

## The Divine Madness of Romantic Love

by John Ryan Haule

www.jrhaule.net

Apparently love has made us crazy -- you and me. Evidently we've strayed from the highways and mainstreams of American life. Perhaps we carry a bit of wilderness inside us. I speak tentatively. We don't know these things about one another. We doubt them about ourselves. But we know we are a bit mad. Perhaps we have tasted -- however faintly -- a flavor of divine love. It doesn't take much of it to jumble up our values, and draw us in a different direction from that of our neighbors. We're here today because we caught a whiff of something that has beguiled us, and we feel we just have to tag along until we know more about it. We place ourselves at the feet of a man like Jalaluddin Rumi, because he has "learned the ropes." He stumbled his way around quite widely in this new world that love made, and found words to describe it. He made us a map. In one of his quatrains he says:

Let the lover be disgraceful, crazy,  
absent-minded. Someone sober  
will worry about events going badly.  
Let the lover be. (*Rain*: 7)

The thesis of my book on *Divine Madness* is that *all* love has the potential to bring us to the brink of this insanity. To be "insane" in this sense, means to live in a different world from the one agreed upon by the overwhelming majority in our society. In the sane "public world" that surrounds us and constantly infiltrates our thinking, reality is defined by logic and statistical verification. This kind of thing leaves *us* cold. In our mad world, the most important events are irrational, and things are not what they seem. Rumi says:

Those who pay attention to ways of behaving  
and speaking are one sort.  
Lovers who burn  
are another. (*Longing*: 20)

The lover's world is defined by a certain throb we feel when we see a gleam deep down at the center of things. The lover's gaze passes right through the outer envelope of appearances down to a riveting core. Some of us are mad enough to believe that there is divinity in the spark that animates our beloved's soul. We find ourselves in the presence of God. The fabric of the everyday world is suddenly rent, and through its gap we glimpse a vision of something wholly other.

The Greeks of late antiquity had a name for this kind of knowing. They called it *gnosis*, by which they meant a spiritual and experiential knowing of the heart. *Gnosis* can only be spoken of in metaphor and by allusion. This is why Rumi turned to poetry. Really all his poetry is an attempt to describe *gnosis* and the gnostic. Here's an example:

When a gnostic says, "wine,"  
what does he mean?

How does he make a liquid  
refer to that!

.....

Young lovers like to drink red wine  
and listen to love songs,  
but there's another  
Lover, another Wine, another Lovesong,  
another Tavern.  
*Hand me*, says the mystic poet  
to the One he can't see, *Your Cup*.  
*You are my face. No wonder I can't see You.*  
*You are the intricate workings of my mind.*  
*You are the big artery in my neck.*  
*When I call out in the desert, O God,*  
*I'm only pretending, to distract the others,*  
*so they won't notice Who sits beside me. (Longing: 58)*

In this attempt to describe *gnosis*, Rumi first alludes to the gnostic's intoxication. He means that to know with the heart in the gnostic manner means to feel and be out of our senses. Gnostic knowing is like wine: the more we take in, the more carried away we become. But then as Rumi thinks further about the matter, he inclines to see the wine bottle in the hands of lovers because they are already intoxicated, even before they start searching for the corkscrew. Yes, he thinks, *gnosis* is like love: its object is not separate from us. She is our very self. She is our face, our mind, our jugular vein. We can't lose such a beloved, and we can't find her. She is "in [us] all along" (*Secret: #1246*). *Gnosis* is the means we have to know our identity with our beloved, and her identity with God.

There are many degrees in the transcendent knowing of *gnosis*. Perhaps there are even times when we "see God face-to-face," as the Hebrew metaphor puts it. But there are all too many times when we act like Lancelot on the quest of the Holy Grail. He sees the sacred cup without knowing what he sees, while lying in a cataleptic lethargy, completely unable to move or even to react inwardly. It's very much the same with us when we stand before the divine spark in our beloved and manage somehow to miss seeing it. Our attention gets stuck on mundane details, and we cannot see through to the gleam. Perhaps we feel the outlines of our very selves beginning to dissolve as we merge with our beloved into a rapt unity. But just at this moment we distract ourselves. We're afraid of falling through the gap in the fabric between the two worlds. We're so good at pretending we haven't seen anything extraordinary that finally we convince ourselves.

Ordinary reality -- "*public* reality" we might better call it -- seduces us into denying or altering what we see in order to conform our experience with social expectations. From infancy on, we have learned to do this automatically, to keep ourselves "sane." We fear isolation and loneliness so much that we sacrifice our own unique experience, denying it in order to belong to a family, a community, a society. Rumi is aware of this danger and tries again and again to alert us to our self-sabotage. For example he says:

I have lived on the lip  
of insanity, wanting to know reasons,  
knocking on a door. It opens.  
I've been knocking from the inside! (*Rain: 75*)

The first lesson about the mystical quest, the pursuit of crazy wisdom, is that the divine lurks everywhere. It hides itself amidst the ordinary, dancing on tiptoes like an excited child, dying to be discovered. Meanwhile we're breaking our heads trying to find a strongbox or a hollow place beneath the floorboards. Ordinary knowing counsels us to look for God in all the logical places. It is on the lookout for something monumental. *Gnosis* finds the Holy Grail everywhere, constantly. In the eyes of *gnosis*, everything ordinary is also divine. Ordinary faith hopes to find God after death, while the mad faith of the gnostic cannot escape God. It bumps into divinity wherever it turns. The sane and the mad don't speak the same language. They live on different planets, even as they jostle one another in the same coffee shop.

Traditionally, many of the Sufis were vagrants and beggars, like Buddhist monks and Franciscan friars. They gave up everything for God -- not out of a spirit of sacrifice but because once they'd come to know God in a gnostic manner, they had no use for everyday concerns. They were often on the road, vagrants, dirty shiftless bums, saintly pilgrims. How do you tell which madman is schizophrenic, which an alcoholic, and which intoxicated with *gnosis*? Or which filthy vagrant is a murderer on the lam, which a thief in disguise, and which a saint in ecstasy? By outer criteria, they all look pretty much the same. Over the centuries, the Sufis have been a crazy, disreputable lot. Rumi says:

Those on the way are almost invisible  
to those who are not. A man or a woman  
recognizes God and starts out. The others  
say he, or she, is losing faith. (*Rain: 44*)

"Losing faith": that's an expression no gnostic would ever use. Only the sane speak of *having* faith and *losing* it, for they are primarily concerned with doctrinal purity, with conformity to a collectively approved set of propositions. We mad men and women do not conform ourselves to a doctrine, we find ourselves in an intoxicating world. We may *neglect* our faith or *deepen* it. But we don't "have" it; it has us. It's the same with prayer. We gnostics do not pray five times a day like pious Muslims, we either pray all the time because we are always in the presence of our Beloved or else we don't pray at all, because our love has outstripped the words and gestures of orthodoxy. Rumi put it this way:

Once a day, once a week, five times an hour,  
is not enough. Fish like we are  
need the ocean around us! (*Three: 5*)

The ocean is probably Rumi's favorite image for what it is to live in the world that love and gnostic knowing has made. It requires a different kind of breathing and a different kind of movement. The water we dive into lies deeper than the land we walk upon. And the deeper we go, the darker becomes our night of love. Here's another example of the ocean metaphor; Rumi says:

The Ocean will not allow its fish out of itself.  
Nor does it let land animals in  
where the subtle and delicate fish move.

The land creatures lumber along on the ground.  
No cleverness can change this. There's only one  
Opener for the lock of these matters.

Forget your figuring. Forget your self. Listen to your Friend.  
When you become totally obedient to That One,  
you'll be free. (*Longing*: 35)

In another place he says: "Breathe water. Become river head to foot." (*Three*, p. 42).

In the Sufi view that Rumi articulates, "Everything in the world is in some mysterious way connected with Love and expresses either the longing of the lover or sings of the beauty and glory of the eternal Beloved who hides His face behind a thousand forms." (Schimmel, 1982: 77f). Love between men and women is part of *divine* love, for the human experience both conceals and reveals the ultimate Lover and the ultimate Beloved. Indeed the love of God is really the only love there is. The eleventh-century Sufi, Ibn al-Arabi says:

It is God who in each loved one manifest himself to the gaze of each lover . . . for it is impossible to adore a being without imagining the divinity present in that being. . . . Thus it goes for love: a creature really loves no one but his Creator. (Corbin: 111).

Human love and divine love are metaphors for one another. The mystic poet knows that one who has never loved another human being, lacks the wherewithal to comprehend the love of God. But in the erotically shared images and emotions we all cherish, Rumi finds the language to hint at his experience with God. He says, for example:

You don't have "bad" days and "good" days.  
You don't sometimes feel brilliant and sometimes dumb.  
There's no studying, no scholarly thinking having to do with love,  
but there is a great deal of plotting, and secret touching,  
and nights you can't remember at all. (*Secret*: #674)

This we can understand. We know immediately the tantalizing promise of an intimate closeness that trembles on the brink of exceeding all bounds. How it holds us, content and restless, rapt in fascination and yet aflame to burst the last remaining membranes keeping us apart. Here is the root of our madness. This agonizing nearness amidst distance is so gripping, so significant, so wondrous that we become like the man in Jesus' parable. We're ready to sell all we have to buy a field that hides such a treasure. (Mt. 13:44). Our neighbors think we're crazy because our decisions no longer respect the values they hold dear. We're living on another plane, now, where our closeness to and distance from our beloved occupies our whole consciousness. We reach a point where we don't know any more which it is that thrills us more: our mutual dissolution or our insurmountable separateness. We're inside one another, while a universe separates us. Rumi knew this experience well, he says:

When I am with you, we stay up all night.  
When you're not here, I can't go to sleep.

Praise God for these two insomnias!  
And the difference between them. (*Secret: #36*)

This is probably my favorite quatrain from what we might call the Coleman Barks canon of Rumi's verses, so I'd like to say a few words about it. First of all, it refers to experience we have all had with a human partner; and yet it's clear Rumi means this to refer to his divine Beloved. Secondly, it's a description of the Sufi at prayer. Most of the Sufi writers speak of "night" as the time for prayer. I think, too, of Jesus, who taught in the Temple by day and withdrew to "the hill called Olivet" to spend the night (Luke 21:37f). Rumi's nights are filled with his Beloved: either in the form of God's presence or God's absence. It is just as it is with us when we are freshly in love with a human beloved. When she's with me, I stay up all night -- because consciously enjoying her presence is more important to me than sleep. This would be a night of magic and joy and transcendence, when I am lost in the marvels of her incomparable being. I am thrilled with her golden heart and the dark unplumbable depths of her soul. We fly together to radiant realms known only to the angels. If Rumi experiences his divine Lord in this way, we can hardly wonder at his escatic enjoyment of the night.

But, because he praises God for *two* insomnias, it is clear that he also finds great delight in the nights God is absent. Perhaps this seems to conflict with our own experience of insomnia when our beloved is absent. Aren't they the miserable nights, when we toss and turn and feel his or her absence as the abyss into which we are endlessly falling? These can be the worst nights of all. Some get themselves drunk to forget their loneliness; some try to replace their beloved with another bed-partner. But not Rumi. Rumi thanks God also for this second kind of insomnia. For him, there's an important love-making that goes on even in the nights God is absent.

I think I know what he means. This address that I'm delivering to you today was written when my own beloved was absent -- at late hours when I could not go to sleep. The same goes for my book, most of whose 300 pages were written between 10 pm and 3 am. My beloved was absent so that I had nothing but my memories of her. I made love to her by enjoying the images of her that rose before my mind's eye. Images of past moments and images of moments that never occurred before the night they found the words to make themselves real. I needed those nights of distance from my beloved in order to find out who she is, who I am, and who we are.

Praise God for these two insomnias!  
And the difference between them.

Passionate love oscillates between the two moments of presence and absence. In the tension between them lies our joy, our pain, our longing, and our leap of transcendence. The profound unifying presence of lover and beloved has often been symbolized by the literary image of the love potion. This magic elixir works a deep transformation upon the souls of the two people who happen to drink it. It somehow overcomes our separateness, and against all odds makes of us a single common substance. We are now one heart, one soul, one mind. The "lead" of our individuality is transmuted into the "gold" of our union. After drinking the potion, we can't imagine a greater freedom or privilege than to fall into the hands of our

beloved.

Although the love potion is concocted magically so that its essence belongs to the world of madness, it is also fabricated for the sanest of motives. For example, in the story of Tristan and Isolde, the incomparable maiden, Isolde, has been promised to the aging King Mark and therefore contemplates a dreary future. Her mother concocts a drink to make her and her spouse deliriously happy with one another. Thus the mad drink has a sane purpose. But in the end madness conquers sanity, because she mistakenly drinks the potion with the gallant, young hero, Tristan.

The tales may be fantastic, but they are also psychologically accurate; for we rarely fall madly in love with a sensible partner. The classic stories of romantic love are in agreement on this point. For social and religious reasons, the lovers' unions are impossible in the sane world, so that the partners have to spend a great deal of time apart. Even when they are together, they may well choose not to consummate their love physically. They suffer from the second kind of insomnia because they freely accept the distance between themselves. As a proof of their chaste intentions, they may place a *naked sword* between themselves when they sleep in the same bed. A psychologist like myself reads the literary device of the naked sword as a symbolic statement about the nature of romantic love. It needs distance. When we think we want to be united with our beloved every single moment, now and forever, we're right about how much she means to us; but we're wrong if we overlook the refining fire of distance. It transforms us and our love. It accomplishes wonders -- the way a gooey mass of flour, water, and yeast becomes bread when closed inside the oven for a while. All the mystics were aware of needing their distance from God, even as it tormented them. Rumi says:

A certain person came to the Friend's door  
and knocked.

"Who's there?"

"It's me."

The Friend answered, "Go away. There's no place  
for raw meat at this table."

The individual went wandering for a year.  
Nothing but the fire of separation  
can change hypocrisy and ego. The person returned  
completely cooked,  
walked up and down in front of the Friend's house,  
gently knocked.

"Who is it?"

"You."

"Please come in, my Self,  
there's no place in this house for two." (*Three*: 84)

There are many variations on the theme of the naked sword -- not the least of which are the medieval stories in which the partners voluntarily intern themselves in separate monasteries.

According to modern sensibilities, this represents the craziest of notions; for if we love one another, why should we not spend our lives together in the same kitchen, the same bedroom, sharing the same bank account? Surely there's nothing wrong with marriage and the life of the "householder," as Hinduism calls it. The majority of people are called to this way of life; and it by no means precludes their loving God -- or even finding God in one another. But the image of a pair of lovers voluntarily choosing at a certain point to live out their lives in separate monasteries speaks to the *process* of the love relationship. It is not some static "happily ever after" kind of thing.

Relationship grows and changes. Hinduism recommends that householders, when their child-rearing is done, should move to the forest and end their days living like hermits, concerned with nothing but the love of God. Some of the greatest saints of Christianity -- like Teresa of Avila and Ignatius of Loyola -- began with romantic love and followed love's changes until they found themselves in love with God. Rumi says:

Don't grieve. Anything you lose comes round  
in another form. The child weaned from mother's milk  
now drinks wine and honey mixed.

God's joy moves from unmarked box to unmarked box.  
from cell to cell. As rainwater, down into flower bed.  
As roses, up from the ground.  
Now it looks like a plate of rice and fish,  
now a cliff covered with vines,  
now a horse being saddled.  
It hides within these,  
till one day it cracks them open. (*Secret: #1937*)

Rumi implies our love for one another is like an acorn: inside its drab, inauspicious shell lurks a marvellous kernel. If we break it open, we find a nourishing nut; but if we have the patience to wait through the changing of the seasons, it cracks open from the inside and, over the decades, becomes a powerful tree.

Time and the seasons bring about big changes in growing things. This applies to love as well. In the beginning we're overwhelmed by the blissful wonders our beloved opens up for us. We dive into a tropical sea and delight in its gaudy magnificence. As time goes on, we discover more and more pain in our union as well as in our separation. All mystics are aware of these developments. One Sufi put it this way:

Old Man Love:  
"Come in, come in:  
don't loiter around  
outside!"  
Inside:  
SPLENDOR,  
cups of pain.

(Nasimi in Wilson and Pourjavady: 74)

*Gnosis* brings us as much pain as bliss. Both experiences enable us to grow in love, and there's no rule to tell us what next to expect. If we regard our love as an oak tree or the third

member in our partnership with our beloved, we grant it its rightful place as the source of the creativity between us.

Love may not be forced or negotiated. It is a living, growing principle that derives from the uniqueness of its human partners, but is never reducible to them. With love, it's never a question of what I want versus what you want, and let's find a compromise point somewhere in between. It's also not giving in and subordinating my will to yours. Love has its own life and its own will. It's wiser than both of us. There's nothing for us to do but to follow *its* lead.

The real ascetic practice in love involves holding ourselves between the love potion and the naked sword, between unity and separation, between my will and your will. In the tension between these opposites, we allow the relationship itself as the third member of our partnership to express itself. Following the lead of this Third is, admittedly a subtle practice. And a crazy one. It means attending to details that are invisible to most everybody else. "There's no studying . . . but a great deal of plotting and secret touching." The outcome is unknowable and irrelevant. Our course comes to us gradually in each moment of our mutual presence with one another. We entertain and take seriously all the images of and feelings about ourselves and one another. We pay attention, too, to the images, feelings, and intuitions which occur to us regarding the relationship itself. Nothing is discarded *a priori*; everything is taken seriously and playfully. We "hang in there" and learn.

What are we looking for amid all these images and feelings? This is the central question, the task of tasks. Rumi addresses this issue in a parable. A man who is searching for his lost camel is joined by a second man who *pretends* to have lost a camel so that he can tag along for a while and then lay claim to the first man's beast when it is found. The man who really lost a camel, however, behaves quite differently from the pretender. He recognizes scents the other does not smell and finds clues the other does not see. He knows his camel's smell and habits. Above all, he knows what it is like to be close to finding a lost camel, while the pretender has no inkling. There is a "stinger" to this tale. Unbeknownst to himself, the pretender has also lost a camel. And as he tags along after the first man in his ignorant greed, suddenly he sees his own camel standing a few feet before him. It's quite a shock and quite a recognition. Now he, too, becomes a seeker (*Longing*: 29f).

We can draw at least three conclusions from Rumi's parable. First, staying "on track" when we follow our relationship means recognizing clues which are intimately familiar to us. It means stalking scents we have lived inside of and come to know so well that we forget them the way we forget our ears when we listen to music. The second lesson in Rumi's parable is that if we have not lost a camel, there is no point in searching for one. There will be no clues to recognize. When we are searching for a camel we did not lose, we are ignoring what's right before our minds and hearts -- trading in reality for illusion.

The third lesson in Rumi's parable is that even if we think we have lost no camel -- even if we think we have never owned one --, there is a camel out there which belongs to us. Sometimes we are on the track of our relationship without ever guessing that there are scents to follow. Perhaps we have been living in an *unconscious* state of oneness. This does not mean there is no divine spark in our union. There's a camel out there waiting for us.

Rumi probably addressed this parable to his slowest followers. Those who had only the

faintest glimmering of what a spiritual life might be. He invites them to follow the Sufis who *know* that they have lost God's presence. When they recite the *dhikr*, perhaps a phrase about God's presence repeated over and over, and begin to whirl in the dervish dance, they might be surprised. They might find their camel.

When we finally encounter the camel we didn't know we had, we get a "feel" for having a camel. In the same way, we can get a feel for when we are following our relationship. Rumi has found a compelling way to say this:

When you do things from your soul,  
you feel a river moving in you, a joy.

When actions come from another section,  
the feeling disappears.

.....

Don't insist on going where you think you want to go.  
*Ask the way to the Spring.*

Your living pieces will form a harmony. (*Three: 44*).

When we are in harmony with the Third, a joyful river flows through us. But beware! Following that river is not always the same as doing what we *think* we want to do. The joyful river results from the confluence of our several living pieces -- and not from such a single privileged piece as the ego. Following the relationship means going against our ego-nature for the sake of our greater Self.

If all this sounds a bit strenuous, let me conclude with a different take on things. Again, Rumi speaks through the English words of Coleman Barks:

For sixty years I have been forgetful,  
every minute, but not for a second  
has this flowing toward me stopped or slowed.  
I deserve nothing. Today I recognize  
that I am the guest the mystics talk about.  
I play this living music for my Host.  
Everything today is for the Host. (*Secret: 74*)