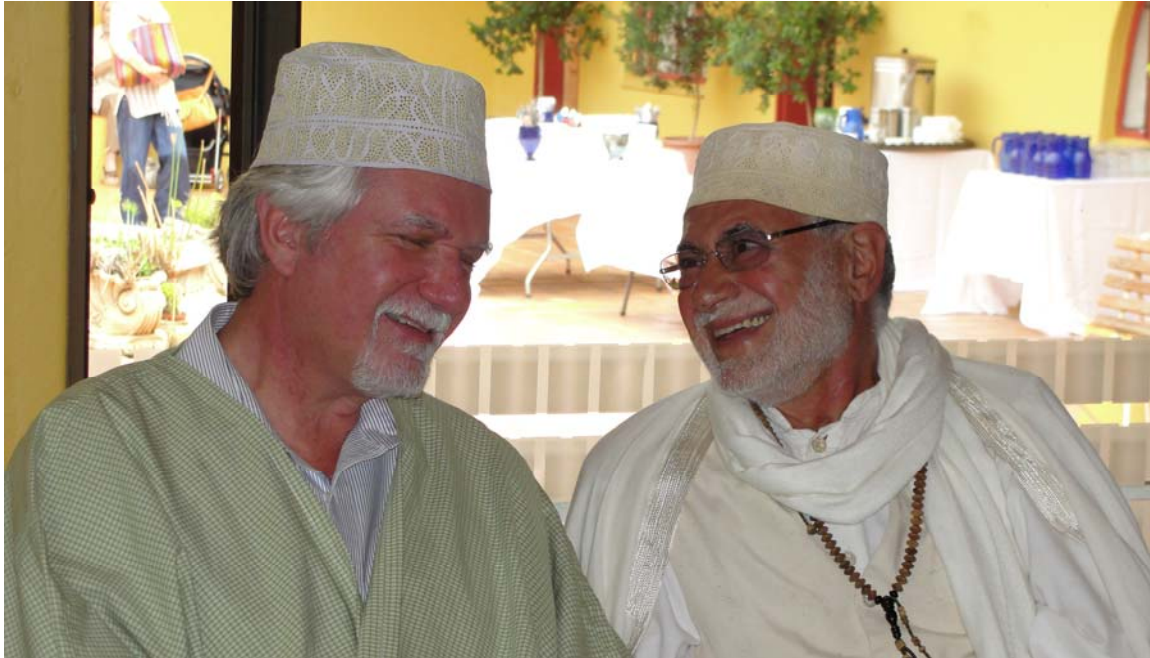


With Shaykh Fadhlalla in South Africa

Kabir Helminski



Shaykh Kabir & Shaykh Fadhlalla

The friends of Allah are the most beautiful people. During the days I spent at the Rasooli Center with Shaykh Fadhlalla and friends from South Africa, England, Canada, United States, Iran, and Scandinavia, what I witnessed was an unbroken flow of kindness, generosity, nurturing, respect, humor, and love. If this seems like extravagant praise; it is not. These words do not exaggerate nor do they do adequate justice to the noble manners and immeasurable hearts of these dervishes. One cannot enter such an environment and remain untransformed.

At the center of it all is a Shaykh, a man whose countenance is so sweet, whose words sparkle with such joy, whose presence is so engaging, whose glance is so intense, that one immediately feels the necessity of rising to a new level. At the same time it is here that one feels totally accepted for what one is. Anyone who has a problem or a need will be cared for. And one might eventually learn that the person serving you could be someone who in everyday life might employ or command dozens or hundreds of others. This is definitely the major league of humility, service, and compassion. It would not be surprising to ask the question: how could I be so lucky as to be *here*.

But here is just here, and that is the point. Everything is perfect as it is. We realize that away from this place and these friends it is too easy to live at a lower level of consciousness and love. On the one hand there are people here who have been on the Sufi Path for more than fifty years; and at the same time there are children—children who have no doubt that

they are loved. And there are also people relatively new to the community, this practice, this way of being. Not that there is an official membership, initiation, or definitive principle of inclusion. But that is not to say there is anything random about this collection of people, for some higher principle of organization seems to be at work.

On the weekend there would be a conference, but in the days leading up to it there is time to get to know people, or for old friends to reconnect. In the company of the Shaykh people have many of their most fun, serious, entertaining, and illuminating interactions. The conversation moves from lighthearted metaphysical commentary, to the various meanings of a poem or word in Arabic or Persian, to recollections of various near legendary people, especially those known for the unique and interesting ways they express their spirituality. The individual stories deserve to be told but that will be reserved for other occasions.

During the conference I am struck by the consistently high quality of the talks. The speakers include a provincial Premier, a non-black member of the African National Congress, formerly jailed during apartheid. A white English high court judge who had experienced the truth of the Qur'an for himself and embraced Islam. There was an economist who spoke about the spiritual implications of "the worst economic crisis humanity has ever faced" and told an amusing story about a village that had begun to trade in monkeys due to an outside who had created a demand for them. Over time the villagers begin to save their hard-earned money to buy monkeys speculatively as the price for them increases. In the end, of course, having put all their money into something of no real value, the monkey bubble bursts and there are no buyers for their uselessly caged monkeys.

These people talk about and the ploys of the ego, the lives of saints, and the ways of God, as readily as some people talk about celebrities, real estate and politics. Certain themes seem to recur. At every opportunity the positive is affirmed: beauty goodness, the miraculous, the divine compassion. We live in the most wonderful times. While some Muslims might talk about the disappearance of prayer in people's lives, the Shaykh talks often about disappearing in ritual prayer, entering a positive state of oblivion in which we can be cosmically refreshed. This is the transformative nature of worship and ritual, without which they are just empty habits. There is making light of life and death, and the shadow nature of all phenomena. Sometimes there are reminders not to be confused, that everything we see is the Divine manifesting itself to itself.

The Shaykh has a rare capacity to draw our attention again and again to the Highest Truth in each moment. He also says that ideally we would live this highest truth without talking about it at all. In his youth in Karbala, Iraq, in what was a stable spiritual society, people were so accustomed to living generosity, caring for each other, living with dignity and humility, setting limits to the ego, that no one needed to talk about truth, the path or Islam. Islam was completely integrated as a way of life. Once, many years later, he asked one of the old shaykhs of Karbala why he never talked about the Path (*tariqah*). "If you have arrived in a beautiful place," the old Shaykh said, "do you spend your time talk about the road you travelled to get there?" Nowadays, in most places there is more talk about surrender than actual surrender.



Shaykh Hossam, Shaykh Kabir, Shaykh Fadhlalla, Abbas Bilgrami

The days are punctuated, of course, by the periodic ritual prayer which harmonizes the group as a whole and keeps us tethered to the deeper reality. We are led by a sweet, young Imam who recently came from Tajikistan. He tells me about his master's thesis devoted to the Sufi poet Sadi. I like him. He leads without any pomp or self-importance, and he is there in the nightly circles of *dhikr*, attending as a humble dervish.

It is in the gatherings for *dhikr* where we feel not only that intensity of Divine depth, but the continuity of centuries as well. Sitting in the *Halqa*, chanting the rhythmic phrases of the *Diwan*, blessed by the felt presence of the Prophet, strengthened by the presence of brothers and sisters, we are companions of a timeless order. And slowly the realization comes—the immensity of what has been bestowed by the Prophet Muhammad and kept alive by noble souls like these, merciful to one another but firm in the face of any and all ignorance and denial. The circle of remembrance is a place of exchange, where the Unseen penetrates the seen, where each in the giving of devotion and pure attention is lifted to the heavenly planes. Humbly we are together and separately we express our adoration of an invisible Presence. What we yearn for is not absent and has touched us with such sufficiency that we are ruptured by its beauty.

Finally when there are no more songs of intoxicating divine oblivion to be sung, no more prayers to be said, we express the same devotion to each other, with a touch, a word, or a kiss, and walk together into the night of stars.

* * *

Some advice from Shaykh Fadhlalla:

The financial situation is not a cause of our moving but a sign or indication that a change is called for. Shaykh Fadhlalla: You have done all the right things: the studies, the practices, the disciplines, the responsibilities, accepting the proper limits. Now do what you love. Place yourself under the shadow of God's whims.

*A man led by his whims
Is like litter on a dusty street.*

*The container of self-restraint
Is like a hearth kindled to a blaze.*

*God has whims of as well.
The one who puts himself under those whims*

Learn to discern your true path. Serve humbly, but don't allow yourself to be used for lesser purposes. Serve with all the dignity that is your right. Know what is yours and what is not. Keep your spirit of emancipation and freedom.

Be true to the spirit, let it be expressed, let it be strong. Catch some of the fragrance and live the noble ways of our Prophet.

Some thoughts on our present situation:

It has taken quite a bit of energy to keep this place going and it has given us six years of extraordinary experience. There's nothing to be disappointed about. Life moves forward by sacrifice and sacrifice always leads to something better. I have recently received a great gift of inspiration and spiritual support from our tradition. If I have received it, it means we have received it. The form of Sufism is changing and we are being called to work in a wider dimension.