

Tell Them I Said Yes to Life¹

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Service Description: Sometimes, life's challenges feel so overwhelming that we may want to say "no" to the world; to close ourselves off, or shut our surroundings out. When our energy feels completely drained, where do we find the strength to answer our life's deepest call?

We spent the first week of our trip stumbling around the holy sites of Istanbul in a jet-lagged haze that no amount of strong Turkish coffee could clear.

I had arrived in Turkey as part of the Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi immersion experience with 25 members of the Starr King community.

We admired the golden halos of icons in ancient Orthodox churches. We donned headscarves and kneeled shoulder-to-shoulder with Turkish women in modern liberal mosques. We climbed the cool cramped cobblestone ramp to get to the balcony of a 4th century church that had become a 15th century mosque and was now a 21st century museum. We had to show our passports and wait for clearance between bomb-proof doors before entering an Ashkenazi synagogue.

Every day, five times a day, the call to prayer echoed through the city from the minarets of its three thousand mosques.

And when the week ended, we watched the moon eclipse over the ferry that carried us to the train that would take us overnight to the ancient city of Konya, homeland of Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi.

In the United States most of us know Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi simply by the name "Rumi." In the Sufi world, he is known as Mevlana; master; teacher.

We had travelled to Konya for the annual celebration of Mevlana's life and teachings - known as the Sebi-Arus. Every year, tens of thousands of Sufi Muslims and from around the world descend on Konya for celebration, fellowship, prayer, and shared spiritual practice. Many of you have joined them.

The Istanbul portion of the trip was interesting, but I had really come to Turkey for this. For Konya. To join my colleagues and Muslims from around the world in paying homage to Mevlana Rumi's life. The first book of poetry I ever bought as a teenager was written by Rumi.

The old Unitarian Universalist joke rang very true for me – that UUs preach the gospel of Rumi and Mary Oliver more than Mark, Matthew, or John. That's certainly what I'm doing today. ☺

¹ Audio link from version of this sermon that was preached at All Souls Church in Washington, DC 9/2/12:
<http://www.all-souls.org/node/132>

I hadn't come to Turkey just to be a tourist. After a year filling my brain with the study of theology, I craved an experience that filled my soul.

During the day, we would study with professors and artists-in-residence from Mexico, India, Turkey, and the United States. We would cook and clean together. Eat together. Share tiny bedrooms. Shower in cold water. Each night, we would host a worship service that was open to the entire community of Konya. In our free time, we could wander the streets.

Our first day in Konya, our lead professor, and Starr King's resident Sufi Sheikh, Dr. Ibrahim Farajaje gave the opening lecture (and his words will be familiar to those of you who have spent a lot of time with him).

Dr. Farajaje told us that the human heart is like a cardamom pod. Our goal on the trip was to crack open our hearts. "We must crack open our hearts," he said, "so that love, like the rich, velvety scent of cardamom, would pour forth from us and fill our senses and our world."

We must crack open our hearts so that our love, like the scent of cardamom, fills the world.

A few days later, one of our artists-in-residence, Duha, gave a workshop on voice. Duha is a Mexican singer and spiritual leader of a Sufi community in her hometown – and many of you met her at the Symposium if you didn't know her already. Duha told us that our voices were entwined with our truth. Voicing what is in our hearts frees us, she said. And then she sang us a song that she had written with lyrics gathered from our words.

She did not sing words I had written. She didn't even sing words entirely in a language I understood. But as Duha arrived at the refrain, I felt that she was singing directly to me.

I cannot rise until I say yes

Evet bende-yi rah-i aşk

Evet bende-yi rah-i aşk²

I leaned back against the lush carpet that draped the wall.

I cannot rise until I say yes

Evet bende-yi rah-i aşk

In Turkish, Evet means "yes," and "bende-yi rah-i aşk" can be roughly translated to "I am a servant on the path of love." It's a refrain spoken often by those on the Sufi path.

I cannot rise until I say yes.

Yes.

I am a servant on the path of love.

² From "Ma Tovv – All Voices are Beauty" - <http://vimeo.com/34419262>

I cannot rise until I say yes.

For a long time, I had been struggling with saying “yes.” The previous five years had been difficult ones for me – my father had been diagnosed with, and later died from, brain cancer. Two years later my marriage collapsed. Shouldering my grief, I tried to begin life anew on the other side of the country, only to feel the call to ministry shortly thereafter.

Theologian Frederick Buechner says we are each called to “place where our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” We each have our own unique purpose, we each have something we want to contribute to, and receive from, life. Whether we have figured out our specific purpose yet or not, I would bet that for most of us in this room, that purpose is somehow connected to love.

For me, the call to ministry is the call to be a servant on the path of love. This work ignites my passion; - unites my heart, mind, body, and soul; - and invites me to be a force for love and justice in the world. I had spent years in a professional rut as I searched for a vocation that called me so completely, and I had finally found it.

Yet following my call meant beginning life anew, again, as I moved to yet another city to start seminary.

I’ll be honest. I resented my call. Why should the choice to become a servant on the path of love force me to leave behind so many loving relationships? I was angry. I was grieving. I was lonely.

We have all experienced loss. Each one of us has found ourselves in a rut that we cannot seem to climb out of.

Perhaps you have thrown yourself into work, or a relationship, only to find the job, or your new love that you were so excited about became stale.

Perhaps you have done what you believed you “should” do, only to find that your reward is not the fulfillment you expected. Maybe instead, the result was an aching sense of emptiness. Or worse, a frantic feeling of being trapped.

Perhaps an injury, or just plain time, took away physical or mental abilities that you used to take for granted.

Perhaps someone you thought you couldn’t live without, died. And you are still here.

When we lose something or someone that matters to us, our whole being grinds to a halt.

Our limbs may feel too heavy to lift, and so our bodies remain limp and still. Words become disconnected from their meanings, and so we remain silent. We become immobilized when our hearts empty of feeling, overflow with grief, or boil with rage.

Though rest and caring are needed to survive loss, we need more than comfort measures in order to return to life.

I cannot rise until I say yes.

By the time I arrived in Turkey, I was already a year into seminary, but I was not fully on board.

Life had asked me if I would immerse myself in ministry.

My answer had been a tentative and begrudging “I suppose.”

I knew ministry was the right path, yet I was shuffling down the path, eyes downcast, and occasionally looking back over my shoulder.

I cannot rise until I say yes.

Something in me knew that I could not really thrive in life unless I let go of the chains of resentment and said “yes” with all my heart and soul. Duha’s song asked me for more than “I suppose”; the song asked me for “yes.”

I began to sing to myself as I walked around Konya.

In shops stacked high with prayer rugs,

I cannot rise until I say yes.

Thanking the street vendor for the figs and the warm sesame scented pretzel,

Evet bende-yi rah-i aşk

Covering my face from the thick fog of coal smoke that blanketed the city every evening,

Evet bende-yi rah-i aşk

As the twists and turns of Konya’s vibrant streets became inscribed on my memory, the call to say yes began to become inscribed on my heart.

Six months after my visit to Konya found me in a very different environment. I was serving as a chaplain in the psychiatry unit of a Maryland hospital. While the hospital staff members were kind, the unit was still a grim place to be. Instead of visiting patients in their rooms like in other parts of the hospital, chaplains always met with the psychiatry patients in the day room.

The day room was stark. White walls. Tiled floors. Half of the room held a series of sterile round tables with grey plastic chairs. The other half of the room had 8 or so faded and torn aqua blue pleather chairs. In one corner of the room sat a pile of battered and torn board games. On the other side sat a small bookshelf, empty save for a couple of books on mental illness and the occasional Bible. There was a view, but no way to get outside. The TV played an endless series of Law & Order episodes. There were no plants on the unit. No music. No art. No privacy.

One day I received a referral to visit a man who I'll call James. James had come to the hospital after finding himself about to walk out into the street in front of a bus.

James was a quiet, unassuming man with a gentle manner. Every day, he wore a pair of hospital-issue navy blue sweatpants and a white tee shirt. The first few times I visited with him, I don't think he smiled once.

You wouldn't know it if you met him, but James told me that he had been an alcoholic and an addict since he was fourteen years old. Though he had spent long stretches of his life sober, for some reason, he always eventually seemed to relapse.

James told me about how much he loved his children, his girlfriend, and his girlfriend's children. But when he relapsed this time, his girlfriend told him she had had enough. He had just found out that his ex-wife had taken his 2 children back with her to the Dominican Republic. James didn't think he'd ever see any of them again. He had dropped out of school. No one in his family would take him in, and for the first time in his life, he found himself living on the street.

Talking with James felt like calling down a deep well to someone who never wanted to climb out. To James, there was no reason to keep on living. There was no hope. He had nothing to give to the world, and the world had already taken everything from him.

But he told me that he missed having God in his life. He had been trying to reconnect with God by reading the Bible, but it hadn't been working.

"Well, reading the Bible isn't the only way to feel God's presence," I told him, in true Unitarian Universalist fashion. "why not start with what you know - where have you felt God's presence before?"

James told me he used to feel God's presence in a song. When he was getting divorced, he listened to the song on repeat, dozens of times a day, just to get by.

"If I can find the song on youtube, would you want to listen to it with me?"

I had expected to hear a song of compassion. Maybe a song that promised that one day, things would be ok again. Maybe a good breakup song.

I handed James one of my earphones. We each put an earphone in one of our ears, and I pressed play.

Will your heart and soul say yes

Will your Spirit still say yes

There is more that I require of thee

Will your heart and soul say yes³

I was wrong.

³ from Shekinah Glory Ministry song "Yes" - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vK47InW6EhY>

It was not a song of pity, not a song of despair, not even a song of promise.

It was a song that asked something of James.

Called him to say yes to life.

Told him that life requires more of him than he had yet given.

Asked him to commit, wholeheartedly, to life again.

When the song ended, we both removed the earphones from our ears and sat in silence for a minute.

Finally, James said “Thanks. I really needed to hear that.”

“Me too.” I said.

Back in Konya, I had been singing to myself for days by the time the Sebi-Arus finally came. Thousands flocked to the large museum in central Konya that houses Mevlana Rumi’s tomb to await the ceremony. We had arrived over an hour early, and I soon found myself directly in front of Mevlana’s tomb. I had become separated from all but one member of my group, and even he was 10 feet away.

The air was filled with the buzz of conversation I couldn’t understand. The man to my left prayed from a small copy of the Koran he held close to his face. A woman in front of me chanted quietly in Arabic as she passed one prayer bead after another through her fingers. As more and more people filled the hall, it became more and more difficult to move. We were standing so close, if just one person became violent, we would have become a human stampede.

I was separated from my group. I didn’t speak or understand the language of the people around me. I was one wave in an ocean of people, yet I was alone. Cramped, but unable to move. Waiting.

I felt all of the loneliness, resentment, and grief of the past five years well up inside me.

And so I prayed.

God, Universe, everything, emptiness, music. Love.

I cannot rise until I say yes.

Evet bende-yi rah-i aşk

Yes. I am a servant on the path of love.

I want my heart to be broken open.

I am ready to say yes.

Help me to say yes.

I cannot rise until I say yes.

Yes.

I cannot rise until I say yes.

Yes.
Yes.
I am a servant on the path of love.
Help me to serve love.
Help me to say yes.
Yes.

Tears began to roll down my face as my heart relaxed.

I kept praying, kept crying, and suddenly, unexpectedly, the soft, spicy scent of cardamom wafted by my nose. I laughed aloud as the tears continued to trail down my face. Dr. Farajaje wasn't kidding. Love really does smell like cardamom.

My friend looked over at me from where he stood.

Seeing my tears, he mouthed "Are you ok?"

"Yes."

My friends, when we feel stagnant, empty, or devastated by loss, comfort will help us subsist for a time. Being cared for by others, and being gentle with ourselves, is the first step to survival and healing.

But for us to return to life from our malaise, or hopelessness, we must listen to what life is asking of us, and we must say yes to it.

Just as long as we have breath, may we answer yes to life.

Life requires more from us.

Love requires more from us.

We must all say yes

We cannot rise until we say yes

Yes. We are servants on the path of love

Yes. May we all be servants on the path of love

May our hearts and our souls say yes

Amen.