

Humility's Present

By Jo Ann Samah Ross

Humility and human come from the Latin word, humus, dirt. A human being is someone . . . taken out of the dirt. A humble person is one who recognizes that and even rejoices in it!

-- Richard Rohr

In 2000, at the age of 50, I burned out. As a corporate consultant, I travel a lot, which some folks regard as glamorous. But like anything you do daily, the veneer gets scuffed, and you end up resenting the time in airports and hotels, breathing air that has no home.

So, in an effort to soothe a tired body and disengaged soul, I found myself at the University of Spiritual Healing and Sufism in California, where we studied love and compassion.

No, actually, the studying part was minimal because once I located my heart, the love and compassion organically flowed--with no effort!

The Sufis love to talk about hearts—not the physical heart, but nearby. Everyone has this real estate, Sufi or not. It's the center of the chest, where your mother applied Vicks Vapor Rub. This is referred to as the spiritual heart, and when it's opened—as I discovered—it offers quite a menu of delicious opportunities. Like love and compassion.

And then my mind tapped me on the shoulder.

Excuse me, Jo Ann, you're traveling on a dangerous path to unemployment. If you rely on your heart, you will sound too soft for the corporate world. You don't want to be a wimp, do you, with all this talk about love?

OK, mind, I heard you. But I've paid my tuition, and the peace I experience beckons me to continue this journey.

Months before, when a friend suggested I study Sufism, I didn't know what that was. But, it didn't sound like anything remotely similar to my work, so I reckoned it would be a welcome moratorium from the stretched hours and weariness of earning a living riding rails and tarmac.

I approached the workshops with a just a sliver of skepticism. After all, I already knew a lot about training and teaching, as evidenced by more than two decades of kudos from demanding Fortune 100 global companies. Was there anything new to learn in a Sufi school?

A humble, impish-faced American doctor, with a monk's bald spot, who carried the Sufi name of Wadude (which means Love) taught a meditative technique that helped us open our hearts. He explained that the heart is where universal truths and connectedness reign. At first I wasn't sure what all of that meant, but the Sufis are really into the experience, not so much the talk and theory. Given my sleep-impooverished mind, I was game for experiences.

The teachers would ask us to focus our attention on our hearts—that upper chest place--and gently repeat a sacred name that represented the “highest” to us. I chose the recommended name Allah, which means the One. I liked the flow and rhythm of two book-ended Ah sounds, and it produced instant waves of peace. We played with this technique for a while, realizing that it takes time to ease into a place where the mind is not sovereign.

Then we were invited to sense the hearts of our audience (the other students in the class). This was not difficult, but it did take some practice and guidance from our faculty. When it came to reading the needs of hearts, the message was always something profound and elevated, like peace, strength or justice. It was never “*they need a Big Mac and a Heineken.*” This ancient, sacred approach wouldn't waste its time on a short-lived quick fix.

One day, we were asked to spontaneously teach Sufi wisdom from our hearts, but with a twist: we had to keep our foreheads on the ground for a teaching module of roughly ten minutes. Why? Our teachers explained that it's a path to humility. Many of us would have opted for a mild lashing instead.

I started out—as most everyone else—uncomfortable, trying to focus on my classmates without seeing them, blood rushing to my head. I started speaking from my heart, allowing the unrehearsed words to spill out like tiny, hesitant pebbles.

“Allow yourselves to experience the compassion that’s always available to you from the Universe.”

The room was so quiet, I could hear my eyelashes brushing against the wool carpet. The voices in my head were anything but quiet. *No can understand me--I sound like I’m in a barrel. My derriere is sticking up in the air, and they’re assessing its enormous size.*

Ignoring this distracting, unsolicited counsel from my ego, I willed myself to keep returning to my heart. Through this cacophony of judgment and doubt, I strained like a puppy on a leash to connect with the hearts of my fellow classmates. In hindsight, I realize that this is not unlike the many corporate conference calls I attend where I see no one, but strive to make a connection despite the time zones that separate us.

Finally, I sensed the teaching was complete. I raised my head, relieved to have finished.

“Please put your head back on the ground and continue,” Wadude’s soft voice vouching for his name.

I continued the teaching, listening carefully to the messages my heart wanted to transmit. *“In this unpredictable, tumultuous world, we are hungry for peace and justice and order. An ocean of unconditional love is always accessible to us through our hearts.”*

My head started to pop up again. This time I witnessed an inner battle. That forehead was fighting for all its life to get off the ground, as if it had a mind of its own. *(Oh, it does have a mind of its own. It’s called the mind.)*

Again, I heard Wadude’s calmative voice, *“Keep your head on the ground.”*

My mind screamed, *That’s not fair! He didn’t tell the other students to keep their heads down this long.*

I willed my forehead to go back to the carpet. But this time I experienced something shift within me. Was it my soul opening? My ego being cleansed? I heard a loud sobbing that catapulted me back to the room. The sobs were my own, equally emanating from a

sense of loss and gratitude. I had literally lost my mind, and it was completely liberating. My mind had no choice but to bow to.. .to what? Spirit? My Creator? A purer version of myself? Someone else was in control, and I was simply the physical delivery system for the message. This experience was one of the closest I've ever come to being in the company of a divine entity.

After the sobs slowed down to a gentle release of grateful tears, I met my classmates' eyes. As I witnessed their weeping, I knew that they had traveled with me to a place of humility, of magical nonjudgement, of expanded awareness.

My roommate, who carried the mundane name of Susan, shared her reaction. *"We were with you, washing our own egos. I am humbled by your own journey to humility. "*

After class, Mr. Love (Wadude) and I hugged, cried, laughed, filling the room with unbridled emotions. My whole body seemed lighter, my every breath holy, my hearing more acute, my vision sharper. Something had broken (open) in me.

What broke was a prison that held me in performance mode. I was captive to an ego that wanted to constantly out-perform, to do better and faster than others, an ego that had little concern for my body or soul. The freedom I found by breaking out of that prison, even for five minutes, was life-changing. I realized that with my head bowed and heart open, I was purer, less burdened with competition and nagging voices telling me I had to do it perfectly or else...

Wadude explained that in many spiritual traditions, including Sufism, it is common to pray with the head touching the ground. Why? Because when the head is below the heart, the competitive ego is no longer in control; it is literally crushed to the floor. But your heart, that lovely heart of yours, can generate profound truths and unconditional love.

This experience changed how I interact with my clients. Now I am able to envision my head on the ground whenever I meet with them, and the more I hold that vision, the greater my level of trust. What kind of trust? Trusting the unseen, unheard Source, who conveys purer knowledge and wisdom than my inner competitive drivers. Ironically, the more I forget myself and the deeper I bow, the greater applause I receive. Those who work with me sense that I approach them with smaller pieces of ego baggage, greater

presence, and focused concern for them. They drink from what my heart freely offers: a sacred share of Love.

One of my long-term coaching clients, a light-hearted, affable Irish manager of a global pharmaceutical company, remarked that it was uncanny how I could sense his needs. *"I think you read minds, Jo Ann,"* he joked with me. *"No, Anthony, I don't read minds, only hearts."*

"I have estimated the influence of Reason upon Love and found that it is like that of a raindrop upon the ocean, which makes one little mark upon the water's face and disappears." - Hafiz

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