**P.K. Page and Sufism**

For UU service on Sun., Aug 4, 2019 - blurb: *PK Page and Sufism*: Canadian poet PK Page is well-known for her written work. But she also participated in a Sufi spirituality group in Victoria. What can we learn about this ecstatic form of Islam through the eyes & words of PK Page? Peter Scales is a community sabbaticant at the UVic Centre for Studies of Religion and Society.

--

Order of Service elements:

Prelude:

Opening Words and Lighting the Chalice: “We set forth…” by PK Page

Song: 189, Light of Ages and of Nations

Story for All Ages – Peter, "blind men and elephant."

Pebbles

Meditation

Offering words & music

Song: 193, Our Faith Is but a Single Gem

Talk: *PK Page and Sufism*

Song: words by Kabir, song oddly called ‘Navajo Prayer’

Closing Words & extinguishing: “We set forth…” by PK Page

Linking Song: #123 Spirit of Life

**Opening Words and Lighting the Chalice**

We set forth on this long journey sleeping. / How waken when we think we are awake?

Each least xx, xy its mother’s marvel / Moving from school to marriage then to children –

And what more real and wide awake than children?

- poem by P.K. Page (“Kaleidoscope” (2010))

**Story for All Ages** – A story from India, likely 3000 years old. A group of blind men heard that a strange animal, called an elephant, had been brought to the town, but none of them were aware of its shape and form. Out of curiosity, they said: "We must inspect and know it by touch, of which we are capable". So, they sought it out, and when they found it they groped about it. In the case of the first person, whose hand landed on the trunk, said "This being is like a thick snake". For another one whose hand reached its ear, it seemed like a kind of fan. As for another person, whose hand was upon its leg, said, the elephant is a pillar like a tree-trunk. The blind man who placed his hand upon its side said the elephant, "is a wall". Another who felt its tail, described it as a rope. The last felt its tusk, stating the elephant is that which is hard, smooth and like a spear. Each one was certain that he ‘knew’ what an elephant was, but we know that their info was incomplete.

19th century American poet John Saxe created his own version, with a final verse that explains that the elephant is a metaphor for God, and the various blind men represent religions that disagree on something no one has fully experienced.

The moral of the parable is that humans have a tendency to claim truth based on their limited experience, and they ignore other people's limited experiences which may be equally true.

The Persian poet Rumi is one of many who have written interpretations of this wisdom tale, and that is why I told it today. “Be Now in Peace…”

HOMILY TEXT:

Let me repeat the advertising blurb for this service: “Canadian poet PK Page is well-known for her written work. But she also participated in a Sufi spirituality group in Victoria. What can we learn about this ecstatic form of Islam through the eyes & words of PK Page?” I wrote that blurb two months ago after seeing a slide show of paintings of P.K. Irwin and being drawn to the Persian forms in her lines and shapes. During the slide show I heard about the Sufi influences on P.K.’s painting (as P.K. Irwin) and poetry (as P.K. Page). During the past few weeks I have learned a lot about P.K. and about Sufism. In the next 18 minutes I intend to tell you about both, but I want to start with a caveat: it turns out that I do not understand P.K.’s poetry, and cannot tell you how the Sufi influences changed her work. Therefore in my talk I am going to tell you **three things**: a little bit about P.K. Page, a lot about ancient Sufism, and a bit about western Sufism. I hope to inspire you to learn more about Sufi traditions, and to inform you about this ancient and modern way of teaching and thinking.

Page is a Canadian poet and artist. She was born in England in 1916 and came to Alberta when she was 3 years old. She was raised in Calgary and Winnipeg, and worked in Ottawa and Montreal. Page married well, and lived for a time as the wife of a diplomat. All the while she wrote poems. When she lived in Ottawa she met other poets and attended poetry gatherings. In 1963 she and her husband moved to Victoria. She continued to paint and write. Page’s poetry describes day-to-day things, often in simple terms, and describes the cosmos a few times. Several of her poems seem to be commentaries on the poems of other people. In the 1940s Page was exposed to Sufi-inspired art through the French tapestries of Benedictine Dom Robert [Djwa, pg 117] [ www.francetoday.com/travel/following-heart-warp-weft-tapestry/ ]. In 1965 she was exposed to the writings of Idries Shah, who wrote *The Sufis* (1964), and in 1966 PK Page and some friends (including UVic Art teacher Pat Martin Bates) started a group “for people of like-minded spirit who wanted to achieve a higher level of consciousness.” I will talk more about Shah in a few minutes. Eventually PK Page published books, lectured at Simon Fraser University and UVic, found fame, and toured Canada with Margaret Atwood on speaking tours. Page died in 2010 in Victoria, age 93, and with no children. [end of PK Page]

Among the many sources of our living tradition, Unitarians take wisdom from the religions of the world. We do not accept that there is one book which contains all the answers, nor that one prophet holds the key to heaven (or non-heaven). Among the world’s belief systems, the great Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – hold lessons for us at times. Today’s talk is primarily about Sufism, which is a tradition within Islam.

Maybe you have heard that Islam is divided into Sunni and Shi’a, in a way like Christianity and Judaism have divisions based on which authority people follow.

Here’s an obvious question: What is a Sufi? The word Sufi is Arabic for ‘wool’, and it refers to the simple cloaks that travelling teachers wore. At the risk of over-simplifying, Sufi can be defined as "Islamic mysticism." The first Sufis were Muslims who knew the Quran, and chose to celebrate and teach using stories and sayings and music. Some Sufis chanted. Some Sufis danced. The teaching stories they used were not limited to the Quran. For example, Sufi writings include variations on ‘the Blind Men and the Elephant’, an Indian story that was almost 2000 years old when Sufism was born. Some Sufi stories originate in pre-Islamic times in Arabia and Persia. The original Sufis sought to understand truth through God, not by memorizing but by absorbing the mystical sense of the divine.

In addition to the Quran, do the Sufis have a main text? Yes, the most significant early written text of Sufism is called “The Conference of the Birds,” written in the Persian Empire in 1100s. The poet is named ‘Attar’, which means pharmacist or herbalist. Sepideh gifted me a copy of *Conference of the Birds* earlier this year.

In Attar’s story, all the birds gather and decide to appoint a king bird. They had heard mythic tales of the Simorgh, and felt that they should travel to where that wise bird lived. The birds had a vote and decided to appoint the *hoopoe* to be their guide, because the *hoopoe* had flown messages for King Solomon. The hoopoe affirms that the Simorgh is the king of the birds. [In the translation by Dick Davis,] The hoopoe tells the other birds that the voyage to see the Simorgh will be very long and difficult.

Do not imagine that the Way is short; Vast seas and deserts lie before His court.

Consider carefully before you start; The journey asks of you a lion’s heart.

The road is long, the sea is deep – one flies / First buffeted by joy and then by sighs;

If you desire this quest, give up your soul

And make our Sovereign’s court your only goal.

The hoopoe’s description is so vivid that some birds die when they hear it, and many of the birds have excuses for not going on the journey. Hoopoe tells each one why his excuse is petty, and then tells a related Sufi myth. For example, the owl says he cannot go on a journey because he prefers to be alone, searching wild grounds and ruins for precious treasure. The owl says,

Love for such treasure has directed me / To desolate, waste sites; in secrecy

I hide my hopes that one day my foot / will stumble over unprotected loot.

Love for Simorgh is a childish story / My love is solely for gold’s buried glory.

The hoopoe answered him: Besotted fool / Suppose you get this gold for which you drool;

What could you do but guard it night and day / While life itself – unnoticed – slips away?

The love of gold and jewels is blasphemy; Our faith is wrecked by such idolatry.

Then the associated Sufi myth goes like this:

A miser died, leaving a cache of gold; And in a dream what should the son behold

But his dead father, shaped now like a mouse / That dashed distractedly about the house,

His mouse-eyes filled with tears. The sleeping son / Spoke in his dream:

“Why, father, must you run / About our home like this?” The poor mouse said:

“Who guards my store of gold now I am dead? Has any thief found out its hiding place?”

The son asked next about his mouse-like face / And heard his father say:

“Learn from my state; Whoever worships gold, this is his fate –

To haunt the hidden cache for evermore, An anxious mouse that darts across the floor.”

And here is the crux of Attar’s *Conference of the Birds*:

How can the weak gain the Simorgh? Such a goal / Belongs to those who discipline the soul.

The hoopoe counselled them: ‘The world holds few / As worthy of the Simorgh’s throne as you,

But you must empty this first glass; the wine / that follows it is love’s devoted sign.

If petty problems keep you back – or none -- / How will you seek the treasures of the sun?

In drops you lose yourselves, yet you must dive / Through untold fathoms and remain alive.

**This is no journey for the indolent / Our quest is Truth itself, not just its scent!**’

Later in the journey one of the birds complains of his own sinfulness. The leading bird, the hoopoe, told of a sinner who was afraid to repent [Attar pg 99].

But in the dawn he heard a voice: “The Lord / Was merciful when first you pledged your word,

You broke it again and I gave you time, / Asking no payment for this newer crime;

Poor fool – would you repent once more? My gate / Stands open always; patiently I wait.”

Earlier I said that Attar’s *Conference of the Birds* is a foundational text in Sufism. Foundational in the sense that Rumi, Hafez, Khayyam and others adapted his themes and stories. Let me read again that last bit of advice from the hoopoe (in the translation by Dick Davis):

“The Lord / Was merciful when first you pledged your word,

You broke it again and I gave you time, / Asking no payment for this newer crime;

Poor fool – would you repent once more? My gate / Stands open always; patiently I wait.”

Sepideh researched: Here is how an earlier Sufi poet, **Abu Sa'id** Abu'l-Khayr (967-1049) had written that sentiment:

Return, return, whoever you are; Heathen, fire-worshipper, or idoltress: return.

Our is not a portal of despair. Come, even if you have broken your penitence 100 times.

And here is the version that our grey hymnal incorrectly credits to the Persian Sufi poet Rumi:

Come, come, whoever you are; Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving;

Ours is no caravan of despair, Though you’ve broken your vow a thousand times,

Come, yet again, come.

There’s one more thing I want to say about the original Sufi tradition. It grew during a time when some Muslims were seeking closeness to the Divine by going alone into the desert to pray, or by fasting often and deeply, or by closeting themselves away to memorize the Quran. The Sufi message was that true believers must be with the people, serving the people; teaching and listening; guiding and learning. Sura 2:177 of the Quran is often cited to encapsulate the Islamic idea of social welfare: “It is not righteous that you turn your faces towards East or West; but it is righteous to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book and the Messengers; to spend of your wealth, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity, to fulfill the contracts which we have made; and to be firm and patient, in suffering and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the God fearing.”

At the start I said that I was going to talk about three things: PK Page; original Sufism; and western Sufism as developed by Idries Shah and Inayat Khan. I have discussed the first two and now I want to tie them to Unitarian-Universalism.

Have any of you noticed that Unitarianism can be a hard row to hoe? We offer no easy answers, and we are almost proud of our lack of certainty. We have neither commandments, no laws, nor prophets. We have seven principles and six sources, and when we reflect on them most of us can support them. I want to draw your attention to the 3rd Principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; and the UU 4th Principle: The free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

The Rev. Paige Getty, UU Congregation of Columbia, Maryland, wrote a reflection on the Fourth Principle: “As responsible religious seekers, we recognize that we are privileged to be free, to have resources to pursue life beyond mere survival, to continually search for truth and meaning, to exist beyond bonds of dogma and oppression, and to wrestle freely with truth and meaning as they evolve.

“This privilege calls us not to be isolated and self-centered, believing that our single perspective trumps all others, but rather to be humble, to be open to the great mysteries of truth and meaning that life offers. And those mysteries may speak to us through our own intuition and experience—but also through tradition, community, conflict, nature, and relationships.

“As a faith tradition, Unitarian Universalism makes sacred the right and responsibility to engage in this free and responsible quest as an act of religious devotion. Institutionally, we have left open the questions of what truth and meaning are, acknowledging that mindful people will, in every age, discover new insights.”

If I have time, the third thing I want to talk about is Western Sufism. This might have to be the subject of a future talk…

The Sufi Order in the West, founded by Inayat Khan, the musician and mystic who first introduced Sufism to the modern Western world in 1910, teaches the essential unity of all faiths, and accepts members of all creeds. Inayat Khan founded the Sufi Order between 1915 and 1917 as an independent universalist take on Sufism. One of Khan’s disciples was Samuel Lewis, who rose to prominence in the late 1960s and created the Dances of Universal Peace also called "Sufi Dancing." This existed in Victoria until earlier this year, according to a website.

The Inayati Order is an international organization dedicated to spreading the Sufi teachings of Inayat Khan,. The Inayati Order operates internationally through a network of 100 centers, and offers a number of programs and activities. The Inayati Order commits itself to the purposes identified by Inayat Khan in at the first establishment of his Sufi organization:

- To realize and spread the knowledge of unity, the religion of love and wisdom, so that the bias of faiths and beliefs may of itself fall away, the human heart may overflow with love, and all hatred caused by distinctions and differences may be rooted out.

- To discover the light and power latent in the human being, the secret of all religion, the power of mysticism, and the essence of philosophy, without interfering with customs or beliefs.

- To help bring the world’s two opposite poles, East and West, close together by the interchange of thoughts and ideals, that the universal brotherhood-sisterhood may form of itself, and people may meet beyond the narrow national and racial boundaries.

Idries Shah wrote in England during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. He introduced Sufism as a path to psychological awakening.

Lessons for UU’s: Recall the story of ‘The Blind Men and the Elephant’… The ancient Sufi masters said that wisdom can only be gained when we listen to each other, and draw upon the wisdom of each other. Unitarian-Universalism calls on us to (3rd) accept one another and encourage spiritual growth in our congregations; and to (4th) the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We can be part-Sufi and all-UU if we use all of our available senses, listen to each other, keep learning, serve the community [variously defined], and seek truth.

As the hoopoe told the others in the Conference of the Birds, **This is no journey for the indolent / Our quest is Truth itself, not just its scent!**

Amen/amin/so be it.