



Fresh Rain

A Quarterly e-Journal of the Open Path / Sufi Way

SUMMER 2016

IN THIS ISSUE: Reflections on "Aging" by Pir Elias, Mèhèra Bakker, Amin Witt and Bill Scheffel; poems by Leslie Gabriel Mezei, Jeanne Rana, and Sharif Stannard



Dear Friends,

In our Summer issue, we examine the theme "Aging"—both the good and difficult sides. Many of us are in this phase of life—old, and getting older. Here are some of our experiences.

Elias leads with a prose poem which brought me to tears. I suspect it will touch you, too. Because Sufi Inayat Khan never had the opportunity to reach old age, Mèhèra has gifted us by writing about his final years. Amin Witt brings a personal reflection on his own aging, and Bill Scheffel offers a powerful story of an aging woman he got to know in Cambodia.

Leslie Gabriel Mezei gives us a poem titled *Aging Gracefully*—a guide for all of us! Jeanne Rana provides *I Would Die*—as we all, unfailingly, will. Sharif Stannard offers *Living Zikr*—off-theme, and why not?

In the Autumn issue, we'll tackle "**Polarity**"—as my country and our world struggle to find common ground.

As always, my gratitude to all who send offerings. Please, continue! And when you email writing, please attach a face photo separately, so we may include it with the article or poem.

With love to you all,

Amrita

editor, Fresh Rain: freshrain@sufiway.org



Contents

I Only Want to Say p. 2
– Elias Amidon

On Inayat Khan p. 3
– Mèhèra Bakker

Aging p. 4
– Amin Witt

You're Hired p. 5
– Bill Scheffel

Aging Gracefully p. 6
– Leslie Gabriel Mezei

I Would Die p. 7
– Jeanne Rana

Living Zikr p. 8
– Sharif Stannard

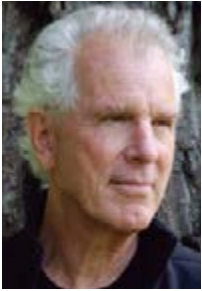
Meeting Each Other p. 9
– Amin John Witt

Upcoming Programs p. 10



I Only Want to Say

— ELIAS AMIDON



Now that I am old my thoughts no longer hold the certainty they had,
 instead they open like a river delta does, spreading to the sea,
 slow calm channels where grasses bow and water birds float and dive and make their homes.
 The torrent of my beliefs has eased, thank God,
 and I no longer need to convince anyone of anything. You and they will find your way.
 I only want to say how good it is and how good you are, as you try to make things better,
 how good it is that this is the way it is, and that we are not alone and never were,
 the same water flowing to the sea and lifting us to the clouds.

It is beautiful that we have been made like this, out of mud and air,
 made so finely that our eyes can shine with the dearest love.

There is nothing to be afraid of.

This may be the best, the most important job we have: to assure one another that each of us is lovable
 and that mercy softens every fall. Death, after all, is a fine homecoming.

As I age and slow I wonder if my life has any meaning left. It does!

Meaning beyond the need for meaning, this one that drenches me with thankfulness.

I am not at war with a meaningless void. There is no need for meaning,
 here where we glisten like raindrops in the sunlight, each drop a prism.

Something unspeakably good is shining here, some generosity so quiet and nonchalant
 it leaves no trace of itself yet appears as you and me
 and every moment created and left behind,
 nothing ever personal yet everything always intimate.

Mountains slide into the sea, even oceans wave goodbye, and we are not what we seem.

My mother died and poured herself into my emptiness. My father followed. I join them, even now.

So shall we walk together, you and I, and watch the evening sky turn into stars?

Shall we talk together about what we think is happening? It doesn't matter if what we say is true.

God after all is too holy to know, and we can be content to say *our hearts have no edge* and leave it at that.

Look how we are made of the warmest light!

It loves us without any words.



On Inayat Khan

— MÈHÈRA BAKKER



Inayat Khan has not written anything about coming of age. He passed away very young—at the age of forty-four after a very intense life.

However, we can learn something by looking at his last years. When he became forty-three, he felt unwell. Yet

he went to the States to teach and lecture to his faithful *mureeds* for many months. He then returned to Europe for his yearly Summer School in Suresnes, France, where during three months he gave his most profound teachings.

In one of his lectures, Inayat told that a mystic knows when he will leave this world.

The following developments suggest that he, as a mystic, must have felt that his time had come too, and that he needed to proceed to the last stage of his life by returning to his beloved India.

After the Summer School, he left for India, leaving behind his family in France, very much in the tradition for Indian mystics to withdraw after they have fulfilled their duties in life.

There he started to sing again, a prayer practice for which he had had no time when lecturing in the West.

He visited several tombs of Sufi saints and went to his birth place in Baroda. Back in New Delhi, he told a friend how much he liked a tree, which was near the tomb of the Sufi saint Nizam-ud-Din Auliya and said he would like to be buried there. Shortly afterwards, he fell ill and passed away at only forty-four on the 5th of February.

Today, his tomb by the tree has become a place of pilgrimage for many followers of his universal Sufi message.

Full moon, where will you be going from here?

—*Into a retreat.*

Why do you take a retreat after fullness?

—*To make myself an empty vessel in order to be filled again.*

— Sufi Inayat Khan



Aging

— AMIN WITT



I looked into the mirror and saw how white my beard is becoming—it seems just yesterday that it was black. And this is not the only change—my libido is diminishing, still there at times, but instead of being a bright fire, it is embers which at times flare up, but less as time passes. Contact, warmth, cuddles, stroking and being stroked become more important than the fire of desire; sometimes this is a relief, as the quality of despair which went with it is also not there, more of a memory than an active presence.

Sometimes I miss what I remember as my youthful fierceness, sometimes I just am grateful that life is less of a struggle, I don't have to perform or prove myself in the same way—and I am not just thinking about sex. I catch myself saying to my adult children, and other young people I am in contact with "When I was your age..." and "I remember feeling like that..."

I remember when I was younger both being impatient with older people, and wanting to be one of them. Well now I am, and sometimes I just don't want to accept it. I would still like to think of myself as a player—yet I remember well when, a couple of years ago, my son Will invited me to join him at a party. "We'll look after you, Dad," he said. I was grateful, indeed flattered to be asked, looked at Erica (my wife) who said "You go, but count me out"—and after a bit of reflection I decided that going home was the wise option, I didn't want to be the oldest swinger in town. At the same time I felt a bit sad, a bit of failure, like an old warhorse hearing the sound of trumpets, neighing, then putting his head back down in his stall.

Having said all this, I feel freer than I ever felt when I was younger. Those who were my children are now capable adults—they are facing the challenges of whether and when to have children themselves, how to deal with all the pressures that our society places on our young—success, earning money, finding out who are real friends, the rich complexity of living. I still resonate with some of this, but with years of experience behind me and knowing that most of my life is past, I am savoring life in sips rather than gulping it down, learning the value of being in the present rather than working hard building for the future.

Many years ago, in my childhood, my father introduced me to Kipling's Jungle Book stories, and "The Miracle of Purun Bhagat" gave me a kind of model for life that I have more or less followed: "twenty years a youth, twenty years a fighter, twenty years head of a household"—I interpreted this as "twenty years education, twenty years

working and developing a career, twenty years involved in family, the rest for myself." Well my real education began when, aged twenty-four, I got involved in psychotherapy. When I was thirty-one, I finally settled in a monogamous relationship and we created a (fairly!) stable family. I am now almost sixty-three and have just ended practicing psychotherapy.

Unlike Purun Bhagat (do read the story, it is very moving) I am not about to retire from the world, though I am writing this in Spain where I am spending a month on my own, something I have not done before. I have had the privilege of having time to meet myself and reflect in a very different way, away from daily pressure, living very simply—at times it is very challenging, facing uncomfortable feelings, at times even depression, as well as moments of sheer delight, of really being present. What I have come to realize is that aging, if we let it, gives us time—I still want to be involved in life, but I don't have to drive myself. I can be more dispassionate, engage, but not have to prove anything. I still want to contribute to, and join with others, to help humanity grow, but am doing it from a more serene, less intense place.

As an older person, I can still have many of the qualities I had when younger, I can be curious, I can engage with others, I can participate in, and help develop projects, I can be passionate, but I can also be much more reflective. Even though objectively, I have less future, I have a breadth of past experience which helps me take a longer term view of the future.

I would like to end by telling you about last night. Yesterday I happened to meet somebody who was celebrating a birthday—it was one of those fortuitous situations where everything falls into place; I was invited to join a small party for a paella dinner. The food was delicious (Carmen who runs the local bar here in Gualchos is a wonderful cook) the wine and beer flowed, the conversation was lively. Some of the people knew each other, I was the honored stranger as I knew nobody. We talked about the virtues of various whiskeys, Sufism, ecology, drugs, politics, religion. There were moments of warm contact and much fellowship. Come ten o'clock the paella was finished, I felt "well oiled," and the proposal emerged to go to the other bar in the village and continue drinking. I was tempted, I really liked some of the people, but I also realized I had had enough, so I said my goodbyes. I must have done it well, as I experienced both that I was more than welcome to stay on, but also that my departure was understood and accepted. I felt, and feel, deeply satisfied—we shared a lovely evening, and I knew when, for me, the time had come to stop.

I think that here is the essence of aging, the possibility of knowing when we have had enough, while having the energy, and knowing how, to engage appropriately and effectively with life.

You're Hired

— BILL SCHEFFEL



I first visited Phnom Penh in January of 2005. The place was mesmerizing. A city with few functioning traffic lights but with traffic moving so languidly it didn't need them. Thousands of small motorcycles navigating intersections like fish adept at their instinctual migration. Markets dense with vendors who could sit patiently all day in

twelve square feet of floor space, surrounded by mangoes. Young monks with glowing innocence wandering semi-abandoned temple grounds. Through subsequent trips to Phnom Penh I gradually met a circle of friends, simple people who worked the streets of the city that I encountered and got to know on my daily walks. One of them was Amoi.

Among the legacies of Phnom Penh's colonial period include the extant secondary schools and government buildings the French built as well as the many street vendors who still sell French bread. Small loaves of bread—xxx *noom paang* as it's called in Cambodian—can be found and bought fresh for twenty-five cents throughout the city. Amoi was one of Phnom Penh's xxx *noom paang* vendors. I met Amoi while I was learning Khmer, the Cambodian language. Once she got used to me saying hello and asking if I could buy a loaf of bread she became fond of correcting my Khmer pronunciation. I would part from her, for instance, by saying the Khmer version of "See you tomorrow." Amoi would gleefully attack my limp pronunciation of tomorrow, xxx *psa'aic*. I wouldn't say it loud enough, aspirate adequately or put in a proper glottal stop. Amoi would tutor me until I did, insisting I say xxx *psa'aic* five or six times until I got it right and as the smiles and laughter between us grew.

I'd encounter Amoi every morning, after I'd taken breakfast and on my way back to my guesthouse. Amoi worked in front of an elementary school and knew the young women who worked as teachers or secretaries behind a counter that opened onto the street where she parked her bicycle and sold her bread. The teachers spoke English and helped me get to know Amoi and her story. Her story was not uncommon for people of her generation. Essentially all her relatives died during the Khmer Rouge era and Amoi had fended for herself for a long time, selling bread under the hot sun for eight hours a day, six days a week. She had no safety net but her bread and the stamina to sell it.

Amoi was probably in her late fifties, wore decent dresses, and still had good teeth. Her hair was gray, her smile fierce, radiant and winning. She was an attractive woman, perched between good health and looming old age; an orphan on the streets of Phnom Penh, a dot of human light in a city indifferent, populous and growing. Amoi sat on a plastic stool behind twenty or thirty loaves of bread and occasionally shut down her roadside shop to fetch more xxx *noom paang* from whatever local bakery she purchased it from. One day, improbably and suddenly, she asked me if I would take over for her while she made a bicycle run for bread.

Thus I was momentarily hired into my first and only job in Cambodia, a crazy *baraang* (foreigner) with blonde hair and Ray-ban sunglasses selling French Bread on Phnom Penh Street #143. For the next twenty-five minutes I did pretty well. I knew enough Khmer to ask how many loaves a customer wanted, count change and say thank you. And customers did stop. Men or women on motorcycles loyal to Amoi's few square feet of concrete, who saw me and must have thought they were hallucinating, yet urged on by habit and the desire for bread they stopped. I sold six or eight loaves, garnered many laughs and made a couple of dollars for Amoi. When Amoi returned she was nonplussed but loaded down with xxx *noom pang*. She offered me several fierce smiles, but otherwise no thanks and no pay. When we parted I could at least pronounce "tomorrow" correctly.





Aging Gracefully

*What I wish for
People of any age,
And for myself:*

Fulfilled but not full,
Still growing.

With equanimity,
But not uncaring.

In love with life,
Not afraid of death.

Listening more,
And singing too.

Accepting what is.
Yet lots more to do.
Less caring for how many,
More for their meaning.

Surrender to ever changing,
Adapting to our new being.

Living the ups and downs fully,
Seeing beauty in it all.

Less knowing,
More deep feeling.

Seeking solitude,
Embracing community.

Loving fully,
And accepting love.

Mentoring others,
Allowing help for us.

Leaving a legacy,
For others to define.

Awakened spirit,
United with all.

Sinking into deep abiding,
Living life passionately.

Taking oneself less seriously,
Laughing a lot.

Knowing sorrow and suffering,
And joy and ecstasy.

Accepting the old,
Seeking the new.

Reviewing life again,
Finding fresh nuances.

Being here and now,
Living fully in the moment.

Looking back,
With new satisfaction.

Looking ahead,
With faith in coping.

Hoping for more time,
Accepting whenever the end will come.

When finally, it all comes to an end,
Moving on gently, into the adventure of the great
unknown.

—Leslie Gabriel Mezei, November 14, 2015



I Would Die

I would die

in a meadow
or on a knoll
under a large old oak

I would sing my passing
how can I bear
to leave this beautiful earth?

I would have
sky burial for my body
the last great sleep under the stars
the sun would warm
the night would cool
my bones
my flesh would be food
for others

OR:

I would be burned
on a pyre
or in a boat
set out for the western isles

I would die
tired accept the graceful
end
would love time to
say thanks
for all the kindnesses and
heartaches family friends and
foes provide

I would die
content
if it were today
content tomorrow
though the breath
I can't imagine it
the breath
stops

— Jeanne Rana
June 21, 2014

*Allan died a year ago now
in a hospital bed
I was not there
he left us
like a Viking warrior
I cried and watched the boat move
down through fjords
toward the sea*



Living Zikr

Been thinking of Zikr lately

“la ilaha illa’llah.”

So simple, yet the beating of the Sufi heart.

Over the brief span of my journey

I’ve sought to embrace Zikr in several ways.

Sometimes it is a mantra

That I quietly repeat over and over

When I’m alone

Or driving

Even in a crowd.

And it becomes a comforting resting place

For my overly-busy mind.

Sometimes it is a carefully-crafted practice

Sitting cross-legged on a cushion

Wearing a white robe

With a ring of prayer beads

Rotating my body in time with my chant.

And it becomes my total awareness

“la ilaha illa’llah”

Sometimes I reach into the content of Zikr

And realize it is really about life, all of life.

Every moment,

Every place,

Every breath.

Calling me, not out of life

To a mantra or a practice,

But into the beauty, the ugliness, the joy, the sorrow

Of this fleeting gift I have been given.

Oh Beloved, help me to live Zikr.

“la ilaha illa’llah”

—Sharif Stannard

May 12, 2016

Meeting Each Other

With each issue of Fresh Rain we will include a few short biographical sketches and photos of Sufi Way initiates. Since many of us are scattered in different places on the globe, this is one way we can introduce ourselves to each other—along with speaking together

on teleconferences or, if we're lucky, meeting each other at a program or retreat. If you would like to introduce yourself like this, send a photo and a 200-word (or less) bio written in the first person to: freshrain@sufiway.org



Amin John Witt

When Kunderke asked me to host Elias at our home, I was deeply involved in my work as a psychotherapist—I thought “what an interesting man; he has his path and I have mine.” Then my wife Erica decided to explore the Open Path. I resisted manfully, then chose to follow suit....

Half way through, I realized I had finally found my spiritual home, and over the last few years it has transformed, and keeps on transforming, how we both live. Last year I realized that after over thirty years as a psychotherapist it was time to stop. Something new is emerging in me. I need to keep open to a new, as yet undefined, way of engaging with the world and people around me.

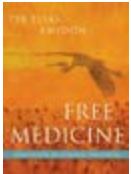


Upcoming Programs 2016



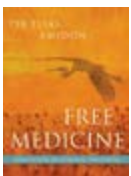
A Joyous Cosmology

4-day Advanced Open Path Retreat
 Himmelreich Retreat Center, Lindau, Germany
June 30 – July 3, 2016



Free Medicine

Reading and Book Signing
 Tsunami Books, 2585 Willamette St.
 Eugene, Oregon
Thursday, September 15, 2016 7-9pm



Free Medicine

Weekend Retreat with Pir Elias:
 "Spiritual Awakening without Religion"
 Eugene, Oregon
September 16-18, 2016



A Joyous Cosmology

4-day Advanced Open Path Retreat
 Sparjeburd Retreat Center, Heerenveen,
 Netherlands
October 20 – 23, 2016



Coming of Age

A retreat on embracing our aging and mortality
 Nada Hermitage, Crestone, Colorado
 Elias Amidon and Rabia Elizabeth Roberts
November 3 – 10, 2016