

# The Deepest Cut

## Sermon by Reverend Stan Barrett

March 19, 2023

There is more to grief – as there is to love – than meets the eye. Yes, grief’s roots reach to the depths of us, just as love touches our core. Each love carries echoes of previous loves, and any love of another implicates and impacts our sense of self. Every new grief resounds of previous losses, and no grief fails to leave its mark on who we know ourselves to be. Both grief and love must be spoken of, yet neither can be encompassed by words, nor even by thought. Two great mysteries are these, and often intertwined, mysteries that, beyond words, speak of who we are.

Grief is our February theme here at the First Religious Society. I’m leaving it to others to explore the obvious and vital meanings of that theme in our lives. I’m not doing that because that ground-level reality of grief doesn’t need to be addressed. In fact, there are times when nothing is more important than to be related to in our grief in that most basic – even most embodied – of ways: to be held, to be fed, to be understood silently, to be spoken to with love. I’m not focusing on that crucial level of grief today because there’s another aspect of grief which, in my experience, is seldom mentioned, but which I believe impacts all our griefs, and which, if deeply incorporated in our outlook, can enrich us not only in our losses, but in all our life.

I’m referring to the grief which Jalaluddin Rumi has the reed flute describe in one of the poetry selections we just heard. It’s the grief that can cause us to weep without apparent cause when we hear music with no connection we recognize to a sad memory or story, but which clearly strikes a chord. My paternal grandmother once related to me the story of her hearing Schubert’s “Ave Maria” for what I assume was the first time. “I wept,” she said. She was a college-educated woman, but I doubt she understood the Latin text, and if she had, good Presbyterian that she was, when she got to “Holy Mary, Mother of God,” her only tears would have been at what struck her as the sacrilege of it! No, I think Catherine Clark Barrett was moved beyond understanding by the music. And so can we be moved.

Rumi says that these tears are for a home, a

connection, an identity which we’ve forgotten, and that the story is one of primordial loss. The flute made from a reed says in effect: You are like me. I was cut from the reed bed, my original home, to make the musical instrument that I am. You, too, come from elsewhere to make music in this world. You, like me, suffer from a deep and ancient loss. You miss home. No wonder my lament makes you wail! It strikes the chord of your longing, brings to the fore a yearning typically forgotten and almost inexpressible. You, like me, long for home. You too yearn to know and be who you most deeply are and always have been.

Rumi places this “Song of the Reed” at the beginning of his masterwork, *The Mesnevi*, which is so imbued with the Qur’anic perspective that it is often called “the Qur’an in the Persian tongue.” Why? Why does he start with this, setting the tone for the whole work? Surely it is because this long, rambling opus, often structured by stories within stories within stories, is like a kaleidoscope, ringing changes on the message of these first few lines: you are not only more than you think you are, more than your successes and failures, more than the limits imposed by yourself or others or society, and more than what you know or dream has been suppressed by those limits. You, dear one, are rooted in the infinite and eternal, rooted in God. Pay attention to your tears! Remember! Wake up!

So if we are asleep, if we are in a state of forgetfulness, what have we forgotten? To what do we need to awaken? In the Islamic spiritual and cultural world of Rumi, the Qur’an was and is understood to be a reminder. But of what? Our words and images are inadequate, but can point or gesture toward an answer. I’ve suggested “home” – where we come from – and “God” – our source. “Home” and “source” say a lot. I want to point to another: “Self.” “Home” speaks to the question “Where am I from?” “God” or “Source” speaks to “In whom or what do I originate?” “Self” gets at “Who am I?”

The other selection from Rumi we heard earlier is a call to the deepest reality of who we are: “Come to the root of the root of yourself.” Again and

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again we hear it, as a refrain we hear it: "Come to the root of the root of yourself." And in case the invitation needs strengthening, we're enticed with one hint after another of what that self of our self of our self might be: "You are a ruby embedded in granite..."; "...a guard at the Treasury of Holy light." "You are born from a ray of God's majesty..."; "...a talisman protecting the treasure" but also "...the mine" where the gems are found and from which they're dug. In the spiritual order which received its impetus from Rumi's life, this deepest reality, this original self is often referred to as one's "secret." A parallel image in Zen Buddhism is "your face before you were born." The Judeo-Christian tradition sees the human as the bearer of the divine image.

Yet if this is our secret, it is a strange one: we have it, yet somehow we don't. It's a secret held in our depths, yet effectively a secret from us. Maybe you could say that awareness is the key to this conundrum: this is our deepest identity, but we're able to live our lives with little or no knowledge of it. It's who we are, but we don't identify with it. It may send up smoke signals, as it were: flares, hints, winks, but we easily lose track or forget. Perhaps our best guide to its presence is our yearning for something beyond anything we experience of this world, our instinct that there is more – and we are more – than what typically comes to us through our senses.

And the yearning, and the instinct that there's more, bring pain in their wake. It's a pain at what we've lost, and at its elusive – often seemingly unreachable – nature. This pain, these tears, at being out of touch with our deepest, most original self, is, I'm suggesting, our deepest, most original grief. It precedes and intensifies and finds echoes in all our other losses.

This is the pain, the tears, the grief elicited by the song of the reed flute, or other experiences combining beauty and sadness. To quote Rumi again,

You are born from the children of God's creation,

But you have set your sights too low.

How can you be happy?

Come, return to the root of the root or yourself.

Or, as if we know of our deep secret but pretend we don't:

You are a ruby embedded in granite.

How long will you pretend it isn't true?

We can see it in your eyes.

Come, return...

Or, referring to what are often called the "eyes of the heart":

Open your hidden eyes

And come...

It's as though the poet is saying that something in us knows, but we don't know that we know.

So why have I chosen this particular focus on grief today? It does seem to take us far from loss and grief as we usually experience them. Why have I chosen this occasion to align myself with the one who calls us, saying, "Come, come, come to the root of the root of yourself"? And that's clearly what I'm doing, not as another Rumi or spiritual adept of any sort, but as one who has heard the call and endeavors haltingly to answer and follow. Why this, and why now, during a grief-themed month?

I suppose I have at least two motivations for choosing this focus. First, as I suggested earlier, I think it can help us understand – and maybe assist us in bearing – the depths of our grief. If the idea that we have lost touch with our deepest and most ancient self becomes part of our view of life, it can give context to other losses, allowing us to hear in them echoes of this prior grief. I think such a perspective on our losses can, with time, help with our healing. I also believe strongly that any steps we take toward restoring contact with our most essential self will give us a more solid stance with which to meet whatever life brings, losses included.

Second, it seems to me that Rumi's description of what it is to be us – to be a human being – is truly amazing and, if taken in deeply, offers a basis for a very high and noble sense of ourselves and what we are capable of: a sense of our unique humanness far beyond what we usually call self-esteem. Hear me as I join Rumi in describing you: You are a ruby; you protect the treasure; in fact you are the mine where the

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jewels are to be found. You are born from a ray of God's majesty. You are a treasury of Holy Light.

Some of you have read Amor Towle's novel *A Gentleman in Moscow*. If not, I recommend it highly. It's 1922, and Count Alexander Rostov, having escaped execution because he is remembered by some powerful people as a hero of prerevolutionary days, has instead been sentenced to perpetual house arrest in the grand Metropol Hotel right in the center of Moscow. He is soon befriended by a bright, inquisitive 9-year-old, Nina, who has managed to acquire a copy of the hotel's master key. Having already explored many of the Metropol's secret places, she proceeds to introduce the Count to its wonders.

One night they discover something new, even to Nina. Behind a bright blue door is a storage closet holding the hotel's dinner service for banquets. Included, of course, are various serving utensils – and now I quote, "...utensils, each of which had been designed with the greatest of care to serve a single culinary purpose." From among them, Nina picked up what looked like a delicate spade with a plunger and an ivory handle. Depressing the lever, Nina watched as the two opposing blades opened and shut, then she looked at the Count in wonder.

"An asparagus server," he explained.

"Does a banquet really need an asparagus server?"

"Does an orchestra need a bassoon?"

Dear ones, take your pick, or choose both. You may prefer Rumi's image and think of yourself, your secret, deepest self, as a ruby: a unique jewel to be discovered and excavated from inside the granite of the body and personality you so far know as you. On the other hand, perhaps one of the images from Towle's novel is more appealing to you: you are an asparagus server, designed for a unique purpose, but in this case a purpose you are still in the process of discovering. You are a bassoon, your inner ears still alert for melodies which resound in their full beauty only when spoken in your unique range and timbre. You are a ruby, an asparagus server, a bassoon, an unprecedented and not-to-be-reproduced ray of Holy Light.

What would it mean, then, to take seriously the

call to return, to enter on a path of seeking our deepest reality? Or if this is a journey you already see yourself as engaged in, a better question might be, "What would your next steps be?" Of course, just as everyone's self is unique, so is each one's path. Still, I do have some suggestions.

Pay attention to what gives you joy. Pay attention to what brings beauty into your life, what brings peace. Pay attention to what enlivens you, and to love. Certainly I mean love of a person, or of another creature, yes, but also of anything that engages your heart. Crucially, whether it be joy, beauty, peace, enlivening, or love, let it be something that takes you deep, that takes you toward your core.

Also – in line with where we started – pay attention to your tears – or to what would be tears if the tears could come. Especially pay attention if your tears – or sadness, or longing, or discontent – seem to come out of nowhere, or if the intensity is more than you can explain. It may of course be about something "this-worldly," as it were, but stay open to the possibility that there's an element of yearning for going deeper even, for furthering your soul-work.

A hint about tears is to do the opposite of what's instinctive for most of us, i.e., drying them up. Unless it's clearly inappropriate for the situation, or you're in a deep depression or already drowning from a recent grief, I'd suggest you welcome, encourage, even prolong your tears. Tears are our friends in spiritual work. They're a form of the melting of our frozenness, our stuckness in the familiar, a melting that can ease our movement along the path. Pay attention, wonder, follow what comes up, and imagine that the first or second answer is not the whole story.

Pay attention, that is, and then start walking. There's a reason for the term "spiritual path." It's a process. It's not over with the first hearing of the call, the first layer of the onion, the initial "aha!" or feeling of ecstasy, the first experience of thawing or melting. The process calls for practice, for some consistency in our effort. My own spiritual teacher, Refik Algan, quotes another teacher, Cahit Gozkan, as saying, "Everything depends on practice, even spirituality." Pay attention, then walk.

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Your spiritual path, your inner work, though always unique and therefore having a dimension of aloneness, need not be lonely. Having a trusted friend, or group of friends, is invaluable. You may find an identified path, e.g. Christian, Buddhist, Indigenous, Jewish, Muslim, as I did, and be able to share in common practices while exploring your individual form of that practice. It may be that a spiritual teacher to whom your heart responds may cross your path, as also happened for me. A therapist who is open to spiritual work, or a trained spiritual director, is sometimes just the support we need for moving ahead. In any case, companionship on the journey is important.

My final suggestion has to do with forming a viewpoint, one that supports the kind of work we've been talking about. From my perspective, this would be a viewpoint that gives our minds some leeway to follow our hearts in these matters. You see, I think many of us have a very positive heart response to Rumi – or other similar spiritual voices – but our minds don't easily follow. It was much easier in Rumi's day than it is in ours to have a viewpoint that has space for the idea of our having come from elsewhere, with an origin in the infinite and eternal, and a self rooted in the divine.

So I invite you to follow your heart: to let your heart take the lead, at least for a while, and let your mind listen and wonder and imagine. I invite you to be open to the possibility that the metaphors we've explored, metaphors of divine origin, of primordial home, of essential self, are not just sweet, appealing ideas we wish were true, but actually refer to the deep structure of Reality.

Listen, please, with your heartful mind as I say to you again: You are ruby embedded in granite. How long will you pretend it isn't so? I can see it in your eyes. And in fact, sometimes I can: when I'm more alert than usual, paying better attention, I can see it in your eyes. Can you see it? When you look at yourself in the mirror? In the eyes of the person sitting next to you in the pew, or chatting with you as you leave the service? Can you see it in mine?

So may it be. Amen.