hurt. You don't know you're having it unless you happen to be as I was, talking on the phone to my sweetie, Lisa Starr. I was just talking and I became unintelligible. So immediately I drove myself to the emergency room and checked myself in and got that treatment called TPA, I think, that only 2 percent of stroke victims get there in time to have. But it helps you to recuperate and recover much better than you would otherwise.

So I've been very fortunate. That's part of my sense of things, too, the change since then that I feel. Just very lucky and, I don't know, I guess sort of quiet. A little quieter than I was before. And I hear it in my voice, and I'm sure the people listening to me can hear the difference between the recorded voice before the stroke and my voice now.

TS: But it's very, very minor, Coleman. And I feel so happy that six months later—and, you know, it's curious, because you mentioned when Guru Bawa came to you in a dream, and you said, "I'm so lucky." And here you were able to drive yourself immediately and receive a treatment that only two percent of the—"I feel so lucky." Do you think, I mean, is luck just what it is, on face value?

CB: No, I mean, I don't mind using the word "grace." It's a gift. I don't know what kind of presence we're living within, but I feel the gift of it more. It is more precious to me because of this stroke. I think the grace is just always happening, it feels like to me. That's certainly what Rumi's poetry—it's just filled with that sense of gratitude and gracefulness and sense of hilarity about the whole thing. Anyway, let's hear the ...

TS: This is a piece that's called "Like This."

CB: Oh yeah.

TS: I just love this piece and this whole actual recording. It's a live recording where you were performing down in Santa Fe, and I often refer to this production, I Want Burning: The Ecstatic World of Rumi, Hafiz, and Lalla, as a little jewel, the whole CD is a little jewel. Let's listen.

[Music and poetry]

TS: And Coleman, just like this, this moment, sharing this time with you, I just want to thank you so much for being here with me, for all of the work that you've done, really, to bring Rumi to so many of us. There are no words to describe how valuable it is.

CB: It's a pleasure. And thank you for your work. You do such a beautiful job on this three-CD set, it's just perfectly done. Very lovingly done. So thanks for that, babe.

TS: Coleman Barks and David Darling recently releasing a three-CD collection called Just Being Here: Rumi and Human Friendship, a beautiful, beautiful collection, as well with Coleman Barks Sounds True has two previous releases: we just heard from I Want Burning: The Ecstatic World of Rumi, Hafiz, and Lalla, and also a previous release called Rumi: Voice of Longing that has Marcus Wise on the tabla and David Whetstone on sitar. Coleman, God bless you. Thank you so much,

CB: Thank you.

TS: Be well. Bye bye.

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