

Part of an Ancient Story: A Conversation with Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee
A Parable in the Classroom Lesson



Islam originated in the caves of Arabia in the seventh century C.E. Located astride trade routes, Christian, Jewish, and animist merchants interacted in Mecca and led a thoughtful and pious young man to consider the eternal truth. Orphaned at a young age, the man understood social injustice and the wrongful ways of men. When his fortunes changed through marriage to a wealthy widow, he still sought solace in the caves surrounding Mecca, waiting for the still voice of something greater to speak to him and indeed, according to Islamic belief, God spoke to him. For in those caves surrounding Mecca, the angel Gabriel appeared and said, “Recite.” And Muhammad recited the beautiful words of Allah, the sacred scripture of the Muslim (he who submits to Allah), the beautiful words of the Qur’an.

Shaken, Muhammad returned to his wife, Khadija, and spoke of his encounter. Believing in her husband’s revelations, Khadija and several close friends of the Prophet began to learn from Muhammad’s revelations. As the “Seal of the Prophets” or the last Prophet of the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), Muhammad taught the Five Pillars of the Faith: a radical monotheism, daily prayer – five times throughout the day, zakat or charity to the widow, the orphan, and members of the umma (community) in need of his brother’s help, fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, and the hajj or the pilgrimage to Mecca. He spoke of God’s mercy and the need to recognize God throughout each and every day. As his teachings attracted more followers, he was forced out of Mecca by powerful forces and fled to Medina (“the City of the Prophet”). The year was 622 C.E. and it is recognized as the first year in the Islamic calendar. In Medina, Muhammad built a powerful army and a united community. He vowed to return to Mecca and promised to cleanse the Ka’aba, a pre-Islamic pilgrimage site, of its many idols. After conquering Mecca, Muhammad realized his vow and the Arabian Peninsula was united under one faith, one leader, and one God.

After the death of Muhammad, Islam spread in many ways. It spread through conquest, although conversions were not forced and it spread through trade as Muslim merchants brought their teachings to new lands and new peoples. And it spread through persuasion as a special group of individuals brought God’s words not through His laws and His rules but through His love. The Sufi or Islamic mystic was a different sort of practitioner. Unlike the pious Muslim who adhered to God’s rules, the Sufi sought more than God’s rules. The Sufi sought union with God, a direct knowing and experiencing of God. In many ways, the Sufi was the perfect conduit for Islam, the perfect missionary. For the Sufi did not bother himself with the specific cultural ways of the people – whether they

performed a ritual this way or that – but rather the Sufi concerned himself with man’s love and devotion to God. The Sufi was the lover and as the perfect lover, the Sufi lavished his Beloved with attention and devotion.

In the *Free Will and Destiny* issue of Parabola Magazine, Ms. Tracy Cochran, the Editorial Director of Parabola Magazine, interviews Llewellyn Vaughn-Lee, a Sufi mystic and lineage holder in the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya Sufi Order and the founder of The Golden Sufi Center. Mr. Vaughn-Lee was brought to Sufism through the realization of his spiritual path and has spread its message to the West. While religions may be identified with nations, the path of the mystic knows no home, knows no boundaries or limitations. Like the itinerant Sufi mystic travelling from village to village either alone or in the company of ghazis (Islamic soldiers), the heart of the mystic is the heart of the lover inebriated with love of the Divine – wandering not with a purpose but to imprint love on every step of the path he treads.

In the lesson that follows, students will read Ms. Cochran’s interview with the Sufi master, Llewellyn Vaughn-Lee, and answer questions – beginning with reading comprehension questions to deeper reflective thinking questions. Thus, let the journey begin; let us journey into the very heart of love.

Pre-Interview Questions:

1- Describe pre-Islamic Arabia.

2- Locate Arabia on a map. What bodies of water border Arabia?

3- Why was Arabia located on the crossroads of trade?

4- Identify three significant facts about the early years of Muhammad.

5- Describe Muhammad’s experiences in the caves surrounding Mecca.

6- Who appeared to Muhammad and what was said to Muhammad?

7- Identify the Five Pillars of the Islamic Faith.

8- The Hijrah is Muhammad's flight to Medina. What was a cause of the Hijrah?

9- What did Muhammad do after becoming a powerful leader in Medina?

10- Define umma.

11- How did Islam spread?

12- Define Sufi.

13- What is the primary goal of all mystics?

14- Why were Sufis conduits of Islam or effective missionaries?

15- Why is the Sufi often compared to the lover?

Questions for the Reading:

1- Describe Mr. Vaughan-Lee's life in the 1950's.

2- Why does Mr. Vaughan-Lee say that his childhood was "somebody else's story"?

3- What did a boyfriend of Mr. Vaughan-Lee's elder sister give Mr. Vaughan-Lee when he was sixteen?

4- Interpret the Zen koan that Mr. Vaughan-Lee encountered: "The wild geese do not intend to cast their reflection; the water has no mind to receive their image."

5- How did the book and the koan change Mr. Vaughan-Lee?

6- What happened to Mr. Vaughan-Lee when he was nineteen years old?

7- Why did Mr. Vaughan-Lee have the physical experience of becoming a piece of dust on the floor?

8- Describe Mrs. Irina Tweedie.

9- What had Mrs. Irina Tweedie experienced in her fifties?

10- What did Mrs. Tweedie's guru (teacher) say to her and why did he say this?

11- Describe the journey of Yūsuf Hamadānī and how his journey led to Mrs. Tweedie's meeting with her Sufi sheikh, Radha Mohan Lal?

12- What happened to Mrs. Tweedie when she met Radha Mohan Lal?

13- What happened to Mr. Vaughan-Lee when he was twenty-three?

14- How does Mr. Vaughan-Lee understand stories or destiny?

15- What was Mr. Vaughan-Lee's heart's desire and how was it realized?

16- What happened in Mr. Vaughan-Lee's life that reminded him of the story of the Zen student who very lovingly builds a beautiful house and invites his teacher, a Zen Roshi, to see it when the Roshi says, "Very nice house, I will live here."?

17- Who could Mrs. Tweedie connect with and how did this connection occur?

18- What is the Uwaysi connection?

19- Why does Mr. Vaughan-Lee believe that his story is very much Mrs. Tweedie's story?

20- What happened when Mr. Vaughan-Lee was thirty years old?

21- How and why did Mr. Vaughan Lee come to California?

22- What happened to Mr. Vaughan-Lee in his English garden and how did Mr. Vaughan-Lee's life change?

23- What does Mr. Vaughan-Lee believe about the soul and the destiny of the soul?

24- Describe the dream that Mr. Vaughan-Lee's friend had – a dream where she met the Sufi teacher, Radha Mohan Lal, pointing to a dusty road.

25- What is part of Mr. Vaughan-Lee's work?

26- Describe the inner connection between the Sufi master and his student.

27- What is rabita?

28- What is the difference between the physical destiny and the spiritual destiny?

29- How does Mr. Vaughan-Lee describe his destiny and why has it been incredibly demanding?

30- What did Mrs. Tweedie ask the Dalai Lama the first time she met him?

31- What was the Dalai Lama's answer?

32- What did Mrs. Tweedie ask the Dalai Lama the second time she met him?

33- How did he respond the second time he was asked the same question?

34- What does Mr. Vaughan-Lee believe about relationship?

35- What does it mean in the Naqshbandi tradition that the end is present at the beginning?

36- What are Mr. Vaughan-Lee's views on spiritual ecology?

37- How is our destiny also the Earth's destiny according to Mr. Vaughan-Lee?

38- What is the one story and why must we be prepared to say yes to it?

Going Deeper: Questions to challenge ourselves

1- How does the mystical path differ from the purely religious path?

2- Why must a mystic know God?

3- Describe ways in which mystics alter consciousness to break the barriers of preconceived thought to experience a direct knowing of God.

4- How do prayer and meditation differ from other forms of mental activity?

5- What is the role of a spiritual lineage?

6- If God is unknowable, how can the mystic know God?

7- Draw the image below:



Experience the practice of being completely present while engaged in a task. It is that complete focus and complete presence that the mystic cultivates in his love of God.

“When I am with you,
We stay up all night,
When you are not here,
I cannot get to sleep.
Praise God for these two insomnias!
And the difference between them.”
~ Rumi
Translated by Coleman Barks

