

Lost in Rumi

Marman, D., Khalvati, F., Shafaei, M. (2019). *The Hidden Teachings of Rumi*. Ridgefield, WA: Spiritual Dialogues Project.

Marman, D. (2010). *It Is What It Is. The Personal Discourses of Rumi*. Ridgefield, WA: Spiritual Dialogues Project.

Reviewed by Jonathan Reams¹

As I was finishing writing my dissertation (Reams, 2002), I searched for an opening quote that could capture the essence of my admittedly fuzzy and even non-academic ambitions with that project. After considering a wide range of inspiring quotes from the leadership and or consciousness literature I was focused on in my dissertation and feeling dissatisfied, I turned to the poetry of Rumi and opened my dissertation with:

*You knock at the door of reality,
shake your thought-wings, loosen
your shoulders,
and open*
(Rumi, 1997, p. 200)

As I revisit this snippet of Rumi now 18 years later, I am struck by the layers of invitation the passage evokes. I aimed in my PhD to explore the subtler, transpersonal, transrational aspects of knowing and being and how to evoke them and impact our capacity for leadership. It was easy to get lost in this territory, as familiar markers, or even the concept of markers, or of concepts, all faded as the process of knocking at the door of reality, shaking loose of thoughts and stepping into the opening that emerged.

My attraction to the mystical, or transpersonal and such has been a thread throughout my life inquiry and writing. The idea of getting lost, or being in the cloud of unknowing (Wolters, 2018) and resting in a sense of the ineffable has always held an attraction. At the same time, a mental curiosity, a desire to know, (I appear to score as a 5 in the Enneagram), understand and explain things is also a driving energy in my life. Thus, my penchant for writing about things that are difficult to capture in words.

Over time, poets have been the ones to achieve this best, and while I certainly have no talent in this area, nor especially gone into reading much poetry, (I did dig into William Blake and other Romantic era poetry at one point in my undergrad studies), I do have an appreciation for how

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poetry can open up these subtler spaces, evoking portals into the deeper realities of life. It is from this frame of reference that I have approached Marman's (along with his colleagues) work of creating an opening into the deeper works of Rumi.

In *the Hidden Teaching of Rumi*, Marman, along with his colleagues Khalvati and Shafei,² take the time to educate the reader into these hidden teachings, step by step initiating us into the layers of mystery Rumi reveals. The opening page sets the tone: "*I tell you a story that can't be spoken, and I hide it from observers when I say it*" (Marmon, et al., 2019, p. v). This is typical of Rumi's approach – to be speaking of what can't be spoken and hiding it in plain sight. This means there is a type of riddle, or koan presented to us that requires unlocking. This unlocking can come, I believe, through two main roads. One is that of experience, *adequatio* or having the personal experience(s) required to know what Rumi is pointing to.

The second is scaffolding, or bridge building and it is this approach that Marman and colleagues use. In the introduction they describe how Rumi is not asking us to just 'think outside the box' or watching how our beliefs limit us. They point to "lenses of perception" (Marman, 2015, 2018) that are deeply subconscious ways of seeing (I'm reminded of Bonnitta Roy's (2006) reference to the term 'view' instead of 'perspective' as a way of pointing to something deeper). This is a way of orienting us as readers, preparing us for the journey.

Each chapter begins with parallel text laying out one of Rumi's poems in Farsi and English. This is followed by commentary, sometimes general, sometimes unpacking the poem line by line. The opening commentary continues the theme described above.

Reading Rumi's poetry is like chasing fleeting images that change before our eyes and flow from one to another. We become lost as we try to follow his twists and turns. This is exactly what Rumi is trying to teach us: How to lose ourselves as we follow something that is alive with beauty and love. (p. 39)

The flow of this commentary starts out carefully, guiding us slowly and surely into unlocking meaning hidden in the poem in focus. This brings us to a point where we can begin to see that Rumi is not merely spouting random, free association lines that have no clear connection to each other, as many of his interpreters have presented him. Each poem is a whole in itself. While the narrative source may jump from Rumi to his beloved teacher Shams of Tabriz, the meaning hangs together.

Marman and colleagues take the time in some chapters to bring up references to historical details that provide context and clues about specific incidents that Rumi is referring to. They also weave in references to Rumi's discourses (more on these later) that all provide more clues and weave the lens we can use to unlock the hidden meaning even further.

Then, as the book goes further, the commentaries shift gear. We no longer receive a line by line unpacking of the poems, but move into a set of commentaries that take us even deeper. In some

² Farzad Khalvat and Mitra Shafei both grew up reading Rumi's poems in Farsi and were able to contribute their firsthand native speaker's knowledge of the language, as well as the depths of their own experiences with Rumi's works, to the translation and commentary project.

ways, the poems focused on later in the book are more obtuse, the meaning requiring more connections to clues that need to be unpacked both from within the poem itself and from historical or other reference points. Yet the reward is even greater, and we come into view of a profound insight into an esoteric aspect of spiritual teaching.³ No spoilers here, you'll need to read it for yourself to find the treasure.

Closely linked to this project, is Marman's earlier *It is What It Is. The Personal Discourses of Rumi*. This project was something Marman began in the late 1970s, going through layers of revision as he encountered new friends, colleagues who grew up with Rumi in Farsi and his own growth, all of which enabled deeper layers of meaning to be revealed. The over three decades journey shows itself in the quality of the translation as well as in the precision of the commentary.

Rumi's discourses are less known than his poetry. However, they provide an equal depth of invitation into the subtle realms. The chapters here follow a similar pattern, with a translation of the discourse into English and then some commentary. The proportions are different here, as the narrative form of the discourses provides easier access to much of the meaning.

All in all, there are 71 of these discourses. I took them as bedtime reading over a period of a few months, taking one at a time only on evenings when I felt receptive to the opportunity being presented. I have studied a number of discourses of this nature as part of my own spiritual practice and found these discourses, despite the 700 years of time and cultural distance separating me from them, to be highly impactful.

In many chapters, Rumi tells stories or parables that are as amusing to read as they are instructive. The layers of meaning are present in relation to the layers of being we listen with, as Marman says in his commentary: "Our human self hears and enjoys his stories, but he is also speaking to the deeper part of Self that recognizes there is nothing conventional or traditional in anything he says" (Marman, 2010, p. 138).

It is this "deeper part of Self" that likes to get lost. Lost from the mind and its limitations. Lost from the whims, push and pull of emotion. Lost from the biases that come with the human senses and consciousness. It is in this sense of losing the limitations of conventional forms of human perception that makes getting lost a worthy endeavor and opens us to the essence of our being. Getting lost in Rumi is an invitation to not only lose ourselves in his poetry, but to lose our selves entirely and fall into a vast ocean of being.

References

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³ You can also find an interview with Marman by Jeffrey Mishlove in his *New Thinking Allowed* series here https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=109&v=3xKXPrADILQ&feature=emb_logo. As well, Marman has a website collecting his published works; <http://spiritualdialogues.com/author/dmarman/>. Among the items is a talk *It's All Poetry. Lessons From the Spiritual Path* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xI_mFViQcx0&feature=emb_logo from an evening in Toronto Canada for the Rumi community there.

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